Chapter 1: Medical Humanities—The Intersection of Art & Science

"All interest in death is only another expression of interest in life."

—Thomas Mann

Although Thomas Mann did not write *Death in Venice* with the intention of teaching readers and scholars about aging, the novella is a valuable resource in the context of medical humanities. An emerging field, medical humanities strives to educate health professionals and laypeople on topics in sickness and health by combining medicine and the humanities. The Journal of Medical Humanities was established by the *British Medical Journal* and *The Journal of Ethics* to create a strong academic and scholarly relation between medical sciences and medical arts. Although the humane notion of medicine was first popularized by Hippocrates during classical Greek civilization around the year 430 B.C.E., only in the past few decades has medical humanities started to become an integrative and essential aspect of the modern practice of medicine. The *Journal of Medical Humanities* describes its aims and scope as following:

> Medical Humanities is dedicated to interdisciplinary exploration of how humanities disciplines can illuminate the nature, goals and practice of medicine, and to promote the integration of the humanities within medical education, research, and practice. It proposes, and seeks to establish and explore a conception of medicine as being more fully 'a science of the human', in which scientific understanding of physical nature is permeated by humanistic understanding of experimental nature, manifested in the histories, narratives, reasoning and behavior of patients as thinking, knowing, experiencing subjects.

Why is the medical humanities project valuable? With patients' and practitioners' increased discontentment with the way medicine is practiced, a humanities perspective applied to medicine is crucial to understanding where the problem lies. Generally, the practice of medicine has focused too much on the scientific principles of cause and effect. After all, medicine is an odd hybrid of the art of clinical practice and the scientific process. Science and technology overwhelm today's medical practice, providing tangible answers for most bodily maladies. Although science is an excellent vehicle for explaining the biological basis of disease and thus indicating the correct treatment, the application of these treatments is in need of drastic change. The integration of science and art is necessary to fully understand human aging and suffering in order to treat the disease and suffering from a humane perspective, as well as from a scientific perspective. How to deliver the treatment of disease and suffering is the problem.

In treating the elderly, it is most important to understand how the person seeking medical and psychological treatment experiences aging. Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1911), the story of an old German man and his holiday in Venice, is not only a fine piece of literature; it is also a perceptive representation of the aging process and could be used as a tool by medical practitioners. Literary critics have written extensively about this novella. *Death in Venice* stands among other works such as *Buddenbooks* (1901), *Tristan* (1903) and *The Magic Mountain* (1924), which are all thoroughly permeated by themes of death and decay. However, with the theme of death inevitably comes the theme of life. In Mann's works, particularly *Death in Venice*, life is disguised in the form of art and beauty. "At a higher level of relations between art,

life and death are treated in the masterful short story *Death in Venice*."[1] Of course, there exists a passage of time that unites life and death: aging, the process taking a human being from the realm of life, closer to death's door.

Mann's recurrent themes of disease, decay and death and their relationship to art and creativity are prevalent in all his works, yet *Death in Venice* complexly interweaves these themes into one coherent framework. The life of an artist, Gustav von Aschenbach, follows one pathway, while on a parallel route the quest for creativity follows closely. The themes of creativity and life are parallel in the story, they never actually cross paths, and yet they are closely and intimately related. At the same time a third track containing the destructive forces of disease, decay and death follows the first two. These three themes all affect Aschenbach, but don't influence each other. In this metaphor aging functions to undercut the creation of art, the quest for creative inspiration for writing and bodily disease. Without aging, the three themes would not be related, thus aging is the final piece of the puzzle that links the common themes in Thomas Mann's literature.

Thomas Mann did not thematize *Death in Venice* as a story solely about the experience of aging. Rather, Mann used the text as an artistic medium to express his frustration and struggle with his own sexuality. Aschenbach's character is the alter ego of the author. Thomas Mann shared a similar position in society with the older writer, somewhat successful, but lacking great fame. The two also shared families alongside homosexual relationships, "at the beginning of his own such crises in 1910 Mann was rethinking the issues of dignity, creativity, and health in old age."[2] Although this biographical information of Mann's intentions for his novel were later revealed in his diaries, the information does not change the essential story: to describe the death and demise of an aging and forgotten writer.

What can change however, is the message that can be extracted from the underlying plots. In the analysis of *Death in Venice,* the subject of aging is often overshadowed by the themes of love, beauty and art, even though death has always been a prominent theme. In fact:

> The novella is far more than the story of an artist. It is about anti-individualistic mores and conventions, social expectations and personal choices, the liberating as well as destructive impact of chaotic, irrational forces upon ones life.[3]

This shows the complexity of the novella, that the plot cannot be reduced to merely the story of an aging artist and his subsequent loss of creative drive. Instead, the story of the struggling artist is interwoven with the themes of impending death and the first-person experience of aging and suffering as universal.

Both the medical humanities and traditional literary critical perspectives are equally valuable in examining *Death in Venice*. The medical humanities perspective includes the use of literature, music, film and other creative mediums to examine medicine, health and sickness. In conjunction with this perspective, medical humanities perspective examines the complex

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[1] Marck, Siegfriend. Thomas Mann as a Thinker.
[2] A Novella and It's Critics, p. 187.
[3] A Novella and its Critics, p. 88.

interrelationship between science, behavior and human experience. Using both methods, I will look at Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* in order to determine how the novella may be used as a literary tool useful to the medical community for understanding the process of aging. By using this novella as a teaching case, both the scientific and humanistic sides of aging can be fully integrated to create a complete understanding of the human condition of aging.

Scholars such as Lilian Furst,[4] McLellan,[5] Jeffrey Meyers,[6] Margaret Church[7] and Robert Carter[8] describe *Death in Venice* as a story of disease. Thomas Mann published the novella in 1911, during the time when, in literature specifically, the notion of disease and art as inseparable spread throughout Western Europe, as seen in Victorian novels of the era. During the beginning of the 20th century, characterized by tumultuous politics and the onset of modernity, many writers and artists in Europe used their discontentment with the world to create art. As a result artists used disease as a metaphor for the massive loss of life due to war and thus obtained creativity for art through the destructive force of disease.

The artist of the story, the writer Gustav von Aschenbach, is a romantic figure since he suffers from an infectious disease. He is able to harness the disease as a source of inspiration, effectively giving him an escape from the mundane world. Even if it is assumed that all humans will suffer from some disease at one point in their life, it is rare for people to respond and tend to their disease in the same way. Aschenbach's experience with his diseases gives him a special viewpoint on his own life and subsequently inspires him to create literature. Phillip Sandblom describes artists such as Matisse, Picasso, Mahler and Beaudelair as having been inspired by sickness; without disease and ailment, they would not have created their great works of art.[9] The sickness a writer experiences provides him with motivation and a sense of self. In a way, he needs to suffer from disease in order to flourish artistically.

The text uses symbolism in physical forms and historical allusions to cast aging into the center of attention. The text employs metaphors such as describing life as a book and journeys towards death in order to depict how Aschenbach experiences the day-to-day effects of aging and the resulting changes in personality and physical composition that accompany such drastic changes. Similarly, symbolism and imagery ranging from scenes from family names to Dances of Death help illuminate how Aschenbach experiences aging, from the indirect viewpoint of the narrator. Prior to the publication of this paper, the focus while reading *Death in Venice* has been placed on the themes of art, love, creativity and disease. While these themes and ideas are still relevant in discussions of the text, thinking about the novella along the lines of a story about aging is important in today's world. With aging and death cast into the limelight in ethical debates about euthanasia, the right to die and end of life issues, understanding aging from a humanistic perspective is even more important, not only to the practice of medicine, but also to the understanding of the human condition.

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[4] Furst, Lilian. The Ethics of Reading *Death in Venice*.
[5] McLellan, M. Faith. Literature and Medicine: Some Major Works.
[6] Meyers, Jeffrey. Cancer Ward and the Literature of Disease.
[7] Church, Margaret. *Death in Venice*: A Study of Creativity.
[8] Carter, Robert. The Mask of Thomas Mann (1875-1955): Medical Insights and Last Illness.
[9] Sandblom, Philip. How Illness Affects Literature, Art and Music.

In attempting to understand aging, I have divided the text into three main sequences. The first section of the paper includes Aschenbach's experience with aging while in Germany. This includes the introduction of Aschenbach's health history as well as his major decision to travel to Venice. The second piece of the paper gives a commentary on Aschenbach's movement to Venice and his various expressions of emotions as he nears his goal, although with some surprises. The third and final section gives an analysis of Aschenbach's final days, including why healthcare practitioners should consider Aschenbach's life as a valuable case study in aging.

Thus, Death's role should be reexamined as a prominent theme in *Death in Venice*. While critics and scholars have often discussed death in other contexts, such as social sciences or politics, the process of how death is reached, aging, has not been discussed. Although sources discussing death in these and other contexts are not lacking, they are not as ubiquitous as they ought to be. For example, Tolstoy, Camus and Solzhenitsyn are writers whose works often contain the themes of illness and death in literature. While these are famous names in the realm of English-language literature, the names are as famous as they are limited. Mann's *Death in Venice* should be added to the list as a literary work describing the intimate relationship between aging and death because from the opening scene of the novella, death and dying confront the reader.

Chapter 2: A Brief Introduction to Gustav von Aschenbach

> "Death? Why this fuss about death. Use your imagination; try to visualize a world without death! Death is the essential condition of life, not an evil."
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> —Charlotte Perkins Gilman

The first few words of the story introduce a name, a name that signifies both life and death: Gustav von Aschenbach. The character's name is not only important because he will be the protagonist of the story, but also because his name indicates what the story will entail. The title, *Death in Venice,* foreshadows a fatal ending. By introducing Gustav von Aschenbach immediately in the first line, Mann establishes a link between death and the character. This is so because the quick transition from the title to the introduction of the first character creates a bond between the two; they are now inseparable due to their close proximity on the page and therefore, also in the reader's mind.

It is important to examine the composition of the character's last name. The first half is derived from the root *Asche*, which in German means ash. This is reminiscent of the biblical phrase "ashes to ashes, dust to dust." This phrase is often uttered at funerals and is interpreted as a metaphor for death, symbolizing the return of a human body to the earth in the form of ash. The second half, *Bach*, means creek in German. A creek is the symbol for life and nourishment, since water is a basic requirement of life. When these two meanings are put together, ash representing death and creek representing life, an odd juxtaposition is created. Does this mean that life precludes death? Or does it mean that death is greater than life, since ash is before creek in the name?

Of similar juxtaposition or ambiguity is the use of the modifier "von". The German Kaiser, or King, gave this title as an award, in order to signify nobility and to commemorate great achievement. The text states that Gustav Aschenbach became Gustav von Aschenbach after his fiftieth birthday. "[Gustav von Aschenbach] indicates nobility was conferred upon Aschenbach due to his outstanding literary achievements, and that he leads a dignified, respected existence that is based on a strict work ethic."[10] Therefore, the modifier "von" grants a new feature to Aschenbach's character, as it is now evident that he is an important figure in society. However, it is unclear whether or not Aschenbach will live up to the expectations that come with the name. Later in the story Aschenbach's past is revealed by the narrator, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Thus, examining the two aspects of Aschenbach's name, the meanings of the two root words and his noble title, provides a concrete image of the protagonist. This name intertwines the realm of death and life with order and dignity. While death is apparent through the title of the novella and the dominant first half of Aschenbach's name, the counterforce is also established. This opposite of death is life, and both appear in his last name, side by side. Thus, from the beginning of the novella, there is ambiguity and contention between the two. This ambiguity places a new perspective on death and aging. Since the aging process is ambiguous, it is not possible to articulate that death is concrete and that aging, as a process leading toward death, is entirely negative. Ambiguity serves to question the validity of arguing against death. Solely by looking at Aschenbach's name, it is not clear whether death is a positive or negative image. The ambiguity is evidence of the progress made from previous rhetoric surrounding discussions of death; previously many images of death were solely negative. The newly discovered ambiguity changes how death and aging are viewed, since death now is not solely negative, it is solely a tragic ending.

Does the ordering of Aschenbach's name demonstrate a viewpoint on aging? It could easily be argued, using the root words of Aschenbach's name, that death is greater than life, on the basis of order. Since the death aspect of Aschenbach's name comes before the life piece, death can be seen as having the greater role. Soon after the initial introduction of Aschenbach, he is described as a character that has experienced a decline in spirits, in work and in life (to be discussed in the next chapter), which signifies death's effects on life.

In the same way that Aschenbach's name can be viewed as death being greater than life, it can also signify the opposite. Since in his last name death is before life, a reader might literally interpret this as death is before life. However, the other image deduced from his name is that of life after death. This does not necessarily convey religious or spiritual tones, stating explicitly that there is an afterlife and all humans will enter into it after death. Instead this statement means that death is not the end, does not have to be viewed as the endpoint of all life, in which life is destroyed. Ultimately, Aschenbach's name serves to introduce the theme of death and its ambiguity and the surrounding viewpoints.

Chapter 3: Signs of Aging

[10] Understanding Thomas Mann, p. 88.

> "A good old man, sir. He will be talking. As they say, when the age is in, the wit is out."
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> —William Shakespeare

Soon after the introduction of Gustav von Aschenbach, Mann gives a description of Aschenbach's life. He is a man and writer who in the past-amassed great fame, but at the present time is experiencing a change in his lifestyle. Describing Aschenbach's situation, the text states:

> He had sought but not found relaxation in sleep—though the wear and tear upon his system had come to make a daily nap more and more imperative—and now undertook a walk, in the hope that air and exercise might send him back refreshed to a good evening's work.[11]

This passage stresses the conflict between what Aschenbach wants and what he actually achieves. Despite his efforts to produce acclaimed literature, he fails in achieving the status he held as a younger, more prolific man. His ailment, at this point in the story, is not necessarily defined as his old age or anything related to physical health, but rather his struggle with producing work. While he seeks rest and productivity, he cannot find it. He only finds stress on his body and mind, forcing him to take even more leave from his work.

Though Aschenbach's lack of creativity can be attributed to simply reaching an endpoint in his artistic career, it can also be explained by his old age and subsequent overwhelming fatigue. Either way, Aschenbach lacks the essential ingredients to write great literature—his passion and creative drive— and so he forces himself to seek alternative inspiration because writing is essential to his being. Aschenbach is approaching a point in his life in which he struggles with daily exercises, those which in the past had brought him great pleasure. His passion for writing has caused him to turn from what he has loved—because he is no longer able to create literature, he starts to hate writing. He has nothing left to look forward to; he must search for some new source of deep passion in his advancing age. He had hoped that rest would bring him success, yet it does not. He must keep looking.

Mann writes that a younger Aschenbach "at forty, worn down by the strains and stresses of his actual task, he had to deal with a daily post heavy with tributes from his own and foreign countries."[13] Even at age 40, a relatively young age, he faced problems with being "worn down" by his work. Even though he received "tributes" from both native Germans and foreign admirers, with youth and fame he was still stressed and tired, just as he was in his old age. It is unfair to generalize Aschenbach's later suffering as being directly correlated with his age, because Aschenbach suffered from the same problems as a middle-aged man and as an old man. If it is true that this suffering is universal across the age spectrum, aging is less negative because it is not just old age that brings suffering; youth carries it as well.

Aschenbach carries his past (his youth) with him into the future (old age). The description of the writer at age 40 serves to illustrate that aging is not easily defined and is not a

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[11] *Death in Venice,* p. 1.
[13] *Death in Venice,* p. 9.

singularly concrete stage in life. In the past, in his youth, he had faced problems with health. He especially believed in "fortitude under suffering,"[15] an example of his will to conquer the challenges of old age. When he was challenged by looming old age, his reply was:

> Besides, he deeply desired to live to a good old age, for it was his conviction that only the artist to whom it has been granted to be fruitful on all stages of our human scene can be truly great, or universal, or worthy of honour.[16]

This demonstrates that physical toil and emotional suffering is not a new experience for Aschenbach because even in his youth, he experienced both. Yet, once he reached old age, the meaning of his suffering immediately changed connotation. Scholars such as Woodward "understood *Death in Venice* as 'a parable of the dominant discourse of aging in the west'."[17] When he was young, his physical problems and stress were not explained as symptoms of his age. However, oftentimes, the suffering of elderly people is excused as routine to their daily life and a natural occurrence. However, old age is not an excuse for old age. If someone is sick and suffering, it cannot always be explained as only due to the effects of aging. Medical humanities would claim that babies suffer, young people suffer, everybody suffers and many times their suffering is not attributed solely to their age. Suffering in the elderly should not be dismissed as routine, instead each case should be treated just as uniquely as suffering and disease is in younger people.

Aschenbach's old age is self-defined in terms of productivity. When he was younger, he wrote more, as he aged he was less productive. First he is described as "desiring" to continue living into old age, but directly after this quotation he explains age's relation to being human, namely that the only way to become great is to be "fruitful." He may "desire" to live to an old age, in order to maintain great fame through productivity, but can he truly get what he wants? How does aging in combination with death limit Aschenbach's chances for success in his aspirations?

It is true that Aschenbach "desired" to live a full and rewarding life, yet he is limited in his ability by his fatigue and lack of inspiration. Aschenbach attempts to let his passion for writing and honor dictate his direction in life, yet death is an impending roadblock to his career as an internationally acclaimed author. He only has so much time to remedy his current affliction, his lack of creativity, until death arrives. In his suffering, Aschenbach is no different than any other human being, whether noble, as the Aschenbach name alludes he is, or common—death unites all humans.

Aschenbach's character presents a valid viewpoint on aging, suffering and death. His whole life has been dedicated to producing great literature in order to distinguish himself within society. When describing how critics qualify a work of art as "great", or not, Aschenbach states that:

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[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Woodward, Kathleen. Youthfulness as a masquerade.

> They think to justify the warmth of their commendations by discovering it in a hundred virtues, whereas the real ground of their applause is inexplicable—it is sympathy. Aschenbach had once given direct expression—though in an unobtrusive place—to the idea that almost everything conspicuously great is great in despite: has come into being in defiance of affliction and pain; poverty, destitution, bodily weakness, vice, passion, and a thousand other obstructions. And this was more than observation, it was the fruit of experience.[18]

Critics of art think they are providing praise and respect for a struggling artist, yet Aschenbach believes it is merely sympathy for the artist. Greatness is, in some form, an allusion in itself since it exists only as the "defiance" of all that is horrible and painful, such as "bodily weakness." When Aschenbach was young, he achieved greatness through his defiance of suffering, but later in his older age he found that he could no longer be as defiant. Instead of being creative despite his suffering, he used his suffering as a source of passion and creativity. Though suffering does interfere with his abilities to create in his older age, it still is a catalyst for his trip to Venice and therefore still serves him in his quest for greatness. It is the role of the artist to provide great art, yet "bodily weakness" may interfere, which in Aschenbach's case is definitely true. He suffers, and has suffered, in order to produce.

It is important to mention that Aschenbach's experience with suffering is not merely observational, but rather based on his own personal experience, an experience subject to emotion, logic and thoughts. His self-evaluation of his own process of aging and life-course, is actively on his mind. He does not just "age," he is actively concerned with the changes he is facing. His own experience and descriptions of it provide valuable insight into how aging is experienced, the universality of suffering, and how said suffering plays a major role in the life of an artist and in the life of any human. An artist is constantly self-evaluating, and using the analysis to create art. Such analysis provides material in consideration for medical humanities discussions about the experience of aging. Although not every person is a writer, Aschenbach's life as a writer may be applied to examining aging and death. In the case of Aschenbach, the crucial question in need of an answer is the following: Since Aschenbach is seeking new sources of creativity and life, what can give it to him? What events in his life will provide him with a new source of essential passion, given his day-to-day experience with aging? How do his thoughts, feelings, physical activities help clarify what aging truly means and can it be extrapolated to others?

Chapter 4: Dances of Death—Leading Aschenbach Towards Death

> "Too many people are thinking of security instead of opportunity. They seem to be more afraid of life than death."
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> —James F. Bymes

[18] *Death in Venice,* p. 10.

As a tired and aging Aschenbach sets out to find new inspiration, he finds himself wandering through an old cemetery in Munich. Once he reaches the cemetery, he expresses his fatigue, prompting him to sit down. He describes the area using words such as "mortuary, chapel, empty, graveyard, and future life."[19] These words function to foreshadow Aschenbach's future, namely his impending death in the face of his quest for creativity. It is here, at the cemetery, that he will make the decision that forever changes his life. Although everyone knows death is inevitable, it is not oftentimes at the forefront of a person's thoughts. However, when signs of impending death appear all around, a person's attention is inevitably drawn to thoughts of mortality.

However, what is most interesting about Aschenbach's description of his surroundings is not the use of certain words that connote death, but rather the timing and placing of these words. Just prior to this passage in the novella, Aschenbach expresses his lack of creative inspiration and motivation. The point at which he is seeking creativity, and new life, he wanders into a cemetery. This is significant because soon after this point, he decides to travel to Venice. Death incites in him the excitement to search for the unknown. He only has limited time left to find his creativity. His discovery of the figure of death in the cemetery prompts not only the acceleration of his quest for creativity but also the end of his life. It is the figure of the grave keeper who triggers his imagination simply because he is such an odd character to encounter. It is not a daily occurrence for Aschenbach to wander through graveyards. Aschenbach meets the character and describes him:

> He was brought back to reality by the sight of a man standing in the portico, above the two apocalyptic beasts that guarded the staircase, and something not quite usual in this man's appearance gave his thoughts a fresh turn.[20]

The grave keeper gives Aschenbach new ideas, ideas about how to cure his lack of creativity. From here, Aschenbach is able to make the decision to travel to Venice. He is no longer afraid of the unknown and he is able to undertake a monumental trip. Aschenbach also describes the character as exotic and foreign, which denotes that he is from another "world." His physical features are described as thin, beardless and "snub-nosed" which elude to a figure from Dances of Death (below) a series of stained glass depictions of Death's interactions with an assortment of people. As shown in the illustration, the figure resembles the description of the man in the cemetery, as he is thin, beardless and with his head turned upwards, "snub-nosed." The grave-keeper also functions as the Greek god "Hermes who guides souls into the underworld."[21] He is a figure of death, leading Aschenbach into the next world, to death in Venice.



[19] *Death in Venice*, p. 4.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Understanding Thomas

Interestingly, the oldest known Dances of Death images came from St. Mary's Church in Lübeck, Thomas Mann's birthplace. This suggests a historical context for the inclusion of the figure from the paintings. Similarly, the text states that Aschenbach was born in the town of "L—" hinting that it might be Lübeck and consequently insinuating the character's intimate link with death. Although the original church no longer exists today, since it was destroyed during World War II bombings, newly created stained glass depict similar scenes. The old church earned the nickname of "Totentanz-kapelle" (trans. Death-dance Chapel) due to the paintings in the church's chapel [see above image]. Døden fra Lübeck provides a historical context for the paintings:

> "Death from Lübeck" was a 30-meter painting, showing Death in a long chain-dance with 24 humans - painted life-size - from all classes of society, from pope to infant. Death dances around in the procession, calling people to the dance, but most of the dancers-to-be try to decline.[22]

The fact that death tries to dance with a broad range of people suggests that death is universal. Whether one is The Pope, a king or a peasant, death is a constant threat. Regardless of position in society, everyone is united through the Dance of Death.

The figure of death's importance is increased when examined in relation to his introduction within the story. The fact that this figure is introduced early on, almost as early as the protagonist himself, provides death with increased importance and sets the tone for the rest of the story. Not only is death apparent from the title of the novella, but also from the reader's early meeting with death through the figure in the cemetery. The tone is set: life is temporary. Death is the prevailing characteristic of life; death will overshadow Aschenbach's life.

Interestingly though, it is Aschenbach who seeks the cemetery and the grave-keeper, and not the other way around. Death did not go searching for Aschenbach, Aschenbach found it. As

[22] "Døden fra Lübeck" http://www.dodenans.com.

a result, the figure in the cemetery also functions to foreshadow, and almost to "express a warning against destructive forces and against the irresponsibility of art."[23] Art is the sole desire of Aschenbach's life and it is ultimately destructive for him. Seeking creativity for his art leads him to death. Without Aschenbach's desire to create a flawless and perfect piece of literature, he would not have sought to enter the cemetery. In fact, he would probably never have left the comfort of his home. However, that is not the case. He is the tormented, lonely and aging writer, seeking creativity, new life in his work. He feels he must change the pattern of his life in order to achieve greatness.

Immediately after his encounter with death, Aschenbach feels strong emotions regarding youth. The narrator states that he felt "a youthfully ardent thirst for distant scenes"[24] which demonstrates Aschenbach's desire for removing the stigma that old age is always crippling and debilitating. Aschenbach chooses to go to Venice as an attempt to use the "exotic" characteristic of Venice as a mask for the effects of his old age. Since the adjective "youthfully" is used to describe Aschenbach's emotions, his age is linked to his personal problems. It is the desire for youth that is depriving him from his work and productivity. As a result, he must do something, anything, in order to restore his prior productive mind-set. He must do anything to retrieve his lost youth.

After Aschenbach expresses his desires, he feels strong inclinations towards travel. His emotions are so strong that they evoke a physical response: "True, what he felt was no more than a longing to travel; yet coming upon him with such suddenness and passion as to resemble a seizure, almost a hallucination."[25]It is now, when he again feels alive and filled with hope that he decides to travel. He describes a fantastic and exotic scene and his reaction to the vision:

> There were trees, misshapen as a dream, that dropped their naked roots straight through the air into the ground or into water that was stagnant and shadowy and glassy-green...among the knotted joints of a bamboo thicket the eyes of a crouching tiger gleamed—and he felt his heart throb with terror, yet with a longing inexplicable. Then the vision vanished.[26]

It is to this locale, a place of chaos and instability, to which he desires to travel. The thought of this strange land brings both feelings of fear and of desire—desire for its possibilities and fear because it is almost as if Aschenbach knows that he is doomed to soon die. He seeks this place of destruction in order to fulfill his destiny: "in betraying his artistic calling, he becomes a victim of reality"[27] It is interesting to note that in his vision, Aschenbach sees a tiger, a symbol of the orient and exotic.

It is important that he prophesizes seeing a tiger, since in traditional Asian literature, tigers are often depicted as feared creatures. This allusion to the East and foreign lands is explained through Venice's locale, not only as a southern city, but also a major port linking

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[23] Understanding Thomas Mann, p. 98.
[24] *Death in Venice,* p. 5.
[25] Ibid.
[26] *Death in Venice,* p. 6.
[27] Understanding Thomas Mann, p. 95.

eastern and western trade and communication. One such example is the Chinese novel Outlaws of the Marsh. Tigers frequently attack foreign travelers, therefore the tiger embodies Aschenbach's impending death. In the future, a "tiger" will attack Aschenbach in a foreign land, through his encounter with cholera in Venice.

The narrator of the novella goes on soon after the description of the vision to articulate that Aschenbach has been "too laden with the care and duty to create...now more than ever, since his life was on the wane." By describing Aschenbach's life as "on the wane," the narrator is acknowledging that Aschenbach knows his life is to end soon. He knows that he is declining, as evidenced by his physical fatigue and by his struggles with creativity, both factors that in the past were of little or no challenge for Aschenbach. As a result, he seeks to abandon his routine life in exchange for something new, an adventure in a foreign land that will bring him inspiration.

What is the significance of Aschenbach's decision to go to Venice? Why is it important that he decides to travel to a foreign land at the moment he is exploring a cemetery? The figures of death suggest that Aschenbach already has death on his mind, and makes the decision to travel perhaps in light of those thoughts. Seeing a figure of death immediately triggers new ideas in Aschenbach and brings him a source of inspiration to travel. It seems that his age has taken control of his life; he has let his problems with life force him, unknowingly and ironically, towards choosing death. He does not need to travel in order to survive; yet he feels compelled to visit the strange land of his visions. He seeks to visit the figure of death that he cannot escape.

Chapter 5: Life as a Book

> "Experience is a revelation in the light of which we renounce our errors of youth for those of age."
>
> —Ambrose Bierce

Most traditional stories and books have three parts: a beginning, middle and an end. This structure allows for the statement of a problem, a conflict, and a resolution by the end of the story through the journey of the characters. This same book structure can be applied to life: the introduction of the book is like the beginning of life, when a person grows in childhood and youth. Maturity and middle age symbolize the middle and majority of the book. The conclusion of the book is the end of life and the summit and synthesis of all that happened during the "book." Similarly, Aschenbach's life can be illustrated in a corresponding layout. In the beginning of the novella, the narrator expresses a problem: Aschenbach's struggle with his formerly routine activities. In the past, he effortlessly expressed his thoughts in writing and thus led a productive literary life. However, in the middle of his life, he began to show signs of slowing down, signs of aging.

As aging brought about the "middle" of his life, the narrator expresses Aschenbach's conflict: how to resolve the problem. He must seek the idea, or in his case the place of refuge, that brings about a resolution. He spontaneously chooses a trip to Venice soon after encountering

a figure of death. As he makes this decision, he is moving closer towards the third stage of his life, the end of the "book," right before death arrives. The end of the book is Aschenbach's attempt to resolve his conflict with aging—to regain the creativity that is crushed by aging through stress and fatigue.

However, aging does not necessarily have to be a negative factor, especially when approached from the medical humanities perspective. It does not have to be an obstacle that ruins all life. In fact, Aschenbach's decision to travel and his undying quest for creativity show that Aschenbach does not fear death. He is faced with signs of death, but he does not cower at their sight and await death. Instead, he makes an effort to use his remaining time wisely by continuing to search for creativity. This can be seen as a positive image of aging, an image of using aging to one's advantage. He has the wisdom to not fear and flee from death, but instead to cherish his time to achieve his artistic goals and fortify his reputation and legacy as a writer. Without aging, Aschenbach would not be pushed to succeed and overcome obstacles.

Interwoven within the theme of a book representing life is the idea of the physical versus the spiritual. The book describes the "spirit" and its strength in controlling the physical body. Phrases such as "flesh" and "domain of beauty" signify the physical body, but these are only temporary descriptions. Physical characteristics are fleeting and changing and are unable to carry a body through all three chapters of the book of life. It is the spiritual that encompasses all three chapters and until the end. A purely physical description of aging, therefore, does not acknowledge an actual human who feels, thinks and expresses emotions.

However, this does not mean to say that aging should only be expressed in terms of its impact on the psyche of a person. As Wainwright says, thinking of aging only as pertaining to the mind "vividly depicts the social reductionist approach to aging as it ignores the inevitable biological decline in physical capital that aging brings."[31] The fact that aging *does* affect the body is crucial to the discussion of the process of aging. The above passage from *Death in Venice* acknowledges this issue of physical aging with descriptions of bodies. While "Biological disruption"[32] is a term used by Bury in his descriptions of chronic illness, the same principles could be applied to the aging process even though it is not a chronic illness. Aschenbach has felt signs commonly associated with aging, stress, fatigue and disease, since his middle age. However, he is not able to accept that aging will dictate the course of the rest of his life. Prior to this point, he allowed the effects of aging to interfere with his lifestyle: taking naps, constantly being tired and not writing due to fatigue and lack of concentration. Unfortunately, Aschenbach only recognized these signs as signs of "aging" too late, almost at the point when he is to die. Youth is not free of these problems, and recognizing and combating the signs of aging earlier is beneficial to aging well. These problems are treated right away during youth, but the same problems are not given as much attention or importance later in life. They are merely dismissed as normal and expected. From the medical humanities perspective, this is unacceptable. Everyone's case, whether old or young, should be considered as equally unique and treated equally as vigorously.

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[31] Wainwright, SP. Reflections on Embodiment and Vulnerability.
[32] Bury M. Chronic Illness as Biological Disruption.

It is important to view aging as a manageable obstacle rather than an unsolvable problem, because this connotation employs the ability to overcome the struggle. One can overcome the obstacle, with a bit of work, while the problem will remain. If aging is described as problematic, then the person experiencing it, Aschenbach for example, is faced with something that is extrinsic to the human condition. A problem is an outward force directed towards a person, such as an infectious disease. On the other hand, an obstacle is merely another challenge in life. If an older person sees their disease as an unsolvable problem, they are more willing to capitulate to the disease and give up on leading a better quality of life. However, if the effects of aging, such as fatigue and certain sicknesses, are seen as manageable obstacles with concrete solutions, the person can treat the malady and continue to be happy and productive in later stages of life.

Aschenbach does precisely this, he manages his obstacle, when he decides to go to Venice. Aschenbach has entered the third part of his story in the "book of life" and he is soon to experience the beginning of the end in the last chapter of his life. N.K. Denzin describes "epiphany"[33] in the sense of life history, the point at which a person first notices physical or mental decline due to aging. It is at this moment that the decision to cope with their newly discovered obstacle is made. This decision is the link between the "middle" section of the book and the "last" and Aschenbach's journey to Venice is the transition to the final stage of his life.

The next important question regarding Aschenbach's journey towards the end of his life, is about the setting for his end of life. Why is it important that he will die in Venice? Many Germans have characterized Venice as a place of "beauty, fear and death."[34] Venice is the embodiment of the conflict between life in beauty and death. Yet Aschenbach does not know that he will die there, only the narrator and the reader are aware of Aschenbach's impending death. Leppmann says "for it is [in] Venice that the conflict between requirements of industrial society and the preservation of a unique cultural heritage is being waged in an exemplary fashion."[35] . Venice is in turmoil due to the conflict between changes wrought by modernity and protection of tradition. Venice is unusual, a place of instability and appropriately is the setting for both Aschenbach's fulfillment of his exotic vision and also the place where he confronts death. The canals of Venice not only give the city exotic and unique charm, but also spread infectious disease throughout the entire, vulnerable city.

Chapter 6: The Journey Towards Death

> "When we finally know we are dying, and all other sentient beings are dying with us, we start to have a burning, almost heartbreaking sense of the fragility and preciousness of each moment and each being, and from this can grow a deep, clear, limitless compassion for all beings."
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> —Sogyal Rinpoche

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[33] Denzin N.K. Interpretive Interactionism.
[34] Seyppel, Joachim. Adel des Geistes: Thomas Mann und August von Platen.
[35] Leppmann, Wolfgang. Time and Place in *Death in Venice*.

As Aschenbach makes his way towards Venice, he begins to show slight signs of reluctance and questions his motives for going there. Aschenbach had decided to make a journey, a major decision in his end of life. Yet he does not quite acknowledge at this point that he will die, even though he recognizes the signs and symbols. The narrator does know he will die, but it is only later that Aschenbach will finally realize the choices he had made, but not until his death is upon him. The ticket agent who gives Aschenbach his rite of passage to Venice exclaims the following:

> An excellent choice," he rattled on. "Ah, Venice! What a glorious city! Irresistibly attractive to the cultured man for her past history as well as her present charm." His copious gesturing and empty phrases gave the odd impression that he feared the traveler might alter his mind.[36]

Again the metaphor of life functioning like a book appears in descriptions of Aschenbach's encounters with death and aging. The descriptions of the "past history" and "present charm" describe a structure with a past, present and soon-to-be-discovered future. Later, it is revealed that the past history of Venice not only refers to the city's history, but Aschenbach's past encounters with Venice as a child.

Once Aschenbach finally embarks on his journey, he encounters a character on the boat that illustrates an odd picture of aging. Aschenbach describes seeing a man who is loud and aggressive and who shows signs of youth and virility. Yet Aschenbach "was shocked to see that the apparent youth was no youth at all."[37] Instead, he was an old man. This again shows a conflict between physical and mental processes of aging. On one hand, the elderly gentleman is physically "old," yet judging his age by personality and behavior he is "young." These are relative terms, which demonstrate "aging is socially constructed"[38] because it refers only to the body of the person who is experiencing aging. Defining age and the aging process is subject to personal interpretation, bias, prejudice and emotions and therefore is a mutable concept. Aging is not easily defined by contrasting terms such as "old" and "young." In this case, the physically "old" man is psychologically "young." The ambiguity of the presentation of aging is again expressed: it is possible to look and feel young without actually being young. The old man on the boat seeks to fool himself about aging, while Aschenbch begins to accept his aging.

Immediately after the description of the odd man in the boat, comes the first descriptions of Venice appear in the novella and the book-like structure of life is again employed:

> The Lido appeared and was left behind as the ship glided at half speed through the narrow harbor of the same name, coming to a full stop on the lagoon in sight of garish, badly built houses[39]

The ship moves in the sequence from full speed to half speed and finally to a complete stop. This is analogous to the full speed of the first stage of life and youth, the half speed of the second

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[36] *Death in Venice* p. 16
[37] *Death in Venice* p. 17
[38] Phillipson, C. Reconstructing Old Age: New Agendas in Social Theory.
[39] *Death in Venice* p. 18

stage of slowing down and aging and finally stopped through last signs of aging and death's approach, the end of the book, the end of life. Prior to the journey to Venice and in Aschenbach's youth, he enjoyed youthful virility in marriage and vibrancy in his career as he moved at "full speed." Then, Aschenbach began to navigate through life at "half speed," showing signs of slowing down due to aging. In Venice, he will experience the third and final stage of a "full stop." As the boat approaches Venice, death is approaching Aschenbach through aging.

During the approach to Venice, Aschenbach sees death, embodied by the Lido, but it quickly vanishes. The Lido represents death and the voyage to Venice is the vehicle that represents aging. When the ship passes by the Lido and leaves it behind, it is a second chance for Aschenbach, death is for the moment also left behind. He will eventually die, yet he does not have to at the point he first reaches Venice. Though Aschenbach has reached his destination when he arrives in Venice, he has not yet reached or attempted to reach his goal and thus life, and the continuation of the aging process, continues. He catches a glimpse of death as he sees the Lido, loses sight of it, and later sees it in full view.

Once Aschenbach leaves the ship, he comes ever closer to death than before. He makes a statement that [describes] the close relationship between his motivation for traveling to Venice, his arrival in Venice and his impending death:

> Is there anything that must repress a secret thrill, on arriving in Venice for the first time—or returning thither after long absence—and stepping into a Venetian gondola? That singular conveyance, come down unchanged from ballad times, black as nothing else on earth except a coffin—what pictures it calls up of lawless, silent adventures in the plashing night; or even more, what visions of death itself, the bier and solemn rites and last soundless voyage![41]

He says "silent adventures" and "secret thrill" indicating he has found life in his travels to Venice. Prior to his travels, he had not used words that indicate youthfulness and life. The fact that he now expresses adventure and feelings of excitement denotes that Aschenbach is again alive. These events are also a "secret" and "silent" indicating an allusion to death, which is oftentimes considered a silent, secret and sacred passage. The narrator also uses the words "singular conveyance" which is a synonym for death, a singular event, conveyed through aging, an extended phenomenon.

Does this mean Aschenbach understands death and that he is moving closer to the end of his life? His exclamations of positive feelings juxtaposed next to indications of death demonstrate that he notices the events surrounding him. As described earlier in the novella, he met death in the cemetery and was not afraid, but rather enthused. Presently in Venice it seems as if he is again "obsessed" with and excited by death, a sentiment designated earlier.

It is perhaps the "last soundless voyage" that Aschenbach describes which will allow him to finally meet death: a voyage in a coffin. Aschenbach's attempt at "one last soundless voyage" is his one last effort at life. When he had hit the bottom, when his lectures were boring, his writing dry and his life lonely, he did not give up on life. Instead, he was inspired by death,

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[41] *Death in Venice* p. 20

inspired by something new. Before he met the man in the Bavarian cemetery, he did not really think about his impending death and what it really is. It was in the cemetery where he encountered many symbols and signs of death that he decided to make the journey to Venice: ostensibly the journey towards death.

Because Aschenbach does not consciously realize the consequences of the decision to go to Venice, he blindly carries on in his pursuit of creativity and art. Meanwhile, the narrator has keenly communicated to the reader when Aschenbach will die because:

> The narrator of *Death in Venice* is to Gustav von Aschenbach as Aschenbach is to his own functional characters; like Aschenbach, the narrator of *Death in Venice* both mirrors and corrects his character; like Aschenbach, he is objective.[42]

The narrator acts as a spokesperson for Aschenbach, helping the reader to understand how Aschenbach will die because of his decisions. This allows a better understanding of how aging plays a major role in the demise of Aschenbach. The common perception would be that dying young is more tragic than dying old, but Aschenbach's death, as a lonely man on a beach chasing the impossible is in a way just as, if not more, tragic.

Chapter 7: First Encounters With Death

> "Let us never know what old age is. Let us know the happiness time brings, not count the years."
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> —Ausonius

As Aschenbach finally arrives in Venice, he is closer to his death than ever before, not only because of aging but also because of the impending plague that will soon hit Venice. Aschenbach has made progress in the process of aging; he is no longer denying death's presence because he is no longer trying to escape. The text does elucidate explicitly how long the voyage to Venice took. Since the voyage represents aging, we do not know how long Aschenbach's aging process lasts. The length of the voyage is unpredictable; it is impossible to foretell when the ship will dock. There is no previously determined death of death; there is just the previously determined fact that one day it will happen. Due to the unknown factors of death and aging, both entities cannot be ascribed particular attributes: aging is not defined by one particular period or quantized amount of time, it is unique in each case.

Continuing on his journey and his aging process, Aschenbach arrives at his hotel. As he settles into the hotel, Aschenbach meets a new character, a young boy named Tadzio on vacation with his family. Previously, the only character the story is focused on is Aschenbach but with the introduction of Tadzio, Aschenbach must share the attention and storyline with him. Tadzio provides another link to death for Aschenbach precisely because the character is introduced in

[42] Vogt, Karen. Vision and Revision: The Concept of Inspiration in Thomas Mann's Fiction.

Venice. Aschenbach and the narrator both describe Venice through words and metaphors of death and suffering and meeting Tadzio in Venice ultimately links the boy with death. Once Aschenbach meets Tadzio, he begins to feel uneasy and states that "what this morning had been slight regret, some little doubt of his own wisdom, turned now to grief, to actual wretchedness, a mental agony."[43] Aschenbach again expresses regret and remorse, although now the feelings are amplified.

Earlier in the text, Aschenbach had shown signs of regret before he embarked on his trip. Once he reaches Venice, he again expresses regret, but once he meets Tadzio, he can no longer turn back despite his regrets, he can no longer escape death. Prior to this, Aschenbach saw death from a distance in the figure in the cemetery, the old man on the ship and the Lido itself. Now, he sees death up close, in the form of Tadzio, but is so enamored that he forges a link between himself and death that he cannot break. Aschenbach's meeting Tadzio so greatly piques his desire for beauty and creativity in art that he is completely paralyzed in his actions and under the control of Tadzio. Aschenbach's desire for Tadzio is finally released around the same point as he begins to comprehend the first signs of impending death on the voyage.

It is also interesting that at this point it is revealed that Aschenbach's current apprehensions about Venice are based on his past experiences. As a young man he visited Venice and felt the same uneasiness that he now feels. Once again, Aschenbach states his regrets about coming to Venice since "now for the second time the place had made him ill, since for the second time he had had to flee for his life, he must henceforth regard it as a forbidden spot."[44] It is important that this is Aschenbach's "second time" not only in Venice, but also his second showing of regret and uneasiness because it strengthens the image of Venice as a place he fears and is apprehensive about. The connotation of anxiousness that Venice holds foreshadowing the fact that Aschenbach will encounter his death there.

However, whether or not Aschenbach realizes that he will die in Venice is irrelevant since he decides to stay despite the influx of a cholera epidemic. He endeavors to resolve his inner conflict, whether to stay or go, by assuring himself: "yes, if he fled it now, he felt that wounded pride must prevent his return to this spot where twice he had made actual bodily surrender."[45] He is stating that pride is the reason to stay and face death. It was his decision to make the trip to Venice in order to alleviate his suffering and lack of creativity caused by the aging process. He feels that now he is unable to leave, since, to leave would be an insult to his pride. To leave would be Aschenbach's secession to aging. In choosing between surrendering to age or death he chooses death. It is the "bodily surrender" that he chooses, his final journey towards death in a coffin.

Aschenbach meets Tadzio, the force that binds him to stay in Venice, at his hotel. Upon his first encounter with Tadzio, Aschenbach immediately becomes enamored with the young 9-year-old boy. At this meeting, Tadzio makes his first acknowledgment of Aschenbach in the form of a half smile. The narrator describes the half-smile as Tadzio, with, "the lips slightly

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[43] *Death in Venice* p. 37.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.

pursed, perhaps half-realizing his own folly in trying to kiss the cold lips of his shadow."[47] This slight smile, it is important to notice, is not a complete smile, as if Tadzio did it by accident. The narrator interprets the smile as a mistake or error he has made is a result of his trying to meet the cold lips of his shadow, presumably Aschenbach. While this may seem as merely a sign of friendliness or minor affection, the old and lonely writer takes the brief smile as a sign of clear affection. A clear gap between the two characters is indicated by Tadzio's youthfulness and Aschenbach's cold personality. It sounds as if the young and foolish Tadzio is even trying to make contact with an already-dead figure. Regardless, Aschenbach seizes upon the miniscule gesture of a half smile to build a relationship with the young boy and he ultimately uses the perceived affection as an excuse to remain in Venice.

Aschenbach's exaggerated reaction to Tadzio's half-smile is also important to note. The narrator states Aschenbach's reaction:

> Aschenbach received that smile and turned away with it as though entrusted with a fatal gift. So shaken was he that he had to flee from the lighted terrace and front gardens and seek out with hurried steps the darkness of the park at the rear. [...] He flung himself on a bench, his composure gone to the winds, and breathed in the nocturnal fragrance of the garden. He leaned back, with hanging arms, quivering from head to foot, and quite unmanned he whispered the hackneyed phrase of love and longing-- impossible in these circumstances, absurd, abject, ridiculous enough, yet sacred too, and not worthy of honour (sic) even here: "I love you![46]

After noticing the half-smile, Aschenbach flees the scene in order to attempt to regain his composure, having become overly excited by the encounter with the boy. Aschenbach should be at least joyous, if not ecstatic, that he has finally found a connection with the young boy of his desires. Instead, he rapidly departs into "darkness." This represents Aschenbach's detachment from the physical and mental world. Once he is alone in both physical body and mental thought, he is now somewhat at ease, although he is not entirely content. The powerful imagery of him quivering alone and in the dark is indicative of how he soon may find himself alone in all senses. He is soon to be disconnected from the world, not just separated. He is to die physically and mentally.

In the passage, the narrator calls the half-smile a "fatal gift." It is precisely this fatal gift, this momentary affection that leads Aschenbach to stay in Venice and die. As described above, Aschenbach meets his newly acquainted desire with ambivalence. He is eager and vitally restored. He has found a purpose for living; he has found a new companion in the young Tadzio. However, his attitude changes almost immediately. After Aschenbach recognizes the faint, naïve and youthful smile, he runs away to darkness to meet death. He meets the darkness with "his composure gone" and finds "the impossible." His principal reason for remaining in Venice, in light of the virulent strain of cholera killing foreigners, is the allure of the young Tadzio. Although it is not the youth that kills Aschenbach directly, it is his presence and affection that brings Aschenbach to his demise. It is this recognition of a metaphorical "fatal gift" given by

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[47] *Death in Venice*, p. 50.
[46] *Death in Venice*, p. 51.

Tadzio that shows that he is somewhat alarmed, while at the same time tempted. Again, Aschenbach is apprehensive to comprehend that he will soon die.

Once Aschenbach realizes the truth that he will actually die in Venice, he loses composure. The truth is he will die, whether of old age or due to choleric infection. The foreign notions of death and its suffering were until this point unbeknownst to Aschenbach. It is true that he had undoubtedly suffered in the past, given the loss of his wife, children and fame. Yet he had never until this point experienced true suffering: the realization of death. His reaction is even so strong as to affect him physically. His realization of impending death and receiving his "fatal gift" has such an impact on him that he is unable to move or function properly. He is only able to run away, his futile attempt to escape the truth. He removes himself from the situation only to find himself alone and in the dark.

Aschenbach's realization of death is paralleled with his realization of love. The point at which he realizes the "fatal gift" of Tadzio's smile is the point at which Aschenbach reacts uneasily. He attempts "the impossible, absurd, abject, and ridiculous" which is to demonstrate his feelings for Tadzio. This passage "reveals that it is not the love for the boy that the narrator categorically condemns, but what this love does to Aschenbach."[48] The love keeps Aschenbach in Venice, where death is ubiquitous.

The *effect* of love on Aschenbach pushes him closer to death. In his advancing age, he is unable to control himself and his desires. Besides, "at this age, one loves...symbolically."[50] Aschenbach does not desire to forge a physical relationship with the young boy. Rather he wants any form of contact with other human beings. He is a lonely old man, driven by passion for life to endure a long trip to Venice. He seeks only solace in his age; he seeks refuge from the suffering of entering the final stage of life through aging. Love drives him to alleviate the loneliness, but instead this love only accelerates his death.

Similarly, "the object of Aschenbach's attention could not be a woman since any hint of sexual sensuality would have been made his hesitation at death's door too sentimental."[51] Instead, the love interest is a young boy. In his encounter with Tadzio, Aschenbach meets new life in the love of a youth but is also confronted with death for the first time. He meets death as he meets life in Tadzio. This juxtaposition between life and death is further articulated by the following passage, which I will continue to discuss in Chapter 8.

As Aschenbach continues on his journey towards death, he continues to seek life through coming closer to Tadzio. He wants to embrace life, especially since he had sought to enter Venice in order to find passion and creativity and he finds life in Tadzio, who ironically also represents death. Aschenbach wanted "adventure," "thrill" and life and he temporarily achieved his goals. He describes how passion plays a role in his life and in society:

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[48] Understanding Thomas Mann, p. 92.
[50] A Novella and It's Critics, p. 223.
[51] A Novella and It's Critics, p. 40.

> Passion is like crime: it does not thrive on the established order and the common ground; it welcomes every blow dealt the bourgeois structure, every weakening of the social fabric, because therein it feels a sure hope of its own advantage.[52]

The narrator expresses that passion is unconventional and is ruthless. Similarly, Aschenbach's passion is ruthless as it destroys his life. In this case, it is passion that leads to death. The passion that Aschenbach harbors for the youthful Tadzio is the reason he decides to stay in Venice despite the cholera.

As Aschenbach stalks Tadzio in the narrow Venetian alleyways, death simultaneously stalks Aschenbach. The text states that Aschenbach "would follow him through the city's narrow streets where horrid death stalked too."[54] Once again death is the unifier of all humans. On one hand the young and naïve Tadzio wanders the streets of Venice with his aristocratic family while on the other, the lonely, aging and adventure-seeking writer from Bavaria is following in the same steps. They all walk in the shadow of death. Even though Aschenbach is closer to death due to his advancing age and unstable health, the two characters are nevertheless united by death. Once Aschenbach meets life through love of Tadzio, he is surely able to meet death because it is finally real and tangible. Death is now in full view.

Chapter 8: Realizing Death

> "Old age has a great sense of calm and freedom."
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> —Plato

Once Aschenbach realizes his love of the young Tadzio, he attempts to reverse the signs of his aging, particularly the physical signs of aging in order to place himself youthfully on par with the boy. In fact, "in twelve steps he reduces himself, through several regressive maneuvers to an enamored elderly buffoon."[55] This description of Aschenbach is entirely reminiscent of the description of the elderly man on the boat to Venice who attempted to look younger. Aschenbach described the man as a fool, a man who should not bother to conceal his age. Later in the novella, Aschenbach becomes that same figure through his constant visits to the barber. Aschenbach feels "weak" due to his physical appearance, but not due to his personality or mental status. As a result, he attempts to regain "strength" in renovating his physical facade. Behind the strength however, lies Aschenbach's true weakness. He is psychologically and physiologically debilitated.[56] His weakness is his loneliness, catalyzed by the aging process.

It is worthy to note that Aschenbach seeks a barber to regain youthfulness. Historically, a barber's title is synonymous with a surgeon's. A barber's duties included not only shaving, cutting hair and other cosmetic practices, but also procedures such as blood-letting, extracting teeth and

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[52] *Death in Venice* p. 53.
[54] *Death in Venice* p. 67.
[55] Davidson, Lead. "A Mid-Life Crisis" in Thomas Mann's '*Death in Venice*.
[56] Vogt, Karen. Vision and Revision: The Concept of Inspiration in Thomas Mann's Fiction.

general surgery. It is the barber, an agent of beautification and healthcare, who tells Aschenbach of the current situation in Venice:

> One day at the barber's-- where he was now a frequent visitor-- he heard something rather startling. The barber mentioned a German family who had just left the Lido after a brief stay, and rattled on in his obsequious way: "The signore is not leaving—he has no fear of the sickness, has he?" Aschenbach looked at him. "The sickness?" he repeated.[57]

Therefore, it is the barber who advises Aschenbach on matters of beauty and health and provides him with youthful attributes such as darker hair, redder lips and wrinkle-free skin.

Altering his physique is Aschenbach's method for escaping aging. His love for the young Tadzio compels him to look and feel young. The alteration to his physical appearance is because "the aging Aschenbach longs for youth and his story portrays youthfulness as a masquerade for an aging body in a dark way that reinforces our culture's phobia about aging."[60] Although Ashenbach's obsession with his appearance and his attempts to look younger may suggest a phobia or stigma of aging, he does not harbor a phobia of death and this makes Aschenbach's story a great medical humanities case because there is a lot to learn from how he experiences death and aging. In the face of the cholera epidemic, Aschenbach does not run away from the deadly disease. Instead he "welcomes the deadly Asian cholera as an adventure and a counterforce to order."[58] He does not strive to die, but he also does not cower at the sight of death, he sees it as an adventure. After all, he seeks life, creativity, adventure in Venice, not death.

However, the moment at which Aschenbach heard of the sickness is the moment when he could have potentially have left Venice in order to save his own life. He has begun to hear stories of an outbreak, a deadly and foreign strain of bacterium, which has reportedly killed many visitors of Venice. Literary critic Hannelore Mundt provides negative portrayal of Aschenbach but one that it is still useful in thinking about the aging theme in the novella. The following passage describes Aschenbach's demise through aging and his concurrent meeting with new life:

> Mann also wants us to take a critical stance. Aschenbach's love is controlled by asocial, selfish emotions and nourishes anarchic-nihilistic thoughts. Not only is he willing to destroy himself and to see the obliteration of social and cultural institutions, but he also risks the life of his beloved. As he withholds his knowledge about the cholera epidemic from Tadzio and his family, he exposes them to the possibility of infection and death.[59]

Aschenbach demonstrates his increasing readiness to embrace death. He clearly understands the risks associated with staying in Venice, yet he does not take heed. Adventure and thrill take over his life as the lonely Aschenbach chases after youth. The fear of becoming separated from the

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[57] *Death in Venice*, p. 51.
[60] Woodward, Kathleen. Youthfulness as a masquerade.
[58] Understanding Thomas Mann, p. 93.
[59] Ibid.

youth he longs for, both figuratively and literally in the form of Tadzio, forces Aschenbach to remain in Venice. He knows that he could die because of the plague, and it is very likely that he will if he stays, but he becomes so lonely in his old age that a half smile from a young boy is enough affection to keep him in a place where death abounds. Aschenbach does make an attempt to leave but purposefully allows his plans to be foiled, in order to have an excuse to stay in Venice, near the one obsession and source of life he has left: Tadzio.

However unique Aschenbach's life and aging process is, his character's struggles with aging are by no means a new occurrence in literature, history or any other discipline. However, what is unique about his story is that he provides an intimate description of a man who is suffering due to his old age: the complex interplay between coping with the physical effects of aging and the concurrent loneliness. Once Aschenbach sees the concrete manifestation of death at the barbershop, not just allusions or symbols of death, he again becomes enthused. He seeks adventure and thrill through the rumored epidemic. Not only does the "sickness" give Aschenbach inspiration for writing, his close proximity with death also suddenly strikes fear of the unknown within him. Yet again he is perhaps not as prepared for death as he had previously thought. In the beginning of the novella, he was excited by death in the cemetery, welcoming death as a source for creative insight to fuel his writing. He had twice before expressed reluctance in his decisions to travel to Venice, yet he continued and stayed. Also, in between his reluctance to meet death, he feels entirely confident with approaching death. In order to obtain the possibility of a relationship with Tadzio, he must concurrently receive the consequence, death, since the two are juxtaposed.

The role of disease in *Death in Venice*, namely how disease affects aging, is principal. While disease has traditionally, medically and historically been associated with death and suffering, the "dis-ease" plays a new role in the novella. Though it is true that death can, and often does, follow disease, disease is not a pre-requisite for death. In fact, Aschenbach could very well have died in Venice without the plague. Although this is not the case in the text, removing the epidemic from the story would not alter the way death is perceived, because Aschenbach did not necessarily die from cholera. It is the "cause" of the death that is important, Aschenbach's longing for emotional attachment and relief from the solitude of his old age.

The cholera in the novel also functions as a "symbol of the epidemic inside Aschenbach."[62] This is especially the case since the text never clearly states that the cholera kills Aschenbach, it is only speculation based on the scene in which Aschenbach eats a strawberry. Although it is implied that Aschenbach contracts cholera by eating the fruit, that fact is never explicitly stated. The Free Medical Dictionary defines cholera as "an acute epidemic infectious disease caused by Vibrio cholerae, characterized by profuse watery diarrhea, extreme loss of fluid and electrolytes, and prostration."[63] In the text, these signs and symptoms are never described. The text only describes "prostration" in the final few lines of the story, but this is a characteristic secondary to most infections. Thus, removing cholera from the plot would mean giving Aschenbach relatively more control over death if he is not in the presence of such a looming, deadly disease. His presence in Venice, a city built upon canals, would have inevitably led coming in direct contact with contaminated water. In the story, it is unclear whether cholera

[62] Faesi, Robert. Thomas Mann: Ein Meister der Erzaelkunst.
[63] The Free Medical Dictionary.

or simply "old age" killed Aschenbach. The text does not delineate a direct causal relationship although the narrator implicitly tells the reader that the cause of Aschenbach's death is the strawberry he ate. Therefore, if it is not the cholera that kills him, Aschenbach has more control over his own death because at least he could have a chance to fight against other influences, whereas it is seemingly impossible to escape an infectious agent like cholera in a place like Venice. Yet even if this is true, he still cannot control fully his experience with death or his reaction to the events leading up to it.

Everybody dies, but each person dies differently. Aschenbach's case is a unique case of dying, including more factors than just his aging and this demonstrates that not everybody is a textbook case. Medical humanities provides the tools for bridging the gap between standard definitions of disease and how the aging person actually defines his or her own condition. No longer will all aging patients have to feel neglected and forgotten at the hands of honest and knowledgeable, yet misguided clinicians. Understanding aging is the first step towards treating the whole individual, not just the signs and symptoms.

Chapter 9: The End of Life—Loneliness of Aging

"The biggest disease this day and age is that of people feeling unloved."

—Anonymous

The final stage of Aschenbach's life is marked by his discovery of physical signs of aging and death. The narrator's descriptions of Aschenbach's behavior do not quite describe his physical state, nor do they delineate his mental being. Mann writes:

> He [Aschenbach] was not feeling well and had to struggle against spells of giddiness only half physical in their nature, accompanied by a swiftly mounting dread, a sense of futility and hopelessness—but whether this referred to himself or to the outer world he could not tell.[64]

The description of the spells as "only half physical" leaves room interpretation. What exactly does "half physical" mean? This implies that there is another half to the whole, a half that up until this point has not been explicitly expressed by the narrator. Since this feeling is intertwined with a mental and emotional feeling, the other half is Aschenbach's mental state as he approaches death. Aschenbach is finally mentally aging, an accompaniment to his physical aging.

Aschenbach feels a sense of "futility and hopelessness," which supports the idea that he is lonely in his old age. Once he finally begins to notice that he is rapidly aging and that his death is approaching, he leaves the hotel with a sense of dread. He realizes that he is a lonely old man; he realizes that dying is lonely and aging is lonely. At this point, he cannot alleviate his loneliness. If he had noticed this back when he was still in Munich, he would have been able to change the events in order to ease his loneliness. He would not be trapped between a looming

[64] *Death in Venice* p. 71.

water-borne infection and satisfying his personal need for human relationships. It is not Venice that kills Aschenbach, but rather the events that take place against the backdrop of the foreign city. He would not have had to die alone, chasing an oblivious boy around in a foreign country.

In the passage, Aschenbach's sense of dread does not have a clear direction--he does not know whether the sense of fright refers to the world or to him. This sentiment suggests that the dread and suffering he feels is universal, not just his. His fear and reluctance in aging can be extrapolated to speak on behalf of other aging people, despite different circumstances. Aschenbach's uncertainty with aging and upcoming death is the link between him and the rest of the world. By not running away from the dread he feels, Aschenbach admits that aging is a significant part of life. All humans must age, all humans seek intimate relationships, all humans suffer--all of these are universal to life. Without aging, Aschenbach would be another detached soul, discordant with the rest of the world but aging, and the suffering he feels because of it, connects him to the rest of the world.

The loneliness and suffering Aschenbach felt caused him to not fulfill his goals of creating art. Aschenbach's primary goal of reviving his former self is not met. The younger man who was hailed by his peers and fellow citizens as a great artist is not resurrected. However, he did succeed in rejuvenating himself physically and emotionally, with the aid of makeup and a quasi-relationship with a young boy. In relation to Aschenbach's quest for creativity and productivity in Venice, Mundt says the following:

> *Death in Venice* makes the point that Aschenbach, a pathetic voyeur and solitary man, and repeatedly identified as a 'lonely man' in the last chapter, fails to take the opportunity to communicate with Tadzio and to channel his infatuation into artistic productivity.[65]

His failure in rejuvenating his career is the consequence of his loneliness. Due to his hopeless obsession with Tadzio, he ignores his quest: to find inspiration in order to make art. If he had in fact not been the solitary old man that he was, the situation could have been quite different. In order to express his emotions and creativity, Aschenbach needs other adults. Since he has no one to talk to, except himself, he is unable to direct his newly discovered and Tadzio-influenced feelings and thoughts onto paper. His loneliness and obsession with forging an intimate relationship overpowers his ability to produce literature.

Aschenbach dies because of his loneliness but his death is not entirely negative. Even though the narrator paints a grim picture of Aschenbach's demise—a death in a romantic, although foreign and contaminated city-- there is still beauty in his death in the final few pages of the novella. For one, it is Tadzio, not the traditional figure of death, who leads Aschenbach away from the realm of worldly loneliness into the realm of death. Instead of the grim reaper figure, a gruesome symbol of death, it is a young, ideally beautiful boy who takes Aschenbach to his death. Aschenbach may have been a lonely old man seeking attention from a naive boy, but the reaction of the world to his death demonstrates that Aschenbach is really not a gruesome pedophilic figure:

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[65] Understanding Thomas Mann p. 96.

> Some minutes passed before anyone hastened to the aid of the elderly man sitting there collapsed in his chair. They bore him to his room. And before nightfall a shocked and respectful world received news of his decease.[66]

Though Aschenbach was a lonely man, the respectful response to his death by a "shocked and respectful world" means that he was not as lonely or as ruined as he thought. The fact that the world mourned his loss makes Aschenbach a less lonely character, even though he does not know the world's reaction. The fact that he was respected, and that the world mourned his death, shows that Aschenbach was held in high esteem even if he was lonely in his personal life. If only he had known of the world's viewpoint, he might have then been able to cure his case of loneliness, filling his quota for human connection with the collective adoration of his former fans.

Another aspect of beauty in Aschenbach's death is that he dies happy, watching Tadzio on the beach. If Aschenbach were to die alone in a dark alleyway, or in his hotel room, his death would perhaps not have been as positive. Instead, he dies in a place where he wants to be: in the presence of Tadzio. And by "having Aschenbach die in the place where he desires to go Mann lends the scene at the cemetery in Munich the character of a dance of death painted by Hans Holbein the Younger."[67] The figure from the beginning of the story was supposed to "dance" with Aschenbach, in order to lead him into death, and the figure, in the form of Tadzio, finally leads Aschenbach away into death.

The omnipresence of the figure of death demonstrates the universality of death in a positive manner. It makes no difference whether it is Aschenbach, Tadzio or a random character from *Death in Venice* who experiences death. Death is the one common denominator between all humans. What is important is that it is Aschenbach's death through aging that is the focus of the novella. Ernst Heilborn provides an answer to the question as to why death is a relevant theme in the novella:

> Aschenbach succumbs to such an orgiastic experience of dying and Mann's failure to delineate him more clearly has the advantage that such dying seems more typical and terrifying, being independent of the person who dies.[68]

This is a positive way of thinking about Aschenbach's death because Mann's choice not to describe Aschenbach's demise in precise terms allows for an interpretation of the text in the frame of aging. Describing dying as "typical" strengthens the claim that death is universal and thus aging is a universal part of human experience.

Although the following does not speak directly for the novella so much as the film based on the novella, the stress on loneliness is still relevant:

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[66] *Death in Venice* p. 73.
[67] A Novella and It's Critics p. 40.
[68] Heilborn, Ernst. Sterbens-Orgie.

> The camera left standing on the beach at the end of the novella is enigmatic, for example, yet it corresponds to dying Aschenbach and concentrates the feeling of abandonment—not only his by that of society.[70]

The proclamation of the camera left standing alone at the end of Visconti's film adaptation of *Death in Venice* (1971)[71] is analogous to the temporal gap in the novella's text. The end of the novella depicts Aschenbach's starved emotions and feelings towards Tadzio's playing on the beach and immediately thereafter news of Aschenbach's death. There is a temporal lag between the two scenes, one of life and one of death. This gap functions in the same way as the neglected camera in the film. Aschenbach's loneliness at the time of his death is an essential cause of his death and thus should be considered by any physician treating a similar character to Aschenbach. Aging is lonely and death is even lonelier and those involved with treating elderly patients can learn from Aschenbach's experiences and if needed, help alleviate a patients' loneliness at the end of life.

Chapter 10: Lessons from Gustav von Aschenbach

> "It is more important to know what sort of person has a disease than to know what sort of disease a person has."
>
> —Hippocrates

Death in Venice is a text rich in valuable material suitable for the teaching of medicine and the practice of medicine in the modern world. The field of Medical Humanities offers a greater understanding of the patient's problems and it is valuable to view *Death in Venice* a medical humanities perspective. To understand this novella from a medical humanities standpoint means being able to realize creative approaches to solving problems related to aging and death. The purpose of medical humanities is to try and "understand the human side of medicine…promoting clinical practice that is sensitive to the experiential dimension of health and illness."[72] *Death in Venice* is a perfect example of "the experiential dimension" of aging because the text, through Aschenbach's actions and the narrator's statements, provides a story of aging. Understanding Aschenbach's literary role in the novella means understanding how death is experienced.

The main conflict today between clinical medicine and the art of healing is the way the patient is viewed. Typically, a patient is viewed as an object receiving care from a physician. This is problematic because this distant relationship eliminates the humanistic aspect of healing. After all, the purpose of medicine is not to only treat problems and ailments manifested through human bodies but to treat *people*. Thus modern medicine uses its tools to solve physical problems, not treat real people, who may experience a certain disease process differently.

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[70] Tindall, William York. The Literary Symbol.
[71] Visconti, Luchino. *Death in Venice*. 1971.
[72] Macnaughton, Jane. Why Pay Attention to the Artist?

"Disease is the problem from the practitioner's perspective."[73] This attitude must change if medicine is to be effective to its fullest extent in treating the person, not just the person's disease.

Death in Venice provides an example of a case study that is valuable to clinicians in understanding how a person experiences aging. Dr. Macnaughton poses a question relevant to the study of *Death in Venice*:

> But it is less clear that this requires [health practitioners] to pay attention to the individuality of the artist as a person, or that paying attention to the artist as such offers anything to the critical consideration of his work. For instance: knowing the artist's personal convictions underlying [his] work can be of biographical interest, but does it help us gauge the work's value.[74]

In the case of *Death in Venice,* it is important to mention that Thomas Mann's own personal experiences at the time of his writing the novella influenced the story. *Searching for Thomas Mann: A Myth of Parable and Truth*[75] provides the relevant background information that explains how *Death in Venice* is relevant as a useful tool in medical humanities. In addition to understanding the text, understanding the author's intentions and reasons for writing the novella provide valuable information to medical professionals who can use the text to increase their sensitivity towards an issue such as aging.

One relevant background fact is Thomas Mann's alteration of ages in the novella. *The Real Tadzio* describes the historical context for the novella and how Thomas Mann's real life experiences are represented in the book. Mann did in fact travel to Venice in the early 20th century where he met a beautiful Polish boy in his hotel. These are all components of the actual text, but the ages of the characters in the novella and their real life counterparts do not correspond. Aschenbach is older than Mann and Tadzio is younger than "the real Tadzio." Gilbert Adair asks: "how should we interpret the fact that Mann chose to alter the factual age, so to speak, of not one but both of these fictional characters?[76]

One interpretation is that the text intends to alter the way aging is perceived. By shifting the age difference between the two characters, Mann suggests that aging is not as negative an ordeal commonly perceived. Aging is symbolic of maturity and wisdom, arguably valuable and prized characteristics of the human lifestyle. The deliberate changing of ages also insinuates that:

> Physicians should generally abandon "names" and "labels" (our function is to help these people, not to further afflict them)—which would then mean, in effect, increasing secretiveness and medical paternalism[77]

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[73] Kleinman, Arthur. The Illness Narratives.
[74] Macnaughton, Jane. Why Pay Attention to the Artist?
[75] Ellerman, Carl. Searching for Thomas Mann: A Myth of Parable and Truth.
[76] Adair. Gilbert. The Real Tadzio: Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and the Boy Who Inspired It.
[77] Sonntag, Susan. Illness as Metaphor.

The entire practice of attributing names, numbers and labels to human conditions and life processes is problematic. Perhaps physicians should focus on treating a patient regardless of characteristics such as age, gender and race. Treating them all equally and uniquely as people. This does not necessarily imply that aging is not an important factor to consider, but rather that emphasis should be shifted from defining aging to understanding aging.

The same practice of deemphasizing how and when death occurs should predominate. In Aschenbach's case, one could define his death as the point at which he lost his creativity and fame as an artist. He died a symbolic death once he lost what was dear to him--his writing. He could also have died the moment he realized Tadzio is unattainable, since by that point, his life was driven by passion and desire for precisely that impossible human contact. Or he could have died once cholera, presumably, accelerated his aging. In any case:

> The moment of death should not be signaled by any single physiological event, but as a moment defined by philosophical concepts that speak to what it means to be alive[78]

Death in Venice imparts a vehicle for discussing what it means to be alive and the resulting meaning of death. Was Aschenbach ever alive? Perhaps he was alive when he met Tadzio, or when he had his artistic creativity. For Aschenbach, life was his work. His passion was his occupation as a writer. It is illogical to discuss Aschenbach's life solely based on his physiology. To say he is alive when he is breathing and alert, and dead when breathless and slumped over in his beach chair is not a complete approach to understanding aging. Aging is a process that is defined by a complex interrelation between physiology, psychology and spirituality.

What gives value to life? Aschenbach considered himself valuable in spite of his lost creativity. Yet others consider him to be a lonely, pedophilic old man, who lost all sense of life to an irrational desire for an unattainable young boy. "The common feature of healthy conditions may, for example, be held to be either their desirability for the individual or their desirability for society."[79] In this case, Aschenbach would not have been as desirable as a person since he is not "healthy." There is an ongoing conflict between health and disease. If one is considered unhealthy, he or she may never hold value in society.

"The physician is in a particularly sensitive position to detect the bewilderment in the contemporary idea of man."[80] It is the role and responsibility of the physician to restore value to the lives of his patients. Although clinicians today are unable to offer Aschenbach, or similar characters, exact answers for how they should age, physicians can learn *how* aging may present itself in their patient's mind. By doing this, the practice of medicine and the results it offers patients becomes more humane. Aschenbach's life and his particular way of aging cannot be generalized to all aging or elderly patients—and that is precisely the hallmark of understanding aging. There is no formula, rule or algorithm for "treating" aging.

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[78] Botkin et al. Confusion in Determination of Death: Distinguishing Philosophy from Physiology.
[79] Boorse, Christopher. On the Distinction Between Disease and Illness.
[80] Pellegrino, Edmund. Humanism and the Physician.

With this in mind, physicians may be able to better tailor their practice of medicine to the needs of the patient. This is a paradigm shift from the traditional view that aging, manifested in various ailments and diseases, is a hurdle to be traversed and a problem for the physician to solve. Instead, putting the physician in the mindset of the patient allows him or her to better understand what the patient experiences. Whether this is coping with physical aging or mental aging, the physician is able to understand how the patient is mentally coping with aging and the thought of impending death. By better understanding the experience, a physician can better provide a treatment plan tailored to the specific needs of the patient.

However, it is crucial to remember that: "medicine cannot make everyone equal—some die young even after vast sums have been spent postponing their death by a few years—and we need as a community to decide when the pursuit of justice should yield to other values that likewise make claims on our limited resources."[81] This raises the question of how much is enough? If a physician were to theoretically treat Aschenbach for his cholera and other unknown age-related ailments, how would he have fared? He most likely would have died the same death, alone and without the object of his desire. A physician is not guaranteed to understand how their patient experiences aging; a physician must not expect to have all the answers for how to help a patient cope with aging. In other words, a physician must not attempt to exhaust all resources in an effort to "cure" aging because it is not a disease. The ethical responsibility of the physician is first to understand aging. Only then, can a physician properly treat and help aging patients through the end of life.

For clinicians, *Death in Venice* provides a wealth of applicable and useful information about helping an aging patient. What is most important is using Aschenbach's tragic story as a tangible firsthand account of the aging process. Beginning with his prior history, the story narrates Aschenbach's progression through life and provides valuable clues as to what to expect from an aging person. For example, examining his social interactions in his old age is beneficial to seeing how loneliness can strongly affect the emotional and psychological integrity of a person. Aschenbach had lost his family, his beloved wife, his surrounding colleagues and his profession. Like many aging people in today's world, he was left with no one. Thus, Aschenbach's "perverse" passions for the nine-year old Tadzio are understandable in the context of his overwhelming loneliness. Through the medical humanities gaze, it is possible to understand the reasons for Aschenbach's behavior and not just judge him. From his history, it is clear that Aschenbach is a severely lonely old man in need of hope and companionship and not just a perverse old pedophilic man, preying on a young and naïve boy.

Perhaps if Aschenbach had had someone to interact with, aside from a distant and immature young boy, he may have not been so lonely at his death. "Something which is often underestimated is the very touching love that can exist between very elderly partners who have lived to an age where the doubts and disillusionments of life have left their scars."[82] This does not imply that a physician is ethically obligated to provide love or a nurturing relationship for every aging patient. Instead, it implies that a physician should seek to understand how lonely aging really is and try to provide some semblance of companionship and understanding, instead of just pure medicine. To be able to understand the mentality of the aging patient is a valuable

[81] Daniels et al. Meeting the Challenges of Justice and Rationing.
[82] Moore, Anthony. The Missing Medical Text.

medical practice. If a physician is able to postulate how a person experiences aging, he or she is better equipped to provide the aged with a more comfortable journey toward death.

Of course, "death has a special, symbolic importance: they want their deaths, if possible, to express and in that way vividly to confirm the values they believe most important in their lives."[83] Though death is an entirely singular incident, it is also the culmination of a person's life and all of their experiences. Some people may age for a long time and approach death slowly, while others may rapidly spiral downward through life towards death. In either case, health providers approaching death from a medical humanities perspective can be extremely valuable for the aging person. Death then not only signifies the end of life, but it also represents how that person lived. In Aschenbach's case, his death was an all-encompassing experience that signified his lonely and desperate existence throughout the majority of his life.

Aschenbach faces more problems with his physical demise than with his mental and psychological decline. He attempts to conceal signs of aging, using various products and treatments, yet his inner appearance suffers no major setbacks. He feels comfortable with his character and personality, it is his physical appearance that worries him. "We are all curious to know how much human life span can increase and what changes to our lifestyles will be necessary to attain this."[84] Everyone wants to stay young forever and conceal the signs of aging. This is problematic for many in the aging population, especially with regards to sexuality and physical intimacy. Aschenbach provides examples of how these two aspects are experienced, a perfect demonstration of *The Aging Male in Literature*.[85] Aschenbach's problems stemmed from his inability to form any type of bond with another human being, whether physical or mental. As portrayed by Aschenbach's character, loneliness is one of the major destructive forces in human lives. Without relationships, personal lives fade away, become hollow and lives are lost. The closest Aschenbach came to establishing contact with another human being in his old age was with Tadzio and ironically, his passion for the boy and human contact killed him.

Thomas Mann's novella presents an outstanding case-in-point of medical humanities literature, crucial to understanding the aging process and how it is experienced by the patient. Aschenbach's character grants a clear example of the inner physical, mental and psychological turmoil experienced by an aging human being. A medical humanities perspective on *Death in Venice* bestows invaluable insight into human suffering. Questions of aging, sexuality, personal experience and body image all arise and this literary work answers those questions, albeit not in exhaustive form. Rebecca Dresser writes, "Our critical interests explain why many of us care about how the final chapter of our lives turn out."[87] It is possible to say the same about Aschenbach's unexpressed desire to "see" the end of his life. Although he did not consciously discern all the signs of his death, he still sought to live a good and full life until the very end.

Therefore, *Death in Venice* placed in a modern context, in a world where the aging population is plagued by problems, proves useful in understanding aging. How does it feel to age? What do we do about the increasing aging population and how do we take care of them?

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[83] Dworkin, Ronald. Life's Dominion.
[84] Sargent, Michael. Biomedicine and the Human Condition.
[85] Musitelli, S. The Aging Male in Literature.
[87] Dresser, Rebecca. Dworkin on Dementia.

How can understanding how aging and the often-slow journey towards death help physicians properly and humanely treat patients? *Death in Venice* provides a lot of background into these questions. The following passage sums up the role of understanding:

> The human body may be reducible to its constituent parts and our ailments may be capable of being described by reference to very few points of data, but indicators such as the partial pressure of oxygen in the blood or the rate of clearing of creatinine in the kidney or the hemoglobin level tells us nothing, necessarily, about how the person feels.[89]

The scientific community should accept art as equally valid in the practice of medicine. This does not necessarily entail the exploitation of literature for the sole sake of reducing suffering in humans lives, but rather that literature is created for a reason: to be read and absorbed. Why not include medical professionals on the list of readers? A great resource exists in art and literature, something that can help not only health providers but also their potential patients. If the integration of art and science is attained by applying medical humanities analysis to literature such as *Death in Venice*, a better understanding of aging, death and other human experiences can be gained. Only then will aging patients get the care they deserve.

[89] Rapport, P. The Nature of Self and How It Is Experienced Beyond the Health Care Setting.

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