

The Treatment and Function of Latent Homosexuality in
André Gide's *L'Immoraliste* and Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig*

by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family and friends who supported me throughout the Master's programme at the Dalhousie German Department.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the theme of homosexuality presented in *The Immoralist* (1902) by André Gide and in *Death in Venice* (1912) by Thomas Mann. Evidence of homosexuality in the texts is substantiated in detail and the way in which the theme is approached, including how it fits into the structure of the narratives, is also examined. Given that these texts are quite complex, the resounding message of this theme can only be assessed through consideration of the novellas as whole works of art. Thus, the other major themes from each text are reviewed prior to reaching conclusions about the 'intended' message behind each work. This thesis proposes that *The Immoralist* centres on the search for the authentic self, while *Death in Venice* concerns the downfall of the artist from the height of dignity and fame. The role of homosexuality as a theme is gauged as it relates to these interpretations.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The critical histories of André Gide's *L'Immoraliste* (1902) and Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912) show that moralistic readers were the first to disapprove of these works of fiction in view of the homosexual theme. Due to the ultimately negative view of homosexuality presented in these works, homosexuals themselves also took exception to these depictions of homoerotic love. However, both of these initial perspectives overemphasize the role that homosexuality plays in these stories.

Understandably, being such an intriguing and uncommon theme of that epoch, the homosexual element is difficult to overlook. In fact, these particular pieces of literature can be hailed as some of the first major works from the European continent to address this facet of human sexuality, however veiled the depiction may be. The example from a few years prior to Oscar Wilde's infamous trials compounded with the political climate of the time leave no questions as to why these authors shielded both the protagonists and themselves with the use of multiple literary devices, leaving the exact explanation for the drama below the surface. It speaks to the genius of the two authors that one could potentially read these texts, superficially and perhaps abstractly, without realizing that they each discuss the plight of a homosexual.

Since literature has long been a public forum for the discussion and even social prescription of morals, it comes as no surprise that the reader feels the need to weigh the moral implications of same sex love as presented in these works, which can effectively overshadow the "intended" basis of discourse of each narrative. After all, with a title that explicitly labels Gide's protagonist as immoral, it seems obvious that this judgement has to do, at least in part, with Michel's sexual preference. In much the same way, knowing

Aschenbach's fate from Mann's title, the reader could see this in connection with or even caused by Aschenbach's hard-wired urges. From this perspective, overt advocacy for homosexuality does not appear to be one of the aims of either novella. Gide writes in the preface to *L'Immoraliste*, "je n'ai voulu faire en ce livre non plus acte d'accusation qu'apologie, et me suis gardé de juger"(8), which suggests that morals, while having a thematic presence, are secondary to the overall focus.

That being said, the even more controversial manifestation of homosexual attraction in pederasty pushes the moral issue further still. Michel and Aschenbach should be understood as individuals whose sexual urges had been overpowered by social confines, which led to sexual repression to the point of unawareness of their own tendencies. Only for the young and naïve objects of their affection can they even remotely express and begin to acknowledge the true nature of their feelings. The imbalance of power intrinsic to this relationship may be what allows Michel to act on his sexual urges. Within the context of both narratives, the pederastic relationship forces self-actualization to be just beyond reach; it is a form of unrequited love, which undoubtedly represents the reality of many homosexuals from that time and, in some cases, sadly, still today. With no possibility of fulfilment through the young boys, Michel and Aschenbach are almost automatically doomed to tragedy. In a general sense, as Max Kirsch notes, "the relative experience of queer peoples is comparable with all those who have been marginalized" (36). After close examination of the two works, one discovers that the homoerotic nature of the attractions in question is used as a device to propel the stories; it does not define them.

Others have dwelled on the foundations in reality that both authors employed from their own lives and regarded the narratives thus as autobiographical, extending the implication even to Mann's and Gide's own sexual orientations. Such preoccupation is not only inconsequential, but also presumptuous. Only with the unfair advantage that comes with the advancement of the last century since the publication of these novels do we benefit from the information contained in the daily journals of Gide and Mann, which incidentally confirm that both men had experienced homoerotic urges and also acted on them. These intimate details are beside the point when it comes to the two texts in question. The only use in examining the autobiographical details from the texts is to separate them from the creative tangents and embellishments that succeed in elevating the novellas to works of art.

What are these texts really about? What use did homosexuality serve in creating the characters Michel and Aschenbach? Despite Gide's prefaced intentions, is there a resulting judgment of homosexuality implied by the respective novellas? In order to assess the importance and centrality of the theme of homosexuality in the texts, the other major themes must also be examined within the framework of each narrative. The major themes to be discussed that are common to both novellas include travel, illness and death, aestheticism, and morals. While the texts themselves include the homosexual theme as a means to construct specific personages, the present work seeks to analyze this theme in particular so as to reveal its treatment and function. This thesis aims to show that the *central axis* of each text has, in fact, little to do with homosexuality or morals in general, but rather the search for the authentic self in *L'Immoraliste* and the downfall of the artist from the height of fame in *Der Tod in Venedig*.

CHAPTER 2: INTERPLAY OF MAJOR THEMES

Section 1: Autobiography

Both Gide and Mann lent their narratives a multitude of experiences from their own lives. These details provide frameworks on which to build the rest of the stories. The parallel between Michel and Gide or Aschenbach and Mann provides a base layer, but only extends as far as the facts from Gide's and Mann's lives. Beyond the point at which the fiction takes over, author and protagonist no longer serve as logical equivalencies and it is no longer effective to draw conclusions about the authors by way of Michel or Aschenbach, or vice versa. How far do the similarities reach? To what extent does the fiction apply to the truth?

In Patrick Pollard's book on the history of Gidean ideas, *Homosexual Moralist* (1991), he concedes in reference to *L'Immoraliste* that "it is clear that many of the incidental details and a number of character traits owe much to the author himself and to the life he led in Algeria" (350). Klaus Mann attributes the "very effectiveness of the novel [...] to its autobiographical impact" (104). Guérard called it "a controlled transposition of personal experience" (109). In the introduction to an English translation of *L'Immoraliste*, Alan Sheridan asserts that the novella "examines the case of a man with wife and child, means and career, a man caught up therefore in a complicated network of overlapping relations and responsibilities, who comes to see his whole life as a hypocritical sham and, in pursuit of his true, authentic, homosexual self, abandons everything. This was, *in potentia*, at least, the central drama of Gide's own life" (x).

As far-reaching as this similarity seems, Gide knew that, in theory, a work of art is far removed from reality. It stands to reason that borrowing too much from his real life

would work counter to making a creatively fuelled work of fiction. At this juncture, Gide proceeds so as not to make the similarities between Michel's life and his own too pronounced. Gide makes a series of modifications to aid in this dissimulation. As Sheridan points out, sometimes the fiction differs from the autobiographical by using simple reversal, as evidenced in the following:

[...] Michel is an academic (not a writer). His mother (not his father) dies during his childhood. His wife Marceline is beautiful and fair, and of Catholic background (Madeleine Gide was rather plain and dark, and a Protestant). The route taken by Michel and Marceline on their honeymoon, and many of the events that take place then, come not from the Gides' honeymoon, but from an earlier trip to North Africa, etc. (Gide Eng vers xi)

Indeed, the basis for the story is largely a transplant from Gide's life. Still, Klaus Mann was correct in recognizing that there is duality in the relationship between truth and fiction from the novella, saying that this subjectivity was another reason for its effectiveness (104). Ambiguity incites curiosity. One could argue that a factual framework translates into a realistic narrative, which in this case, it did.

The following quote reveals a good deal about Gide's aesthetic, which roots itself in reality through personal experience:

That a germ of Michel exists in me goes without saying ... How many germs we carry in us, which will burgeon only in our books! They are what botanists call 'sleeping eyes.' But if, by an act of will, you suppress them, *all but one*—how it springs up at once and grows! How it seizes at once upon the

sap! My recipe for creating a hero is simple enough. Take one of these germs, put it in the pot by itself – and you soon obtain an admirable individual.

For Thomas Mann, Aschenbach's initial conceptualization was based on Goethe's old-age love affair with a teenage girl, but this would change when Mann travelled to Italy in May 1911. He went to Venice accompanied by his wife Katia and his brother Heinrich; they stayed at the Hôtel des Bains. As Prater puts it, "the incidents of the journey and stay [...] form[ed] themselves into the bones of the novella [...] the background for *Death in Venice* (88)". Prater also notes that "[a]s [Mann] began *Death in Venice* and lent Aschenbach so much of himself and of his own work and life, both these strands were woven in: the search for a new classicism, in hard application on the brink of exhaustion, and the achievement of honours and dignity in an apparently solid bourgeois existence" (88).

Like Gide, Mann used a number of incidental details from his own experience to fill out Aschenbach's reality. The borrowings include:

[...] the strange figure at the Munich cemetery, the disappointment of Brioni, the repulsive ageing 'queen' on their gloomy ship from Pola to Venice, the suspect gondolier, the muddle with the luggage on departure (Heinrich's, in fact, not his own), the cholera outbreak (actually in Palermo, only rumoured in Venice), the sinister singer. (Prater 88)

The most notable adoption to the novella from Mann's trip to Venice was, of course, the infatuation with a Polish boy, Count Wladyslaw Moes, who came forward in the 1960s and made headlines in German newspapers, claiming to be the 'real' Tadzio.

Moes “confirmed the accuracy of Mann’s depiction of his mother, sisters and older friend” (Mann Eng vers 228). Though the certainty of this archetypal connection has since been disputed by scholars who believe other boys may have inspired the character Tadzio, many writings on Mann’s novella still reference Moes. Uncertainty surrounding who the precise source was aside, it is clear that Mann based Tadzio on a boy he observed on the beach in Venice because his wife Katia wrote about the experience in her memoirs: “He immediately had a weakness for the youth, he liked him inordinately, and he always watched him on the beach with his friends. He did not follow him through all of Venice, but the youth did fascinate him, and he thought about him often” (Mann Eng vers 228). Like Gide, Thomas Mann layers the remainder of his narrative on top of this factual framework, and then allows the transposition to take on a life of its own.

Section 2: Travel

The element of travel is central to the plot of both narratives and to the psychological development of the protagonists. After all, escaping one’s everyday surroundings is an effective psychological trigger that can bring about a new perspective on the world, or on life in general. The beginning sequence in both novellas is marked by imminent travel, which lays the groundwork for the eventual transformation that Aschenbach and Michel each undergo. Liberation from the very social confines that caused both men to suppress or sublimate the inexplicable energy that fuelled their “*Flucht drang*” (Mann 16) was exactly what they longed for.

At the beginning of *L’Immoraliste*, Michel begins recounting his story after his marriage to Marceline. They stay at Michel’s apartment in Paris on their wedding night,

and they leave for Tunisia soon afterward on their honeymoon and eventually arrive in Biskra, Algeria. It is not only a change of scenery that Michel needs, but also the change in culture. In Biskra, there are no nosey neighbours or other people who might insert themselves into Michel's life. As an outsider, one has the impression that one is "off the grid", so to speak, especially being in a place like Algeria, which is so dramatically different than France. Therefore, social formalities and other customs that might have been expected of them as members of society in France are no longer relevant, and they get to skip over these things as visitors in North Africa. What is important for Michel is that he is allowed to relax and get some space from the person he had passively become as a result of social pressure. Although Michel is not yet conscious of the reason he feels uncomfortable in his own skin in French society, it could be argued that he is subconsciously aware that his attraction to men marginalizes him because he does not share the same feelings as 'everybody' else.

Later in the trip when Michel falls ill, his surroundings take on an important role. In combination with the social freedom, Michel's convalescence could not have taken place unless he had felt the happiness brought to him by the local youth, who were invited into his home by his wife, Marceline. French children likely could not have elicited the reaction that the Algerian children did due to their not being foreign or 'other' to him. This will be a subject of further discussion in the later sections.

In *Der Tod in Venedig*, Aschenbach considered travelling as far away as the tigers, but eventually settled on Venice. By contrast to Michel's reason for travel, Aschenbach's is much more pressing: writer's block. His many years of hard work and

discipline can no longer be forced. His mind simply will not let him. Thus, Aschenbach's mental journey begins before he has even left Munich. Stuck in a difficult situation, Aschenbach's flight impulse engages and he wastes no time taking leave of his regimented life in exchange for the Mediterranean seaside. Setting, then, plays an important role in liberating him from the confines of the stringent life he had created in Germany.

Concurrently, the theme of travel is relevant to Aschenbach because it is his end result. Venice is Aschenbach's symbolic purgatory—but instead of being judged by a greater being, the dignified author must focus his energy internally for the first time. At his advancing age, it is no wonder that this entirely foreign concept causes him to feel euphoria when he is in the presence of the object of his affection, but ultimately his journey is too difficult and sends him into a tailspin.

Section 3: Illness and Death

This theme marks the trend toward decadence that was quite common to turn-of-the-century literary thought. Other decadent themes included: “sickness, decay, perversion, artificiality, and aestheticism” (qtd. in Schulz). Appearing in instrumental form in both novellas, illness ironically *helps* Michel to discover his true desires, and death brings Aschenbach's suffering to an end (although neither did so singlehandedly, but rather in combination with other factors). The distinction between mental and physical health is explored in both *récits*, and the inherent association of illness to homosexuality, which is more prominent in Mann, is troublesome.

Gide's novella portrays Michel's physical and mental health as factors that generally function independently, but also have the potential for influence between them. This relationship may be best described as symbiotic. Initially, Michel's illness causes a change in his mental state because it causes him to be extremely self-absorbed and he begins to realize his true desires. His life thus far had been centred on nothing but external factors, namely "ruines [et] des livres" (Gide 23), which can explain his lack of self-awareness up until this point. Escaping the restrictive environment of study creates favourable conditions in which to pursue the search within himself, which had to circumvent the barriers that kept his homosexuality repressed. Then, when he experiences symptoms of tuberculosis and is at his worst physical health in Biskra, his tone is not marked by worry or fear of death, or anything that might indicate a poor or declining mental state. He does address the effects of his illness on his body, but does not comment on his mental status. By example (as opposed to description), it becomes obvious that his mind is fixated on his favoured company; the mere presence of a local young boy, Bachir, was what he needed to begin loving life once more. (Michel would have the reader believe that the inspiration was on account of the boy's good health, but since Michel is an unreliable narrator, the real reason is still up for debate.) Once Michel returns home and by then is almost cured, he is a changed man. Although his physical health remains stable, Marceline's health begins to decline, which showcases the fact that Michel's mental state has not reverted from its self-absorption, given his immoral actions toward her and others. As the novel progresses, Michel treads the fine line between self-involvement and selfishness, which seems to go hand in hand with his gradual acceptance of his homosexuality. This sequence of events shows a distinct affiliation between

physical and mental health and how they both contributed to recognizing his sexual preference. If it were not for the mental switch to survival mode caused by his physical health, he may never have faced his repressed sexuality. This encapsulates illness' ironic sobering effect.

In Gide's novella the association between illness and homosexuality is muted in comparison with Mann's. Being ill leads Michel to discover newfound pleasures, but also causes him to spread the contagion onto his wife, or so we assume. When Michel falls ill, he trends toward homosexuality, which feeds into his convalescence. Once Marceline contracts tuberculosis, it is Michel's homosexual desires that distance him from her. This eventually takes away her will to live. Thus, Michel's homosexuality is connected with his own health, but is duly coupled with the illness of his wife, illustrating a harsh selfishness in individualism.

In Mann's narrative, the connection between mental and physical health is shown as analogous instead of opposite, as in Gide. Where Michel's poor physical health incites his mental health to convalesce, Aschenbach's mental and physical health decline in tandem. An obvious difference in the two situations is that young Michel is aware of his sickness and pledges to focus only on getting better, and the exhausted Aschenbach, although aware of the potential of contracting cholera, nihilistically allows his obsession with Tadzio to feed his 'drunken' state.

In addition, Aschenbach's homosexual attraction is causal to his illness and subsequent death. If he had not been pursuing Tadzio and his family through Venice, he would not have eaten the infected strawberries from the street vendor and become ill. In

effect, Aschenbach's homosexuality causes his own demise, while Michel's indirectly causes the death of his wife and child.

Section 4: Aestheticism

Adding to the decadence showcased in both novellas, aesthetics are a central concern in *Der Tod in Venedig* and play an accessory role in *L'Immoraliste*. Gide's novella consistently places Michel's sexual attraction in direct correlation to aesthetic value. Meanwhile, Mann's story reflects on the relation of art to beauty, of fame and the artist and on the roots of pederasty in aestheticism.

Each time Michel meets a new person, he provides an opinionated description of the person's physical appearance. These descriptions serve as primary evidence for Michel's homosexuality, given their nature. For example, upon first meeting Bachir, Michel's characterization of him includes the words "un petit Arabe au teint brun", "grands yeux silencieux", "avec un mouvement de grâce animale et câline", "bras nus", "pieds [...] nus", "chevilles [...] charmantes", et "sa mignonne épaule" (Gide 41-42). In using such emotive words, there is evidently a focus on the young boy's pleasing appearance and subordinate demeanour, e.g. things that Michel finds attractive. In describing his wife, by contrast, he simply states, "Marceline était très jolie" (Gide 27). He mentions in passing that she is blonde, but does not appear delicate. Other than that, her physical beauty remains unmentioned and certainly is not the focus of Michel's thoughts or preoccupation if we are to look at the narrative as representative. Later in the story, Michel becomes acquainted with the son of Bocage, who manages Michel's farm, named Charles. At first Michel describes him as "un beau gaillard, si riche de santé, si souple, si bien fait" (Gide 115), but when Charles returns the second summer to work on

the farm, Michel has had a change of heart and inwardly criticizes his “chapeau melon” and remarks to himself “avec dégoût qu’il avait laissé pousser ses favoris” (Gide 191). The specificity of emotion behind the words describing men denotes physical attraction or revulsion, as the case may be.

In particular, Mann’s *Der Tod in Venedig* accentuates aestheticism throughout the progression of the narrative. Once Aschenbach becomes entranced with Tadzio in realizing that his reluctance to leave Venice was solely based on this infatuation, he spends an afternoon observing his muse while composing what he describes as an exquisite piece of prose:

Nie hatte er die Lust des Wortes süßer empfunden, nie so gewußt, das Eros im Worte sei, wie während der gefährlich köstlichen Stunden, in denen er, an seinem rohen Tische unter dem Schattentuch, im Angesicht des Idols und die Musik seiner Stimme im Ohr, nach Tadzios Schönheit seine kleine Abhandlung,—jene anderthalb Seiten erlesener Prosa formte, deren Lauterkeit, Adel und schwingende Gefühlsspannung binnen kurzem die Bewunderung vieler erregen sollte. (Mann 87)

Aschenbach’s theory behind this inspiration appears later in the novel in chapter five in the form of a conversation between Socrates and Phaedrus, which is an imitation of Plato’s dialogue *Phaedrus* (ca. 360 B.C.). “Denn die Schönheit, Phaidros, merke das wohl, nur die Schönheit ist göttlich und sichtbar zugleich, und so ist sie denn also des Sinnlichen Weg, ist, kleiner Phaidros, der Weg des Künstlers zum Geiste” (Mann 134). The reader can take from this that Aschenbach believed Tadzio’s beauty could foster

good artwork by tapping into this connection between the ‘divine’ and ‘visible’. Yet, later in the same passage, just as the writing later turned out to be faulty, so Aschenbach also expresses his belief that the artist is doomed to debauchery: “Siehst du nun wohl, daß wir Dichter nicht weise noch würdig sein können? Daß wir notwendig in die Irre gehen, notwendig liederlich und Abenteuer des Gefühles bleiben?” (Mann 134). In this manner, the narrative moves from discussing beauty and art to the artist’s relationship to fame. Where the narrator had once proudly described Aschenbach’s journey to fruition as an artist throughout chapter two, the reader now experiences the underlying reason why Aschenbach’s career alone could not sustain his existence: the artist is by nature attracted to the abyss of knowledge at any cost. Aschenbach had made himself a regimented life so as to combat this, but his conscious rationalization to do this was to live up to the legacy of his ancestors. Now past the point of no return in his sexual self-discovery, Aschenbach looks at his life’s accomplishments with defeat: “Denn wie sollte wohl der zum Erzieher taugen, dem eine unverbesserliche und natürliche Richtung zum Abgrunde eingeboren ist?” (Mann 135). He refers to fame and social status as “*eine Posse*” (‘a farce’), which tells the reader that he has resigned completely to his errant path. Aschenbach, whose life was once dedicated to the pursuit of beauty in form, can now see nothing but the end result of his pursuit: the loss of dignity.

The final association to aestheticism in Mann’s novel is the root of pederasty in the culture of ancient Greece. Myriad allusions to Greek gods and myths throughout the narrative point toward a connection to the central plot line: the love affair with Tadzio. To name a few, Mann made allusions to Phäake, Amor, Nymph, Eros, Zeus, Orion, Phaidros, Narziß, Semele and Zephyros, often comparing Tadzio to these figures. These

little clues are strewn about the narrative, some as small as the pomegranate juice that Aschenbach drank while the street performers played on the terrace of the hotel. In effect, Mann curbed the attention of the reader to the respected and noble origins of the pederastic relationship from Greek culture, taking emphasis away from the contemporary ideas surrounding homosexuality. Aestheticizing the cause of Aschenbach's infatuation somehow made it easier to digest for Mann's contemporary audience and for the character himself.

Section 5: Morals

As previously mentioned, the moral values presented in Gide and Mann's books are not likely the intended focus of the authors. This holds true, (the comma here I would delete) especially with respect to judging Michel and Aschenbach as individuals. Questions surrounding the role of the characters' socio-political environments are, perhaps, more productive, since a good deal of their behaviour is attributable to the European political climate of that time—both in general, (i.e. social effects of the impending world war) and more specifically pertaining to the ghastly treatment of queers. One can, indeed, draw moral conclusions about the societies in which Michel and Aschenbach exist when considering their role in forming these characters as we are introduced to them at the beginning of the novellas. From today's perspective, there is no wonder why these characters were deeply troubled by their sexual identities. A queer person was by definition excluded from the so-called ideal or universally approved norm, which, for them, translated into continued curiosity about the breakdown of further taboos. This tendency still occurs in today's more liberated North American youth in the

form of widespread interest in body art, piercings, drugs, and all things non-mainstream. Allowing the proverbial pendulum to swing in the opposite direction due to being excluded from what society sees as perfection is all too understandable. With this perspective, we may better understand the notable discussion of virtue versus instinct and Nietzschean nihilism echoed in the two texts.

The conflict between virtue and instinct is a major leitmotiv in *L'Immoraliste*. The definition of virtue is ever-changing on account of the fact that it is a social construct. What makes certain behaviour ethical and other behaviour unethical is entirely a product of the morals adopted by each culture in any given time period. Having already mentioned the political climate of Michel's time, it is evident that Michel's instincts do not jive with what his culture saw as acceptable, which induced significant inner turmoil. Throughout the narrative, Michel is presented with a number of opportunities to choose between a "virtuous" and an instinctual course of action. This is evidenced by his choice to go on extended evening walks instead of caring for his ill wife, or saying nothing when little Moktir stole Marceline's scissors, or taking his anger at society out on his wife's friends who visit her after the miscarriage. Just as he argues that lying becomes easier the more one does it, so he also shows by example that being selfish works the same way. To be fair, however, instinct and virtue are not mutually exclusive, and clearly do overlap in certain circumstances. In Michel's defence, he searches for the boundaries surrounding this relationship out of altruism. Though his love for Marceline is purely platonic, he is aware on some level that his self-indulgence is a threat to her and has moments of lament. It is the momentum behind his selfish deeds that triggers a form of Nietzschean nihilism, and reinforces his need to explore his instincts.

For Aschenbach, his whole life was spent building the wall of virtue to hold back his instincts. By the time we are introduced to him, his carefully constructed existence is in decay. Having been sublimated for so long into stimulating his writing, Aschenbach's instincts burst into his consciousness practically at once with the sight of Tadzio and the strange male figures. He, too, is presented with opportunities to be virtuous that he ultimately shuts down, such as the choice to stay on in Venice instead of discontinuing access to his kryptonite (Tadzio), or the choice to keep the outbreak of cholera a secret, or the choice to follow Tadzio through Venice. Once the infatuation has turned into an obsession, nihilism takes over and his fate is sealed.

CHAPTER 3: FUNCTION OF HOMOSEXUALITY

This chapter presents the evidence contained in the texts to support the claim that Michel and Aschenbach are, indeed, homosexuals. There will also be analyses that serve to explain why homosexuality fits into the narratives. Clues such as word choice, mythical or historical connotations, psychological state, and circumstances serve as the primary indicators for homosexual content. The difference between homosexuality and pederasty will also be assessed.

Section 1: *L'Immoraliste*

The first clue in the *récit* pertaining to Michel's sexuality is found in his apparent decision process to marry Marceline. Making this decision in the first place seems to argue against his being homosexual: if he wishes to marry a woman, he must be heterosexual. However, this assumes that his decision is made conscientiously. As he relays his justification for this life decision, he leaves much to be desired in the one area the reader is inclined to expect to justify this union—love. Michel's narrative sharply contrasts a typical romantic or charming story about, for example, how the two first realized they were attracted to one another. Instead, the reader is presented with the hard facts at the root of this marriage: Michel wanted to ease his dying father's worries about leaving his son alone in the world. He then fully admits that he did not love Marceline, and mentions that at his wedding he was moved only because he saw that other people were (Gide 20). He justifies marrying a woman he did not love by the following phrase: "Si je n'aimais pas, dis-je, ma fiancée, du moins n'avais-je jamais aimé d'autre femme"

(Gide 21). This quote alone serves to substantiate a clear lack of interest in women in general.

Further evidence to support the assertion that Michel is homosexual is his lack of physical attraction to Marceline. Though he describes her as beautiful, his actions do not denote any awareness of her sexuality. It is not until they have survived Michel's bout of tuberculosis during their extended honeymooning in North Africa that they finally consummate the marriage in Sorrento. By this time, it has been several months since their wedding, which suggests that there was no hurry, and arguably that Michel was not sexually aroused by her. From Michel's account of the love-making experience, he seems to have enjoyed it, but having intercourse with his wife seems to be an attempt to test the waters of heterosexuality, so to speak. By contrast to his underwhelmed account of this experience, he relates his encounters with male figures with much more interest. This tells us that he consistently appreciates the males he encounters. Michel then states that he was just twenty-four at the time of his marriage and that he had barely thought of anything outside the world of academia in his life leading up to then. The reader takes from this that Michel was naïve, had no life experience, and thus, never allowed himself a chance to figure out who he was before attempting to give himself to someone else.

Additionally, the timing of this sexual encounter is suspect. Sure, it makes sense that Michel would wait until his health improved before being intimate with Marceline. After all, tuberculosis is contagious. The narrator does not mention the reason, but the events surrounding their intimacy tell us a fair bit. This physical union took place following a mishap with a drunk carriage driver who was endangering Marceline's life with his recklessness. Michel manages to keep Marceline safe by tackling the drunk,

whom he fantasizes about suffocating, but only roughs up. It is following this incident that the two make love. As Marceline lies sleeping next to him, Michel admits to himself how often he abandons her. His next thought is about living up to her expectations, and he proceeds to weep. He realizes that she had given him her every attention in helping him heal, but the moment he felt well enough to escape her he did, and consistently, at that. These feelings are all characterized by guilt, which he seems to be telling us was one of the reasons for his tenderness toward Marceline. In psychological terms, this is a negative motivation and not a positive one. Thus, he makes love to Marceline not for the inherent pleasure of it (positive), but because he is trying to make up for his poor behaviour and feels he owes her (negative). The threat of losing her causes him to pull her closer, but it is not for the 'right' reason. The drunken carriage driver evidently is another piece to the puzzle, since Michel's encounter with him directly precedes his intimacy with Marceline. For all the reader knows, the driver aroused Michel, who acted on his sexuality with his most obvious option: his wife. The scene ends with him placing a tender, loving and *pious* kiss between her closed eyes.

There is a distinct pattern whenever Michel introduces a new character to the story. Firstly, the majority of the new characters are male, and secondly, the few females he mentions (Moktir's mistress during the second trip to Biskra with whom he sleeps, the daughter of the Heurtevent family whose father repeatedly raped her, the servant girl the Heurtevents raped, and the prostitute mentioned at the end of the novel) are all associated with taboos. Though he claims to be intrigued by rejecting convention, his clear lack of interest in these women reinforces the fact that he has no desire for them in general. Furthermore, any conversations he might have had with women, except Marceline, are

never relayed. Women are simply not the focus of his attention. He relays only what he finds significant to his developmental journey, which includes numerous, prominent physical descriptions of men. His depiction of each male character is qualified by the extremes of attraction or revulsion. According to his positive portrayals of the men he encounters, he distinctly enjoys the company of the Arab children, 14 year-old Ashour, his labourers at La Morinière, Charles, Ménalque, Charles' younger brother Alcide, Bute, and two carriage drivers. Michel finds the other men in the novel ugly, and does not hold back in sharing this. Homosexuality is a logical explanation for this behaviour, including his encounters with women, which can be attributed to exploring his repressed sexuality.

Michel's attraction to men is, indeed, of a sexual nature. This is expressed by fetishisation, cropping and a distinct attraction to exoticness. He tends to focus on particular body parts when providing descriptions, as though he is staring at particular features of the men in his presence. The following description of Bachir exemplifies this: "Ses pieds sont nus, ses chevilles sont charmantes, et les attachent de ses poignets" (Gide 42). After he has noticed these specific features, Michel evidences his sexual stimulation by saying "[j]'ai besoin de la toucher" (Gide 42), while observing Bachir's shoulder. It is this consistent sexual attraction to the separate features on the boy's body that indicates fetishisation. He continually comments on exoticness, for example Bachir's "teint brun" (Gide 41), Lassif's "nudité dorée" (Gide 68), the field workers in Ravello with "belles peaux hâlées et comme pénétrées de soleil" (Gide 88), denoting a distinct attraction to darker skin. It also cannot be by mistake that this last quote is characterized by the use of the verb *pénétrer*. The consistency of this type of depiction of males throughout the narrative serves to prove that his attraction is most certainly of a sexual nature.

When Michel is at his worst point in his struggle with tuberculosis, Marceline brings Bachir into their home. The young boy's presence has a significant and lasting effect on Michel. It causes a turning point in Michel's convalescence and he, thus, begins to experience real feelings again. Michel's resulting restlessness upon his returning health is illustrated by his nighttime wanderings. On page 140, he describes how he busies himself as a distraction from his "humeur vagabonde", which by this time has already caused problems in his marriage. In this same passage, though he seems to be ignorant that these wanderings cause Marceline anxiety, he does express fear that they could come between him and his, now pregnant, wife. On the news of her pregnancy, he claims to have spared no expense in selecting an apartment in Paris, almost as if this might make up for his wandering mind. These nighttime adventures continue throughout the novella and show that no consequence is powerful enough to dissuade him from leaving her the next time. It seems that once the illusion of the future he imagined for them is shattered with Marceline's miscarriage, Michel is now resigned to this vice.

Michel makes it quite clear in a number of instances that he feels most comfortable in the company of men when Marceline is not around. This begins with his first inspiring meeting with Bachir. He repeats this while in the public gardens at Biskra with Marceline when the children come over: "Mais ce qui me gênait, l'avouerait-je, ce n'étaient pas les enfants, c'était elle" (Gide 56). He is simply annoyed with her habit of countering his every action, such as when he takes off his shawl and she wants to wear it. Her display of partner-like behaviour gets in the way of him pursuing his desire. Not long after this, Michel considers inviting Ashour into the apartment but does not, for fear that Marceline might be home (Gide 60). The same feeling resurfaces when Michel hunts for

eels in the pond with Charles: “il me semblait qu’elle eût un peu gêné de notre joie” (Gide 119). With each small progression toward embracing his homoerotic urges, Michel seems to gain slightly more distance from her. He recoils a little each time he lets her down severely, such as when she miscarries or has the embolism, but it is ultimately not enough to hold him back from his search to find his true self. His last few ‘adventures’ before Marceline’s death include a spontaneous kiss with an Italian carriage driver (Gide 235), sleeping outside on mats with a group of vermin-infested local men (Gide 241), and sleeping with Mektir’s mistress on their trip to Touggourt (Gide 251) while Marceline sleeps, half dead, back in their shabby hotel room.

Michel’s seemingly most sincere relationship is with Charles, the farm manager’s son. Upon his return to La Morinière the second summer, Michel greets Charles with coldness. Letting his memories of the past encroach on the present, Michel treats Charles as though they had been lovers who had suffered a bad break-up. Perhaps he blamed him for the effects their relationship had on his marriage. He comments on the boy’s ridiculous attire and disgusting side-burns. For a period of time, Michel’s ‘transformation’ goes sour, and he cannot seem to understand why. He apparently thought he could ‘have his cake and eat it too’, but did not realize that this necessarily ate away at his marriage vows to Marceline. He takes her away on another trip to Africa, which only manages to jeopardize her health even more. As her slow death approaches, they both see it coming. Michel tries not to lust after his “freedom” around Marceline, but she already knows he feels this way. The morning he comes home to her last vomiting of blood after having slept with a prostitute, her words to him are, “Oh! tu peux bien

attendre encore” (Gide 253), knowing that he would soon receive what he had been longing for.

The last figure in the novella for whom Michel exhibits an attraction is briefly mentioned in the closing paragraph. Prior to this, there was only one other mention of this character, which came at the beginning of the novel. The friend of Michel’s who transcribes the story provides this description in the introductory letter: “Un enfant kabyle était là, qui s’est enfui dès notre approche, escaladant le mur sans façon” (Gide 17). At this time, the boy’s relationship to Michel is not apparent. At the end of the narrative, however, it becomes clear: “Un aubergiste mi-français m’apprête un peu de nourriture. L’enfant, que vous avez fait fuir en entrant,” Michel explains to his friends, “me l’apporte soir et matin, en échange de quelques sous et de caresses” (Gide 258). Michel reveals that the child is “tendre et fidèle comme un chien” (Gide 258) with him. He describes how the boy’s sister is a prostitute who provided him comfort during the difficult first weeks after Marceline’s death. Thus, the closest example of Michel openly addressing an affinity for homosexuality is veiled behind an account of sexual activity with the sister. He explains: “Mais, un matin, son frère, le petit Ali, nous a surpris couchés ensemble. Il s’est montré fort irrité et n’a pas voulu revenir de cinq jours. ... Est-ce donc qu’il était jaloux?” (Gide 258). Directly after this thought he refers to the situation with the sister as a joke (“*farceur*”), “car moitié par ennui, moitié par peur de perdre Ali, depuis cette aventure je n’ai plus retenu cette fille.” The last few lines of Michel’s story are the most open and honest things he says in the entire narrative: “Elle ne s’en est pas fâchée ; mais chaque fois que je la rencontre, elle rit et plaisante de ce que je lui préfère l’enfant. Elle prétend que c’est lui qui surtout me retient ici. Peut-être a-t-elle un peu raison...” (Gide 258). It is

as if after all of Michel's indirectness throughout the entire narrative, he allows himself to be honest only at the end now that he has shared his story.

Quite obviously, Michel's homoerotic attraction is the strongest to the youth he encounters. By virtue of the fact that one of the largest veins of Michel's story, perhaps even the driving force, are the boys in his life, they appear to be the centre of his focus. With every change in location, there is a switch to a new group of male companions. In Biskra there were the children and the local peasants; back in France he had Charles, Butes, and Alcide; and the places in between are often marked by his nighttime walks. These walks symbolize his search for something to fulfil him, and this drive runs deep because it is this pleasure that motivates many of his actions throughout the narrative. The majority of his companions are young boys, and he admits even early on that he sought them out with intention. On his solo walks through the gardens in Biskra, he would purposefully bring his shawl even in the absence of wind or chill in the air, as he describes, "comme prétexte à lier connaissance avec celui qui me le porterait" (Gide 61). This signals that he is a pederast, most especially because he becomes sexually aroused by them, and prefers to be alone with them. His relationship with Ali is the singular admission he makes to substantiate pederasty. However, the clues point to this assertion all along.

Section 2: *Der Tod in Venedig*

Writing a novel containing any theme would presuppose that the author would have a certain knowledge about it. Continuing the discussion from the first chapter on his personal life, Thomas Mann lead an existence which could be separated into two parts:

the life he had with his wife and children, and a separate one he lead with his male lovers. Katia Mann wrote in her memoirs entitled *Meine ungeschriebenen Memoiren* that she was aware of Mann's affinity for males: "My husband transferred the pleasure that he indeed had from this very charming youth to Aschenbach, and stylized it to most extreme passion" (qtd. in Mann Eng vers. 228). Robert Tobin notes, "thus, like many other of Mann's infatuations and loves, Wladislaw Moes ended up a literary figure. There is [...] a clear historical and biographical basis for the presence of homosexuality in Mann's works." (Mann Eng vers. 228). Thomas Mann seemed to know enough about the gay culture of his time in order to scatter little hints at the answer to Aschenbach's inner struggle throughout the novella. When a reader is also acquainted with this demographic of society, there is no doubt that homosexuality runs deep in the pages of *Der Tod in Venedig*.

Aschenbach's story begins in Munich, where there has historically been a good deal of social liberalism. It was not unheard of that the less-travelled pathways in the public garden were a meeting spot for homosexuals since the time it was built near the end of the eighteenth century. This could account for the unusual description of the man Aschenbach comes upon on his walk: "Mäßig hochgewachsen, mager, bartlos, and auffallend stumpfnäsiger, gehörte der Mann zum rothaarigen Typ und besaß dessen milchige und sommersprossige Haut" (Mann 11). This man immediately falls under the column named "other" in the reader's brain, also owing to Mann's next sentence, which denotes the man's foreignness. Aschenbach is neither actively nor passively seeking an encounter here, since at this point he is still very much bound by sexual repression. After illustrating that repression in actively putting the stranger out of his mind, he is then

aware that the man is looking back at him. The description of this short sequence is markedly awkward:

Wohl möglich, daß Aschenbach es bei seiner halb zerstreuten, halb inquisitiven Musterung des Fremden an Rücksicht hatte fehlen lassen, denn plötzlich ward er gewahr, daß jener seinen Blick erwiderte und zwar so kriegerisch, so gerade ins Auge hinein, so offenkundig gesonnen, die Sache aufs Äußerste zu treiben, und den Blick des andern zum Abzug zu zwingen, daß Aschenbach, peinlich berührt, sich abwandte und einen Gang die Zäune entlang begann, mit dem beiläufigen Entschluß, des Menschen nicht weiter achtzuhaben. (Mann 13)

Even though Aschenbach walks away, he seems to have an idea that what just happened was more than it appeared. He suddenly is aware of a strange feeling, like something had just been revealed to him. The words used to describe his feelings are certainly akin to latent homosexuality:

[...] eine seltsame Ausweitung seines Innern ward ihm ganz überraschend bewußt, eine Art schweifender Unruhe, ein jugendlich durstiges Verlangen in die Ferne, ein Gefühl, so lebhaft, so neu oder doch so längst entwöhnt und verlernt, daß er, die Hände auf dem Rücken und den Blick am Boden, gefesselt stehen blieb, um die Empfindung auf Wesen und Ziel zu prüfen. (Mann 13)

Again, directly after stating how curious he was about analyzing this feeling, he dismisses it as nothing more than *Wanderlust*, the travel bug. (Coincidentally, this is the equivalent to the term Gide used to describe Michel's nighttime wanderings and

continual need to move around.) As his mind wanders into delusion, he begins daydreaming and rationalizes this by his recent hours of hard work and still overactive imagination. The dream that follows is full of exotic imagery, surely meant to symbolize his stirred up sexual energy. This is made clear when considering the phallic nature of many of the images used, for example: “aus Gründen von fettem, gequollenem und abenteuerlich blühendem Pflanzenwerk”, “haarige Palmenschäfte nah und ferne emporstreben”, “Vögel von fremder Art ... mit unförmigen Schnäbeln” (Mann 14). The stranger’s gaze then gives way, and Aschenbach goes back to strolling.

Evidently, psychological analysis plays an important role in determining Aschenbach’s mental and emotional state. Being that sexuality is the actual reason for Aschenbach’s feelings, this must somehow be connected with his own interpretation of what he experiences, which is a desire to travel. As we soon learn, his reason for travelling was his repressed sexuality.

The next sizeable clue to the homosexuality woven into the text comes in the second chapter, where the story of Aschenbach’s literary success is told. Many of the literary works have connections with homosexual authors, as Robert Tobin explains:

The “tapestry of the novel called *Maya*” (18) is inspired by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who had made speculations on male homosexuality that Mann quoted in his essay “On the German Republic” (*Von deutscher Republik* 154). “That powerful tale entitled *A Study in Abjection*” (19) actually has the German title of “*Ein Elender*,” ... *Elend* (“abject”) has the meaning of “banned” or “homeless” and thus connects its main character to all those queer, exotic, foreign strangers whom Aschenbach

meets en route to Venice. (Mann Eng. vers. 232) (Page numbers corrected – RT).

Tobin goes on to tie Schiller and Frederic of Prussia, who are mentioned in Aschenbach's writings, to homosexuality as well.

In the following chapter, Aschenbach decides to travel to Venice. Much like Gide's Michel, Aschenbach chooses a southern destination. As a setting, Venice works well with the homosexual theme because many considered it the most gay-friendly city in Italy at that time, including Mann himself, and this had to do with the relatively carefree lifestyle, history of romance, and a love of artistry. Though they appeared in his dream, Aschenbach opted not to go 'as far as the tigers'.

On the boat from Pola to Venice, Aschenbach encounters another man who strikes him as odd. He sees a group of young people, and only upon further inspection did he realize that one of them was, "*falsch*" (Mann 34). He inspects this man closely, in the way one would in judging sexual attraction, noting the man's wrinkles, make-up, wig, facial hair, fake teeth, and aged hands. Then, Aschenbach projects awareness of his own aging onto the man he sees, and whom he judges for having visibly modified his appearance as though he could, therefore, be accepted by young people. It stood for some sort of validation in the man's behaviour that he could sit among youth and even be mistaken for one, as Aschenbach just proved himself. Seeing this man is immensely unsettling for him and this passage comes immediately after this encounter:

Ihm war, als lasse nicht alles sich ganz gewöhnlich an, als beginne eine träumerische Entfremdung, eine Entstellung der Welt ins Sonderbare um sich

zu greifen, der vielleicht Einhalt zu tun wäre, wenn er sein Gesicht ein wenig verdunkelte und aufs neue um sich schaute (Mann 35).

It is at this moment that the ship leaves the shore. The sight of the openly homosexual man leads Aschenbach further into the world of homosexuality, which is a literal and symbolic departure into the unknown for an aging man full of fear.

The following instance that is characterized by homosexuality takes place when the ship approaches Venice and Aschenbach recalls a poet:

Er gedachte des schwermütig-enthusiastischen Dichters, dem vormals die Kuppeln und Glockentürme seines Traumes aus diesen Fluten gestiegen waren, er wiederholte im stillen einiges von dem, was damals an Ehrfurcht, Glück und Trauer zu maßvollem Gesange geworden, und von schon gestalteter Empfindung mühelos bewegt, prüfte er sein ernstes und müdes Herz, ob eine neue Begeisterung und Verwirrung, ein spätes Abenteuer des Gefühles dem fahrenden Müßiggänger vielleicht noch vorbehalten sein könne. (Mann 37)

Thomas Mann wrote a separate essay on the homosexuality of August von Platen, whose words inspired this passage in *Der Tod in Venedig*. It should also be mentioned that Platen died of cholera, just as Aschenbach does.

As the ship nears the shores of Venice, there is one more encounter with the sexually suspect aging passenger. He speaks to Aschenbach using a term of endearment, “*Liebchen*” (Mann 41), meaning roughly ‘sweetheart’. Just when Aschenbach is utterly revolted, the man also loses control of his dentures and it is at this point that the onlooker cannot take anymore and ‘escapes’.

The second last of the random, strange men used to denote a homosexual type is the gondolier with no licence who takes Aschenbach to the Lido. He is described as “ein Mann von ungefälliger, ja brutaler Physiognomie, seemännisch blau gekleidet, mit einer gelben Schärpe gegürtet und einen formlosen Strohhut, dessen Geflecht sich aufzulösen begann, verwegen schief auf dem Kopfe” (Mann 43). The way in which the gondolier’s movement is described evokes imagery of a homosexual act: the lanky man sitting behind Aschenbach puts his whole body into every stroke with lots of energy. There is an important contradiction in the fact that Aschenbach feels unsafe and potentially misguided by the gondolier, and yet he decides to let himself be led. This is a key moment for him, denoting an unprecedented willingness to allow things to take their natural course, though not without some lingering defensiveness.

The next and most obvious of all the clues to Aschenbach’s homosexuality takes shape in his immediate attraction to the young Polish boy, Tadzio. The initial depiction is of “ein[em] langhaarig[en] Knabe von vielleicht vierzehn Jahren” (Mann 50). By the length and detail of the subsequent description of the boy, it becomes obvious that Aschenbach is more than simply intrigued or surprised:

Mit Erstaunen bemerkte Aschenbach, daß der Knabe vollkommen schön war. Sein Antlitz, bleich und anmutig verschlossen, von honigfarbenem Haar umringelt, mit der gerade abfallenden Nase, dem lieblichen Munde, dem Ausdruck von holdem und göttlichem Ernst, erinnerte an griechische Bildwerke aus edelster Zeit, und bei reinster Vollendung der Form war es von so einmalig persönlichem Reiz, daß der Schauende weder in Natur noch

bildender Kunst etwas ähnlich Geglücktes angetroffen zu haben glaubte.

(Mann 50)

The noteworthy allusion to beauty exceeding that of the gods *and* art serves to place Aschenbach's reaction in the realm of wonder and sublimity. Logically, a response of such pronounced enthusiasm and awe suggests that Aschenbach's feelings may be sensual. Yet, at this juncture, there is a lack of overwhelming evidence to discern the exact nature of his fondness. The narrator goes on to provide further description, and Aschenbach apparently continues to observe the Polish family for an extended period of time. Thus far, nothing has stolen Aschenbach's attention so markedly, so intensely as this boy. He also likens the young Pole to the Greek sculpture of the boy pulling a thorn from his foot: "Man hatte sich gehütet, die Schere an sein schönes Haar zu legen; wie beim Dornauszieher lockte es sich in die Stirn, über die Ohren und tiefer noch in den Nacken" (Mann 51). This connotation draws on the pleasing attributes of prepubescent young men, their androgyny, and references the Greek notion of pederasty.

The last hint of homosexuality in this sequence is that Tadzio is marked as "sick". Aschenbach notices his pale face in contrast to his golden hair. The actual word used is "*leidend*" (Mann 51), which translates to 'in poor health', but is morphologically related to both "*leiden*" and "*Leidenschaft*": the former means 'to suffer', and the latter means 'passion'. Thus, there is a distinct connection to sexuality in the subtext, and the reason for Tadzio's 'poor health' could be homosexuality. As Robert Tobin states, "nineteenth-century medicine viewed homosexuality as an illness to be cured" (Mann Eng vers 235). The actual explanation of Tadzio's weak demeanour is never clarified in the text.

Another significant development occurs when Aschenbach realizes the cause of his failed attempt to leave Venice: Tadzio. The morning of his planned departure, Aschenbach felt a mild pang at the thought of leaving “it all”. It is not until that evening, after his misdirected luggage provided an excuse for him to stay, that he begins to grasp the true character of his affection for Tadzio. Seeing the boy after he attempted to escape his affinity triggers this realization.

Subsequently, Aschenbach begins to seek the boy out. At first, he toys with the idea that this is simply coincidental. Then, it becomes apparent that it is quite the opposite: Aschenbach intentionally follows the boy (and his family), watches him play on the beach and derives pleasure from the sight of him. The reader notices extended passages describing dream-like idolatry, including physical cues, like Tadzio running wet on the beach, tossing his hair, the turning and twisting of his body, laying outstretched in the sand, and his “*gemeißelten Arm*” (Mann 82). Aschenbach has reached a state of increasing drunkenness, and the narrator repeatedly refers to his “gratification”.

At the close of the fourth chapter, the tipping point of Aschenbach’s long-overdue sexual development culminates in the powerful words “*ich liebe dich*” (Mann 97) as a reaction to a narcissistic smile at him from the young boy. Contrary to the more casual English counterpart, “I love you”, this phrase in German is only used to describe true, serious, sensual love and cannot be interpreted otherwise. This admission proves to be too powerful for the tired, aging Aschenbach, who had spent too many years directing his sexual energy elsewhere and denied himself the acknowledgement of his own psychosexuality. As chapter five begins, Aschenbach has slipped into a mental state of mania and the grasp it has on him is relentless and unforgiving.

As a symbol of voluntarily relinquishing control and embracing his instincts, Aschenbach makes a meaningful trip to the barber. His desire to appear attractive and perhaps reclaim some of the years of unending emotional and physical turmoil bring him to allow the barber to accentuate his youth. He has his hair dyed darker in an ironically baptismal manner, gets a facial to refresh his skin, has a close shave with a straight razor, and even allows himself to be made up. This scene parallels Michel, *L'Immoraliste*, and his desire to tan his skin and shave his beard, except with an added touch of obsession. The act of dramatically changing one's physical appearance is closely tied with psychological change; this fact corroborates both protagonists' wish to accept themselves in their own right, and create the possibility that others may observe the change as well. Where Aschenbach once disdained the flamboyant man from the boat ride to Venice, the reader may now see this in hindsight as deluded jealousy. Now without qualms about his own appearance, Aschenbach continues his doomed pursuit of young Tadzio.

The last significant homosexual component of *Der Tod in Venedig* surrounds the final male character who stands for the homosexual type. As a group, these transient personages act as guides along Aschenbach's way to his sexual enlightenment, showing the way by example. In the fifth chapter, Aschenbach is sitting on the terrace outside the Hôtel des Bains and a music troupe comes to play for the crowd. The guitarist is the focus of the description surrounding this group, which suggests that he was of particular interest to Aschenbach. Although this particular man does not exhibit overly flamboyant behaviour, his "otherness" is what links him to the other male figures. Much like the greeter on the boat to Venice whom Aschenbach had likened to a circus director in light of his rash movements and empty speech, this musician now echoes those same qualities

with his “plastisch-dramatische Art zum Vortrag” (Mann 111). His physical features also mirror the same ‘foreign’ qualities that characterize the previous loner-types:

Schmächtig gebaut und auch von Antlitz mager und ausgemergelt, stand er, abgetrennt von den seinen, den schäbigen Filz im Nacken, so daß ein Wulst seines roten Haars unter der Krempe hervorquoll, in einer Haltung von frecher Bravour auf dem Kies und schleuderte zum Schollern der Saiten in eindringlichem Sprechgesang seine Späße zur Terrasse empor, indes vor produzierender Anstrengung die Adern auf seiner Stirne schwellen. (Mann 111)

Words such as “*schmächtig*”, “*abgetrennt*”, “*schleudern*”, and “*frech*” suggest otherness and unpredictability. These words in combination with the description of his hair and the reference to blood flow from the effort of playing connect the ‘queerness’ to sexuality. Although the guitarist does not evoke sexual arousal for Aschenbach (quite the opposite), it seems that the recognition of a possible union, however remote, is what sparks his interest.

Aschenbach’s attraction to Tadzio starts out innocently. At first, he enjoys observing the boy whenever he is in view. It is once he becomes aware of just how deeply the boy evokes emotions in him through his failed attempt to leave Venice that he is then motivated to seek out this gratification incessantly. It is at this point that the nature of Aschenbach’s feelings begin to show a pederastic attraction. Tadzio is, of course, only about fourteen years old, or so Aschenbach estimates. The aging man suggests repeatedly that he idolizes youth and worries about his aging features. Young Tadzio is ultimately

his reason for living, and indirectly causes his death through the infected strawberries. Seen in sequence, these facts make it clear that pederasty is a component of the novella.

CHAPTER 4: TREATMENT OF HOMOSEXUALITY

This chapter discusses the literary techniques that Gide and Mann used to place this theme into the text such that it would remain ambiguous and, therefore, curb the negative attention it would surely incite from pre-World War I readers. As previously mentioned, this is largely due to the social and political climate in which these texts were composed. These parameters are justifiable, considering that they helped to ensure the personal safety of the authors, not to mention ingenious, since they still manage to convey social commentary about the inequality and bigotry faced by homosexuals the world over. The resulting messages from the novellas will then be reviewed with the intention of revealing the inherent treatment of the theme as a whole.

Section 1: *L'Immoraliste*

The word '*homosexualité*' cannot be found within the pages of *L'Immoraliste*. Indeed, it is never openly discussed. Michel only describes one expressly homosexual act at the very end, and the extent of the description was a "*caresse*". How does that affect the way this theme is represented in general? Well, homosexuality takes its shape in the text through suspicion and indirect allusion, which was the subject of the preceding chapter. Michel's inner feelings are hinted at strongly, but the reader must analyze the text in order to get to this underlying explanation for the drama, which Gide hides under the surface layers of the text. He uses a number of techniques that succeed in laying distance between what Michel describes and what the reader can only speculate actually occurred.

First of all, the text is written in the first person, which in theory should reveal the protagonist's inner thoughts. As opposed to a third-person text in which events can be described from an omniscient vantage point, a first-person text has a particular focus on the inner world of the protagonist, and cannot speak for the other characters' thoughts or feelings. Even so, Michel manages to skim over things, providing scant description and only including the bare-bones events. This makes the scope of the narrative quite narrow, which does not generally give the reader much context to go on.

The story is filtered again because Michel is dictating it to one of his listening friends who transcribes it. So now we have a first-person narrator whose account is actually written by a third person. This takes a traditional first-person narrative and puts a spin on it: it almost takes the form of a confession. The reader is reminded on multiple occasions that Michel is relaying his story to his friends, for example when he provides a physical description of Marceline, "Marceline était très jolie. Vous le savez ; vous l'avez vue" (Gide 27). This makes the reader aware that Michel's intended, immediate audience has pre-existing knowledge of certain things that the reader does not have.

Adding to this, the narrative does not take place at the time when the action happens. Michel recounts this story to his friends three months after the fact, therein creating opportunity to reformulate, refocus, or modify the events. Michel's guilt that likely ensued after Marceline's death is a probable culprit for a reinterpretation of the events leading up to it.

The transcribing friend expresses his concern about Michel's morality in the opening letter to the narrative addressed to a government official with these words: "Le récit qu'il nous fit, le voici. Tu l'avais demandé ; je te l'avais promis ; mais à l'instant de

l'envoyer, j'hésite encore, et plus je le relis et plus il me paraît affreux. Ah ! que vas-tu penser de notre ami?" (Gide 13). Thus, the reader is told that his friends do not necessarily understand or agree with what Michel has told them. Judging by the following quote from the end of the novella, Michel's friends stifled their outrage: "Il nous semblait hélas ! qu'à nous la raconter, Michel avait rendu son action plus légitime. De ne savoir où la désapprouver, dans la lente explication qu'il en donna, nous en faisant presque complices" (Gide 257). This disapproval from his friends is very important because it stands to reason that Michel knew very well how they would feel when he told them the story; knowing their reaction makes it all the more likely that he would curb the unpleasant parts, making it a little easier for them to hear and him to tell. All of this adds up to a narrator who is unreliable. With hints being the extent of the evidence, there is no choice but to assume that Michel's account of events is tamed, and perhaps even filled with half-truths.

In general, then, this story is anything but straight-forward. The narrative is removed by two steps from the 'original' story: Michel tells his friends, who tell the reader, and all of this happens three months after Marceline's death, which is plenty of time for Michel's guilty thoughts to accumulate, and cause him to colour the truth.

Upon multiple readings, it becomes more and more apparent that Gide was quite deliberate in his method of framing the story so that it would not be direct or entirely clear. The narrative structure, in fact, compares itself to the game of telephone. This keeps the audience at a safe distance, where they are not privy to the entirety of Michel's inner world. The way the narrative progresses leaves the reader knowing that something is missing in order for it to make sense. This thesis argues that the explanation for the

missing piece of Michel's life puzzle is his homosexuality. Given that the homosexual portion of society was continually being shunned and outcast at the time *L'Immoraliste* was first published in 1901, Gide was by no means obliged to fully disclose that particular characteristic of his protagonist. Perhaps a more artistic challenge for the novella was to have the reader suspect what the 'drama' is all about, without knowing for sure.

The effect for the reader is that it creates a deep, dark secret, which until the end remains abstract, save for his conversations with Ménalque, which skirt around it without naming it. In the potentially erotic circumstances with men that Michel scantily depicts, for example spending the night at Ménalque's home, sleeping on the mats with the Arabs, or whatever he did during his nighttime walks, the reader is left to fill in the blanks mentally. The resulting story is, then, a controlled description of Michel's actions surrounding his homosexuality, but hardly a "coming out". The focus is not on his sexual instinct, though it had been latent for years and accounts for his inner struggle that continually pushes him forward. What this narrative actually is, is the account of how a young man begins the search for his authentic self amongst serious challenges.

After all, Michel's circumstances should not be forgotten. He married to make his father happy before his death, not by his own desire. He did not marry for love, either. Most importantly, he married before he was old and wise enough to recognize his own sexual identity! The journey he began throughout this novella is far from over, too. Even at the end, he is only just admitting to himself that he prefers men over women. Evidently, coming to terms with this revelation is not something a person can do overnight.

Indeed, Gide is consistent in leaving out any explicitly homosexual acts that may have occurred in the situations Michel describes throughout the narrative. That is, of course, until the one small admission Michel makes at the end of the novella about preferring little Ali to his older sister. Significantly, the very last line of the *récit* marks the first and only direct mention of Michel's homosexuality, and this is followed by an ellipsis. The etymology of the word 'ellipsis' comes from Latin via Greek '*elleipsis*', meaning to leave out. The juxtaposition of an admission of his homosexuality and the ellipsis points at the fact that this was the missing element all along. Thus, at the end of the book, the reader is able to confirm suspicions that Michel is homosexual, effectively filling in all the blanks that had been created in the explanation of events with that one crucial detail.

Throughout the narrative, Michel is extremely self-involved and apparently quite ignorant of what goes on around him. Obviously, Michel did not premeditate the death of his unborn child or that of his wife, and any intention of his that had a part in their deaths (his negligent habits, or the fact that Marceline likely contracted tuberculosis from him) is figurative. All that Michel really expressed was a desire to discover what makes him truly happy. In his case, it just so happens that he derives happiness from 'unorthodox' means. But, it is no wonder that he feels the need to be selfish because he lives in a society that runs on a currency that is worthless to him. The entire social script that is designed to fuel procreation (grow up and make a living in order to get married and support a family), which are largely the reasons everyone else gives for living, do not apply to him. On the contrary, his instincts are in line with exactly what society labels as blasphemous and immoral. Thus, faced with living a deeply unfulfilling life, he attempts to make his

existence more tolerable. Taking his description at face value, the majority of his efforts are relatively harmless. It could even be argued that his attempt at compromise in his marriage is chiefly praiseworthy, given that he did not abandon his wife despite the clear contradictions their union created within him, and he made some effort to look after her, most especially when she was ill.

It cannot be stressed enough that Michel's *intention* was never to hurt Marceline. Arguably, he did not knowingly cause or even wish her any harm. The truth is, he simply did not understand her, nor did he have any real interest in understanding her, since he did not desire anything from her. He made an honest effort to make her happy in the limited ways he knew how, but as it turns out, his illusion comes to an abrupt end when Marceline miscarries and any hopes for change in the future are thereby destroyed. Surely it is only with hindsight in such a situation that one could grasp the full scope of his or her own culpability. Living a repressed existence is something no one should have to face, and although society would have liked the simplicity that comes with homogeneity, this novella serves as a case study providing insight into just how unrealistic that notion is.

That being said, why does the title of the novella label Michel an Immoralist? Morality is evidently the first thing that comes to mind, and surely this is by design. The purpose of the title, however, is not to describe Michel alone, but to describe him as he relates to the society around him. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word 'immoral' as "not conforming to accepted standards of morality". Thus, Gide is calling attention to the fact that the concept of morality is not absolute, but rather quite subjective. These 'accepted standards' that tradition and religion have moulded are

exclusive and not inclusive to Michel, and he, indeed, does not conform. By definition, then, Michel is an Immoralist of his time.

Michel's recurring moments of guilt remain somewhat suspect due to the possibility that they may have been added into his story later. An obvious reason to do this would be to appear less selfish to those people hearing it. The friend who transcribes the story comments on Michel's emotions as he was telling the story:

Il avait achevé ce récit sans un tremblement dans la voix, sans qu'une émotion quelconque le troublât, — soit qu'il mit un cynique orgueil à ne pas nous paraître ému, soit qu'il craignît, par une sorte de pudeur, de provoquer notre émotion par ses larmes, soit enfin qu'il ne fût pas ému. Je ne distingue pas en lui à présent, la part d'orgueil, de force, de sécheresse ou de pudeur.

(Gide 256)

The apparent coldness with which he tells his story can be attributable to Michel's intensely conflicting emotions. Though Michel longed for the freedom to discover who he really is, he most likely did not expect to obtain it through Marceline's death. He may not have loved her passionately or wanted her as his wife, but she was, at the very least, a dear friend to him who had many virtues. She was tender, loving, maternal and pious. Ultimately, her life is the cost for his freedom. When he begins telling his story to his friends, he says, "Savoir se libérer n'est rien ; l'ardu, c'est savoir être libre" (Gide 20). He appears to be saying that as difficult a transformation as he endured, this paled in comparison to having to live with the aftermath of it.

Section 2: *Der Tod in Venedig*

The narrative structure of Thomas Mann's novella is written from the third-person perspective, grammatically speaking. This basis allows for an omniscient narrator, and yet Thomas Mann opts for a limitation on the knowledge of the narrator. Even though the protagonist and narrator are *not* one in the same, the scope of the narrative is limited to Aschenbach's world, like it would be if the narrative were written in the first-person. The narrator does not have access to Tadzio's thoughts or inner dialog, which could have the potential to dissuade Aschenbach from his pursuit. Aschenbach's perspective is the only one provided. Additionally, perhaps the only supporting character is Tadzio, and the other figures are merely extras to provide further depth to the story. This way of setting up the narrative creates an ideal stage for Aschenbach's inner journey. The reader is openly informed of Aschenbach's thoughts representatively of how they relate to his psychological process. Concurrently, dream sequences provide particular insight into the truth behind Aschenbach's sexual desires. This third-person perspective, thus, fosters a voyeuristic relationship between the reader and Aschenbach, and this ironically mirrors the one-sided relationship between Aschenbach and Tadzio.

The keen focus of the narrative also eliminates any obligation for the protagonist to be accountable for or even aware of his actions, since the large majority of the drama occurs internally. This way, there is no call to express or explain his story to anyone, and no rationalization to alter the way in which the story is portrayed. Hence, Aschenbach is free from accountability and is able to delve into his delusion and indulgence without anyone to impede him. The absence of accountability makes it seem to the reader that the story is in pure form and has not been tainted by afterthought or judgement on the part of

the narrator. This is, at least, as the narrator relates to Aschenbach's thoughts and feelings. On an ideological level, however, the narrator interpolates the standpoint of society at large into the story. As Dorrit Cohn sharply points out, "in the early phases of the story [the narrator's relationship to the protagonist] is essentially sympathetic, respectful, even reverent; in the later phases a deepening rift develops, building an increasingly ironic narratorial stance" (Cohn 126). Therefore, the narrator is reliable when it comes to the events of the story, but there is judgement passed on Aschenbach as he unravels, which serves to represent society's opinion on the matter.

In this respect, Mann's narrative remains fairly clear and does not lend itself to doubting the presence of homosexuality as readily as Gide's narrative does. *Der Tod in Venedig* makes it quite obvious that Aschenbach is sexually aroused in watching Tadzio. Moreover, Aschenbach comes right out and declares his passionate love for the young boy. The argument to support Aschenbach's homosexuality appears to be irrefutable by today's semantics; however, Thomas Mann provides two loopholes, perhaps in the interest of protecting Aschenbach against those who would judge him: the aestheticism surrounding Aschenbach's attraction to Tadzio as a representation of pure beauty, and Aschenbach's seemingly unstable mental state. As previously discussed, the association to the noble Greek notion of pederasty that involved a platonic attraction between a man and a boy provides the superficial justification that Aschenbach needed to continue his pursuit. On this level, aestheticism stands in ironic contrast to homosexuality in the text. Yet, it also reinforces the deeper hints at homosexuality, since the reader may not agree that the pursuit of pure beauty in art could elicit such a fierce intensity behind a person's actions. Regarding Aschenbach's mental state, as in a court of law, a person cannot be

held accountable for actions committed in a state of insanity. Perhaps Aschenbach's physical health catalysed his mental decline and in turn caused him to lust after the young boy. Depending on a reader's personal beliefs, he or she may be inclined to judge Aschenbach harshly, given that the term 'sexual deviance' applied to homosexuality at the time the story was written and published. Aschenbach's second dream sequence and his irrational thoughts and behaviour denote insanity or mania, which may explain to a 'pious' audience why he suddenly formed a homosexual infatuation-turned-undying-love. Where Gide's literary 'insurance' came in the form of uncertainty that Michel was actually homosexual, Mann's took shape through Aschenbach's questionable psychological state and the artistic or aesthetic context of his experience.

Of course there is another, more thorough way to look at the story. Aschenbach is advancing in his years at the time this fundamental change within him occurs. He had spent his life striving for academic and artistic excellence, which had brought him an elevated level of success. However, the story begins on the day that his will cannot force his success any longer. ("Rächte sich nun also die geknechtete Empfindung, indem sie ihn verließ, indem sie seine Kunst fürder zu tragen und zu beflügeln sich weigerte und alle Lust, alles Entzücken an der Form und am Ausdruck mit sich hinwegnahm?" [Mann 17]). Writer's block prompts him to break from his work by taking a walk through the English garden, where he suddenly becomes aware that he needs a change of environment. The term "*Fluchtdrang*", which Aschenbach employs to describe the way he feels in that moment, specifically denotes urgency. The English equivalent, 'flight impulse', is a psychological term used to define the body's physiological reaction to a physical threat. Aschenbach's threat turns out to be the longstanding habit of repressing

his sexual drive, and consequently sublimating it into fuelling his literary work. Unfortunately, the many years of self-inflicted emotional abuse cause Aschenbach to reach an impasse, which triggers the need to escape his everyday life and go to Venice.

In viewing the narrative this way, Mann appears to be commenting on the fundamental nature of instincts, and how, when repressed, it creates severe inner turmoil. Aschenbach's story can serve as a warning to those who attempt to live a life that is incongruous with one's instincts. In this case, the result of such a life is apparently an opening of the floodgates to one's sexuality to the extent of overpowering the rationale that had supported the repression for so long. The loss of his rationality is characterized by this "drunken" state Aschenbach describes. He is not insane; he is just so sublimely happy that he finally lets go of those carefully forged constraints he operated under for so many years. Sadly, this is a turbulent process for him, and it causes Aschenbach to indulge his newly revealed instincts, ultimately leading to his own death. The link here between homosexuality and death is a characteristic idea for Mann, who paraphrased its role in this novella in a later essay "On Marriage" (1925): "Virtue and morality are the stuff of life, nothing other than a categorical imperative, the command to live—while all aestheticism is of a pessimistic-orgiastic nature, in short: the stuff of death. That all artistry is susceptible to such an abyss is all too certain" (Mann Eng Vers 91).

The first question in analyzing the homosexual take of Mann's story concerns the blurring lines between homosexuality and pederasty: why is it that these two separate concepts are virtually placed in juxtaposition? Not all of the male figures in the book are young, but the only one Aschenbach claims to love is, and yet there are broad references to homosexuality in general throughout the text. Clearly because a homosexual and a

pederastic relationship both occur between two males, this is the one commonality that they share. The major difference in the two types of relationships, by contrast, is that the pederastic relationship involves an inherent and significant imbalance in power between the two parties, which is evidenced in the age difference. Of course, at that time in history equal conjugal relationships did not yet exist for heterosexual partners, never mind between partners of the same sex. It seems all too likely that the tendency for homosexuals at the time was to seek out the most accessible form of relationship to other men. Therefore, it is under tight societal constraints that a homosexual may have chosen to engage in a pederastic relationship primarily on the basis that it was safer than the alternative.

This explanation for the difference between homosexuality and pederasty has only one flaw: its modernity. Though today there is a world of difference between the two concepts, this was not the case at the time the novella was written. In this story, homosexuality *is* pederasty because, on the surface, the relationship between Aschenbach and Tadzio is platonic, and it is only underneath that Mann hints at sensuality. In other words, the two concepts of sexuality overlap between Aschenbach's inner and outer worlds. The gay culture of Mann's time and Aschenbach himself took advantage of the pedagogical and aesthetic ideology surrounding pederasty, which afforded them a certain amount of acceptance based on the cultural significance of this sexual practice from ancient Greece. Ironically, pederasty seemed to be more acceptable than homosexuality between consenting adults at that time.

In Aschenbach's case, there are numerous reasons that could explain why his love interest is fourteen year-old Tadzio. First off, the boy is the epitome of beauty, more

supreme than Art, and clearly aesthetically appealing. Aschenbach is an artist and has a distinct appreciation for beauty. Secondly, being young *and* sickly adds to Tadzio's vulnerability, which creates the imbalance in power necessary to entertain the pursuit. Since Aschenbach is very aware of his social status and reputation as an author, it makes sense that he would be concerned about stirring up controversy. This also explains his fear to approach Tadzio and resulting voyeurism that characterizes their interaction. Thirdly, chance and opportunity seemed to have a great deal to do with it. Prolonged exposure to the boy was a necessary catalyst to bring Aschenbach to such a fanatic state. His feelings did not develop overnight, and without the almost unlimited access to his 'muse', progression could not have taken place.

That being said, what is the resulting message of these concepts being placed so closely together? In large part, the likeness between homosexuality and pederasty is a result of the ideology surrounding romantic relationships in general given that they both would have been classified under "sexually deviant behaviour". For the purposes of the text, however, giving these 'abnormal' qualities to a famous and celebrated author and characterizing the other homosexual figures as 'strange' and 'foreign' manage to provide an ironic contrast to the idea of fame. Fame in itself is supposed to be mass appeal; Aschenbach may have hidden away his homosexuality in pursuit of fame, but it does not change the fact that throughout his life, those feelings existed in him, no matter how repressed. It was not Aschenbach's abnormality that figuratively led him to his death, it was the repression of these most unique parts of himself and the consequent explosion of this energy at such a late time in his life.

The union of fame and obscurity or strangeness in Aschenbach creates a wonderful dichotomy for the text. His situation highlights problems that can arise from celebrity; namely, that one's privacy is at risk by nature of the masses knowing his or her identity. Public figures are subject to popular opinions of them, which, if disapproving, directly impact the person's reputation, career and livelihood. For our protagonist, he has reached the pinnacle of his work, having received accolades and official acknowledgement through the use of his writings in the national education system. It seems that Aschenbach's issue with his fame is the personal price he paid to reach it. The pressure he put on himself over the course of his life took a mental toll, certainly, and surely a physical one too, due to the unyielding stress from his tortured creative process. In the 1903 autobiographical short story *Tonio Kröger*, Thomas Mann wrote: "No problem in the world is more tormenting than the nature of the artist and its effect on humanity" (Mann Eng vers 4). Clearly, this was subject matter that deeply concerned Mann. Having infused his character Aschenbach with qualities that he had himself, Mann philosophizes about what it means to be a celebrated author and a homosexual. That one's sexual preference is relevant to his or her artistry is all too certain because it is such a deeply ingrained element of a person, which affects an artist's personal style. *Der Tod in Venedig* exemplifies this in the fact that Mann's subject matter deals with homosexuality in the first place. If Mann were not homosexual himself, perhaps the story would have been about Goethe after all. The vulnerability involved in making art and allowing it to be distributed for anybody to see, is just what Mann is discussing. "The fifty-year-old 'von' Aschenbach's very name bears the official evidence of his being what Mann had already called himself in 1905, 'a national factor'. Hence Aschenbach

was vulnerable to just the feeling of eminence that would bring eventual self-destruction” (Mann Eng vers 9). Accentuating Aschenbach’s vulnerability by making him morally suspect in the public’s eyes serves to further support the pressure that artists face. Mann goes on to explain, “I don’t want to become a figure. [The danger lies in] a heightened self-respect, taking oneself too seriously... I want to show the painful aberration of an artist who has enough talent to attain his ambitions, but lacks the maturity to master his success, which finally destroys him” (Mann Eng vers 9). This is ultimately the grounding of Mann’s *Der Tod in Venedig*, and along with the plot structure, allusions to Wagner and Mahler manage to reinforce the image of the struggling artist.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Homosexuality as we know it today would not become a formal concept until many decades later into the twentieth Century. What we understand by the modern homosexual relationship is an equal distribution of power between partners of the same sex. The ‘cause’ of sexual orientation, though still contested and debated by some, is seen as a question of nature and not nurture. Notwithstanding these progressions in ideology, the queer movement still faces political challenges in the pursuit of equal rights, with particular emphasis in the North American media on gay marriage over the past few years. During the time this present work was written, the state of New York made it legal to seek a same sex union under the Marriage Equality Act. In Canada, the Civil Marriage Act was enacted nationwide in 2005, which provided a gender-neutral legal definition of marriage. In Europe, France and Germany have been recognizing civil unions and registered partnerships for over 10 years now.

Fortunately, society’s progress in the acceptance of the gay community has brought about much different and, I daresay, more suitable criticism of these two novellas. Literary disputes once marked the criticism of *Der Tod in Venedig*, showcasing how the reviewers’ personal and political motivations often determined their stance. For example, one dispute “involved the Austrian novelist Hermann Broch, who defended Mann against the charge of philistinism” (Shookman 13). At the publication of *L’Immoraliste*, a number of the few readers it found “greeted it with hostile indignation” (Cordle 73). Overemphasis of the homoeroticism in *Der Tod in Venedig* was prevalent among reviewers most notably at the time Mann’s diaries were posthumously published in the mid-1970s. These reviewers attempted to connect the novella with Mann’s

biography, but did so too closely. The problem was that these complex and rich texts contain many layers that play roles in the make-up of the narratives, resulting in the possibility of markedly differing interpretations. In his book *Three Philosophical Novelists: James Joyce, André Gide, Thomas Mann* (1964), Brennan sums up the danger this creates for both texts:

A critic's itch to comment on *The Immoralist* may lead the unwary to a choice of extreme interpretations—one turning the little work of art into a problem in moral philosophy, the other reducing it to a Freudian case history. Guerard's argument against an intellectualistic approach to Gide's story is sound enough, but his own way of handling it has a touch of that psychological reductionism practiced by certain American critics, a bent confirmed when he goes on to suggest that Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* is also "really" a story of homosexuality, and that all poor Aschenbach's philosophizing about the artist-nature is just so much theoretical window dressing. (Brennan 87).

Brennan explains here how complex Mann's and Gide's stories really are, given that neither a philosophical nor psychological approach can entirely explain the narratives. Both novellas rely on multiple factors in revealing the true nature of the subject matter, but even the seemingly large currents such as the biographical content, morals, aestheticism and homosexuality ultimately play supporting roles in each literary work. Thus, modern criticism attempts to neglect nothing and avoids concentrating on any one of the facets of the novella because this intrinsically takes attention away from the other important elements. Ellis Shookman describes this phenomenon in his novel

Thomas Mann's Death in Venice: A Novel and its Critics (2003): “[...] an account of [the novella’s] reception that emphasizes only its homoerotic, psychoanalytical, or political aspect—the aspects treated by the most extensive studies of that reception to date—must necessarily neglect other issues that critics and scholars have raised” (241). Shookman goes on to name these issues, which include aesthetics and artists, intertextuality between Mann’s other works, mythology, similarities with texts by other authors, style, symbols, its place in literary history, its philosophical import, and miscellaneous details. Thus, the complexity of these texts, when underestimated, leads to a skewed interpretation of them. Recognition of this fact is what differentiates the critics of today and those who reviewed the texts at their publications.

Gide and Mann both went to great lengths to disguise and stylize the homosexual theme through narrative techniques, association to the noble idealism of ancient Greece (Mann only), subtle allusions and innuendo, and the high degrees of self-deception by the protagonists. The restraint involved in telling these stories is part of what makes them so remarkable today. Homosexuality has had a chance to mature as a concept, a lifestyle and a legitimate facet of the human race. All those who suffer from sexual identity issues go through a voluntary process to allow their inner feelings to be expressed, commonly known as ‘coming out of the closet’. It would be very uncommon for a homosexual man in this generation to reach Aschenbach’s age without having realized or even being told by someone perceptive that he is attracted to men. Now that society’s eyes are open to more of the diversity of the human experience, and sexuality in general is seen as natural and not perverse, such vicious delusion simply could not exist without some sort of manifestation. Family members, friends, teachers, co-workers, doctors, mentors, and all

of the other people who make up a person's social surroundings would be given the opportunity to get to know the person.

Gide's narrative comes close to being Michel's "coming out" story, since at the end he admits to himself and his friends that he prefers men. Ultimately, though, Gide's story describes Michel's wider journey to acknowledging who he truly is, and it is the journey itself and his choices that makes him an Immoralist by his society's terms, even if his sexuality was the reason for his behaviour. *L'Immoraliste* explores what it is to be a young man trying to figure out how he fits into the pre-existing societal structure. The continuous travelling, Michel's night time walks and changes in location highlight the fact that he is searching for something elusive that comes from deep within himself. The book ends to his story are his marriage to Marceline and her death. Everything in between represents his journey and why and how he got there. A hyperbole of Nietzschean individualism, *L'Immoraliste* begs for tolerance from the forces that make Michel's search for his authentic self so harrowing.

The fact that Michel is homosexual provides the reason for his journey, his debilitating struggle, moral and philosophical debate, and also relates to any number of other reasons for marginalization by society; this is the function of homosexuality in Gide's text. The distance and restraint used to address the homosexual theme defines its overall treatment. Though the novella's title characterizes Michel as immoral, the reader eventually discerns that society's role in defining this label causes Michel's problems. This means that any negative view of homosexuality that a reader may have seen in the text resulted from a differing interpretation from the one this current thesis describes. If one were to see homosexuality as blasphemous as a part of a religious doctrine, then

evidently Michel is to blame for his poor behaviour. On the other hand, an interpretation free from judgement of sexual identity sees society as the larger culprit in causing Michel's repression, which led to his marriage to a woman, and resulting unhappiness. Who can fault a person whose desire is to find out his true nature, even if it means that he makes poor decisions along the way? Surely society's other victims are Michel's unborn child and his virtuous wife who died as a figurative result of his neglect.

Der Tod in Venedig shows us that Aschenbach could not reconcile his homosexuality with his fame because his greatest fear was the loss of dignity. He made incredible progress in accepting himself through feeding into his desires, putting a stop to his self-deception, and embracing a homosexual persona in his physical transformation—but he could not return to Munich this way. It was a dichotomous choice between his career as an artist and his homoerotic desires, and all of this has to do with the artist's philosophical relationship to fame as Thomas Mann saw it. Coming out of the proverbial closet for Aschenbach would have meant surrendering everything he had worked so hard to create throughout his life. The function of homosexuality in this text is to provide this impossible choice between two parts of himself. Naomi Ritter quotes Mann's words from a letter in 1915: "The problem I had in mind particularly was that of the artist's dignity. I wanted to show something like the tragedy of greatness" (qtd. in Mann Eng vers 5). Ritter adds, "Like Goethe, the aging Aschenbach falls in love hopelessly; indeed, the writer's crucial 'adventure of the emotions' leaves him no viable identity, so he must die (37)" (Mann Eng vers 5). The treatment of the theme, then, makes homosexuality a matter of life and death because of society's condemnation of it. The sinister quality of

the homosexual figure from the graveyard in the English garden with his militant stare and the unlicensed Venetian gondolier in his black boat and gnashing of teeth represent the danger Aschenbach is to face from the very beginning. The dual symbolism of these characters tie death to homosexuality, but as the narrator increasingly disapproves of Aschenbach's behaviour, the reader sees that this connection is society's view, just like the narratorial disapproval.

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