

DEATH IN VENICE
by Thomas Mann
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A thesis submitted to the
Mason Gross School of the Arts
Of
Rutgers, The State University of
New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Graduate Program in Theater Arts

Written under the direction of
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New Brunswick, New Jersey
May, 2005

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Cast of Characters

NARRATOR

ASCHENBACH

TADZIO

ACTOR:
STRANGER
SAILOR
GONDOLIER
SHOPKEEPER

ACTOR:
CRITIC
BOATMAN
WAITER
SOCRATES
ENGLISHMAN

ACTOR:
YOUNG-OLD MAN
PORTER
BARBER
BUFFOON

Setting

Munich and Venice

Time

1912

This adaptation of DEATH IN VENICE by Thomas Mann dramatizes the narrative point of view the novella. Structured into several vignettes, the musicality of Mann's language becomes the central melody, while the motivations of the actors move in dramatic harmony or discord with the text. When casting, it is unnecessary for the actors to possess all the qualities attributed to the characters - incongruity is welcomed when it calls attention to the text.

Careful attention should be given to the relationship between ASCHENBACH and the NARRATOR. More than just a passive observer or a device to facilitate the storytelling, the NARRATOR is the instigator of all action and is privy to the deepest desires of ASCHENBACH. In this regard, the characterization of the NARRATOR might function as a representation of Eros – ASCHENBACH'S companion and guide along the way of beauty to “unriddle the puzzle of the artist nature.”

In our own unique way, all of us are artists. The divine is in us all, when we strive to express, to give form, to maintain our own personal philosophy in a corrupt and corruptible world. In Mann's pages, we see ourselves as ASCHENBACH, who strives for excellence, despite “affliction and pain - poverty, destitution, vice, passion, and a thousand other obstructions.” ASCHENBACH sacrifices himself to art. Yet this adaptation attempts to temper any moralization of his excesses, and instead aims to interpret this sacrifice as a spiritual rebirth, a compassionate reawakening of an artist's soul.

A chandelier hangs over a stage covered in sand. The sand should not be contained, but rather spill out naturally over the entire space. Any change in location should be indicated through the use of lights and props. Some of these props are buried in the sand and are excavated when indicated. The color red, signifying desire and danger, should intensify over the course of the play.

DURCHALTEN

- Hold on, persevere under duress

POLA/PULA

- Croatia – Southwest coast of Istria

BONNES

- Nurses

BERSAGLIERI

- Light infantry – Sharpshooters, Rifle regiment

PHAEAX

- Cercyra, a sea nymph was kidnapped by Poseidon and kept as his lover. Phaeax, the father of the Phaeacians (a mythological seafaring race), was the result of this union
- Son of Erasistratus, involved in the Peloponnesian War

“He thought of the melancholy and susceptible poet who had once seen the towers and turrets of his dreams rise out of these waves.”

- Goethe
- *Travels in Italy*, 1846
- The trip came to signify for him a rebirth, not only into a new life, but into what he was always going to become: at several levels it was a journey of self-discovery, a journey into himself.

PROLOGUE

(Several chairs are lined up in rows like gravestones.
ASCHENBACH, wearing a white-linen suit, sits surrounded by
sheets of crumpled paper. The NARRATOR stands behind him.)

NARRATOR

He began his day with a cold shower over chest and back; then, setting a pair of tall wax
candles in silver holders at the head of his manuscript,

ASCHENBACH

he sacrificed to art.

(ASCHENBACH writes.)

NARRATOR

Layer after layer, out of hundreds and hundreds of single inspirations; his pages owed
their excellence to one thing and one thing alone...

ASCHENBACH

“Durchhalten” “Durchhalten” “Durchhalten”

NARRATOR

There he sat, the master; this was he who had found a way to reconcile art and honors;
who renounced bohemianism and all its works, all sympathy with the abyss and the
troubled depths of the outcast human soul.

ASCHENBACH

“Durchhalten” “Durchhalten” “Durchhalten”

NARRATOR

And yet: this moral fiber; does it not result in a dangerous simplification, in a tendency to
strengthen the hold of the forbidden and the ethically impossible?

(Frustrated, ASCHENBACH gets up and paces back and forth.)

ASCHENBACH

“Durchhalten” “Durchhalten” “Durchhalten”

NARRATOR

Who shall unriddle the puzzle of the artist nature? Who understands that mingling of
discipline and decadence in which it stands so deeply rooted?

(Several tolls, from a funeral knell, signal the start of the
performance.)

PART I – THE CEMETERY

(Several tolls from a funeral knell signal the start of the performance. ASCHENBACH, wearing a white linen suit, hat, black tie, and spectacles, paces impatiently near the NARRATOR.)

NARRATOR

Gustave Aschenbach –

ASCHENBACH

or von Aschenbach, as he had been known officially since his fiftieth birthday –

NARRATOR

had set out alone from his house in Prince Regent Street, Munich, for an extended walk. He was overwrought by a morning of hard, nerve-taxing work,

ASCHENBACH

work which had not ceased to exact his uttermost in the way of sustained concentration, conscientiousness, and tact. He had sought but not found relaxation in sleep –

NARRATOR

and now undertook a walk, in the hope that air and exercise might send him back refreshed.

(They take a few steps together, thus beginning the journey.)

NARRATOR

It was a spring afternoon in that year of grace 1912, when Europe sat upon the anxious seat beneath a menace that hung over its head for months. May had begun, and after weeks of cold and wet a mock summer had set in.

ASCHENBACH

(Irritated) The English Gardens felt as sultry as in August and were full of vehicles and pedestrians near the city.

NARRATOR

(As a suggestion) But towards Aumeister the paths were solitary and still.

ASCHENBACH

Aschenbach strolled there, stopping to watch the lively crowds in the restaurant garden with its fringe of carriages and cabs.

(A rumble of thunder is heard in the distance.)

ASCHENBACH

By the time he reached the North Cemetery, however, he felt tired, and a storm was brewing above Föhring;

NARRATOR

so he waited for a streetcar to carry him back to the city.

(Again, a rumble of thunder is heard. The NARRATOR shelters ASCHENBACH with a black umbrella.)

ASCHENBACH

He found the neighborhood quite empty. Not a vehicle in sight.

NARRATOR

Nothing stirred behind the hedge in the stonemason's yard, where crosses and commemorative tablets made an untenanted graveyard opposite the real one. The mortuary chapel,

ASCHENBACH

a structure in Byzantine style,

NARRATOR

stood silent in the gleam of the ebbing day.

ASCHENBACH

(Cleaning his spectacles) Its façade displayed a symmetrically arranged selection of scriptural texts. "They are entering into the House of the Lord...

(A garish red light reveals the STRANGER, dressed in traveling attire and leaning on a walking stick. He grimaces up at the sky.)

STRANGER

May the Light Everlasting shine upon them."

NARRATOR

He was brought back to reality by the sight of a man standing in the doorway, above the two apocalyptic beasts that guarded the staircase, and something unusual in this man's appearance gave his thoughts a fresh turn.

ASCHENBACH

Whether the stranger had emerged from inside the chapel or had mounted the steps from outside unnoticed; it was impossible to tell.

NARRATOR

At any rate, his gaze,

ASCHENBACH

(Defensively) though unawares,

NARRATOR

had very likely been inquisitive and tactless when scrutinizing the stranger;

(The STRANGER glares at ASCHENBACH with vicious contempt.)

STRANGER

“They are entering into the House of the Lord...

ASCHENBACH

for he became suddenly conscious that the man was returning it with such hostility, such plain intent...

STRANGER

...May the Light Everlasting shine upon them.”

ASCHENBACH

that he felt an unpleasant twinge and hastily resolved to give the man no further heed.

(ASCHENBACH turns his back on the STRANGER, and the red light fades away.)

NARRATOR

Now whether the pilgrim air the stranger wore kindled his fantasy or whether some physical influence came in play, he couldn't tell; but he felt a most surprising consciousness of a widening of inward barriers –

ASCHENBACH

a feeling so lively, so new, or at least so long ago outgrown and forgot, that he stood there rooted to the spot.

NARRATOR

True, what he felt was no more than a longing to travel; yet coming upon him with such suddenness, such passion as to resemble a hallucination. He saw...

(The lights on the cemetery dissolve into a collage of distorted shadows and patterns of tropical foliage.)

ASCHENBACH

...a landscape, a tropical marshland, beneath a reeking sky, steaming, monstrous, rank – a kind of primeval wilderness-world of islands, morasses, and alluvial channels. Hairy palm-trunks rose out of lush brakes of fern, fat, swollen, thick with incredible bloom. There were trees, misshapen as a dream that dropped their naked roots into

ASCHENBACH (CONT'D)

stagnant and shadowy water, where mammoth milk-white blossoms floated.
Among the knotted joints of a bamboo thicket the eyes of a crouching tiger gleamed –

(The lights return, and the STRANGER has disappeared.)

NARRATOR

Then the vision vanished.

ASCHENBACH

He thought of looking back after the man in the straw hat,

NARRATOR

but his whereabouts remained a mystery.

(A rumble of thunder is heard again in the distance.)

PART II – ASCHENBACH

NARRATOR

This yearning for new and distant scenes, this craving for freedom, forgetfulness – they were,

ASCHENBACH

he admitted to himself, an impulse towards flight,

NARRATOR

flight from the very spot which was the daily theatre of rigid, cold, and passionate service.

(The NARRATOR exits.)

ASCHENBACH

Now more than ever, since his life was on the wane, since he could no longer brush aside his artist fear of not being finished,

(With the help of the CRITIC, the NARRATOR returns carrying an antique traveling trunk. On top of this trunk are several large, leather-bound books.)

ASCHENBACH

the thought of leisurely ramble across the globe, which should take him away from his desk for months, was too fantastic, too upsetting to be seriously entertained.

NARRATOR

And so this new impulse was made to conform to the pattern of self-discipline he had followed from his youth up.

CRITIC

From the very beginning, Aschenbach's whole soul was bent on fame. From childhood up he was pushed on every side to achievement, and achievement of no ordinary kind:

(The CRITIC hands the books to ASCHENBACH to be autographed.)

CRITIC

author of the lucid and vigorous prose epic about the life of Frederick the Great; patient artist of the richly patterned tapestry entitled *Maia*; creator of that powerful narrative *The Abject*, and last but not least, writer of that impassioned discourse *Mind and Art*, whose antithetic eloquence led serious critics to rank it with Schiller's *Simple and Sentimental Poetry*. "You see, Aschenbach had always lived like this."

(The CRITIC raises hand in a fist.)

NARRATOR

“Never like this.”

(The NARRATOR lets his hand fall open and relaxed.)

ASCHENBACH

His favorite motto was “Hold fast”;

(The CRITIC opens a book and finds a specific page.)

CRITIC

indeed, in his novel on the life of Frederick the Great he envisaged nothing else than the apotheosis of the old hero’s command,

ASCHENBACH

“*Durchhalten*” “*Durchhalten*” “*Durchhalten*”

CRITIC

which seemed to him the epitome of fortitude under suffering. Forbearance in the fact of fate,

NARRATOR

beauty under constant torture.

ASCHENBACH

The figure of Sebastian is the most beautiful symbol, if not of art as a whole, yet certainly of the art we speak of here.

NARRATOR

(Introducing the CRITIC) The new type of hero favored by Aschenbach, and recurring many times in his works, had earlier been analyzed by a shrewd critic:

CRITIC

(Reading from a book) “The conception of an intellectual and virginal manliness, which clenches its teeth and stands in modest defiance of the swords and spears that pierce its side.”

NARRATOR

That was beautiful,

CRITIC

it was spiritual;

ASCHENBACH

it was exact. Almost everything conspicuously great is great in despite: has come into being in defiance of affliction and pain - poverty, destitution, vice, passion, and a

ASCHENBACH (CONT'D)

thousand other obstructions.

CRITIC

And that was more than mere observation – it was precisely the formula of his life and fame. Gustave Aschenbach was the literary spokesman of all those who labor at the edge of exhaustion; of those who are already worn out but still hold themselves upright.

ASCHENBACH

They are the heroes of the age.

CRITIC

And in Aschenbach's pages they saw themselves; he celebrated them, he sang their praise – and they, they were grateful, they heralded his name.

(The CRITIC bows before ASCHENBACH and then exits.)

ASCHENBACH

Yes, personally speaking, art heightens life. She gives deeper joy, she consumes more swiftly. She engraves adventures of the spirit and the mind in the faces of her votaries;

NARRATOR

let them lead outwardly a life of the most cloistered calm, she will in the end produce in them a nervous fever and exhaustion, such as a career of extravagant passions and pleasures can hardly show.

(ASCHENBACH examines his books.)

ASCHENBACH

He thought of his work, and the place where yesterday and again today he had been forced to lay it down. Again and again, he had tried to break the knot, to smash through his block. To him it seemed his work had ceased to be marked by that fiery play of fancy, which is the product of joy, and more potently, the joy of the receiving world.

(ASCHENBACH drops his books into the sand.)

NARRATOR

What he needed was a break, an interim existence, a means of passing the time, to make the summer more tolerable, more productive.

(The NARRATOR opens the traveling trunk and offers ASCHENBACH a white scarf. ASCHENBACH accepts.)

NARRATOR

Good, then, he would go on a journey.

ASCHENBACH

Not far – not all the way to the tigers.

NARRATOR

(Excited) A night in a sleeping car and a “siesta” of three or four weeks at some cosmopolitan resort in the charming south...

ASCHENBACH

He racked his brains, he looked up boats,

NARRATOR

then all at once his goal stood plain before his eyes.

ASCHENBACH

But of course!

NARRATOR

When one wanted to arrive overnight at the incomparable, the fabulous, the like-nothing-else-in-the-world, where was it one went?

(The SAILOR enters with a ticket.)

SAILOR

Ah Venice! An excellent choice. What a glorious city! Irresistibly attractive to the cultured man for her past history as well as her present charm. Here you are, signore mio. One first class ticket to Venice! A pleasant visit to you.

(A loud ship’s horn is heard.)

PART III – THE VOYAGE

(The NARRATOR, the SAILOR, and the YOUNG-OLD MAN form a small group. The YOUNG-OLD MAN wears a stylish panama and a red cravat.)

ASCHENBACH

He stood by the foremast, his gaze on the distance. He thought of the melancholy and susceptible poet who had once seen the towers and turrets of his dreams rise out of these waves – and asked his sober, weary heart if some new enthusiasm, some late adventure of feeling could still be in store for the idle traveler.

(The YOUNG-OLD MAN giggles loudly.)

NARRATOR

Then leaning an arm on the railing, he turned his attention to his fellow-passengers.

SAILOR

Those of the second class consisted of a group of lively youths, clerks from Pola, who had made up a pleasure excursion to Italy and were not a little thrilled at the prospect.

YOUNG-OLD MAN

One of the party, was loudest of the loud: he out-crowded the rest.

ASCHENBACH

Aschenbach's eye dwelt on him, and he was shocked to see that the apparent youth was no youth at all.

YOUNG-OLD MAN

He was an old man,

ASCHENBACH

with wrinkles and crow's-feet around his eyes and mouth; the dull carmine of his cheeks was rouge, the brown hair a wig. His upturned moustache and small imperial were dyed, and the unbroken double row of yellow teeth, were too obviously a cheapish false set. Could they not see he was old, that he had no right to wear the clothes they wore or pretend to be one of them?

NARRATOR & SAILOR

But they were used to him, it seemed; they suffered him among them and paid back his jokes in kind.

(The YOUNG-OLD MAN giggles again.)

ASCHENBACH

How could they? (Dizzy, perhaps seasick) He felt uncanny, as though the world were

ASCHENBACH (CONT'D)

suffering a dreamlike distortion of perspective.

(The NARRATOR helps ASCHENBACH to the trunk.)

SAILOR

Inch by inch, with the to-and-fro motion of her machinery, the strip of iridescent dirty water widened, the boat maneuvered clumsily and turned her bow to the open sea.

ASCHENBACH

The sky was gray, the wind humid.

NARRATOR

Perhaps it would lighten presently above Venice, for the city had always given him a brilliant welcome.

ASCHENBACH

But sky and sea remained leaden, with spurts of fine, mist like rain, and he reconciled himself to the idea of seeing a different Venice.

SAILOR

Harbor and island dropped behind, all sight of land soon vanished in the mist.

NARRATOR

Wrapped in his cloak, a book in his lap, our traveler rested; the hours slipped by unawares.

(A loud ship's horn is heard, and ASCHENBACH is jolted awake.)

SAILOR

The flat coast showed on the right, the sea was soon populous with fishing-boats. The Lido appeared and was left behind as the ship glided at half speed through the Canale di San Marco.

(The NARRATOR placed three stripped poles – red, black and blue – into the sand.)

NARRATOR

He saw it once more, that amazing group of incredible structures the Republic set up to meet the awe-struck eye of the approaching seafarer:

ASCHENBACH

the airy splendor of the palace and Bridge of Sighs,

NARRATOR

the columns of lion and saint on the shore,

ASCHENBACH

the glory of the projecting flank of the fairy temple,

NARRATOR

the vista of gateway and clock.

ASCHENBACH

Looking, he thought that to come to Venice by the station is like entering a palace by the back door. No one should approach this most improbable of cities, save by the high seas as he was doing now.

(Shots from a gun salute are heard. The YOUNG-OLD MAN pops the cork of a champagne bottle, and giggles at his own expense.)

YOUNG-OLD MAN

The youths from Pola were on deck. They had drunk a good deal of Asti and were moved to shout and hurrah at the drilling *bersaglieri*.

ASCHENBACH

But the young-old man was truly a repulsive sight in the condition to which his company with youth had brought him.

YOUNG-OLD MAN

He could not carry his wine like them: he was pitifully drunk. He swayed as he stood – watery-eyed, a cigarette between his shaking fingers, keeping upright with difficulty. He could not have taken a step without falling and knew better than to stir.

ASCHENBACH

He stuttered, he giggled, he leered, and his tongue kept seeking the corner of his mouth in a suggestive motion ugly to behold.

YOUNG-OLD MAN

“We wish you a very pleasant...ssssojourn. Pray keep us in mind. *Au revoir, excusez et bon jour, votre Excellence*. Give her our love, will you, the pppretty little dear” –

ASCHENBACH

(Repulsed) here his upper plate came away and fell down on the lower one...

YOUNG-OLD MAN

(“Little sweet-sweet-sweetheart.” “Little sweet-sweet-sweetheart.” “Little sweet-sweet-sweetheart”...

(The YOUNG-OLD man stumbles as he exits.)

PART IV – THE GONDOLA

(The NARRATOR and the GONDOLIER move the trunk to a different area of the stage.)

NARRATOR

Is there anyone but must repress a secret thrill, on arriving in Venice for the first time and stepping into a Venetian gondola?

ASCHENBACH

That singular conveyance, come down unchanged from ballad times, black as nothing else on earth except a coffin –

NARRATOR

what pictures it calls up of lawless and silent adventures in the plashing night;

ASCHENBACH

or even more, what visions of death itself, the bier and solemn rites and the last soundless voyage!

(The NARRATOR invites ASCHENBACH to sit in front of him on the trunk.)

NARRATOR

And has anyone remarked that the seat in such a bark is the softest, most luxurious, most relaxing seat in the world?

ASCHENBACH

Aschenbach realized it when he let himself down at the gondolier's feet.

(ASCHENBACH relaxes into the arms of the NARRATOR. The GONDOLIER stands behind them dragging a long pole through the sand.)

ASCHENBACH

It was warm here in the harbor.

NARRATOR

The lukewarm air of the sirocco breathed upon him, he leaned back among his cushions and gave himself up to the yielding element.

ASCHENBACH

“The trip will be short,” he thought,

NARRATOR

and wished it might last forever.

NARRATOR

It grew still and stiller all about. No sound but the splash of the oars, the hollow slap of the wave against the steep, black, halberd-shaped beak of the vessel.

ASCHENBACH

And one sound more –

GONDOLIER

a muttering by fits and starts, from the lips of the gondolier.

ASCHENBACH

He was talking to himself, underneath his breath.

NARRATOR

Aschenbach glanced up and saw with surprise that the lagoon was widening, his vessel was headed for the open sea.

ASCHENBACH

Evidently it would not do to give himself up to sweet *far niente*; he must see his wishes carried out. “You are to take me to the steamboat landing, you know.”

GONDOLIER

There was no reply.

ASCHENBACH

“Take me to the steamboat landing!”

GONDOLIER

“The signore is going to the Lido.”

ASCHENBACH

“Yes, yes, I am. But I only took the gondola to cross over to San Marco. I am using the vaporetto from there.”

GONDOLIER

“But the signore cannot use the vaporetto.”

ASCHENBACH

“And why not?”

GONDOLIER

“Because the vaporetto does not take luggage.”

(ASCHENBACH looks to the NARRATOR for confirmation.)

NARRATOR

It was true.

ASCHENBACH

“That is my own affair. I may want to put my luggage in deposit. You will turn ‘round.”

GONDOLIER

No answer.

NARRATOR

The oar splashed, the wave struck dull against the prow.

GONDOLIER

And the muttering began anew.

ASCHENBACH

What should a traveler do? Alone on the water with this obstinate man, he saw no way of enforcing his will. “How much do you ask for the trip?”

GONDOLIER

“The signore will pay. The signore will pay.”

ASCHENBACH

“I will pay nothing whatsoever if you do not take me where I want to go!”

GONDOLIER

“The signore wants to go to the Lido.”

ASCHENBACH

“Yes, but not with you.”

GONDOLIER

“I am a good rower, signore. I will row you well.”

NARRATOR

“So much is true.”

ASCHENBACH

“So much is true. Even if you mean to rob me, even if you hit me in the back with your oar and send me down to the kingdom of Hades, even then you will have rowed me well.”

NARRATOR

But nothing of the sort happened.

(The BOATMAN enters and helps ASCHENBACH off the trunk.)

BOATMAN

At the landing, Aschenbach was helped on shore by the old man with a boat hook who is the permanent feature of every landing stage in Venice;

ASCHENBACH

and having no small change to pay the boatman, crossed over into the hotel opposite.

(Noticing the BOATMAN, the GONDOLIER quickly exits.)

BOATMAN

When he returned, his possessions were already on a handcar, and gondola and gondolier were gone. "He ran away, signore. A bad lot without a license. He is the only gondolier without one. The others telephoned over, and he knew we were on the lookout. (Holding out his hat) The signore has had a ride for nothing."

(ASCHENBACH drops some coins into the BOATMAN'S hat.)

PART V – TADZIO

(The PORTER enters and moves the trunk to a different area of the stage below an ornate, crystal chandelier, indicating the interior of the hotel.)

ASCHENBACH

He directed that his luggage be taken to the Hôtel des Bains

NARRATOR

and followed the handcar through the white-blossoming avenue with taverns, booths, and pensions on either side of it.

PORTER

His arrival was expected, and he was served with courtesy and dispatch.

(The PORTER exits.)

NARRATOR

It was a pleasant chamber, furnished in cherry-wood, with lofty windows looking out to sea.

ASCHENBACH

As soon as he was alone, Aschenbach went to one of the windows and stood looking out upon the beach in its afternoon emptiness, at the sunless sea, now sending long, low waves with rhythmic beat upon the sand.

NARRATOR

A solitary, unused to speaking of what he sees and feels, has mental experiences which are at once more intense and less articulate than those of a gregarious man. Sights and impression which others brush aside with a glance, a light comment, a smile, occupy him more than their due; they sink silently in, they take on meaning, they become experience, emotion, adventure.

ASCHENBACH

Solitude gives birth to the original in us, to beauty unfamiliar and perilous – to poetry.

NARRATOR

But it also gives birth to the opposite: to the perverse, to the illicit, the absurd.

(The YOUNG-OLD MAN and the GONDOLIER enter with chairs and place them facing each other.)

YOUNG-OLD MAN

“Little sweet-sweet-sweetheart.” “Little sweet-sweet-sweetheart.”

ASCHENBACH

Strange, shadowy figures passed and repassed through the traveler's mind.

GONDOLIER

"The signore will pay. The signore will pay."

ASCHENBACH

They did not offend his reason; yet they seemed by their very nature vaguely disquieting.

(The YOUNG-OLD MAN and the GONDOLIER exit.)

NARRATOR

(Distracting ASCHENBACH from his solitude) Yet here was the sea; even in the midst of such thoughts he saluted it, exulting that Venice was near and accessible.

ASCHENBACH

(Consulting a pocket-watch) At length it seemed to be time to change for dinner. He did so, slowly and methodically as was his way, for he was accustomed to work while he dressed; but even so found himself a little early when he entered the hall, where a large number of guests had collected –

(The chandelier is illuminated, and a piano arrangement of
Francesco Paolo Tosti's 'Chanson de l'adieu' is played.)

NARRATOR

There were long, dry Americans,

ASCHENBACH

large-familied Russians,

NARRATOR

English ladies,

ASCHENBACH

and German children

NARRATOR

with French nannies.

ASCHENBACH

The Slavic element, it seemed, predominated. In Aschenbach's neighborhood Polish was being spoken.

NARRATOR

Round a wicker table next to him was gathered a group of young folk in the charge of a governess – three young girls, perhaps fifteen to seventeen years old,

ASCHENBACH

and a long-haired boy of about fourteen.

(TADZIO enters and sits in the chair opposite ASCHENBACH.
TADZIO wears a sailor suit with a red breast knot and a polite
expression of boredom.)

NARRATOR

Aschenbach noticed with astonishment the lad's perfect beauty.

ASCHENBACH

His face recalled the noblest moment of Greek sculpture – pale, with a sweet reserve, the brow and nose descending in one line, the winning mouth, the expression of pure and godlike serenity. Tenderness and softness, it was plain, conditioned his existence.

NARRATOR

Was he delicate?

ASCHENBACH

His facial tint was ivory-white against the golden darkness of his clustering locks.

NARRATOR

Or was he simply a pampered darling, the object of a self-willed and partial love?

ASCHENBACH

Aschenbach inclined to think the latter. For in almost every artist there is an inborn proneness to side with the beauty that breaks hearts.

(The WAITER enters.)

WAITER

A waiter announced, in English, that dinner was served; but the young Poles still sat and waited about their wicker table.

(The WAITER exits.)

ASCHENBACH

Aschenbach felt comfortable in his deep arm-chair, he enjoyed the beauty before his eyes, he waited with them.

(The NARRATOR takes a long strand of pearls out of the trunk,
assuming the role of the matriarch.)

NARRATOR

The governess at length gave a signal and made a bow to the tall woman, who now entered the hall. There was something faintly fabulous in her appearance, lent solely by

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

the pearls she wore: they were nearly priceless, with gems the size of cherries.

ASCHENBACH

In Germany, she might have been the wife of some high official.

NARRATOR

She addressed a few words in French to the governess and then moved towards the glass door. The children followed, the girls in order of age, then the governess,

ASCHENBACH

and last the boy.

(TADZIO stands. He bows before the NARRATOR, and kisses his hand.)

PART VI – THE BEACH

ASCHENBACH

The weather the next day was no more promising.

(ASCHENBACH slowly rises, and the NARRATOR removes the chair.)

ASCHENBACH

Beneath a colorless, overcast sky the sea lay sluggish, so far withdrawn as to leave bare several rows of long sand-banks. When Aschenbach opened his window, he thought he smelt the stagnant odor of the lagoons. He felt suddenly out of sorts

NARRATOR

(As a question) and already began to think of leaving.

ASCHENBACH

Once, years before, after weeks of bright spring weather, this wind had found him out; it had been so bad as to force him to flee the city like a fugitive. And now it seemed beginning again – the same feverish distaste, the pressure on his temples, the heavy eyelids.

NARRATOR

It would be a nuisance to change again;

ASCHENBACH

but if the wind did not turn, this was no place for him.

NARRATOR

To be on the safe side, he did not unpack entirely.

(The ACTORS enter and help the NARRATOR unfold a wooden reclining chair and place a large, beach umbrella behind it. The ACTORS, wear bathing suits, sun themselves on the sand.)

NARRATOR

He delighted, as always in the scene on the beach,

ASCHENBACH

the sight of sophisticated society giving itself over to a simple life at the edge of the element.

ACTOR

The shallow gray sea was already gay with children wading, with swimmers,

ACTOR

with figures in bright colors lying on the sandbanks, arms behind their heads.

(The NARRATOR offers ASCHENBACH a bowl of red strawberries.)

ACTOR

A vendor came by with strawberries,

NARRATOR

and Aschenbach made his second breakfast of the luscious, dead-ripe fruit.

ASCHENBACH

(With mouth full) "I'll stop here."

ACTORS

"Where could it be better?"

NARRATOR

Where could it be better?

(The NARRATOR relaxes in the sand next to ASCHENBACH.)

NARRATOR

His love of the ocean had profound sources:

ASCHENBACH

the hard-worked artist's longing for rest, his yearning to seek refuge in the bosom of the simple and vast;

NARRATOR

and another yearning, opposed to his art and perhaps for that very reason a lure,

ASCHENBACH

for the unorganized, the immeasurable, the eternal –

NARRATOR

in short, for nothingness.

ASCHENBACH

He whose preoccupation is with excellence longs fervently to find rest in perfection; and is not nothingness a form of perfection?

NARRATOR

As he sat there dreaming thus, deep into the void, suddenly, the margin line of the shore was cut by a human form.

(TADZIO enters casting a long shadow over ASCHENBACH. He wears a red and white striped bathing suit.)

ASCHENBACH

He was lovelier than words could say, and as so often before, Aschenbach painfully felt that language could only extol, but not reproduce the beauties of the sense.

NARRATOR

The mother and governess called from the veranda in front of their bathing-cabin, until the lad's name seemed to possess the beach like a rallying-cry

ACTOR

Adju,

ACTOR

Adju,

ACTOR

Adju.

ASCHENBACH

Aschenbach could make out nothing more exact than two musical syllables, something like Adju-

ACTOR

Adgio,

ACTOR

Adgio,

ACTOR

Adgio.

ASCHENBACH

or Adgio.

NARRATOR

And with the help of a few Polish memories, he at length fixed on Tadzio,

ACTOR

Tadzio,

ACTOR

Tadzio,

ACTOR

Tadzio.

NARRATOR

a shortened form of Thaddeus.

ASCHENBACH

He turned and ran back against the water, churning the waves to foam. The sight of this living figure, virginally pure and austere, with dripping locks, beautiful as a tender young god, emerging from the depths of sea and sky, outrunning the element – it conjured up mythologies handed down from the beginning of time, of the birth of form, of the origin of the gods.

NARRATOR

Even when Aschenbach read, without looking up, he was conscious that the lad was there.

ASCHENBACH

Indeed, it was almost as though he sat there to guard the youth's repose; occupied, of course, with his own affairs,

NARRATOR

of course,

ASCHENBACH

yet alive to the presence of that noble human creature so close at hand.

NARRATOR

With closed lids Aschenbach listened to this poesy hymning itself silently within him.

ACTOR

Tadzio,

ACTOR

Tadzio,

ACTOR

Tadzio.

NARRATOR

And his heart was stirred,

ASCHENBACH

it felt a father's kindness.

Tadzio, ACTOR

Tadzio, ACTOR

Tadzio. ACTOR

(TADZIO exits.)

“I’ll stop here. Where could it be better?” ASCHENBACH

PART VII – THE DEPARTURE

(ASCHENBACH stands. The ACTORS remove the wooden folding chair and umbrella.)

ASCHENBACH

In the afternoon, he took the vaporetto to Venice, across the foul-smelling lagoon. He got out at San Marco, had his tea in the Piazza, and then took his customary walk.

NARRATOR

But this walk of his brought about nothing less than a revolution in his mood and an entire change in all his plans.

ASCHENBACH

There was a hateful sultriness in the narrow streets.

NARRATOR

The longer he walked, the more he was in torture under that state, which is the product of the sea air and the sirocco.

ASCHENBACH

He perspired painfully. His eyes rebelled, his chest was heavy, the blood in his temples throbbed.

(The NARRATOR helps ASCHENBACH to the trunk.)

NARRATOR

He reached a quiet square, one of those that exist at the city's heart, forsaken of God and man;

ASCHENBACH

(Wiping his forehead with a handkerchief) there he rested...on the margin of a fountain...and admitted to himself...

NARRATOR & ASCHENBACH

that he must be gone.

(ASCHENBACH rises, and the PORTER enters, moving the trunk to a different area of the stage.)

ASCHENBACH

Once back at the hotel, he announced at the office, that circumstances unforeseen obliged him to leave early the next morning.

PORTER

The management expressed its regret, changed his money and receipted his bill.

(The PORTER exits.)

ASCHENBACH

When he opened his window the next morning however, the sky was still overcast, but the air seemed fresher –

NARRATOR

and there and then his rue began.

ASCHENBACH

Had he not given notice too soon? Had he not let himself be swayed by a slight and momentary indisposition?

NARRATOR

If he had only been patient, not lost heart so quickly, tried to adapt himself to the climate, or even waited for a change in the weather before deciding! Then, instead of the hurry and flurry of departure, he would have before him now a morning like yesterday's on the beach.

ASCHENBACH

Too late! He must go on wanting what he had wanted yesterday. He dressed and at eight o'clock went down to breakfast.

(The PORTER re-enters with the chair, and ASCHENBACH sits.)

PORTER

As he sipped his tea, the porter came to announce that it was time for him to go.

ASCHENBACH

But Aschenbach found it did nothing of the sort, and requested the porter to let him breakfast in peace.

PORTER

The man hesitated and withdrew, only to come back again five minutes later. Time pressed. The car could wait no longer.

ASCHENBACH

Good, then it might go, and take his trunk with it! He would use the public conveyance, in his own time.

(The PORTER bows and exits with the trunk.)

ASCHENBACH

(Consulting his watch) When at length he rose, the time had grown very short.

(The NARRATOR escorts TADZIO onto the stage.)

NARRATOR

And it just so happened that at that very moment Tadzio came through the glass doors into the room.

(TADZIO walks past ASCHENBACH, and then exits.
ASCHENBACH stands.)

ASCHENBACH

“For the last time, Tadzio. It was all too brief!”

(The PORTER enters and removes the chair, while the
NARRATOR hurriedly escorts ASCHENBACH by the hand
around the stage, weaving in and out through the poles.)

NARRATOR

It was the well-known route: through the lagoon, past San Marco, up the Grand Canal. Once more the princely charm of the Piazzetta rose up before him and then dropped behind, next came the great row of palaces, the canal curved, and the splendid marble arches of the Rialto came into sight.

(Letting go of his hand, ASCHENBACH stops following the
NARRATOR.)

ASCHENBACH

How was it he had not known, had not thought, how much his heart was set upon it all! What this morning had been some slight regret now turned to grief. To leave seemed to the sufferer impossible, to remain not less so.

NARRATOR

It was very late, and he had not a moment to lose. (Summoning the PORTER) He hastened to buy his ticket and looked round in the crowd to find the hotel porter.

PORTER

The man appeared and said that the trunk had already gone off.

ASCHENBACH

“Already gone?”

PORTER

“Yes, it has gone to Como.”

ASCHENBACH

“To Como?”

NARRATOR

“To Como?”

PORTER

“To Como.” The trunk had been put with the wrong luggage even before leaving the hotel, and was now, well on its way in precisely the wrong direction.

ASCHENBACH

Aschenbach found it hard to wear the right expression as he heard this news. A reckless joy, a deep incredible mirthfulness shook him with a spasm.

NARRATOR

Was the hotel’s motorboat still outside?

PORTER

Yes, it was at the door.

ASCHENBACH

(Chastising the PORTER) Aschenbach said he would not travel without his luggage; that he would go back and wait at the Hotel des Bains until it turned up.

(The PORTER exits.)

NARRATOR

And then the unbelievable thing came to pass: the traveler, twenty minutes after he had reached the station, found himself once more on the Grand Canal on his way back to the Lido.

ASCHENBACH

(Struggling to contain his delight) What a strange adventure indeed, this right-about face of destiny!

NARRATOR

(The swift-moving vessel went like a shot to its goal;)

ASCHENBACH

Things could not,

NARRATOR

(and he,)

ASCHENBACH

he told himself,

NARRATOR

(its sole passenger)

ASCHENBACH

have fallen out more luckily. There would be the necessary / explanation,

NARRATOR

(sat hiding the panic and thrills / of a truant schoolboy)

ASCHENBACH

a few astonished faces –

NARRATOR

(beneath a mask of forced resignation.)

ASCHENBACH

then all would be well once more, a mischance prevented, a grievous error set right;

NARRATOR

and all he had thought to have left forever was his own once more,

ASCHENBACH

his

NARRATOR

for as long,

ASCHENBACH & NARRATOR

for as long as he liked.

(The Porter enters again with the trunk, and ASCHENBACH rests.)

NARRATOR

Dazed by the whirl of the extraordinary forenoon, he subsided into his armchair by the open window.

ASCHENBACH

(Breathing in a deep sigh of relief) The sea wore a pale-green cast, the air felt thinner, purer, the beach with its cabins and boats had more color.

NARRATOR

At midday he saw Tadzio, coming up from the sea, across the barrier and along the boardwalk to the hotel.

ASCHENBACH

Aschenbach recognized him, even at this height, and had it in mind to say to himself:

NARRATOR

“Well, Tadzio, so here you are again too!”

ASCHENBACH

But the casual greeting died away before it reached his lips, slain by the truth in his heart. He felt the rapture of his blood, the poignant pleasure, and realized that it was for Tazio's sake that his departure had been so hard.

NARRATOR

He sat quite still, unseen at this high post, and looked within himself.

(ASCHENBACH and the NARRATOR study each other for a long moment. The NARRATOR mimics ASCHENBACH as they both slowly raise their arms upward in "a gesture of welcome, a calm and deliberate acceptance of what might come". Lights gradually increase in intensity.)

PART VIII – THE SUN

(The stage is brightly lit. The NARRATOR places an umbrella behind ASCHENBACH'S chair. TADZIO enters and stands on top of the traveling trunk. ASCHENBACH writes.)

ASCHENBACH

Now daily the naked god with flaming cheeks drove his fire-breathing steeds through the heavens and with him streamed the strong east wind that fluttered his yellow locks.

(ASCHENBACH crumples up this page and tosses it into the sand.)

NARRATOR

Has it not been written that the sun beguiles our attention from things of the intellect to fix it on things of the sense?

ASCHENBACH

The sun, they say, dazzles; so bewitching reason, that the soul for very pleasure forgets its actual state, to cling with doting on the loveliest of all the objects she shines on.

(The chandelier above TADZIO is illuminated.)

NARRATOR

Aschenbach saw the boy Tadzio almost constantly.

ASCHENBACH

He encountered him everywhere –

NARRATOR

in the salons of the hotel, on the cooling rides to the city and back, among the splendors of the Piazza.

ASCHENBACH

But it was the regular morning hours on the beach, which gave him his happiest opportunity to study and admire the lovely apparition.

NARRATOR

Soon the observer knew every line and pose of this form that presented itself so freely.

(The NARRATOR and ASCHENBACH encircle TADZIO, as if admiring a statue.)

ASCHENBACH

The ringlets of honey-colored hair clung to his temples and neck, the sun illuminated the fine down on his upper spine, the thin envelope of flesh covering the torso betrayed the

ASCHENBACH (CONT'D)

delicate outlines of the ribs and the symmetry of the chest. His armpits were still as smooth as a statue's, smooth the glistening hollows behind the knees, where the blue network of veins suggested that the body was formed of some stuff more transparent than mere flesh. (Stepping back for a better perspective) What discipline, what precision of thought was expressed by the youthful perfection of this form!

NARRATOR

And yet the pure, strong will, which had labored in darkness and succeeded in bringing this godlike work of art to the light of day – wasn't it known and familiar to him, the artist? Was not the same force at work in himself when he strove in cold fury to liberate from the marble mass of language the slender forms of his art?

ASCHENBACH

His eyes took in that noble figure there at the blue water's edge, and with an outburst of rapture he told himself that what he saw was beauty's essence; form as divine thought, of which an image and likeness, rare and holy, was raised up here for adoration.

NARRATOR

Such were the devotee's thoughts, such the power of his emotions. And the sea, so bright with glancing sunbeams, wove in his mind a spell and summoned up a lovely picture:

(SOCRATES enters and helps TADZIO down from the trunk.
They lay down in the sand together near ASCHENBACH.)

SOCRATES

there was the ancient plane-tree outside the walls of Athens, where on the gentle grassy slope, two men reclined, an elder with a younger,

ASCHENBACH

ugliness paired with beauty,

NARRATOR

and wisdom matched with grace.

SOCRATES

Here Socrates held forth to youthful Phaedrus upon the nature of beauty and spirituality, wooing him with insinuating wit and charming turns of phrase. He told him of the burning heat that the lover suffers when his eye beholds an image of sacred beauty. "For beauty, my Phaedrus, beauty alone, is both divine and visible at once. For, mark you, beauty is the sole aspect of the spiritual that we can perceive through our senses, or bear so to perceive. Else what should become of us, if the divine, if truth, if god were to speak to us through the senses? Should we not perish and be consumed by the flames of love, as Semele was by Zeus so long ago? So beauty, then, is the beauty-lover's way to the spirit – but only the way, only the means, my little Phaedrus, only the means"...

NARRATOR

And then the sly arch-lover said the subtlest thing of all:

SOCRATES

that the lover was nearer the divine than the beloved; for the god was in the one but not in the other.

(SOCRATES helps TADZIO back up onto the trunk and then exits.)

ASCHENBACH

Thought that can merge wholly into feeling,

NARRATOR

feeling that can merge wholly into thought –

ASCHENBACH

these are the artist's highest joy. (Intensely excited) He felt a sudden desire to write.

(Overcome with emotion, ASCHENBACH begins to madly scribble down the passion that pours from his heart, letting the blank, white pages fall upon the sand.)

NARRATOR

He would write, and moreover would write in Tadzio's presence.

(ASCHENBACH approaches TAZIO and gently writes on his body: "Beauty is the way to the spirit".)

ASCHENBACH

This boy should be in a sense his model, his style should follow the lines of this godly body and transform his beauty into the spiritual. Never had the pride of the word been so sweet to him, never had he known so well that Eros is in the word.

(The lights gradually fade, as ASCHENBACH keeps writing.)

NARRATOR

Strange hours! Strangely unnerving labor! When Aschenbach put aside his work and left the beach he felt exhausted, broken.

(The NARRATOR helps TADZIO down from the trunk. TADZIO exits.)

ASCHENBACH

Indeed, he went to bed early, for at nine o'clock, with the departure of Tadzio from the scene, the day was over for him.

(Exhausted, ASCHENBACH hands his pen over to the NARRATOR, and the NARRATOR tucks ASCHENBACH into the wooden reclining chair.)

NARRATOR

But in the faint grayness of the morning, a tender pang would go through him as his heart was reminded of its adventure.

ASCHENBACH

He could no longer bear his pillow and rising, would wrap himself against the early chill and sit down by the window to await the sunrise.

(The NARRATOR collects ASCHENBACH'S pages. Gradually the lights grow with intensity over ASCHENBACH, as the NARRATOR reads his writing.)

NARRATOR

Heaven, earth, and its waters lay enfolded in the ghostly, glassy pallor of dawn; one pale star still swam in the shadowy vast. But there came a breath, a winged word from afar that Eros was rising; and the farthest strip of sea and sky was tinged by the first sweet flush that heralds to men their sense of Creation. Roses were strewn at the edge of the earth; infant clouds hung illumined like attendant amorette in the blue and blushful haze; purple radiance fell upon the sea, that seemed to heave it forward on its welling waves; from horizon to zenith went great quivering thrusts like golden lances and the gleam became a glare; without a sound, with godlike violence flaring flames swelled upwards, and with flying hooves the steeds of the sun-god mounted the sky.

(Basking in the warm sunlight, ASCHENBACH smiles and closes his eyes content.)

PART IX – THE SMILE

(While ASCHENBACH rests, the NARRATOR retrieves TADZIO.)

ASCHENBACH

There can be no relation more strange, than that between two beings who know each other only with their eyes, who meet daily, yes, even hourly, and yet by some whim or freak of convention feel constrained to act like strangers.

NARRATOR

Some sort of relationship was set up between Aschenbach and the youthful Tadzio;

ASCHENBACH

it was with a thrill of joy the older man perceived that the lad was not entirely unresponsive to all the tender notice lavished on him.

(ASCHENBACH anxiously sits in his wooden folding chair, awaiting TADZIO’S arrival.)

ASCHENBACH

For instance, what should move the lovely youth, nowadays, to always avoid the boardwalk and saunter along the sand, passing Aschenbach’s tent in front, sometimes so unnecessarily close as to almost graze his table or chair? Could the power of an emotion so beyond his own so draw, so fascinate its innocent object?

NARRATOR

Daily, Aschenbach would wait for Tadzio.

(The NARRATOR directs TAZIO to walk past ASCHENBACH.)

ASCHENBACH

Then sometimes, on his approach, he would pretend to be preoccupied and let the charmer pass by unregarded.

(The NARRATOR directs TAZIO to walk past ASCHENBACH again.)

NARRATOR

But sometimes,

ASCHENBACH

sometimes he looked up, and their glances met;

NARRATOR

when that happened,

NARRATOR & ASCHENBACH

both were profoundly serious.

ASCHENBACH

Aschenbach felt, simply, a wish to address him and have the pleasure of his reply. But he found his heart throbbing...unpleasantly fast...while his breath came...in such quick pants...that he could only have gasped had he tried to...

NARRATOR

had he tried to...

ASCHENBACH

"Too late!" he thought and let the charmer pass by unregarded.

NARRATOR

But the truth may have been that his illusion was far too dear to him, that he was too arrogant to admit fear of an emotion?

ASCHENBACH

"Too late!" he thought and let the charmer pass by unregarded.

NARRATOR

But was it too late? Addressing him might so easily have put everything in a lighter key.

ASCHENBACH

"Too late!" he thought and let the charmer pass by unregarded.

(TADZIO passes. ASCHENBACH stands and paces, while the
NARRATOR and TADZIO reset for the next encounter.)

NARRATOR

But once, one evening, it fell out differently.

ASCHENBACH

The Polish family had missed the evening meal, and Aschenbach had noted the fact with concern. He was restive over their absence, and after dinner walked up and down in front of the hotel;

(The NARRATOR directs TADZIO to walk past ASCHENBACH
once more.)

NARRATOR

when suddenly he saw Tadzio appear in the light of the arc-lamps.

ASCHENBACH

The sight of that dear form was unexpected, without giving him time to compose his features. Joy, surprise, admiration might have painted themselves quite openly upon his –

NARRATOR

and just at that instant it happened: Tadzio smiled.

ASCHENBACH

Smiled at Aschenbach, unabashed and friendly, a speaking, winning, captivating smile.

NARRATOR

Aschenbach received that smile and turned away with it as though entrusted with a fatal gift.

(TADZIO exits.)

ASCHENBACH

(Overcome with emotion) “How dare you. How dare you smile like that! No one is allowed to smile like that! No one!”

(The NARRATOR embraces ASCHENBACH.)

NARRATOR

Quivering from head to foot, and quite unmanned he whispered the trite phrase of love and longing – impossible in these circumstances, yet sacred too, and not unworthy of honor even here:

(ASCHENBACH whispers, “I love you” into the NARRATOR’S ear.)

PART X – THE SECRET

NARRATOR

In the fourth week of his stay on the Lido, Aschenbach made a certain singular observation touching the world about him.

ASCHENBACH

He noticed that though the season was approaching its height, the number of guests declined.

(The BARBER enters, placing the red-striped pole near the trunk, and wraps a white sheet around ASCHENBACH.)

BARBER

One day at the barber's – where he was now a frequent visitor –

ASCHENBACH

he heard something rather startling.

BARBER

The barber mentioned a German family who had just left the Lido after a brief stay, and rattled on in his obsequious way: "The signore is not leaving – he has no fear of the sickness, has he?"

ASCHENBACH

"The sickness?" he repeated.

BARBER

Whereat the prattler fell silent.

ASCHENBACH

When Aschenbach persisted,

BARBER

he said he really knew nothing about it at all, and tried in a fresh burst of eloquence to drown the embarrassing subject.

(The BARBER hastily exits.)

NARRATOR

After luncheon, Aschenbach had himself ferried across to Venice, in a dead calm, under a burning sun.

ASCHENBACH

As he sat in the Piazza, he suddenly noticed a peculiar odor: a sweetish, medicinal smell, associated with wounds and disease and suspect cleanliness.

(The SHOPKEEPER enters near the blue, striped pole, sweeping the sand with a straw broom.)

SHOPKEEPER

At the street corners placards were stuck up, in which the city authorities warned the population against the danger of certain infections prevalent during the heated season; advising them not to eat oysters or other shell-fish and not to use the canal waters.

NARRATOR

The ordinance showed every sign of minimizing an existing situation.

ASCHENBACH

He spoke to a shopkeeper lounging at his door. "Why in the world are they disinfecting the city of Venice?"

SHOPKEEPER

"Just a formal precaution, signore. A police regulation we have to put up with. The air is sultry – the sirocco is not wholesome, as the signore knows. Just a precautionary measure, you understand – probably unnecessary...."

(The SHOPKEEPER exits. The NARRATOR presents ASCHENBACH with a newspaper.)

NARRATOR

On reaching the hotel he sought a table in the lobby and buried himself in the newspapers.

ASCHENBACH

The foreign-language sheets had nothing.

NARRATOR

(Pointing out a specific article in the newspaper) But in the German papers certain rumors were mentioned, statistics given, then officially denied, then the good faith of the denial called into question.

ASCHENBACH

Thus, the departure of the German and Austrian contingent was made plain.

NARRATOR

As for the other nationals, they knew or suspected nothing.

(ASCHENBACH abruptly closes the newspaper.)

ASCHENBACH

"It ought to be kept quiet. It should not be talked about."

(TADZIO enters, casting a long, dark shadow over the sand.)

NARRATOR

Passion is like crime: it does not thrive on established order and common round; it welcomes every blow dealt the bourgeois structure. These things that were going on in the unclean alleys of Venice, under cover of an official hushing-up policy – they gave Aschenbach a dark satisfaction. The city's evil secret mingled with the one in his own heart –

ASCHENBACH

and he would have staked all he possessed to keep it. He cared for nothing, nothing but to keep Tadzio here, and owned to himself that he could not exist were the lad to pass from his sight.

NARRATOR

It came at last to this - that his frenzy left him capacity for nothing else but to pursue his flame, to dream of him absent, to lavish, lover-like, endearing terms on his mere shadow.

(ASCHENBACH kneels in TADZIO'S shadow and foolishly clutches fistfuls of sand.)

NARRATOR

One night, returning late from Venice, he paused by his beloved's chamber door, leaned his head against the panel, and remained there long, powerless to tear himself away, blind to the danger of being caught in so mad an attitude.

(As TADZIO exits, ASCHENBACH tries to capture his disappearing shadow.)

ASCHENBACH

And yet there were moments when he paused and asked himself what path was this on which he had set foot. Like most other men of attainments, he had an aristocratic interest in his forebears; he liked to think he had compelled their admiration, their regard. He thought of them now, involved in this illicit adventure, seized of these exotic excesses. What would they have said? What would they have said? / What would they have said?

NARRATOR

And all the while he kept doggedly on the traces of the disreputable secret the city kept hidden at its heart, just as he kept his own –

ASCHENBACH

“It ought to be kept quiet. It should not be talked about.”

PART XI – THE BALUSTRADE

(ASCHENBACH and TADZIO sit side by side. The NARRATOR and the WAITER stand behind them. The BUFFOON enters, strumming a guitar arrangement of Francesco Paolo Tosti's *Chanson de l'adieu, Song of Farewell*.)

BUFFOON

It so happened that a band of street musicians came to perform in the hotel garden that evening after dinner.

PARTIRE, È MORIRE UN POCO
È MORIRE A QUEL CHE SI AMA:
SI LASCIA UN PO' DI SE STESSI
IN TUTTI I MOMENTI E IN TUTTI I LUOGHI

WAITER

Aschenbach sat near the balustrade, a glass of pomegranate juice and soda-water sparkling ruby-red before him.

ASCHENBACH

(Drinking) His nerves drank in thirstily the sentimental tune.

BUFFOON

E' SEMPRE IL LUTTO DI UN DESIDERIO
L'ULTIMO VERSO DI UN POEMA
PARTIRE, È MORIRE UN POCO
È MORIRE A QUEL CHE SI AMA

BUFFOON

Idly he watched the antics of the buffoon with his face set in a fixed and painful smile,

ASCHENBACH

while inwardly his whole being was rigid with intensity of the regard he bent on Tadzio.

WAITER

The lad would cast a glance that might be slow and cautious, or might be sudden and swift, as though to take him by surprise, to the place where his lover sat.

ASCHENBACH

Aschenbach did not meet the glance. An ignoble caution made him keep his eyes in leash.

BUFFOON

E SI PARTE, ED È UN GIOCO
E FINO ALL'ULTIMO ADDIO

È LA PROPRIA ANIMA CHE SI DISSEMINA
CHE SI DISSEMINA IN OGNI ADDIO
PARTIRE, È MORIRE UN POCO
PARTIRE, È MORIRE UN POCO

(All applaud.)

BUFFOON

After the song the performer began to take up money.

NARRATOR

He came along the railing to Aschenbach, and with him came that suspicious odor no one else seemed to notice.

ASCHENBACH

“Listen! Why are they forever disinfecting Venice?”

BUFFOON

“Because of the police. Orders, signore. On account of the heat and the sirocco. The sirocco is oppressive. Not good for the health.”

ASCHENBACH

“So there is no plague in Venice?”

BUFFOON

“A plague? What sort of plague? Is the sirocco a plague? Or perhaps our police are a plague! You are making fun of us, signore! A plague! Why should there be? The police make regulations on account of the heat and the weather...”

ASCHENBACH

“Quite,” and dropping an unduly large coin into the man’s hat dismissed him with a sign.

(The NARRATOR and the WAITER forcibly escort the
BUFFOON away from ASCHENBACH.)

BUFFOON

He had not reached the steps when two of the hotel servants flung themselves on him

NARRATOR

and began to whisper,

WAITER

their faces close to his.

BUFFOON

He shrugged and seemed to give assurances that he had said nothing. They let him go at last, and he vanished in the night.

(BUFFOON exits, laughing hysterically.)

NARRATOR

The company dispersed. Tazio had long since left the balustrade.

(The NARRATOR exits with TADZIO.)

WAITER

But he, the lonely man sat for long, to the waiters' great annoyance. Time passed, the night went on.

(The WAITER exits. ASCHENBACH grabs a handful of sand and lets the grains slowly sift through his fingers. The music returns as a lingering sentiment, floating on the wind from afar.)

ASCHENBACH

Time passed, the night went on. Long ago, in his parental home, he had watched the sand filter through an hourglass – he could still see, as though it stood before him, the fragile, pregnant little toy. Soundless and fine the rust-red streamlet ran through the narrow neck, and made, as it declined in the upper cavity, an exquisite little vortex.

‘SONG OF FAREWELL’

TO LEAVE IS TO DIE A LITTLE
IT IS DEATH TO WHAT ONE LOVES
YOU LEAVE A LITTLE OF YOURSELF BEHIND
AT ALL TIMES AND EVERYWHERE

IT IS ALWAYS IN MOURNING FOR A WISH
THE LAST LINE OF A POEM
TO LEAVE IS TO DIE A LITTLE
IT IS DEATH TO WHAT ONE LOVES

YET YOU LEAVE, AND IT’S A GAME
AND UNTIL THE LAST FAREWELL
IT IS YOUR SOUL THAT YOU SOW
THAT YOU SOW WITH EACH FAREWELL
TO LEAVE IS TO DIE A LITTLE
TO LEAVE IS TO DIE A LITTLE

‘ABSCHIEDSLIED’

ABSCHIED IS IMMER EIN STÜCKEN TOD
HEIßT DEM ENTSAGEN, WAS UNS TEUER IST

UND AN JEDEM ORT, IN JEDER STUNDE
LASSEN WIR VON UNS ETWAS ZURÜCK

STETS SIND ES BEGRABENE WÜNSCHE
DIE LETZTE ZEILE IN EINEM GEDICHT
ABSCHIED IST IMMER EIN STÜCKEN TOD
HEIßT DEM ENSAGEN, WAS UNS TEUER IST

WIR GEHEN FORT, FAST IST'S EIN SPEIL
UND BIS ZUM ALLERLETZTEN LEBEWOHL
BIRGT JEDER ABSCHIED
IN SICH UNSERE SEELE
ABSCHIED IST IMMER EIN STÜCKEN TOD
ABSCHIED IST IMMER EIN STÜCKEN TOD

PART XII –THE PLAGUE

NARRATOR

The very next afternoon the solitary took another step, in pursuit of his fixed policy of baiting the outer world.

(The ENGLISHMAN enters.)

ASCHENBACH

This time he had all possible success. He went into the English travel bureau, and posing as a suspicious foreigner, put his fateful question.

ENGLISHMAN

“No ground for alarm, sir. A mere formality. Quite regular in view of the unhealthy climatic conditions.”

(The ENGLISHMAN pulls ASCHENBACH aside.)

ENGLISHMAN

“At least, that is the official explanation. I may tell you there’s a bit more to it than that.” For the past several years, Asiatic cholera had shown a strong tendency to spread. Its source was the hot swamps of the Ganges, where it bred in the mephitic air of that island-jungle.

(Using the sand as a map, the ENGLISHMAN places the three poles in different locations that correspond to the spread of the plague.)

ENGLISHMAN

The pestilence had spread throughout Hindustan; moved eastward to China and westward to Afghanistan and Persia. It was carried by sea from Syrian ports and appeared simultaneously at several points on the Mediterranean.

ASCHENBACH

Northern Italy had been spared –

ENGLISHMAN

so far. But in May the emaciated and blackened corpses of a bargee and a woman who kept a grocer’s shop were found on the same day. The Venetian authorities published a statement to the effect that the state of the city’s health had never been better, at the same time instituting the most necessary precautions.

NARRATOR

The authorities were more actuated by fear of the large losses that the hotels and shops would suffer in case of panic and blockade.

ENGLISHMAN

But by that time the food supplies had been contaminated, for death unseen and unacknowledged was devouring and laying waste in the narrow streets.

(The NARRATOR knocks over a pole.)

ENGLISHMAN

Eighty out of every hundred died horribly, for the onslaught was of the extremest violence, and not infrequently of the “dry” type, the most malignant form of the contagion.

(The NARRATOR knocks over another pole.)

ENGLISHMAN

In this form the victim’s body loses power to expel the water secreted by the blood vessels, it shrivels up, his blood grows thick like pitch, and he suffocates in a few hours.

(The NARRATOR knocks over the last pole.)

ENGLISHMAN

He is fortunate indeed, if, as sometimes happens, the disease takes the form of a profound unconsciousness, from which the sufferer seldom or never rouses.

ASCHENBACH

He is fortunate indeed.

ENGLISHMAN

“You would do well to leave today instead of tomorrow. The blockade cannot be more than a few days off.”

ASCHENBACH

“Thank you,” said Aschenbach and left the office, triumphant in his possession of the truth at last.

NARRATOR

One decent course lay open to him. He might approach the lady of the pearls and say to her: “Madame, will you permit an entire stranger to serve you with a word of warning?”

ASCHENBACH

“Madame, will you permit an entire stranger to serve you with a word of warning?”

NARRATOR

“Venice is in the grip of pestilence.”

ASCHENBACH

“Venice is in the grip of pestilence.”

NARRATOR
“Go away.”

ASCHENBACH
“Go away.”

NARRATOR
“Leave here at once without delay,

ASCHENBACH
“Leave here at once without delay,

NARRATOR
with your daughters

ASCHENBACH
with your daughters

NARRATOR
and Tazio.”

(ASCHENBACH does not respond.)

NARRATOR
“Venice is in the grip of pestilence. Go away.”

ASCHENBACH
“Go away.”

NARRATOR
“Leave here at once without delay, with your daughters

ASCHENBACH
with your daughters

NARRATOR
and Tazio.”

(Again, ASCHENBACH does not respond.)

ASCHENBACH
There crossed in his mind the vision of a white building with inscriptions on it, glittering
in the sinking sun –

(A red light reveals the STRANGER.)

STRANGER

“They are entering into the House of the Lord: ...

ASCHENBACH

he recalled the strange pilgrim apparition that had wakened a lust for strange countries and fresh sights.

STRANGER

“They are entering into the House of the Lord: ...

ASCHENBACH

And these memories, brought in their train the thought of returning home, returning to the old life of effort, to reason, self-mastery, and an ordered existence.

STRANGER

“They are entering into the House of the Lord: ...

NARRATOR

May the Light Everlasting shine upon them.”

(The red light on the STRANGER fades away.)

ASCHENBACH

“It ought to be kept quiet. I will not speak.”

PART XIII – THE DREAM

(The lights slowly dim around ASCHENBACH, and a low, dull thunder is heard.)

ASCHENBACH

That night he had a fearful dream –

NARRATOR

if dream be the right word.

(The NARRATOR places the black pole center, which is illuminated by a single shaft of light.)

ASCHENBACH

Night reigned; his senses were on the alert. He heard a voice, naming, though darkly, that which was to come:

(The ACTORS enter, wearing grotesque Venetian masks, and lead TADZIO in a processional to the pole.)

ACTORS

“The stranger god!”

ASCHENBACH

A glow lighted up the surrounding mist and by it he recognized a mountain scene like that about his home. From the wooded heights a whirling riot of men and animals came raging down, and overflowed the hillside with flames and human forms.

ACTORS

“The stranger god!”

(The ACTORS tie TADZIO to the pole.)

ASCHENBACH

He trembled, he shrank, his will was steadfast to uphold his own god against this stranger who was sworn enemy to dignity and self-control. But the mountain wall took up the noise and howling and gave it back manifold.

ACTORS

“The stranger god!”

(The ACTORS dance around TADZIO, unearthing arrows that have been hidden in the sand.)

ASCHENBACH

His senses reeled in the steam of panting bodies, and another, too familiar smell – of wounds, uncleanness, and disease. His heart throbbed to the drums, he craved with all his soul to join the ring that formed about the obscene symbol of the godhead, which they were revealing and elevating, monstrous and wooden, while from full throats they yelled:

ACTORS

“The stranger god!”

(The ACTORS stab TADZIO with the arrows. With each thrust, TADZIO tosses his head back in ecstasy.)

ASCHENBACH

Foam dripped from their lips,

ACTORS

“The stranger god!”

ASCHENBACH

they drove each other on with lewd gesturing and beckoning hands.

ACTORS

“The stranger god!”

ASCHENBACH

They thrust their pointed staves into each other’s flesh and licked the blood as it ran down.

ACTORS

“The stranger god!”

(TADZIO’S body is pierced with arrows – an unholy symbol of St. Sebastian. ASCHENBACH enters the circle. The ACTORS and ASCHENBACH wildly dance around TADZIO.)

NARRATOR

But now the dreamer was in them and of them, the stranger god was his own. Yes, it was he who was flinging himself upon the animals, he who bit and tore and swallowed smoking gobbets of flesh – while on the trampled moss there now began the rites in honor of the god, an orgy of promiscuous embraces – and in his very soul he tasted the bestial degradation of his fall.

(ASCHENBACH raises an arrow over his head and aims it at TADZIO’S heart.)

ASCHENBACH

“The stranger god!”

(Blackout.)

PART XIV – THE FALL

(When the lights return, the dream has vanished. The NARRATOR helps ASCHENBACH to the trunk. The BARBER enters, placing the red-striped pole near the trunk, and wraps a white sheet around ASCHENBACH.)

BARBER

Beauty makes people self-conscious.

NARRATOR

(Holding up a hand-mirror.) Like any lover, he desired to please and suffered agonies at the thought of failure.

ASCHENBACH

(Gazing upon his reflection) “Gray.”

BARBER

“Slightly. Entirely due to neglect. Very natural, of course, in men of affairs, but, after all, not very sensible. We are only as old as we feel, but no older, and gray hair can misrepresent a man worse than dyed. You, for instance, signore, have a right to your natural color. Surely you will permit me to restore what belongs to you?”

ASCHENBACH

“How?”

(The BARBER begins to apply a black dye to ASCHENBACH’S hair)

BARBER

For answer the barber washed his client’s hair in two waters, one clear and one dark, and lo, it was as black as in the days of his youth. Some folk have very strict ideas about the use of cosmetics, as they logically should. “Now if we were to freshen up the skin just a little...”

(The BARBER powders ASCHENBACH’S face and applies red lipstick and rouge.)

BARBER

He watched in the mirror and saw his eyebrows grow more even and arching, the eyes gain in size and brilliance. A delicate carmine glowed on his cheeks where the skin had been so brown and leathery. The dry, anemic lips grew full, they turned the color of ripe strawberries, and the lines round the eyes and mouth gave place to a youthful bloom.

(The NARRATOR hands ASCHENBACH the hand-mirror.)

ASCHENBACH

It was a young man, a young man who looked back at him from the glass.

(The BARBER removes the white sheet. ASCHENBACH looks both clown and corpse-like, but most importantly reminiscent of the YOUNG-OLD MAN.)

BARBER

“The merest trifle, signore, the merest trifle. Now the signore can fall in love as soon as he likes.”

(The BARBER snaps the white sheet with a flourish and exits.)

ASCHENBACH

Mind and heart were drunk with passion.

(TADZIO enters.)

NARRATOR

One afternoon he pursued his charmer deep into the stricken city’s huddled heart.

ASCHENBACH

All his care was not to lose sight of the figure after which his eyes thirsted.

(TADZIO weaves his way between the poles. ASCHENBACH pursues him, careful to follow his footpath in the sand.)

ASCHENBACH

He slunk under walls; he lurked behind buildings or people’s backs; and the sustained tension of his senses and emotions exhausted him more and more.

NARRATOR

Tadzio walked behind the others, and as he sauntered slowly after, would turn his head and assure himself with a glance of his strange, twilight gray eyes that his lover was still following.

ASCHENBACH

He saw him – and did not betray him. Lured by those eyes, led on the leading-string of his own passion and folly, utterly lovesick, he stole upon the footsteps of his unseemly hope –

NARRATOR

(As a question) and at the end...

ASCHENBACH

and at the end found himself cheated.

(To ASCHENBACH's dismay, the NARRATOR has erased TADIO'S footsteps from the sand.)

ASCHENBACH

The labyrinthine little streets, squares, canals, and bridges, each one...so like the next...at length made him lose his bearings. His head burned...his body was wet with clammy sweat...he was plagued by an intolerable thirst.

NARRATOR

He looked about for some refreshment and found a little fruit-shop.

ASCHENBACH

He bought some strawberries. They were overripe and soft.

NARRATOR

The street he was on opened out into a little square, one of those charmed, forsaken spots he liked;

ASCHENBACH

(Breathing heavily and delirious with laughter) And he recognized it as the very one, the very one where he had sat weeks ago and conceived his abortive plan of flight.

(The NARRATOR opens the traveling trunk. ASCHENBACH rests against the trunk.)

NARRATOR

He sank down on the steps of the well and leaned his head against its stone rim.

ASCHENBACH

It was quiet here.

NARRATOR

Grass grew between the stones, and rubbish lay about. A waft of carbolic acid was borne on a warm gust of wind.

(ASCHENBACH rests against the trunk catching his breath. With his handkerchief, ASCHENBACH smears his heavy make-up, as the black dye drips down into his face.)

NARRATOR

There he sat, the master; this was he who had found a way to reconcile art and honors; who renounced bohemianism and all its works, all sympathy with the abyss and the troubled depths of the outcast human soul.

ASCHENBACH

(Addressing TADZIO) “For mark you, Phaedrus, beauty alone is both divine and visible; and so it is, little Phaedrus, the artist’s way to the spirit. But tell me, my dear boy, do you believe that such a man can ever attain wisdom and true manly worth, for whom the path to the spirit must lead through the senses? Or do you rather think – for I leave the point to you – that it is a path of perilous sweetness, a way of transgression, and must surely lead him who walks in it astray?”

(ASCHENBACH struggles to stand. With the help of the NARRATOR, he staggers towards TADZIO.)

ASCHENBACH

For you know that we artists cannot walk the way of beauty without Eros as our companion and guide. We may be heroic, disciplined warriors of our craft, yet we can be neither wise nor worthy citizens, for we must roam in the realm of feeling, where love is our desire – our craving and our shame. Our magisterial style is all pretence; our honorable repute a farce. For what good can an artist be, if from his very first step, he is headed directly for the pit?

(ASCHENBACH points back to the open trunk.)

ASCHENBACH

He may seek to avoid it, by reaching for knowledge and honor in the world, but however he turns, it draws him still. For knowledge, Phaedrus, does not make him who possesses it dignified or austere. Knowledge is all-knowing, understanding, forgiving. It has compassion with the abyss – it is the abyss. And so, our path must be with beauty...with beauty only. But beauty and simplicity lead to intoxication and desire. They lead the noblest among us to frightful emotional excesses. So, they too, they too, lead to the bottomless pit.

(ASCHENBACH staggers back to the open trunk without the assistance of the NARRATOR. ASCHENBACH falls before the open trunk and peers deeply within.)

ASCHENBACH

Yes, they lead us there, I say, us who are artists – who by our very nature are prone not to excellence but to excess. And now, Phaedrus, I will go. Remain here; and only when you can no longer see me, then do you depart also.”

PART XV – THE FAREWELL

(The NARRATOR helps ASCHENBACH to his feet. The PORTER enters with luggage in hand.)

NARRATOR

A few days later, Gustave Aschenbach left his hotel rather later than usual in the morning.

ASCHENBACH

In the lobby he saw a quantity of luggage lying strapped and ready; asked the porter whose it was, and received in answer the name he already knew he should hear –

PORTER

the Polish family.

ASCHENBACH

“When?”

PORTER

“After luncheon.”

(The PORTER exits. The NARRATOR helps ASCHENBACH to the wooden folding chair.)

NARRATOR

It was an unfriendly scene. The whole beach, once so full of color and life, now looked autumnal, out of season. A camera on a tripod stood at the edge of the water, apparently abandoned; its black cloth snapped in the freshening wind.

(Francesco Paolo Tosti’s ‘Chanson de l’adieu’ is played, as TADZIO enters.)

ASCHENBACH

Tadzio was there, tracing figures in the wet sand with his toe. A remote and isolated figure, with floating locks, out there in sea and wind, against the misty inane.

NARRATOR

The watcher sat just as he had sat that time in the lobby of the hotel when first the twilit gray eyes had met his own.

ASCHENBACH

Yes, they lead us there, I say, us who are poets – who by our very nature are prone not to excellence but to excess.

(TADZIO points out towards the sea.)

NARRATOR

He rested his head against the chair-back and followed the movements of the figure out there, then lifted it, as it were in answer to Tadzio's gaze. It sank on his breast, the eyes looked out beneath their lids, while his whole face took on the relaxed and brooding expression of deep slumber.

(The NARRATOR reverently closes the trunk. Since his physical death is a spiritual rebirth, ASCHENBACH rises.)

NARRATOR

It seemed to him the pale lovely Summoner out there smiled at him and beckoned; as though, he pointed outward as he hovered on before into an immensity of richest expectation.

ASCHENBACH

And now, Phaedrus, I will go. Remain here; and only when you can no longer see me, then do you depart also.

NARRATOR

And, as so often before, he rose to follow.

(Several tolls from a funeral knell are heard. ASCHENBACH follows the NARRATOR as he exits. The stage is littered with books, pages, and arrows stuck in the sand, as though a great and perilous battle has been fought. Gradually, ever so gradually, the lights fade around the image of TADZIO)

END OF PLAY