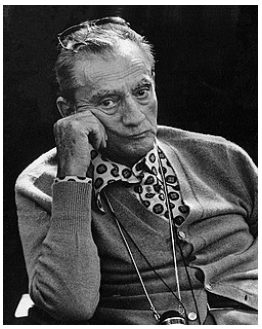
HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
J. Zimmerman, MA

Sexuality in Cinema

Death in Venice (1971)

Luchino Visconti (1906-1976)



Director One of the fathers of Italy's cinematic realism movement, Visconti was born to a noble family in Milan and exposed to art, music, and theater throughout his early life. He began his film career as a set dresser in 1936. In his young adult life, he was struck by the initial imagery of fascist aesthetics, but the rise of Mussolini drove the young man to join the Italian Communist Party and enter into the wartime resistance in the 1940s. His first film, *Ossessione* (1943) was considered an affront to fascist ideals, and the use of realist plots and characters would continue throughout his career, only being supplanted by romanticized imagery when Visconti was first experimenting with color film. Visconti was also a notable director of stage and opera, known for both preserving the tradition and provoking controversy with unique costuming. He made no secret of his homosexuality in his later years, though for most of his early life his affairs were secret, only divulged in his biography published seven years after his death.



Film Based on Thomas Mann's 1912 novella of the same name, the idea of a film had been passed around between European directors and producers since 1964. In 1969, Luchino Visconti was officially attached to the project, as per a statement in *Var* magazine. In the next year, he was able to purchase the rights to the story from other production companies with the help of the Mann estate, the family swayed by the inclusion of Dirk Bogarde as Gustav von Aschenbach. Shooting began in June 1970, primarily at the Hôtel des Bains, with some interiors being shot at Cinecittà Studios in Rome. *Death in Venice* is one of Visconti's more lush films, more focus being put into the filmcraft than the story for most of the film. Contemporary criticism of the film was split: Most critics would admit to the film's visual beauty and engrossing cinematography, but notable figures like Roger Ebert decried the themes of homosexual desire and pedophilic tendencies. Modern critics have softened on these points, most giving the film positive reviews. At the time of writing, *Death in Venice* has a 70% rating on the review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes.

Background Some negative feedback about the film is based entirely on the adaptation's choice to change Aschenbach's profession from that of an author to a composer. This is a reasonable change for the viewer, however, as we can easily hear music, but we cannot read what Aschenbach has written without bogging the film down. Beyond this change, the film is a faithful adaptation of the book and goes to great lengths to shoot at the locations Mann described. The young man who played Tadzio, Björn Andrésen, has spent his life trying to escape the portrayal and sexualization of the young boy that has followed him his whole life. A documentary was made about his experience: *The Most Beautiful Boy in the World* was released in 2021. American executives at Warner Brothers nearly threw the project in the trash heap after their first screening, fearing that it would be banned in the US for obscenity. In the film's final scenes, Aschenbach is seen in white makeup to hide his sickly complexion. Dirk Bogarde recalled how the makeup department tried cream after cream until settling on one that he would later find was labeled "keep away from eyes and skin." Visconti ignored this warning and, after testing the cream on

small patches of the film crew's skin, shooting went forward with full makeup. Bogarde's ability to perform even as the makeup burnt his face are a testament to the actor's skill.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Gustav von Aschenbach – A disgraced composer who finds an artistic muse in a young boy
Thaddeus **"Tadzio" Moes** – The object of Aschenbach's obsession
Mrs. Moes – Tadzio's mother
Alfred – Aschenbach's former friend and student
The Hotel Manager – The manager of the Hôtel des Bains

SYNOPSIS

In 1911, German composer Gustav von Aschenbach travels from Munich to Venice on medical advice, seeking rest after a physical collapse following a creative embarrassment. He spends his time at the Hôtel des Bains on the Lido, where the ordered luxury of the surroundings soothes him, appealing to his disciplined temperament. Among the hotel guests, Aschenbach notices a Polish family. He becomes transfixed by the adolescent son, Tadzio, whose beauty strikes him as effortless and classical. Watching Tadzio at meals, on the beach, and in the hotel corridors, the boy's presence stirs memories of philosophical debates with Aschenbach's pupil Alfried.

Although intending to leave Venice, Aschenbach stays after his luggage is mistakenly sent elsewhere, and he interprets the delay as fate. He abandons his work on an older composition and spends his days observing Tadzio, drawing fresh inspiration from the boy's presence. Though they never speak, the composer grows deeply attached, treating the boy as both muse and ideal. At the same time, rumors of illness circulate through the city. Aschenbach sees some disease precautions and smells strange smells, which officials dismiss as preparations for the summer heat. He learns the truth only after seeking out an independent source but chooses to stay, responsibility and desire urging him to warn the boy's family.

As the cholera epidemic worsens and the city empties, Aschenbach's physical condition declines. Desperate to preserve youth and desire, he alters his appearance and continues following Tadzio and his family through the increasingly desolate streets. When he learns they are leaving Venice, he drags himself to the beach one final time. Watching Tadzio walk toward the sea, Aschenbach succumbs to illness, dying alone while pining after his muse who plays in the waves.

PLOT



Steamer – Romantic music swells as the image of a steamship at sea fades into view. On the deck of the ship, a man sits in a wicker chair, reading a book. This is Gustav von Aschenbach. He is tightly bundled in winter clothes and has a blanket across his lap. Around him, sailors and personnel wander, tightening lines and performing other tasks. Along nearby sandbars, a half-dozen people wander in the early-morning sun, collecting shellfish. From the top of the ship, we see a harbor before the camera finds Gustav once more. He has a sad look on his face as he begins to drift to sleep. The ship drifts further into the port, and we see the historic cityscape of Venice. On deck, Gustav shakes himself awake. The ship's horn blows as it enters the port proper, and people swarm the deck to watch nearby soldiers going for their morning run, accompanied by a bugle. Twice more the ship blows its horn, attracting the attention of a pilot vessel that leads it into dock. Gustav stands and readies himself to disembark.



Disembarking – A swarm of gondoliers rows toward the steamer. As they grow closer, they begin shouting in Italian, trying to attract customers. Gustav from before makes his way down to the lower deck to disembark, and there a peculiar man in grotesque makeup that gives him a corpse-like appearance laughs and makes lascivious remarks about Gustav's "pretty little sweetheart." On a gondola, Gustav looks back at the rower a few times before stating that he wants to go to a specific dock. The rower replies in English that it's not normal for people with luggage to disembark there. Gustav barks that he won't pay the rower unless he takes him where he wants, and the rower changes course, muttering and cursing to himself in Italian. As the gondola drifts into port, Gustav steps onto the dock and is greeted by a hotel porter who quickly and skillfully loads Gustav's unwieldy trunk onto a cart. Gustav turns to pay the gondolier, but he's disappeared. Gustav running the dock explains the gondolier had no license and fled when he saw police nearby. "Signore, you had a ride to the Lido for nothing," the dockworker says, taking off his hat. Begrudgingly, Gustav plunks a few coins into the hat before accompanying his luggage into the city.



Hotel – Flags flutter in the breeze outside the Hôtel des Bains as Gustav climbs the front steps. Inside, tourists from across Europe flock and mingle. An elderly hotel worker leads Gustav to the front desk, where the hotel manager greets him: "Good afternoon, Professor von Aschenbach. Allow me to extend the compliments of the management." In Italian, he instructs the desk workers to pass him a room key before leading Gustav upstairs via the elevator, chattering about the quality of the hotel and the services they can provide for him. In his room, Gustav ignores the manager as he performs his over-the-top duties, opening windows and bossing around porters. When he finally leaves, Gustav stops unpacking and steps out onto his little balcony to take in the sea view.



Terrible illness – In another room in another hotel, Gustav lies on a couch, a deathly pallor to his skin. A doctor feels his pulse and turns around to a roomful of people, telling them Gustav will recover. "When do you think he'll be able to work again?" a young man asks. "That's difficult to say in cases like this," the doctor replies. "He has no reason to be proud of his heart. He needs to get away from it all, a long period of complete rest." The young man crosses to Gustav and kneels beside him. Gustav smiles and holds his hand. Later, the young man plays the piano, smoking a cigarette. "I remember," Gustav says, now seated upright. "We once had one of those in my father's house…" He looks at an hourglass, describing the unique construction of the glass: "To our eyes, it appears that the sand runs out only at the end."



Waiting for dinner – It's night now at the Hôtel des Bains, and Gustav busies himself with grooming and dressing. He whistles to himself as he dons his jacket, before turning to gaze on the photo of a girl, his daughter. He picks up the photograph and kisses it before continuing to dress. Across the room, a photo of his wife rests on another table, and he does the same with it when it catches his eye. Downstairs, a small group of musicians performs a waltz to entertain the wealthy clientele awaiting their dinner. Gustav sits among them, reading the newspaper while people-watching. Across the room, Gustav sees a family, and his gaze stops on a curly-haired blond boy among them. As another waltz begins, Gustav realizes that he's staring, and he continues to look around the room. As the camera pans around, Gustav eventually finds himself fixated on the boy again. People begin filing into the dining room, and eventually only Gustav and the family remain.



Lady in pink – A woman in a pink dress with long strands of pearls draped around her neck enters the chamber and approaches the family. She speaks indistinctly with the family: apparently, she is the mother, and the woman seated with the children was their governess. She sits with them, speaking in Polish as the music draws to a close. She switches back to French to speak with the governess. Still, Gustav watches the boy from afar. Eventually, the family rises and walks into the dining room together, paying no mind to Gustav. Only at the edge of the room does the boy turn and acknowledge Gustav's gaze. Gustav rolls up his newspaper and returns it to the common table before heading into the dining room himself.



Dinner – The dining room staff are hard at work serving soup and appetizers to the many wealthy clients of the hotel. Plates and glasses clink amid the din of chatter. The camera pans around the room slowly until it hits a wall, and Gustav walks into the dining room. The hotel manager greets him and leads him to a table personally. After ordering his dinner and shifting the flowers decorating the table out of his line of sight, his eyes settle on the young Polish boy again. Gustav stops himself from staring just as the waiter returns with his soup. As he eats, he remembers a conversation, and it dominates the soundscape: "Beauty," a man says. "You mean your spiritual conception of beauty." Gustav's voice replies, "But do you deny the ability of the artist to create from the spirit?" "Yes, Gustav," the man replies, "that is precisely what I deny." Again, Gustav gazes at the boy across the room. The memory of the debate continues: "And so, then, according to you, our labor as artists is only—" "Labor," the man interrupts. "Exactly." "Do you really believe in beauty as the product of labor?" "Yes," the man replies. "Yes, I do. That's how beauty is born. Like that, spontaneously, in utter disregard for your labor and mine. It pre-exists our presumption as artists."



Debate – The wealthy patrons of the hotel flock outside after dinner for dessert and aperitifs. Gustav walks silently among them, smoking his pipe. The memory of the debate from earlier continues: "Your great failure, my friend, is to consider life, reality, as a limitation." Suddenly, we are transported into the memory. Gustav stands on a balcony somewhere in Northern Germany. "But isn't that what it is?" he replies. "Reality only distracts and degrades us. You know, sometimes I think that artists are rather like hunters aiming in the dark. They don't know what their target is, and they don't know if they've hit it. But you can't expect life to illuminate the targets and steady your aim. The creation of beauty and purity is a spiritual act." "No, Gustav," the man says. The camera finally reveals him as the man who spoke to the doctor in the last memory. "Beauty belongs to the senses. Only to the senses." Their arguing continues back and forth whether beauty is sensorial or spiritual, human or divine. A bit later, over tea, the conversation cools down. Gustav says, "You know, Alfred, art is the highest source of education. And the artist has to be exemplary… He cannot be ambiguous." "But art is ambiguous," Alfred counters, "and music the most ambiguous of all the arts. It is ambiguity made a science." To prove his point, Alfred crosses to the piano in the corner and plays several diminished chords. "You can interpret them in any way you like. You have before you an entire series of mathematical combinations, unforeseen, inexhaustible." He plays another, sharper chord: "A paradise of double meanings in which you, more than anyone, romp and roll about like a calf in clover!" Alfred then begins to play a tune, asking, "Don't you hear it?" "Stop," Gustav replies, but Alfred continues. "It's all your music!" he shouts.



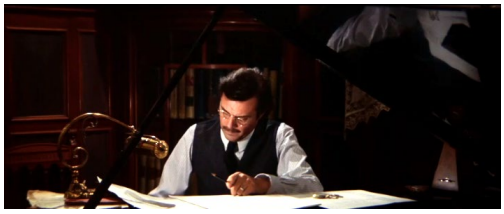
Breakfast – “Good morning, Professor von Aschenbach,” says the hotel manager. He stands by Gustav’s table in the dining room. “The weather, the sirocco,” Gustav asks, “How long will it last?” The manager goes into a complicated, long-winded, and occasionally contradictory explanation of the weather phenomenon, and Gustav removes his glasses, revealing dark bags under his eyes. A fter his explanation, the manager excuses himself. As always in these situations, Gustav looks across the room and finds the Polish family. The mother, governess, and the daughters sit at the table, but the boy is nowhere to be found. Gustav looks away, and a porter moves quickly across the room, presenting Gustav with a newspaper and some letters. He looks through the letters, sighing at their contents. Across the room, the Polish boy enters and crosses to join his family, Gustav’s eye on him the whole time. Not wanting to stare, Gustav opens his newspaper. While he reads, the boy turns and looks across the room, a small smile on his face as he looks in Gustav’s direction.



Beach – On the hotel’s private beach, Gustav walks stiffly toward the private cabins. A worker in a swimsuit greets him and shows him to an unoccupied cabin. The air is dominated by the sound of wind and surf as well as local men selling strawberries: “Strawberries! Fragola dolce!” Gustav bosses the worker around, telling him to fetch things from the small cabin. Across the beach, Gustav spies the Polish boy. He watches as the young man wanders. Eventually, the worker sets up the table and chair for Gustav, and he leaves after receiving a tip. Gustav pulls out his letters, but instead of reading, he watches the boy who joins his friends and runs out into the surf. As the hour grows late, we see the boy and his friends working on a large sandcastle. Gustav’s gaze shifts and follows the locals hawking costume jewelry and fruit. The Polish boy and a friend walk by, and the friend kisses the boy on the cheek. Gustav sees this, a subtle jealous look crossing his face. He then continues his people-watching as he writes replies to his letters. Later still, Gustav eats strawberries bought from a hawker. Nearby, a doctor with some friends tells them it’s dangerous to eat fresh fruit in such heat, waving the vendor away. Moments later, the Polish boy’s mother appears, shouting for him, and Gustav hears his name for the first time: “Tadzio! Tadzio!”

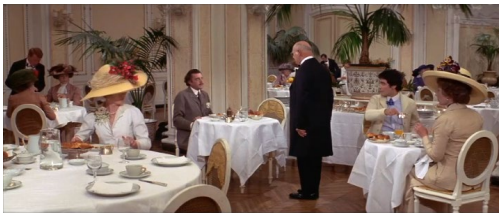


Elevator – Inside the hotel, Gustav walks through the boisterous lobby. When the elevator stops at the ground floor, several women step out, and Gustav steps in. Just as he thinks he’ll have a solitary ride with the operator, a group of boys rushes into the car, pressing Gustav to the rear wall. Among the group is Tadzio, who jokes and giggles with his friends. Gustav struggles to keep his eyes off the boy. As the boy steps off on the second floor, he turns around and stares at Gustav, walking backwards as the door shuts. In his room, Gustav quickly removes his hat and jacket before crossing to a chair. Frustration grips his every movement, and he picks up a sheet filled with musical bars. A few notes grace the topmost line. Gustav crosses to the sink and splashes water onto his face before collapsing to the couch, breathless. After regaining his composure, he stands and flings open his trunk. Gustav begins to throw his belongings inside.



The nature of shame – As he packs, Alfred’s voice takes over again, this time biting with sarcasm: “That’s not shame, that’s fear. Shame is a spiritual distress to which you are immune, because you are immune to feeling. You are a man of avoidance, of dislike, the keeper of distances.” In his memory, Gustav sits at a piano, plucking out a melody as Alfred chastises him. Alfred’s shouting; Gustav ignores him, continuing to compose. “You are afraid to have direct, honest

contact with anything. Because of your rigid standards of morality, you want your behavior to be as perfect as the music you compose. Every slip is a fall, a catastrophe, resulting in irreparable contamination." "I am contaminated!" Gustav finally shouts back. "If only you were!" Alfred quips. "To be in debt to one's own senses for a condition which is irredeemably corrupt and sick! What joy for an artist!" Alfred takes the composition away from Gustav, talking about the "dryness" of good health, both moral and physical. "Tell me," Alfred concludes, "do you know what lies at the bottom of the mainstream? Mediocrity."



"Time does not press" – In the lobby of the hotel, the manager sprints to intercept Gustav. "You are leaving us tomorrow?" He asks, a concerned look on his face. Gustav says he's had an engagement come up and must return home. The next morning, Gustav tries to have breakfast in the hotel's dining room, but the staff want him to leave. "Forgive my insistence, but the motor launch is waiting," a hotel employee says. "Time presses, sir." Gustav is irate: "Time does not press. Hotels have a habit of trying to be rid of one as soon as they have paid one's bill. I find it intolerable!" The other diners turn to look at who is causing the racket. Gustav, embarrassed, explains that he will be on his way once he's had his breakfast, telling the employee to send his luggage on ahead. Gustav watches the Polish family. Tadzio isn't with them. He gathers his belongings and stands, crossing paths with the boy as he leaves the dining room. They stand for a moment in subtle recognition. After the boy walks away, Gustav mutters, "Farewell, Tadzio. It was all too brief. May God bless you."



Ticket booth – At a busy train station, Gustav requests a train ticket to Munich. "For today?" the teller asks. "I don't know that you can catch the train. It leaves for Verona in four minutes." Gustav asks him to hurry, leaving in such a rush he forgets his change. In the thick of the bustle, a porter approaches Gustav, apologizing. "I am mortified. An error. A most unfortunate—" "Who are you?" Gustav demands. The porter explains that Gustav's luggage has been sent on the wrong train. "I want it back now!" Gustav snaps. "Immediately." The consummate professional, the porter tries to explain that it is impossible, but he will try to correct the mistake as soon as possible. "I will not leave Venice until my trunk is returned!" Gustav snaps, sitting on a bench. The porter leaves, and a man who accompanied him from the hotel steps in to see what's going on. Gustav hands him the train ticket, requesting it be refunded immediately, and asks to be taken back to the hotel. Nearby, a man collapses, panting and sweating. People give him space, but ignore him. Romantic music swells as, smiling, Gustav rides back to the hotel. Back in his room, he opens the shutters and looks out on the beach. Tadzio is there. Gustav waves, though he goes unseen.



Memories – Back on the beach, Gustav sits with his newspaper. Tadzio's mother seems to notice him, though she quickly looks back to her novel. Breathing happily, Gustav remembers a happier time. In his mind, his wife and daughter run to him. They lie on the grass and play among the wildflowers outside an idyllic mountain cabin. Gustav's daughter giggles and hugs him before Gustav's wife stoops to kiss him. The memory gives way to Gustav's gaze finding Tadzio again. The boy wrestles with his friends. He runs back to his mother with a handful of shells, both he and they covered in sand. She chastises him in Polish and brushes him off. Gustav watches, smiling. Soon, he sits down to dry off, and his mother passes him an orange. Gustav watches the boy play with his food before retreating to his newspaper. From underneath, he pulls out a score, an opera playing in

his mind. Watching Tadzio, now draped in a beach towel like a toga, walk toward the surf, Gustav writes down the music in his head.



Sunset – The pinks and oranges of sunset shimmer across the ocean to the horizon. Gustav opens the shutters to his balcony and steps outside, lighting a cigarette. He rubs his eyes and wipes the sweat from his brow before gazing out toward the horizon. His opera he is composing begins to play as he stares at the sun setting in the distance. The next day, Gustav walks back out to the beach, the opera still playing. On the path to the hotel's private beach, he sees Tadzio and he pauses. The boy plays, winging himself around the posts that hold up the canopy, making eye contact with Gustav several times before running off to the water's edge. Gustav holds the last post the boy touched for a moment, thinking of spinning around it himself, but instead he staggers away, his legs seemingly giving out beneath him. Behind one of the private cabins, he takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes wearily,



"**No need for concern"** – In the grand parlor of the hotel, Gustav wanders in. The melodic line of Beethoven's Fur Elise plays from a piano in the corner of the room. He looks, and the camera swings away slowly to reveal Tadzio plucking out the notes clumsily, practicing. The boy turns to see Gustav, and goes back to his practice. In the background, the hotel manager passes, and Gustav calls to him, asking why the newspapers aren't printing anything about the disease that is obviously spreading in the city. "Ah, so," the manager chuckles, "you have heard those extravagant rumors, too? Believe me, sir, there is no epidemic. Not even sickness." "What about the notices being put up by the health department?" Gustav retorts. "Every year in the summer months," the manager replies, "Venice is papered with that sort of notice. The police do it. They are interested in avoiding any risk to the public well-being. But it's nothing more than that, I assure you." He continues, accusing the foreign newspapers of libel to discourage tourism. "But no need to be concerned, Mr. Aschenbach. No need for concern." The manager smiles and excuses himself.



Brothel – Holding his head wearily, Gustav wanders closer to Tadzio, listening to his repeated rendition of Fur Elise's famous melodic line. He sits on the stage where the chamber typically plays, and he is struck by a memory. In another place, another time, the melodic line of Fur Elise continues. A much younger Gustav enters a brothel and sits on a couch next to a working girl. The madam calls out in German for Esmeralda, the woman Gustav wishes to see. It's her playing the piano, and she doesn't stop though the madam asks her to. With the door left open, Gustav enters, standing in the doorway to watch the woman play. Skillfully, she plays the bridge, looking past the upright piano at the man. She stops abruptly and stands, kicking the door shut before taking off her top. Smiling and putting her arm around Gustav's neck, the film makes a hard cut to their post-coitus lounging. Without a word, Gustav leaves a few bills on her bedside table. Though she tries to hold his hand, his wedding ring clear to see. He pulls away and wanders out, leaving the young woman disappointed. In the parlor, Gustav clutches his head in shame. Fur Elise begins to play again as he leaves.

Crossing paths – Outside the hotel, the number of guests has dwindled. What was a boisterous space filled with rich tourists now sees only a few ladies in large hats chatting quietly and sipping aperitifs. Gustav looks almost improper in his tails and Panama hat. He wanders away through the night. In the darkness, he happens to cross paths with the Polish family, who are returning to the hotel. He and Tadzio



share a passing glance, and Gustav walks away hastily, finding a bench to sit on. “You must never smile like that,” he says as if speaking to Tadzio. “You must never smile like that at anyone… I love you.” The next day, Tadzio prays in a church. Nearby, Gustav watches. Outside, Tadzio walks with his family, seeing the sights of the city. Gustav follows from afar, watching. He looks pale, his fingers twitching. The family fails to notice him. On a bridge crossing the canal, Tadzio does look back to see him, but his governess calls to him, and Gustav is distracted by a local man dumping a milky white liquid all over a plaza. “What is this filthy smell?” Gustav asks a vendor, but he gets no reply. “Thank you,” he says, impotently, before wandering away.



Music on the patio – A group of musicians plays jaunty folk music in the private courtyard of the hotel. They spend a little time at each table, and most of the patrons smile and clap along. Gustav sits alone with a cigarette, staring at Tadzio, who leans on a nearby railing. The boy looks back at Gustav, now clearly aware that the man keeps looking at him. The musicians begin another tune and make their way up to the patio where Gustav sits. To his dismay, the musicians keep making their way back to him as the manager steers them away from other disinterested patrons. After they’ve finished singing, the leader of the musicians approaches the patrons for tips. When he walks up to Gustav with his hat held out, Gustav asks, “Why are they disinfecting Venice?” The musician gives Gustav almost the same explanation as the hotel manager, though it sounds even less convincing from a sweaty man with a white-painted face and missing teeth: “Just a precaution, signore.” Gustav begrudgingly tosses a coin into the man’s hat and waves him away.



Mocking melody – In the courtyard, the hotel manager shoos the musicians away. When they dawdle, the hotel porters forcibly show them out. The man leading the porters pulls the leader of the musicians aside, and they share in some very animated conversation. Afterward, the musicians play one last song, a mocking melody, the band’s leader swinging his rear and thrusting comically and laughing aloud at the gathered guests. The guests laugh at first, thinking this is just a bit of comedy. Eventually, the accompaniment stops, but the laughing continues as the bandleader makes his way onto the patio, laughing in the faces of Gustav and the others. On his way out, the bandleader turns and sticks his tongue out at the gathered guests. Later, the courtyard and patio empty, Gustav sits, watching porters and waiters clear and clean the tables, his drink untouched. It’s clear he doesn’t believe the reassuring lies about the lack of illness in Venice.



Currency exchange – The next day, Gustav walks with purpose through a beautiful yet empty courtyard. He enters a bank and approaches a teller to exchange some marks for lira. After receiving his bills, Gustav tips his hat and turns to leave, but he changes his mind suddenly, returning to the teller and asking, “Could I have a word with you, please?” The man agrees and walks toward him. “I’ve been trying to find out,” Gustav continues, “but no one will tell me the truth. They’re disinfecting Venice. Do you know why?” The teller chuckles and delivers the usual line: “No cause for alarm, sir. Just a precautionary measure.” Sensing Gustav’s displeasure, the man interrupts himself and leads Gustav to an office where they can speak in private. There, he says, “Now that was the official explanation, which they seem to want to stick to. But I can tell you there’s a bit more to it than that…” He goes on to outline the recent history of the spread of Asiatic cholera, claiming it has finally

reached the swampy lands around Venice. The first deaths were hushed up, but “week by week, there are more and more deaths.” With a worried look, the teller continues, “The people all know, of course. But they’re terrified, and they’re silent. And do you know why? Summer. Tourists.” He advises Gustav to leave Venice this very day.



Advice and warning – On the hotel patio, Gustav approaches the Polish family. Removing his hat and bowing, he says to the mother in frantic, breathless staccato, “Will you permit an entire stranger to serve you with a word of advice and warning which self-interest prevents others from saying? Go away. Go away immediately. Don’t delay. Please, I beg you. Take Tadzio and your daughters. I implore you! Please. Venice is gripped by pestilence.” The woman says something in Polish to her daughters before asking Tadzio to come and join her. The boy sits next to his mother, and Gustav strokes his hair. Suddenly, the scene snaps back to Gustav seated in the bank office. It was all in his head. He thanks the teller for his honesty before returning to the hotel. Shuddering and swaying back and forth on his feet, Gustav barely makes it to his room before coughing and breaking down in tears. He mutters to himself. In his memory, he watches his daughter’s casket get loaded onto a horse-drawn hearse. Sobbing, his wife runs to him. They weep together as the hearse rolls away.



Barber – “Gray?” Gustav says, now seated in a barber’s chair. “Yes,” the barber says. “And you know why, signore? Because of your negligence. Because you don’t take enough trouble over your appearance. Understandable in a great gentleman such as you, but a big mistake nonetheless.” He praises Gustav for his profession and art before reassuring him, “I will restore what belongs to you immediately.” “How?” Gustav asks as he lies back in the barber’s chair. “Leave it to me.” The barber mixes and applies hair dye to Gustav’s scalp and facial hair before beginning to trim and style. He then begins applying makeup. Pleased with his work, the barber stands Gustav up and, placing a pink rose in his lapel, tells him, “Now the signore may fall in love as soon as he pleases.” Gustav, while still unsure, seems happy with the makeover, though he appears much like the lascivious man from the steamer into the city. Gustav stares at his reflection, a blank expression crossing his face.



Fires in the streets – Reflected in the water of a canal, the Polish family walks the streets of Venice. Gustav, dressed all in white, stares down at this reflection as they pass, remaining unseen. Behind him, fires spout nasty black smoke around once beautiful plazas. A man sits dying, leaning against the well in the center. The governess leads her wards away from the frightful scene, and, casually, Gustav follows. As Tadzio follows his sisters from a bit of distance, he keeps looking back. At one point, he lets the others leave him behind, striking a thoughtful pose amid the smoke, looking down an adjacent alleyway. “Tadzio!” the governess calls from around the corner, but he ignores her. Scolding, she approaches, and Gustav enters the alley. With a look to the older man, Tadzio follows after his governess. Hurriedly now, Gustav follows. Sweat covers his face: It’s clear this is a great exertion for him. Too quick for the sick man, the family soon loses Gustav. Realizing he’s lost his chance to speak to Tadzio, he begins to panic and fret, but even when they return, exiting a nearby shop, Gustav makes no move, only staring after the boy.

Succumbing – Alone in a plaza, having watched Tadzio walk away, Gustav begins daubing his face with a handkerchief. Unable to breathe, he loosens his tie and unbuttons his shirt. Either from his illness or from the heartbreak of his inability to approach Tadzio, Gustav collapses, leaning against a large stone basin in the middle of the plaza. Nearby, a shopkeeper smokes his pipe, uncaring, simply watching as Gustav languishes. Seeing the man turn around and walk inside, a cruel smile crosses Gustav's face, and he begins laughing. Soon the laughter turns to tears, but then again he begins laughing again.



"**Magnificent swindler**" – In his mind, he relives the moment that originally broke him. As he conducts the final note of his symphony, the crowd erupts in boos, jeers, and taunting whistles. Unable to tolerate the embarrassment, Gustav flees backstage. His wife and Alfred follow quickly. The whistling and booing can still be heard as Gustav's wife rushes into the parlor where he cowers from the angry crowd. Holding him and kissing him with worry, the tender display is interrupted by Alfred. Alfred, instead, taunts Gustav: "You cheat! You magnificent swindler!" The composer's former pupil breaks out in mocking laughter. "What more do they want from me?" Gustav asks, breathlessly. "Pure beauty. Absolute severity. Purity of form! Perfection! The abstraction of the senses!" Alfred shouts. "It's all gone. Nothing remains!" Pounding dissonant notes on the piano, he continues: "Your music is stillborn, and you are unmasked. People begin rushing into the room, and Gustav's wife stands to keep them back. "Alfred," Gustav begs, "send them away. Please make them go." With more mocking laughter, Alfred replies, "Send them away? I will deliver you to them! They will judge you! And they will condemn you!"



The nightmare lingers – Screaming in his bed in the hotel, Gustav awakens. Alfred's words linger in his mind: "Wisdom… Truth… Human dignity. All finished. Now there is no reason why you cannot go to your grave with your music. You have achieved perfect balance. The man and the artist are one. They have touched bottom together." Painfully, Gustav lifts himself into a seated position and turns on the bedside lamp. Breathing heavily, he looks at his pocket watch. Alfred's voice continues: "You never possessed chastity. Chastity is the gift of purity, not the painful result of old age. And you are old, Gustav. And in all the world, there is no impurity so impure as old age." In his mind's eye, Gustav sees Tadzio, his golden hair caught by the seaside wind, staring right at him.



Death in Venice – The following morning, Gustav notices a large stack of luggage in the hauntingly empty lobby. He asks about it and learns that the Polish family is leaving. Satisfied, Gustav heads out to the beach. There, a woman sings a somber song to her friends. Only a few children play in the sand. The rest of the beach is empty, motionless, though the hotel goes through the motion of serving its clients. Gustav is seen entering the private beach, slowly making his way to a lounge chair and chatting with an attendant who he leans on for support. On the beach, Tadzio wrestles with a friend, and the roughhousing gets out of control. Gustav watches with great concern, but he's too weak to do anything but watch. The other boy pushes Tadzio's face into the wet sand, and Gustav shudders,





crying. His vision of beauty is being ravaged, soiled. Frustrated, Tadzio throws the other boy off and walks away, shying away from him when he approaches again. Sadly, Tadzio walks along the surf, alone. Gustav watches, his vision fading, his life receding, the pigments he used to hide his age and illness trickling away as he sweats feverishly. As he takes his final breaths, Tadzio looks back toward him and points up toward the sun. Gustav reaches out to him but collapses. His body is found by the attendant, who calls for help to carry the body inside.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Gustav von Aschenbach Gustav is a disgraced composer from Germany. On the orders of his doctor, he takes a trip to Venice in the hope that the seaside air and a vacation will help him recover from a medical episode he suffered after the public failure of his symphony. While he is in Venice, he becomes obsessed with a young boy who he views as a perfect muse of innocence.

Cowardly Cowardice is Gustav's main character trait. Throughout the film, he shows himself to court the opinions of others first and foremost. Despite his deep emotional nature, he tries to deny and repress himself to appear as normal and middle-of-the-road as possible. He wants mainstream success even though such aspirations are based in mediocrity celebrated by people who inherently disagree with his high-minded ideas about art and desire. Instead of composing in a search for what he finds beautiful, his cowardice and desire for mainstream acclaim guide him to compose music based on what everyone already thinks is beautiful: He adds nothing to the conversation, nor does he make any meaningful commentary on beauty or its nature. Outside his career, we see his cowardice appear in the way he fails to ever talk to Tadzio or his family. He imagines such instances often, yet he never acts, always forced to hide or avoid the boy's glance because of his fear of rejection, of being perceived as predatory, and of his expectations failing to be met.

Quiet Gustav doesn't often speak when it's not necessary. While he does have a few angry outbursts in the film, he quickly quiets himself and leaves so as not to make a scene: He wants others to perceive him as quiet and reserved. Even though he is a composer, he never sings his melodies aloud. In a memory, while composing, he is drowned out at the piano simply by Alfred's arguing. His former pupil isn't even yelling at this point: Gustav simply doesn't want to be heard. In his quietness is a contradiction. He is a composer: It's literally his job to make noise. It is his quiet space being invaded by loud critics as well as the loud mocking of Alfred that causes Gustav's medical collapse before the film even begins.

Pessimistic Gustav has a pessimistic edge to his ideas. He doesn't believe that anyone can learn the skills they need to examine or appreciate beauty, claiming that such skills only belong to the divine, those who lack human sensation. Similarly, instead of trying new things with his music, he steals so much from past successful composers that Alfred calls him a "great swindler." He is guided toward such aesthetic choices by fear and pessimism. Gustav fears that people will reject his ideas, so he tries to stick with what he views as safe and what society views as boring or cliché. Beyond his fear, it is his pessimistic attitude that causes him to never initiate any contact with Tadzio. Gustav believes the boy will reject him or that his influence will somehow degrade the young boy he's picked as his muse of innocence.

Tadzio Tadzio is the young son of the Moes family. We are never given any insight into what he thinks and never hear him speak. He is the object of Gustav's desire.

Passive Tadzio is a textbook example of a passive character. We never even learn what he sounds like, let alone what he thinks and feels. We only learn how Gustav feels about him, and even in this only vaguely. Gustav finds Tadzio beautiful and pure, and latches onto the boy as a muse. Because of his obsession, Gustav's feelings lean towards sexual attraction as well, though we never learn more about this because of the man's cowardice. Tadzio exists almost as a macguffin, an object just out of reach of the main character that drives the film's plot.

Alfred Alfred is Gustav's former student and a close friend. They spend a lot of time together debating philosophy and writing music. In a way, Alfred is the cause of Gustav's collapse that leads to his trip to Venice when, at Gustav's lowest moment, he adds to the abuse and criticism he faces instead of helping to defend him.

Angry Because the film is from Gustav's perspective, we see a lot of Alfred's anger. In Gustav's memories, he relives the worst arguments the two had, and Alfred is not one to tamp down or manage his anger instantly. He often raises his voice and gesticulates emphatically while debating his former teacher. It's Alfred's anger that helps to cause Gustav's medical collapse after the very public failure of his symphony. Instead of helping to comfort and defend his friend, Alfred fans the flames, mocking Gustav's beliefs and rhetoric before saying he'll "deliver" his critics to him.

Imaginative As a counterpoint to Gustav, Alfred is quite imaginative and sees the potential in every person to reach the lofty heights of creativity and artistry that Gustav says can only be reached by strict discipline and disengagement from human feeling. In Gustav's memories of their conversations and arguments, Alfred is always talking about the capacity for all to be inspired by natural beauty, by cities, and by other people. While he believes that beauty is inherent to existence and predates art, he believes it is the artist who draws forth that beauty for others to see, and that even with all their skill and honing of their craft, simple people may be better able to express beauty through ephemeral arts such as music than composers like Gustav. In many ways, his ideas haunt Gustav and are proven to be true.

Engaged Alfred is intensely engaged with Gustav's ideas and music. His is an infectious intensity, adding depth and passion to any conversation that he joins. When he argues with Gustav, he's always giving it all of his attention and brainpower. During one of their conversations, he proves his rhetorical point that music is naturally impossible to fully define or do "properly" by playing some of Gustav's own music, which the composer rejects because of its "improper" sound. While we don't often see Alfred on screen, we're well acquainted with his engaging conversational style by the end of the film.

THEMES

<u>Appearance</u>

Beauty We see beauty through the vague lens of Gustav's ideals and through the direct lens of the camera. Gustav believes that beauty can only be seen by those who have, through self-denial, reached a form of divinity and come only from innocence. It is because of this that he latches on to Tadzio, who he believes is the most beautiful boy in the world. Gustav's ideals keep him from ever interacting with Tadzio, however, as he believes his interference would harm or degrade the boy's innocence and therefore his beauty. As the film goes on, we see Gustav's beauty fade as he grows sicker. In an attempt to regain some of his youth—and, therefore, his innocence and beauty—Gustav has a barber color his hair and give him a corpse-like makeover with white skin cream and bright red lipstick and blush. In his attempts to chase beauty, Gustav has become just like the lascivious man on the boat he reviled in the first scenes of the film. The camera is our true conduit of beauty throughout the film. Visconti frequently lingers on shots of Venice or the natural world, reveling in the beauty of the composition like one would a painting in a museum. Because of the vagueness of the plot and the lack of interaction between Gustav and his object of desire, Tadzio, the only real beauty given to us is that which Visconti allows us to see.

Illustrative moment It is only in the film's final moments that our view and Gustav's truly overlap. As he sits dying in his chair on the beach, he watches Tadzio, who wanders alone in the surf. The shimmering sun and exquisite composition give us a view that would be welcome in any museum, and for a moment, we see some of the beauty Gustav sees in the boy. Looking back toward Gustav, Tadzio points



upward, toward the sun, a simple figure in an artistic composition. Wordlessly, as through the rest of the film, Tadzio fulfills his purpose as a muse, guiding Gustav in his final moments, urging him to follow the light.

Sexuality

Admiration / Desire While portrayed in an esoteric, complex way, desire drives the plot of *Death in Venice*. We are totally immersed in Gustav's mind and experience, and his time in Venice is informed by grief, a public embarrassment, and a medical collapse we are fed information about piece by piece throughout the film. His career as a composer was centered around stripping earthly desire from his art in an attempt to reach some true spiritual meaning. In his desire to be bereft of human desire, another desire is born, and it is this contradiction and the way others react to his "perfect" music that sends him spiraling into poor physical and mental health. Alfred, Gustav's friend and former student, is one of the loudest opponents of Gustav's philosophy, stating repeatedly that beauty precedes art or analysis, that it is our capacity as humans to see beauty in almost anything that makes art worthwhile, and that the ephemeral and highly personal definition of beauty is part of what makes music so powerful. To Alfred, desire is natural and comes from human experience, not a lack of "pollution" from other people or society. Contradicting his philosophy, Gustav latches onto Tadzio as a muse, viewing the boy's beauty and innocence as divine. In reality, Gustav is experiencing sexual attraction, although he and the film do their best to obscure this idea with artistic expression and philosophical idealism. In trying to rid himself of desire and channel innocence, Gustav is doomed to either write soulless music or to betray his ideals to write expressive music people enjoy. He creates for himself a Sisyphean task, which he also fails at every turn, ensuring his desires lead to tragedy.

Illustrative moment There are many moments of obvious desire throughout the film, but the most powerful comes at the film's end when, sitting on the beach, Gustav watches a boy bully Tadzio. Unable to stand and defend the object of his desire, his muse, Gustav reaches out impotently as Tadzio fights off his friend. Despite everything, all his ideals and all of his failures lead to Gustav's death on the beach.



Social Taboo/Norms There is some subtle exploration of taboo and norms in *Death in Venice*. We are most aware of these explorations when it comes to Gustav's obsession with Tadzio, but in these moments we are given the least clarity. Because this film is from Gustav's perspective, we can't trust any of the things Tadzio does: Gustav may be reading longing, recognition, and joy into Tadzio's frankly impermeable expressions. There is also no discussion of these thoughts or expressions, only their presence. We see a lot more outright discussion and clear representation of the strict social norms of the early 1900s, especially during Gustav's more irate moments. Especially from other high-class people, the rich and aristocratic are quite unfriendly and shocked by angry behavior and outbursts. It's also clear that most of the enforcement of these norms comes from the upper class itself, as a fear of gossip or social shunning is all it takes to get Gustav to change his behavior. We also see how many societal norms don't apply to the lower classes, as several times in the film low-class people are abandoned during medical episodes as the cholera outbreak in Venice worsens.
Contrast these moments with the rapid, concerned response to a worker finding Gustav unresponsive on the beach at the film's end.

Illustrative moment The clearest moment of social norms comes near the halfway point of the film when, having checked out and paid his bill the night before, Gustav is disturbed at breakfast by the head waiter, who tells him he should hurry up and leave, though in much more polite terms. Gustav responds with anger, slamming his fist on the table and demanding service in peace. This outburst causes



the entire dining room to fall silent as every head swivels to face Gustav. Especially in this high-class setting, peace, quiet, and civility are the highest of all laws, and no one appreciates them being disturbed.

Homosexuality While many critics and scholars discuss the homosexual themes in *Death in Venice*, the actual obvious homosexual moments are few and far between. Visconti with the cinematography, and Mann in the source material, make Gustav's attraction vague and theoretical enough that defining the character as homosexual is difficult. While there is some form of attraction going on, since Gustav is too cowardly to act on it, we never really learn if his attraction is fully sexual or more aesthetic, as he claims it is. This ambiguity drives debate to this day

Illustrative moment The clearest moment of homosexual themes come just past the film's halfway point when Gustav encounters the Polish family as they're returning to the hotel for the night. They pass, he and Tadzio sharing a glance, and Gustav continues walking for a moment before finding a bench. Gustav sits on the bench and practices what he wishes he could have said to Tadzio: "You must never smile at anyone like that… I love you."



Repression/Denial This odd dual theme is the most important in the film. We first learn of Gustav's bizarre musical philosophy from his flashbacks to discussions and arguments with his former pupil, Alfred. Gustav believes that only through a complete repression of human feeling can one truly begin to understand beauty, equating true beauty to divinity. Alfred argues against this, describing beauty as ineffable, common, and predating human observation but only valuable through human understanding. We see this repression and denial of the self and emotions through Gustav's actions in the film. Instead of acting on or expressing his desires, Gustav stuffs them down and holds himself back from action. In spite of his desire to know and interact with Tadzio, he physically pushes himself to hide when the possibility of contact presents itself. While Gustav sees this repression as a virtue, as a defense of Tadzio's innocence, his penchant for self-denial leads to his hollow death at the end of the film.

Illustrative moment One of the clearer moments of repression in the film comes toward the end. After following Tadzio through the city's streets, where anti-plague pyres of special wood and herbs burn, Gustav loses sight of the boy and his governess. Soon, however, they emerge from a shop, and Gustav hides himself behind a pillar. For the third time that evening, Gustav denies himself the chance to approach the boy, and it drives him to tears when he's left alone.



<u>Flaws</u>

Obsession is perhaps the most obvious theme throughout the film. There is rarely a moment where we don't see Gustav staring across the room at Tadzio, imagining what he would say to the boy if they were alone, or following the boy's family to watch him. This unhealthy preoccupation with the innocence of youth keeps Gustav from acting in his own self-interest, such as when his trunks are sent to the wrong place, and instead of following them or sending a message to where they will end up with where to send them, he takes it as a sign that he is supposed to stay near Tadizo. We also see this obsession with regaining innocence physically manifest at the film's end when Gustav alters his appearance to make him seem less sickly and old.

Illustrative moment The clearest moment of obsession comes during an imagined conversation between Gustav and the Polish family. In this moment, he passionately and eloquently begs Mrs. Moes to leave the city as the pestilence that grips it threatens her children. Almost as if thanking him, Mrs. Moes calls to Tadzio, and Gustav reaches out shakily to stroke the boy's hair. The scene snaps back to the bank office, showing us this was all Gustav's imagination.



Cowardice Throughout the film, Gustav's cowardice drives him to act more often than any other thought or emotion. He is afraid to stand out, adopting new modes of dress to blend in throughout the film. Similarly, Gustav is afraid to act out, even when he's wronged or when he tries to get information about the cholera outbreak. In several imagined moments, we see Gustav acting bravely, breaking social norms to warn the Polish family about the cholera outbreak or speaking with Tadzio. He never acts on these imagined moments, stifling his feelings and causing himself mental and emotional strain that further weakens him and leads to his death. Gustav's inability to act bravely is the main cause of his illness and death.

Illustrative moment The most obvious moment of Gustav's cowardly nature comes toward the film's end when we're shown the failure of his symphony. Fleeing the boos and jeers of the audience, Gustav runs into the rear of the building and secludes himself in a parlor. While his wife comes to support and care for him, Alfred becomes Gustav's strongest critic. Instead of listening, Gustav begins to panic, begging Alfred to stop and to keep his critics away. As a cowardly, prideful man, Gustav literally cannot take the criticism of what he believes is his magnum opus. The strain from this moment leads to Gustav's medical collapse.



<u>Psychology</u>

Grief While rarely overtly addressed throughout the film, grief is a driving force in the plot of *Death in Venice*. Grief from a damaged friendship, a career flop, rejection by high society, and the loss of his daughter leave Gustav weakened and ill. His heart cannot take the emotional strain, likely because he represses so much feeling. In spite of being such a powerful force, we're only shown a few outright moments of grief, such as toward the end of the film when Gustav realizes he'll never speak to Tadzio before collapsing in the plaza and in the film's final scene when Gustav cannot do anything to stop Tadizo from being bullied.

Illustrative moment The most illuminative moment of grief in the film is but a flash just after an imagined moment of bravery. When returning to the hotel after learning the truth about the cholera outbreak in Venice, Gustav remembers his daughter's body being taken away for burial. Watching the hearse being loaded with her casket from atop a hill, Gustav and his wife weep. Despite the great pain he must be feeling, Gustav remains stoic while his wife flails and hugs him in her desperate sadness. The loss of a child is always devastating, yet even with this experience himself, Gustav cannot bring himself to warn the Polish family of the threat of disease in the city.



Shame A more philosophical idea of shame is addressed in the film. Gustav feels social shame the most, seeking to be mainstream but failing to innovate enough to find the success he desires because of his warped ideals of beauty and innocence. Because of his inability to feel shame or express its effects due to his habit of self-repression, these feelings are sequestered so deeply that Alfred accuses him of being unable to feel shame. This comes up again when—even though we don't hear the full composition—Gustav is accused of stealing his musical ideas from successful composers after the premiere of his symphony. His lack of shame and desire for mainstream success lead him to pollute his art in the most shameful of ways: Imitation is flattering, but theft is unacceptable in the creative arts.



Illustrative moment Shame is at the center of a discussion between Alfred and Gustav. While critiquing Gustav's craft, we enter the conversation partway through. Alfred tells him, "That's not shame, that's fear. Shame is a spiritual distress to which you are immune, because you are immune to feeling. (This is meant to be mocking, not truthful.) You are a man of avoidance, of dislike, the keeper of distances." Alfred's mocking criticism of Gustav is punctuated with Gustav flinching away from the sound of his own music. It does not meet his ineffable standard for what good music is, causing the man to react with shame, which he immediately tries to avoid.

<u>Relationship</u>

Intellectual Friendship We're given a somewhat warped view of friendship in Death in Venice. Because we're only seeing Gustav's relationships through his eyes and memories, we only see one side of the equation and a very small sample size of his time with others. While his wife never speaks in his memories, Alfred often does. Once his pupil when he was teaching at a university, Alfred became Gustav's closest friend after his graduation, and the two men would often spend hours together, discussing philosophy and art while composing. Their friendship is one of intellectual stimulation, as they have opposing ideals around art and expression, divinity and humanity. Gustav's memories of their closeness add to the vague themes of homosexuality, although one could equally easily read simple comradery between peers into their relationship.



Illustrative moment One of the clearest moments of friendship comes during an especially long memory Gustav has early in the film. He remembers a stimulating conversation he and Alfred had about the nature of beauty and the role of sensation and humanity in perceiving or translating such ephemeral subjects. Though they argue, occasionally snapping angrily at the opinion of the other, it is clear their relationship and friendship is based in such intellectual stimulation, and both value the other, though they frequently fail to agree.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In your opinion, is *Death in Venice* a queer film? Why or why not?
2. In what ways does the cinematography support Gustav's philosophy of art? In what ways does it contradict it?
3. Did this story necessitate such a long runtime? How much of the film is about the story and how much of the film is about beautiful imagery?
4. Visconti is known for his early realist stylings. Do realist themes and imagery show up in *Death in Venice*, or does it lean toward romanticism? Support your answer with examples of scenes.