

Thomas Mann, Monthly discussion groups--October

Tonio Kröger

The novella, Tonio Kröger has a tripartite structure:

1. The stories of Tonio's doomed, adolescent loves first for Hans Hansen, then for Ingeborg Holm
 2. Tonio's visit to his artist friend Lisaveta Ivanovna in her Munich studio when both are in their thirties
 3. Tonio's journey to Denmark and into his past.
1. How does the narration of Tonio's adolescent loves contrast to the speechifying of his visit to Lisaveta?
 - How much "life" (detail, feeling, memory) does the story of Tonio's adolescent loves capture? Could someone who had held himself aloof from the life of feeling have recreated these vivid and poignant recollections?
 - How is the reader to take Tonio's diatribe about art as requiring the sacrifice of "life," about the artist as a cold, isolated, intellectual eunuch?
 - In Tonio's visit to Lisaveta is Thomas Mann voicing his views of art through a mouthpiece? Or is Tonio a fully realized character, whom Mann ironizes as an arrogant, insufferable, even comic narcissist?
 2. How does Tonio's journey to Denmark repeat and/or revise the experiences of his adolescence? What does this journey into the past reveal about the role of memory in the development of an artist? How does the journey repeat and/or revise the vision of art he expressed to Lisaveta in his visit to her studio?
 3. A "Künstlerroman" is a "class of *Bildungsroman*, or apprenticeship novel, that deals with the youth and development of an individual who becomes—or is on the threshold of becoming—a painter, musician, or poet" (Britannica).
 - Is Tonio Kröger a Künstlerroman? If so, through what stages does Tonio pass in his development as an artist?
 - What role do the conflicts between his heritage from his northern burgher father (Kröger) and his heritage from his southern musical mother (Tonio) play in his formation as an artist?
 - Why does the novella reference Hamlet so often: (a) Horatio's chastising Hamlet in the graveyard for considering bodily decay too curiously, (b) Tonio's desire to stand on the battlements where Hamlet's father's ghost appeared, (c) Tonio's journey to Hamlet's home, Elsinore? What do Tonio and Hamlet have in common?
 - Does Tonio ever reconcile the contradictions between art and "life" that torment him? Does his final letter to Lisaveta hint at an artistic breakthrough:

"I will do better . . . I look into an unborn, murky world that needs to be shaped and fashioned; I look into a teeming throng of human shadows, who beckon to me, wanting me to exorcise them and redeem them . . . and I am very fond of them . . . Do not scold me for this love, Lisaveta; it is good and fruitful."

Death in Venice

1. To what extent is Death in Venice a realistic representation of loneliness, aging, the bankruptcy of bourgeois values, social decay and corruption at the turn of the twentieth century in Europe?
2. To what extent is Death in Venice a psychological study of repressed homoeroticism and the consequences of repression?
3. Does Aschenbach have control over his actions? Does he have free will?
 - Is he marked for death before he leaves Munich?
 - Is he possessed by “*The alien god*” (p. 358) in Venice?
 - Why does he choose to stay in Venice when he first falls ill, then later when he discovers the cholera epidemic?
 - If he “loves” Tadzio, why does he finally decide not to warn the boy’s family of the danger of cholera?
4. To what extent is the story, as the novella recounts it, not realistic? Is it, at least in part, a mythic tragedy in which universal archetypes erupt strangely into ordinary, bourgeois European life? What do you make of the appearance of the following figures in the narrative?
 - “**Psychopomps** . . . (‘guide of souls’) are creatures, spirits, angels, demons, or deities in many religions whose responsibility is to escort newly deceased souls from Earth to the afterlife” (Wikipedia).
 - “**Silenus** [in Greek mythology] was a companion and tutor to the wine god Dionysus. He is typically older than the satyrs of the Dionysian retinue . . . and sometimes considerably older . . . [He] presides over other daimons and is related to musical creativity, prophetic ecstasy, drunken joy, drunken dances and gestures” (Wikipedia).
 - “**Charon**, in Greek mythology, the [figure] whose duty it was to ferry over the Rivers Styx and Acheron those souls of the deceased who had received the rites of burial” (Britannica).
 - “**Eros** . . . is the Greek god of love and sex . . . He is usually presented as a handsome young man” (Wikipedia).
 - “**Dionysus** [in Greek mythology] is the god of wine-making . . . festivity, insanity, ritual madness . . . Those who partake of his mysteries are believed to become possessed and empowered by the god himself” (Wikipedia).
 - “**Maenads** [in Greek mythology] were the female followers of Dionysus . . . inspired by Dionysus into a state of ecstatic frenzy through a combination of dancing and intoxication” (Wikipedia).

How is the reader to understand these mythic eruptions in an otherwise realistic narrative?

- For example, is Tadzio a young innocent child, who inadvertently becomes the object of Aschenbach’s obsession? Or does he embody Eros, the amoral, seductive god of love, who leads Aschenbach to self-destruction?

5. In Plato's dialogue Phaedrus, Socrates talks of the madness engendered by gazing on the earthly beauty of a young boy. This erotic madness, if tempered by self-control, can lead the lover toward reverence and awe for the true abstract form of Beauty itself.
- Does the novella put Plato's dialogue to the test of actual lives lived in early twentieth century Europe?
 - How does Aschenbach reimagine Plato's dialogue in the final monologue of his "half-dozing brain" (p. 363)?
 - To what extent is Death in Venice a study of the role of beauty and erotic passion in the generation of art?
 - Aschenbach reasons, "Beauty alone is divine and visible at once, and so it is the path of the senses . . . the artist's path to the spirit . . . we poets cannot take the path of Beauty unless Eros joins us and sets himself up as our guide" (p. 363). If Aschenbach speaks Mann's views, then does the novel become a cautionary tale about the inevitable dangers faced by the artist?