

The Unfulfilled Quest: The Hero In
Thomas Mann's Tonio Kröger, Death in Venice,
James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,
and André Gide's La Symphonie Pastorale

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INTRODUCTION

There exists an experience that is at once personal and universal. That experience is one of self-awareness. At some point in each person's life, a time comes for questioning beliefs and reexamining values. We, being human, feel a need to fill the void -- to know, as Socrates said, ourselves.

We begin innocently on our journey through life, and through a myriad of experiences we reach new levels of awareness and understanding. We begin to know who we are, and why we are what we are. This experience comes at different times in each person's life. The quest is sparked by different catalysts. Some of us seek self-awareness, and some fear it. Yet we all experience it.

The search of one's self is a universal theme in literature as well as in life. Man's conflicts on his journey through life -- how he acts, reacts, and interacts with others lead him to greater self-awareness. How man deals with this is the common thread throughout each of the four works with which we shall deal. These works are Tonio Kröger and Death in Venice, both by Thomas Mann, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, by James Joyce, and La Symphonie Pastorale, by André Gide. In each of these stories, the author shows us a different way of dealing with our search for identity. Each author follows a character on his search for self-awareness as he journeys through life, and brings him to some point of

acceptance or resignation.

In Thomas Mann's works, we will see his main characters travel constantly, restlessly, struggling to reach an ideal. This search is changing but never ending, and his characters cannot resolve their conflicts or attain their ever-elusive ideals. Therefore, they are resigned to live, or die, unfulfilled.

James Joyce allows his readers to follow his main character on his journey toward self-awareness by revealing glimpses at the different feelings and experiences he has. His character goes through the cycle of life, sometimes winning and sometimes losing, always questioning the world about him. He finally reaches a point where he can accept himself for what he is. He comes to grips with his existence, and therefore resolves his conflict.

André Gide's main character is a tragic one, who refuses to face himself or his conflict until it causes the fall or destruction of everything he loves. Faced with his loss, he finally sees who he is and what he has done. He accepts this, and is resigned to live with it.

Each author shows us his character's progression on two different planes -- that of human action, and that of harmony of action. Thomas Mann and Andre Gide show human action. The reader witnesses the story's drama as it unfolds. James Joyce uses both human action and a harmony of action, the

intermingling of which lends it a greater sense of reality. There is little or no use of narrative in these stories.

Each author also reinforces the psychological progress of his character with the use of vivid imagery. Thomas Mann uses images of water and death. James Joyce alternates images of hot and cold, hope and despair, and clean and dirty. By the juxtaposition of these images, he shows the reader the cyclical nature of life and how his character progresses through the life cycle. Andre Gide uses images of snow and then of water as the winter turns to spring, to show the progression of his characters and the storyline.

In the following chapters we will examine these works more carefully, noting how each character progresses or regresses on his journey to self-awareness and how he deals with the reality of himself.

CHAPTER I : THOMAS MANN

Tonio Kröger, written by Thomas Mann in 1903, is a sort of autobiography; the study of the growth of a man into self-knowledge. In this story, Mann traces the life of the protagonist, Tonio Kröger, by giving the reader glimpses of the feelings and experiences of three relationships through which he develops. Mann shows us Tonio's growth from a young schoolboy to a successful artist who learns to accept himself and his life.

The reader's first glimpse of Tonio is as a boy of fourteen, vying for the affection and attention of his school mate Hans Hansen. The second relationship in which we see Tonio is with his neighbor girl Ingeborg Holm. Both Hans and Inge were "...the blond, fair-haired breed of the steel-blue eyes, which stood to (Tonio) for the pure, the blithe, the untroubled in life; for a virginal aloofness that was at once both simple and full of pride..."¹ This represents an ideal for Tonio, an ideal which he knows he can never achieve. Tonio becomes aware of this through the conflict he sees between himself and others. He is not blond and fair, but dark and black-haired like his mother. Even his name, Tonio, was "foreign and queer" (p. 13). Tonio realized very early that "...there was always something queer about him, whether he would or no, and he was alone,

the regular and usual would none of him" (p. 13). He became acutely aware from his relationships with Hans and Inge that:

...love would surely bring him much pain, affliction, and sadness...yet he received this love with joy, surrendered himself to it, and cherished it with all the strength of his being; for he knew that love made one vital and rich, and he longed to be vital and rich... (p. 15).

Mann shows us in these two relationships how Tonio's "differentness" pulls him apart, separates him from others. He wants to be like them, but knows that he isn't. Tonio suffers from his alienation, but this suffering makes him grow stronger as an individual. Tonio leaves home and spends several years traveling. Through his experiences, "...all that he saw could be put in two words -- the comedy and tragedy of life. And then, with knowledge, its torment and its arrogance, came solitude" (pp. 21-22).

As Tonio matures, as a man and as an artist, we can see his development through his frank discussions with his friend Lisabeta Ivanova. Even as he becomes a well-known artist, Tonio feels the conflict that plagued his youth. He knows the "curse" of the artist -- the feeling of differentness. He is aware that:

The artist must be un-human, extra-human;

he must stand in a queer aloof relationship
 to our humanity; only so is he in a position
 ...to represent it, to present it, to portray
 it to good effect (p. 26).

As a poet, Tonio must feel, yet he must coldly analyze those feelings. He must be at the same time ordinary, yet extraordinary. For Tonio, art and life run parallel. He must always be different, distinct, set apart from that which is his ideal. Tonio confesses that he loves life and is "...sick to death of depicting humanity without having any part or lot in it" (p. 27).

Toward the end of the story, Tonio is haunted once again by those feelings when he accidentally meets Hans and Inge in Denmark. They do not recognize Tonio, and he longs to speak to them, but he does not. He realizes that he cannot go back and begin again. "All was as it had been, and he too was happy, just as he had been" (p. 57). Tonio is resigned to believe that his conflict was destined, and that were he to begin again, everything would turn out just the same. He sees himself as he now is:

He thought of the dreamy adventures of the senses, nerves, and mind in which he had been involved; saw himself eaten up with intellect and introspection, ravaged and paralysed by insight, half worn out by the fevers and frosts of creation, helpless and in anguish of conscience between two extremes, flung to and fro between austerity and lust; raffiné, impoverished,

exhausted by frigid and artificially
heightened ecstasies; erring, forsaken,
martyred and ill -- and sobbed with
nostalgia and remorse (p. 58).

Sadly enough, Tonio remains lost, helpless to escape his alienation. Here in the end, Tonio accepts this realization. Ironically, he constantly insists that he is not a "gypsy in a green wagon" (p. 13), yet he is. His journey to this knowledge of himself has made him accept his isolation, and he resigns himself to his "differentness." Says Tonio, "I stand between two worlds. I am at home in neither, and I suffer in consequence" (p. 59). From this point, Tonio must live in a constant state of conflict. He cannot be fulfilled because he accepts his conflict, resigns himself to live with it, therefore not resolving it.

Death in Venice, written by Thomas Mann in 1912, seems to begin almost where Tonio Kröger ended. The main character, Gustave von Aschenbach, is an older man. He, like Tonio, is a well-known writer. One day after his afternoon walk, Aschenbach feels restless and decides that he needs to travel. He goes to a small island, but not finding it to his taste, he moves on to Venice. Staying in the same hotel is a Polish family. Tadzio, the young Polish boy fascinates Aschenbach. To him, Tadzio represents the ideal of art, the classic form, much like Hans and Inge represented perfection to Tonio in Tonio Kröger.

Aschenbach develops an unnatural passion for Tadzio which he imagines the boy to return through eye contact. Aschenbach is obsessed with Tadzio and despite an outbreak of cholera which eventually kills him, he wants to stay near the boy.

Aschenbach faces the same dilemma as Tonio did in committing his life to perfecting his art, to attaining his ideal. To Aschenbach, Tadzio represented his ideal:

His face recalled the noblest moment of Greek sculpture...the expression of pure and godlike serenity. Yet with all this chaste perfection of form... he had never seen, either in nature or art, anything so utterly happy and consummate (p. 82).

Many times the vision of Tadzio brought to Aschenbach's mind the images of mythology, "...like a primeval legend, handed down from the beginning of time, of the birth of form, of the origin of the gods" (p. 89). He compares Tadzio to Phaedrus (p. 100), to Eros (p. 103) and to Hyacinthus (p. 104). Like his love for Tadzio, Aschenbach's artistic style "...showed an almost exaggerated sense of beauty, a lofty purity, symmetry and simplicity, which gave his productions a stamp of the classic, of conscious and deliberate mastery" (p. 71).

Aschenbach faced the conflict, like that of Tonio's, between the artist as a "seer" and the artist as a "creator."

He calls it the "miracle of regained detachment" (p. 71). However, Aschenbach seems to become less "detached" and confuses reality. He equates Tadzio with this perfection of artistic form.

We may use the artist's struggle for perfection as a metaphor for man's search for the ideal. And what is the ultimate ideal for man but immortality? Man may struggle to attain this ideal, but like Tonio, he knows he cannot reach it. Likewise, Aschenbach knew he was searching for something elusive and that there could therefore be no consummation:

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 -- and at the end found himself cheated (p. 124).

Another factor in Aschenbach's inability to achieve his goal, and in man's inability to reach his ultimate goal, is time. Death is imminent throughout the work, as it is in life. It is even foretold in the title. There are many references to and symbols of death throughout the story which Aschenbach notices, but either ignores or accepts. At the very beginning on his afternoon walk, Aschenbach finds himself in a cemetery, where there appears an exotic looking stranger. "He stood there peering up into space out of colourless, red-lashed eyes, while two pronounced perpendicular furrows showed on his forehead... (he) had a

bold and domineering, even a ruthless air..." (p. 63).

When he reached Venice, Aschenbach rode in a gondola:

That singular conveyance, come down
unchanged from ballad times, black
as nothing else on earth except a
coffin...what visions of death itself,
the bier and solemn rites and last
soundless voyage! (pp. 77-78).

At the hotel, the leader of a group of musicians had, like the stranger at the cemetery, a face "...furrowed with grimacing, and two deep wrinkles of defiance and self-will, almost of desperation, stood oddly between the red brows, above the grinning mobile mouth" (p. 114).

This musician also carried with him a "suspicious odour" (p. 114) like that which Aschenbach smelled throughout the city. The odor of sickness was Aschenbach's suspicion of the cholera outbreak that city officials and newspapers tried to hide. (p. 117).

Another symbol of passing time was an hourglass:

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. Sound-
less and fine the rust-red streamlet
ran through the narrow neck, and made
as it declined in the upper cavity, an
exquisite little vortex (p. 116).

Despite these warnings, this overbearing presence of

death, Aschenbach continues to strive for his ideal, for "...he would have staked all he possessed to keep it, since in his infatuation he cared for nothing but to keep Tadzio here, and owned to himself, not without horror, that he could not exist were the lad to pass from his sight" (p. 108).

Aschenbach, like Tonio, was chasing an elusive dream and he knew it. He welcomed it with "a calm and deliberate acceptance of what might come" (p. 96). But because of the factor of time, he had to accept his conflict as unresolved.

CHAPTER II : JAMES JOYCE

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, written by James Joyce in 1914, is exactly that; a portrait of himself, in the character of Stephen Dedalus, as a young man. Like Tonio Kröger, the reader observes glimpses of the artist's life, following him on his life's journey from childhood to young adulthood. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man unfolds the story of Stephen Dedalus' spiritual and personal development in five stages.

The first stage, or chapter, describes Stephen's childhood experiences at Clongowes, a Jesuit boarding school not far from his home in Dublin. Stephen felt, like Tonio, that he was different from the others. "All the boys seemed to him very strange. They had all fathers and mothers and different clothes and voices."² The dominant emotion of his childhood seems to be that of fear and wonder at those around him, and the feeling of being different from them. Even his name, like Tonio Kröger's, is symbolic. Stephen, the name of the first martyr, seems to predestine him to suffering. Dedalus, the mythological master craftsman, seems to symbolize his intelligence and creativity as an artist.

The next three chapters are mostly about Stephen's life at Belvedere College, a Jesuit high school in Dublin.

In chapter two, Stephen, as a teenager is more comfortable with the other boys. He has his own friends and is "a model youth. He doesn't smoke and he doesn't go to bazaars and he doesn't flirt and he doesn't damn anything or damn all" (p. 324). The dominant emotion in this chapter is dissatisfaction and disquietude.

The old restless moodiness had again filled his breast as it had done on the night of the party but had not found an outlet in verse. The growth and knowledge of two years of boyhood stood between then and now, forbidding such an outlet; and all day the stream of gloomy tenderness within him had started forth and returned upon itself in dark courses and eddies, wearying him in the end until the pleasantries of the perfect and the painted little boy had drawn from him a movement of impatience

(pp. 325-326).

With Stephen's increased self-awareness came sexual awakening, and all the rebellion and hyper-sensitivity that accompanies that stage of life.

His blood was in revolt...He felt some dark presence moving irresistably upon him from the darkness, a presence subtle and murmurous as a flood filling him wholly with itself (p. 351).

Overcome by this feeling, Stephen sins secretly until in the third chapter, a spiritual retreat is held at his school. Joyce gives a poignant description of hell in Father Arnall's sermons (pp. 364-368 and pp. 373-379).

"The preacher's knife had probed deeply into his diseased conscience and he felt now that his soul was festering in sin" (p. 368), and Stephen was moved to confession.

In chapter four, we see the height of Stephen's spiritual awareness. He devotes his life to the church and is asked to consider the priesthood. (p. 418). However,

His soul traversed a period of desolation in which the sacraments themselves seemed to have turned into dried up sources. His confession became a channel for the escape of scrupulous and unrepented imperfections. His actual reception of the eucharist did not bring him the same dissolving moments of virginal self-surrender... (p. 411).

Stephen knew that he could not become a priest of the church because he was destined to become a priest of the imagination. "His destiny was to be elusive of social or religious orders... He was destined to learn his own wisdom apart from others or to learn the wisdom of others himself wandering among the snares of the world" (pp.422-423).

In the final chapter, Stephen tries to absorb everything around him. He sees the world in its totality; "Three things are needed for beauty; wholeness, harmony, and radiance" (p. 479). James Joyce expresses through Stephen, as Thomas Mann does through Tonio and Aschenbach, the nature of the artist. Mann portrayed the artist as both "seer" and "creator." He must see and then analyze that which is around

him before he can recreate it through art. Likewise, Joyce says that;

To speak of these things and to try to understand their nature and, having understood it, to try slowly and humbly and constantly to express, to press out again, from the gross earth or what it brings forth, from sound and shape and colour which are the prison gates of our soul, an image of the beauty we have come to understand -- that is art (p. 473).

Like Tonio Kröger and Aschenbach, Stephen realizes that the artist must be part of life, yet apart from it. Stephen, seeing the world in this new light, understands and accepts who he is and what he must do.

I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church; and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can...I do not fear to be alone or to be spurned for another or to leave whatever I have to leave (p. 519).

Unlike Tonio Kröger and Gustave von Aschenbach who are attracted by love, who travel in search of it, Stephen withdraws from it, travels to be relieved of it.

Through these glimpses at the experiences in Stephen Dedalus' life, James Joyce gives us a realistic presentation of the human experience. Throughout the story, we see

Stephen's progression to self-awareness. We see his hopes and despair. By the constant juxtaposition of images of hope and despair, ideal and reality, Joyce shows us the cyclical nature of life. Each chapter which signifies a stage in Stephen's development, ends in a note of hope, only to be destroyed later. With each rise, there is a fall, and with each action, a reaction or result. Stephen is caught in the middle. In the first chapter, Stephen's recovery from illness is followed by Parnell's death. (pp. 262-268). Stephen has been looking forward to going home for Christmas, but the Christmas dinner is spoiled by a heated discussion about the death of Parnell. (pp. 268-283). The image of cold, slimy water is followed by that of a warm fire and a cup of hot tea (p. 249). The image of cold sheets is followed by that of a warm bed (p. 257). The image of washing one's hands is followed by that of dirty water being sucked down the drain (p. 250). The juxtaposition of these images; life and death, hot and cold, clean and dirty, shows us the natural cycle of life.

The cyclical nature of life is also acknowledged at the end when Stephen has accepted himself and decides to leave home. He has, indeed, travelled through the cycle of life and is ready to "encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience..." (p. 526).

CHAPTER III : ANDRÉ GIDE

La Symphonie Pastorale, written by André Gide in 1925, is a tender love story, yet a very tragic one. The main character, a Pastor, is called to a parishoner's house where an old deaf woman has died. There he finds a young blind girl who cannot speak, not because of physical disability, but because she has lived all of her life with the deaf woman. Against his wife's wishes, the Pastor takes the girl into his home to teach her and care for her. The girl, who they named Gertrude, learned quickly from the Pastor and she rejoiced in everything she learned.

A strong bond grew between the Pastor and Gertrude, and it grew, like Aschenbach's love for Tadzio, to be a love something less than innocent. Gertrude finally comes to realize that their love is "outside the laws of God."³ However, as much as Gertrude sees what is happening, the Pastor refuses to see. When it is discovered that his son, Jacques, is also in love with Gertrude, the Pastor sends them both away separately -- Jacques on a mountaineering expedition and Gertrude to the care of Mll. de la M-.

Gertrude undergoes an operation which restores her sight, and upon seeing the Pastor and his wife, she sees their sin which the Pastor had hidden from her. The guilt overcomes her and she commits suicide.

What André Gide has done, is to show us, simultaneously, the progression of one character, Gertrude, and the decline of another, the Pastor. Gertrude begins from an almost animal-like existence and progresses in awareness. However, she can only progress so far, because the Pastor prevents her from learning any evil. He teaches her only the harmony of life:

"If ye were blind ye should have no sin."
Sin is that which darkens the soul --
which prevents joy. Gertrude's perfect
happiness, which shines forth from her
whole being, comes from the fact that she
does not know sin...I will not give her
the Epistles of St. Paul, for if, being
blind she knows not sin, what is the use
of troubling her... (p. 408).

Is Gertrude to be tormented with these
perplexities? Is the brightness of her
sky to be darkened with these clouds?
Am I not nearer Christ, do I not keep her
nearer to Him, when I teach her, when I
let her believe that the only sin is that
which hurts the happiness of others or
endangers our own? (p. 410).

The irony seems to be that Gertrude "sees" more than the Pastor. Is the Pastor speaking of himself when he says, "It is those who have eyes who cannot see" (p. 404)? The Pastor is a tragic fellow whose existence is determined by his family and his religion; and this he views as simply the "method for attaining the life of blessedness" (p. 408). The Pastor, though sighted, is the "blind" one in this

story. He does not see his own sin in his love for Gertrude. He refuses to see it as sin and justifies it as charity. He does not see Jacques' development; his progression to self-awareness and his break from his family and religion to become his own individual. He does not see his wife Amélie's heartbreak because she knows of the Pastor's love for Gertrude. He does not even see Gertrude's progression to the awareness that "the world is not as beautiful as you have made out..." (p. 414).

Indeed, Gertrude realized much more than the Pastor. And when her sight was restored, she saw "that the place I took belonged to another and that it made her unhappy. My crime is that I did not feel it sooner; or rather -- for indeed I knew it all along -- that I allowed you to love me in spite of it" (p. 420).

Just before her death, Gertrude forced the Pastor to see their sin. She told him of her love for Jacques and that they had both converted to Catholicism. Then she repeated a text of St. Paul's, "For I was alive without the law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died" (p. 421).

At the end, the Pastor had to come to recognize the truth. He was forced to see himself as he was. He realized all that he had been blind to, and he saw that his blindness had caused him to lose it all. He no longer had any identi-

fication of himself through religion or his family which he had forsaken. Like Stephen Dedalus, the Pastor had to come to grips with his own existence. He knew now that sensitivity was all that counted. However, unlike Stephen Dedalus, the Pastor had none; "I would have wept, but I felt my heart more arid than the desert" (p. 422). The Pastor at this point is deprived of all hope, of all the things that once mattered, and like Tonio Kröger, he must now live with himself, as he has become.

The character progression in this story is emphasized further by Gide's use of imagery. At the beginning of the story, it is early February and the snow is heavy (p. 375). With the coming of spring and the melting snow, the bond between Gertrude and the Pastor begins to develop (p. 387). By springtime, their relationship is in full bloom (p. 413), and by the end of spring, the truth of their relationship has been exposed and Gertrude tries to drown herself (p. 418).

The physical progression of the seasons coincides with Gertrude's psychological progression and the growth of her relationship with the Pastor. Ironically though, the Pastor regresses instead of progressing, just as the turn of spring, instead of being a joyous symbol of life and renewal, becomes the forebearer of tragedy and death. The same snow at the beginning of the story melts only to become the icy water in which Gertrude finds her end.

CONCLUSION

Through these works which we have examined, Tonio Kröger, Death in Venice, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, and La Symphonie Pastorale, we have seen how four different characters have dealt with self-awareness and self-acceptance. Tonio Kröger, in Tonio Kröger, by Thomas Mann, and Gustave von Aschenbach, in Death in Venice, also by Thomas Mann, both sought self-awareness through an ideal. Both were artists and their ideals, therefore, were the perfection of their art form. Unfortunately, they both displaced that ideal into the form of other people, making that ideal unattainable. Tonio could never be like Hans and Inge because he was who he was. Since his ideal was, therefore, impossible to attain, he had to accept who he was, to simply resign himself to be who he was, and to know he could never be any other way. Aschenbach searched for an ideal equally as hopeless -- the love of young Tadzio. He knew, as Tonio did, that this goal was unnatural and impossible, and he accepted that fact. Yet he continued to strive for it, knowing he could not be fulfilled, even unto his death.

Stephen Dedalus, in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, by James Joyce, sought self-awareness in several ways. He tried scholastics, love, sin, religion and art, constantly questioning himself, his values, and all the world about him. Through these experiences, he came to understand and accept who he was -- he was an artist. But he could not express

himself freely where he was, and set off unafraid, searching for new experiences.

The Pastor, in La Symphonie Pastorale, by André Gide, refused to accept who he was and what he was doing. Instead of accepting it, he denied it or justified his actions. Finally, faced with the destruction he had caused and the losses he had sustained, the Pastor was forced to see himself as he had become. Like Tonio and Aschenbach, he was resigned from that point on, to accept his actions and live with himself.

We have seen the progression of these characters through the drama of human action and the harmony of action. We have followed each character in his progression toward self-awareness by witnessing through the author, his experiences and feelings. These experiences and feelings have been emphasized and reinforced by the clever use of imagery and irony. By these methods, Thomas Mann, James Joyce, and André Gide have shown us how man searches to fulfill the quest of self.

As man reaches self-awareness, he may deal with it in several ways. Like Stephen Dedalus, he may be realistic, accepting what he finds and making any necessary changes to live his life confident and secure in who and what he is. Or, like Tonio Kröger, he may resign himself to live, or like Aschenbach, die, unfulfilled. Man may even, like the Pastor, avoid it for awhile, but man must always reach one conclusion.

And that is that, in the end, man must come to grips with his existence. At the final count, we are who we are, and must learn to accept ourselves and either change what we do not like, or resign ourselves to live, and die, unfulfilled.

FOOTNOTES

1. Mann, Thomas. The Thomas Mann Reader. Edited by Joseph W. Angell. Translated by H.J. Lowe-Porter. New York: Knopf, 1960. (All subsequent references in the text correspond to this edition and translation.)
2. Joyce, James. The Portable James Joyce. Edited and translated by Harry Levin. New York: Viking, 1965. (All subsequent references in the text correspond to this edition and translation.)
3. Gide, André. Ten Modern Short Novels. Edited and translated by Leo Hamalian and Edmond L. Volpe. New York: G.P. Putnam, 1958. (All subsequent references in the text correspond to this edition and translation.)

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