Though Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* and André Gide’s *The Immoralist* have often been compared because of their similar plots, the theme of illness has rarely been treated as a central motif that drives the action of the texts. Using the theories of Susan Sontag, this paper explores the cultural perception of tuberculosis and cholera in the early twentieth century and how Mann and Gide used these ideas to explore the themes of balance and passion.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Page**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Death in Venice</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 The Immoralist</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Conclusion</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WORKS CITED ............................................................................................................................52
Introduction

Scholars have long drawn parallels between Thomas Mann and André Gide, two European authors who explored themes of travel, asceticism, and passion in the early twentieth century. Several articles and dissertations have made comparisons between Mann’s novella *Death in Venice*, published in 1912, and Gide’s *The Immoralist*, published in 1902. The comparison is natural because the plots of these works are similar: a European scholar travels to a foreign locale, contracts an illness, and realizes that his life has been led without passion.

For most scholars, the primary point of interest in comparing these two novels lies in dissecting the influence of Nietzsche’s philosophy on Gide and Mann. A recurring theme is the use of Apollonian and Dionysian imagery in the two works. For example, John Burt Foster, Jr., dedicates a chapter of his book *Heirs to Dionysus: A Nietzschean Current in Literary Modernism* to the idea that *Death in Venice* and *The Immoralist* follow a three-part structure in which the protagonists ultimately succumb to “the savage god” (Foster 155). He proposes that both writers were influenced by *The Birth of Tragedy* and its descriptions of the opposing poles of Apollonian and Dionysian existence; for Foster, Mann and Gide use Nietzsche to attack the principles of modern art and demonstrate the difficulty of living according to Nietzsche’s ideals. Other authors have written on the theme of balance, with Kenneth L. Golden framing his argument using Jung’s theories and Martin Halliwell using Julia Kristeva’s framework to expound upon the issue of abjection.

While the arguments discussing Mann and Gide in the context of the aforementioned philosophers are certainly compelling, this paper takes a different tactic. In this paper, I hope to
bring *The Immoralist* and *Death in Venice* together by discussing the theme of illness as it is treated by Gide and Mann. This approach is particularly relevant at this point in time considering the influence of Susan Sontag’s seminal work on the cultural perception of disease, *Illness as Metaphor*, which has had immense influence on literary analysis since its publication in 1978. Sontag details the history of the cultural assumptions about illness in general and the defining attributes of specific diseases, especially tuberculosis and cancer. Her overarching interest, she states, is not in the way disease affects the afflicted person but in the “punitive or sentimental fantasies” (Sontag 3) that are imagined by the public about the meaning of disease and thus about the person who is sick. Though Sontag’s ultimate goal was to destroy the false symbolism surrounding real life patients, *Illness as Metaphor* and its follow-up, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, created a new topos for discussing literary depictions of illness.

Using Sontag’s theories as a springboard, this paper will deal with the same issues that previous scholars have approached, including the issues of balance and passion, but will look at the role of illness in the protagonists’ transformations. Mann and Gide reveal that they have been heavily influenced by the cultural perceptions of illness and the metaphors that were used to characterize both the diseases themselves and the people who contracted them. They both use illness symbolically to approach the question of physical versus mental strength in the early twentieth century. In both works, the scholarly protagonists contract an illness in the foreign city that they are visiting – Mann’s von Aschenbach dies of cholera in Venice, while Gide’s Michel contracts tuberculosis in Tunis. The metaphors about these diseases that were at work in the early twentieth century influence the characters’ reactions to the threat of disease, the relationship between academic pursuits and physical strength, and their ultimate fates.
Susan Sontag uses both *Death in Venice* and *The Immoralist* as examples in *Illness as Metaphor*, though she does not analyze the novels in depth. Her use of these two works reinforces their significance in the realm of literature and medicine, however, and demonstrates that she believes that the use of illness in these novels is symbolic. Gide and Mann are part of a long line of authors who employed illness in their works knowing that their public would immediately make certain connections according to the type of disease.

Using illness symbolically was not new to literature when Gide and Mann wrote; on the contrary, illness had long been used as a method to punish characters for their specific transgressions. In the eighteenth century, for example, Sontag notes that Laclos’s *Dangerous Liaisons* is a prime example of a literary work in which disease – smallpox and its disfiguring sores – is used as the appropriate punishment for Madame de Merteuil’s specific crime – creating an insincere public persona. In this case, illness is the result of a deplorable action, a poor choice that deserves divine retribution. Beginning with the Romantics, however, disease was no longer conceived as punishment for improper behavior; instead, disease became a manifestation of a character flaw (Sontag 43). This change places the responsibility for disease on the sufferer, who could change the offending part of his personality if he so desired. Therefore, the sufferer brings about his own disease through a combination of personal flaws and lack of action to correct the defect. Previously, the cause of the disease was God or fate, but the Romantics assigned the blame to the individual.

The ultimate romantic disease is tuberculosis, which features prominently in *The Immoralist*. Tuberculosis, Sontag says, simultaneously contains multiple, often contradictory metaphors. It was often a disease of poverty (Sontag 15) that struck the physically weak. Though it was thought to reveal a person’s inner character, tuberculosis was not necessarily a
punishment; it was a disease of artists, of passion, and of heightened sensation and creativity. In the nineteenth century, tuberculosis was coveted by many poets, who longed for the inspiration they believed that disease would bring. Clearly, tuberculosis was not believed to be painful or inelegant; though some of the physical symptoms were cataloged and celebrated (flushed cheeks, coughing, weakness), when death occurred, it was not thought to be painful or ugly. Gide’s Michel embodies Sontag’s prototype of the tuberculosis patient. In the 19th century, the person who fell victim to tuberculosis “was an amalgamation of two different fantasies: someone who was both passionate and repressed” (Sontag 39); often, the passionate side could only be revealed through contracting tuberculosis.

Sontag describes tuberculosis in great detail, but her other concern is cancer, which according to Halliwell has many of the same symbolic qualities as Mann’s choice of disease, cholera. As a disease that affects the excretory system, cholera has some of the same associations as cancer: “cancer is notorious for attacking parts of the body (colon, bladder, rectum …) which are embarrassing to acknowledge” (Halliwell 162; Sontag 18). The comparison is not perfect, though, because while cancer is a disease that strikes individuals and is not communicable, cholera is associated with epidemics that can strike people indeterminately. Sontag says of Mann’s *Death in Venice* and his later novel *The Magic Mountain*, which both treat the subject of illness, “In one fiction, disease (cholera) is the penalty for secret love; in the other, disease (TB) is its expression” (Sontag 37). According to Sontag, cholera is a disease that simplifies the sufferer, making him into a lesson for others to learn from as the patient is punished for his sins.

The symbolic associations of the diseases that Gide and Mann choose is important because doing so reveals at least some of the authors’ goals for their readers. Halliwell claims
that the authors’ choice of illness is “characteristic of the relative ages of the two protagonists … and their relative sensibilities” (Halliwell 161). According to Halliwell, Michel is able to acknowledge the corporality of what was traditionally considered a spiritual illness, while Aschenbach ignores his heightening physical desires until cholera overcomes his body (Halliwell 162). We will start with *Death in Venice*, which was written later than *The Immoralist* but is actually more traditional in its conception of illness and its roots and consequences, and then consider Gide, who uses a disease with richer symbolic associations to explore the issue of individuality.
Death in Venice

Mann’s *Death in Venice* is the better-known of the two works discussed in this paper, with many English translations that are often part of university literature courses.

Though they became acquainted at a later time, Mann and Gide were not familiar with each other when they wrote the works in question (Foster 150). Despite his professed admiration for Gide and his work, Thomas Mann was not impressed with *The Immoralist* when he later read it, criticizing its “faded originality, whose capacity to shock has largely been lost though the decades” (quoted in Halliwell 155). Gide’s choice of tuberculosis was certainly safe, considering that his audience would certainly be familiar with its connotations. On the other hand, Mann chose to approach the same issues as Gide through the use of cholera, with a very different outcome for his protagonist.

From the first paragraph of *Death in Venice*, Gustav von Aschenbach is presented as a man who has a double identity; his name was changed when he turned fifty to the more distinguished “von Aschenbach.” Later it is revealed that the “von” has been gifted to him by the prince for his literary service, but the name change reveals more than just his social status. Late in his life, Aschenbach undergoes a transformation and acquires a new name, so that he has the potential to embrace other changes in his life as well, even though his life is currently stable and predictable.

In the middle of an ordinary work day, Aschenbach makes an unpredictable decision: he wants to take a vacation abroad. Aschenbach decides to go abroad after seeing a strange man with a “distinctly foreign, exotic air” (Mann 4) during his afternoon walk. This man reappears in
different forms throughout the novel; he inspires Aschenbach to go abroad, but he is also a symbol of impending death. This strange man inspires an almost visceral reaction in Aschenbach. He describes the feeling as “a fervent youthful craving for faraway places, a feeling so vivid, so new or else so long outgrown and forgotten” (Mann 5); though he has not traveled extensively in recent years, this desire has remained within him, repressed and under the surface of his consciousness. Thus, in choosing to go abroad, Aschenbach is both aware of and indulging a desire from his youth.

Mann uses the language of illness to describe Aschenbach’s feelings about travel. The desire consumes him “like a seizure” (Mann 6), and he imagines a “primordial” landscape filled with animals’ “misshapen” body parts; he wants to go somewhere not just exotic, but rather ancient, imperfect, untouched by humanity. Aschenbach’s “European psyche” and his feeling that he was “no lover of the external world” (Mann 7) had previously prevented him from going abroad more than was deemed necessary; his academic work consumed his time and energy. The medical terms continue as the writer craves “an influx of new blood” (Mann 10), and the tempting “foreign atmosphere” (Mann 10) that awaits excites Aschenbach. Ilsedore Jonas says that the appeal of Venice lies in the possibility of “the sweet, exotic fullness of life” (36), while Aschenbach himself is more pragmatic in his reasoning: Venice can be reached overnight by train with little trouble or risk.

Aschenbach’s sudden decision to flee his work and take an extended vacation is both out of character and completely necessary. On this day, Aschenbach takes a break from his job to take a walk because he is “overwrought from the difficult and dangerous labors of the late morning hours, labors demanding the utmost caution, prudence, tenacity, and precision of will” (Mann 1). Relying on such a description, the reader imagines that Aschenbach must be involved
in a dangerous, high-risk occupation, but Aschenbach is a writer, which is not typically considered a job fraught with risk. Still, this career consumes him, to the point that Aschenbach is “unable to halt the momentum of the inner mechanism” (Mann 1) and must nap daily in order to restore himself.

Aschenbach, who has already passed his fiftieth birthday, is much older than Gide’s Michel, and is described as a high-strung perfectionist. At this point in his life, he is working on a new literary work, but he is “paralyzed by the scruples arising from his distaste for the project” (Mann 9). A successful writer from a very young age, Aschenbach has had to learn to present himself in public, which speaks to a careful, conscious forming of the self in order to live up to others’ expectations at the expense of the true self. Aschenbach differs from Gide’s protagonist in that he is aware of his duplicity from the outset of the novel, while Michel has never come to terms with the fact that he is living a lie until he falls ill. In spite of his misgivings about his career, Aschenbach holds an impressive position as a beloved writer in his native Germany. In the past, he had completed works of criticism and fiction that had earned him the titles of “artist…creator…thinker” (Mann 11), but in recent years his work has tended toward accessible, public-friendly topics and style; he is no longer thought of as a philosopher on the level of Schiller. Though he was once a great literary figure, Aschenbach has the physical strength required to produce even lesser works. His body’s weakness has impacted his mental capacity at least partially.

Mann emphasizes that Aschenbach’s career is physically and emotionally demanding, even though by all appearances writing would appear to be a less than stressful job. He is not just a writer of the people whose goals are money and glory, but one who cares about the quality of his work. He is disturbed by his recent work, which does not live up to his standards, but
Mann lays some of the blame on Aschenbach himself for his failure to sustain the quality of his work. Aschenbach is not lazy; rather, the problem is that he was not destined to be an author. Aschenbach “was merely called to constant industry, not born to it” (Mann 13), and is thus unsuited to his career, which is the root of his problem. Mann suggests that Aschenbach would have been better served in a profession more suited to his temperament; as a writer, he is forcing himself into a role and playing by a set of rules that were not meant for him.

Aschenbach’s literary characters reflect his own interior characteristics; they possess “an elegant self-possession concealing inner dissolution and biological decay from the eyes of the world until the eleventh hour” (Mann 17); the emphasis on “biological decay” is especially important to Mann’s overall theory of Aschenbach being destined to a certain undesirable end. Mann asks “what heroism was more at one with the times?” (Mann 17), referring to the heroism he finds inherent in the weakness and passivity that are rampant in modern Europe. Heroes like Aschenbach rise above their inherent physical weakness in order to achieve at least “the trappings of greatness” (Mann 18) and rejoice when they recognize themselves in literature, but the physical weakness remains and prevents the hero from achieving greatness. At this point, the physical problem Mann references is not caused by a disease; it is the result of some weakening of the European man.

The description of Aschenbach is that of a man facing exhaustion with his career: “much as the nation honored it, it gave him no pleasure” (Mann 9) because he has been under pressure to achieve his entire life. Given these circumstances, Aschenbach’s sudden abandonment of his work must be a frightening loss of control to a man who has rigidly structured his days for his entire life, but this journey is also thrilling simply because it is so unexpected and a new experience for a man who believes himself to be in the waning years of his life. The trip to
Venice is the first of a series of events in which Aschenbach gives up control of his life against his better judgment; later, he will knowingly give himself over to love and then again to illness.

Aschenbach chooses Venice as his vacation destination because of its “fairy tale-like” qualities (Mann 26). Though this reference might suggest pleasant childhood tales, the resulting experience is closer to the more violent tales from the brothers Grimm. Before he even arrives in Venice, Aschenbach feels “as if the world were moving ever so slightly yet intractably towards a strange and grotesque warping” (Mann 33), which Aschenbach refuses to give in to. The change of perception is not simply a result of traveling to an unfamiliar place, though; there is more at work in Mann’s world than culture shock. Aschenbach sees again the mysterious man whom he had earlier met, this time on the boat to Venice, and this second meeting, in which the stranger is unnoticed by others on the boat, makes Aschenbach question his grip on reality. After debarking, Aschenbach is again thrown off-kilter by the vaporetto driver who refuses his commands and then disappears without warning. Before Aschenbach even sets foot on dry land, Venice is an active character in Mann’s work rather than just a locale associated with illness. Venice is an intoxicating, insidious place which infiltrates Aschenbach’s body and makes him feel ecstatic, but it is also full of a “cutpurse mercantilism” (Mann 64) that breaks the spell and shifts his perception. In Venice, “antiquity and present merge into a oneness, into perfect harmony” (Jonas 37), but the past and present are perhaps the only things that exist harmoniously in Venice. Aschenbach remains uneasy through the early days of his stay in Venice.

To add to Aschenbach’s discomfort, he quickly finds that his health is deteriorating, as it had the first time that he visited Venice years ago. Aschenbach’s illness is presented as a direct result of the weather in Venice, which has been overcast and heavy since his arrival. The fact that the weather is blamed for Aschenbach’s ill health suggests that something – whether Venice
itself or some other force – is actively trying to assault Aschenbach; the other guests at the hotel
are not affected by the weather and go about their vacations happily. When the weather does not
improve on the second day of his stay, he immediately decides to return to Germany, berating
himself for believing that his fragile health would withstand the bad air in Venice. The
symptoms Aschenbach has now twice experienced in Venice are not severe; he asks himself,
“was this not the same listless fever setting in? The pressure in the temples, the heavy eyelids?”
(Mann 50). These apparently minor symptoms suggest Aschenbach is especially sensitive to
pain and discomfort, to the point that he would end a vacation early, and reinforce his frailty.
Later, faced with the prospect of leaving the young boy he has met in the hotel, Tadzio, he
rethinks his perception of the illness, deciding that it might be nothing more than “an
inconsequential indisposition” (Mann 65). As he attempts to leave Venice, Aschenbach
experiences “grief, true pain, an affliction of the soul” (Mann 68) at thinking that Venice is a city
that must be categorized as “an impossible and forbidden destination” (Mann 68). Venice is the
place where twice he has suffered “physical defeat” (Mann 69), suggesting that the city issued a
challenge to which he could not rise. It is the city itself, not the country or the people, that
Aschenbach deems dangerous to his health. This passage explicitly discusses the theme Mann
raised in his description of Aschenbach’s job: “this conflict between the soul’s inclinations and
the body’s capabilities” (Mann 69). The body, especially Aschenbach’s body, is an imperfect
container for the soul, and failures of the body can sometimes prevent victories of the soul. In
this case, Mann will bring together Aschenbach’s imperfect body with a new longing for an
inappropriate relationship; both the soul and the body will suffer in Venice.

Though he is plagued with the overwhelming feeling that something is not right in
Venice, Aschenbach stumbles upon a young boy, Tadzio, who is “purest formal perfection”
Mann (45) and captures Aschenbach’s full attention, to the point that Aschenbach refuses to leave the city that is making him sick. Though both Mann and Gide create young boys for their protagonists to dote upon, Tadzio’s description shows that Mann values a very different set of qualities than Gide. Whereas in *The Immoralist* Bachir’s animal nature is emphasized, Tadzio seems to Aschenbach to be a statue from Greek antiquity made flesh, the highest incarnation of the human. Tadzio’s mother dotes upon him, while his sisters are raised more strictly, so that Tadzio, like Aschenbach, is somewhat sheltered from the outside world. Upon first seeing him, Aschenbach marvels at Tadzio’s seemingly perfect physical state but still wonders “was he ailing?” (Mann 46) upon observing Tadzio’s frail, delicate quality. Aschenbach is also concerned that Tadzio may be sick because he does not act the way a youth his age should act. He concludes, though, that his behavior is probably a result of being pampered as the only son, and not because he is ill. The day after their initial encounter, Aschenbach revisits the issue of illness and decides based on his observation of Tadzio’s physical stature that Tadzio “will probably not live long” (Mann 62). Aschenbach feels “satisfied or consoled” (Mann 62) at this realization. Since Aschenbach has already attributed many of his own qualities to Tadzio, it seems that he hopes that Tadzio does not become what he currently is; Tadzio is too beautiful and pure to be subjected to such a fate. When he decides that Tadzio will not live long, Aschenbach is reassured that perfection is not sustainable in this world, which allows him to feel better about his own poor health and the things that he has not accomplished in his life.

Aschenbach is soon completely overcome by his feelings for Tadzio, which allows him to act in ways that he would not in Munich; his feelings liberate him, even though he knows that what he feels is not socially acceptable. In *Thomas Mann and Italy*, Jonas compares Venice’s deadly, ominous quality to Aschenbach’s forbidden love of Tadzio: “it is Venice, the beguiling city,
which symbolizes the enormous danger in which he finds himself owing to his passion for a fourteen-year-old youth” (Jonas 38). Both the city and Tadzio overwhelm Aschenbach’s senses, causing him to act differently from the regimented control that has characterized his life in Munich. “Beauty and approaching destruction are closely interwoven” (Jonas 39), suggesting that the sensual side of life that Aschenbach has begun to embrace is both seductive and dangerous.

Venice’s destructive, infectious nature is reinforced when the first signs of an epidemic begin appearing in public notices around the city. Visitors are warned against “canal water” (Mann 99), which is an absurd proposition in a city where canals are ubiquitous and a major mode of transportation; water is an essential part of the life of the city, and now it is being considered dangerous to the health of its visitors. The possibility of an epidemic is only discussed in foreign newspapers, and Aschenbach finds the potential for an epidemic thrilling rather than threatening. This is certainly a testament to his changed attitude toward illness and might be caused by his affection for Tadzio. Excitement, in the form of a secret plague ready to descend on the city, foretells “every loosening of the fabric of society” (Mann 100) – the very rules that Aschenbach usually embraces. What is most thrilling about the plague, however, is that Venice’s “nasty secret […] had merged with his own innermost secret” (Mann 100) – his love for Tadzio.

Unlike the classical conception of an epidemic as the punishment for a community’s, or an individual’s sins, Aschenbach does not believe that his secret affection for the young boy is a cause of Venice’s epidemic; after all, the illness-bringing winds were in full force before he arrived in Venice. Since his arrival, though, a new smell, that of antibacterial liquid, has overtaken the city, indicating a problem more serious than the bad air invoked by the residents of
Venice. The whole of the city is implicated in its illness, not just Aschenbach: “the city was diseased and was concealing it out of cupidity” (Mann104). Aschenbach asks many locals their opinions on the epidemic, including a mysterious musician whom he meets in town, and everyone denies the epidemic, taking their stance from the official government line in order to keep the city running as normal. The musician also blames “the heat and sirocco” (Mann 114). Blaming the sirocco – the Mediterranean winds – places the blame not on Venice, but on the foreign countries from which the winds originate. City officials blame the incidences of disease whose existence they will admit upon “totally isolated cases introduced from outside” (Mann 107), insisting that their city is not to blame for spreading a foreign illness, while simultaneously the hotel manager admits that “the sultry and unreasonably warm weather” (Mann 108) might cause a “situation injurious to the public health” (Mann 108). If the weather were only reasonable and stayed within the expected range of temperatures, the public would have no reason to worry; Mann implies that even the weather is expected to conform to what man has deemed reasonable. This is an altogether unnatural expectation, and nature takes its revenge on Venice by sending an epidemic to this city that has forgotten its place. Aschenbach sees the epidemic as an exciting event that he, unlike most of the population of Venice, is privy to; the excitement has its root in its unpredictability and the way that society will be disordered by the event.

After Aschenbach coerces an English travel agent into admitting that the epidemic is not the typical result of the heat and the sirocco, Mann details his idea of the history of “Indian cholera” (Mann 119). Calling the disease “Indian” immediately marks it as an exotic disease acting in a way that is unfamiliar in Europe. On a similar note, Tadzio is Polish, which places him in the realm of the foreign and potentially dangerous as well. Mann describes the spread of
cholera as a fearful, unstoppable force that is carried by man but is also extremely dangerous to him – a threatening relationship that implies that man is responsible for the outbreak, even if unwittingly. The fact that the disease is carried by trade routes implies that modernization and travel are at the heart of its destructive power.

Mann demonstrates that he understands the presence of bacteria and their role in the spread of disease, which means that this disease is not only contracted by those who have issues with their behavior or morals, as was believed in earlier centuries. This passage is also significant because Aschenbach, though he knows some of the truth from international newspapers, has most likely never researched the history and spread of cholera. Mann inserts this paragraph for the readers in order to emphasize the inevitability of the epidemic and its relentless characteristic. Mann also gives a list of the physical symptoms that await cholera victims, but he limits his inventory to the physical symptoms; cholera, apparently, is a disease that does not create any new longings or personality changes in its victims. This is an important distinction between Mann’s conception of cholera and Gide’s view of tuberculosis: tuberculosis was believed to cause new feelings, improved awareness of the body, and creative impulses. In 1945, in the introduction to a collection of Dostoevsky’s short stories, Mann wrote about the heightened mental capacities of people suffering from paralysis, so he clearly felt that illness could affect the mind and spirit in a positive way. Though he does not treat illness as a gift that brings only benefits to the bearer, Mann does recognize that the state of being ill can give the afflicted special insight into the world. He writes of Dostoevsky, an epileptic, that “no matter to what extent the malady menaced Dostoevsky’s mental powers, it is certain that his genius is most intimately connected with it and colored by it” (Mann, “Dostoevsky” xi). Mann also refers to Nietzsche’s supposed case of syphilis as a benefit to the philosopher. However, in the case of
cholera in *Death in Venice*, the disease moves so quickly and is so deadly that one cannot derive insight from it as one could from a chronic disease.

The technicality of Mann’s account of cholera in *Death in Venice* stands in contrast to his belief that disease can increase emotion and creativity; the litany of death rates and symptoms depersonalizes the disease, while making clear that the epidemic is real. Wolfgang Leppmann writes on the subject of cholera that “although the disease had been endemic for a number of years, especially in southern Italy, the [Italian] government had steadfastly denied its existence” (Leppmann 69), and there is historical evidence that the disease did strike Italy in the early 20th century. The reaction of the government in *Death in Venice* is therefore no great stretch of Mann’s imagination. The narrator proposes that Venetian authorities chose to suppress information about the epidemic for financial reasons, which “proved stronger in the city than love of truth” (Mann 122). Throughout the story, Venice is referred to as sick, “the stricken city” (Mann 133), which allows the cholera epidemic to be a judgment of the city rather than the individuals who contract the disease. Perhaps Mann’s choice of cholera was simply due to the prevalence of the disease, but cholera is also useful symbolically because it strikes people quickly and indiscriminately, and at the time of the novel’s publication the steps needed to control it were not well-understood.

The severity of the symptoms of cholera also makes it a powerful symbolic choice. The narrator implies that death is sometimes the better option, saying the lucky ones fall into a coma from which they never awaken, which is the polar opposite of the poets who wished for the experience of having tuberculosis. Aschenbach’s comfort in knowing that Tadzio will soon die is reflected in this passage. At one point, Aschenbach wonders if Tadzio is short of breath, which again leads him to be filled with a “profligate satisfaction” at the thought that he “is sickly
and probably has not long to live” (Mann 117); though Aschenbach says that his questioning of Tadzio’s health is separate from his longing for Tadzio, it is questionable as to whether this feeling is actually reasonable and logical.

After the British man who detailed the truth of the epidemic to Aschenbach warns that a quarantine is sure to descend on Venice, Aschenbach thinks about doing what he considers to be the ethical thing and warning Tadzio’s family to leave Venice immediately. Aschenbach believes that this action would “lead him back, restore him to himself” (Mann 124), but he is loath to separate himself from Tadzio. In fact, he knows that doing the right thing would allow him to return to the life that he has always led, and “there is nothing so distasteful as being restored to oneself when one is beside oneself” (Mann 124). In the end, he decides not to tell the family of the upcoming quarantine while “the image of the infested and abandoned city” (Mann 125) thrills and excites him. This is a critical juncture in Aschenbach’s life as he asks himself “What were art and virtue to him given the advantages of chaos?” (Mann 125); he has decided to give up his previous life in favor of a freedom that will almost certainly destroy him. Returning to “his drudgery” of a job is the equivalent of “sobering up” and “was so abhorrent to him that his face twisted into an expression of physical revulsion” (Mann 125). This passage compares the oppression he experiences at the hands of society to physical unhealthiness, and given Aschenbach’s already-weakened physical state that has resulted from his vacation in Venice, he would almost certainly not be able to function well upon his return to Munich. Thus Aschenbach has created a situation for himself in which he no longer fits into his old life, but he finds that he cannot withstand the physical pressure on his body in this new life. With this realization, Aschenbach makes an active, reasoned choice to remain in this no-man’s-land of not belonging, knowing that there is nowhere to go now that he has experienced a fuller life. As we will see in
The Immoralist, Michel finds himself in the position that would await Aschenbach in Munich when he returns to France after his illness and has a philosophical awakening. In France, Michel finds himself emotionally changed by the physical stress he underwent during his illness, and he no longer fits into his old life. The Immoralist details the Michel’s difficulty in managing his new convictions while trying to live the life that he had built in France. Before returning to Europe, Michel gives no indication that he has considered how his life might change as a result of being sick, but Aschenbach is aware of his predicament and chooses not to return to his old life.

Now that he has chosen his fate in Venice, Aschenbach falls deeper under Venice’s and Tadzio’s spell and sets about changing himself to fit into this new world. Even Aschenbach’s trip to the barber has overtones of illness and wellness. Aschenbach has graying hair, which is natural for a man of his age, but the barber suggests that Aschenbach should only appear as old as he feels, saying “a man like you, sir, has a right to his natural hair color” (Mann 131) and that there is nothing wrong with discarding the differences between the natural and the artificial. The implication that Aschenbach has some right to cheat time and fool nature is earned by the barber’s perception that Aschenbach’s soul is younger than his body. There is something ritualistic in this scene: Aschenbach is painted and prepared indoors, then sent out into the world disguised as a new person.

After he leaves the shop, Aschenbach realizes that, as in his libidinous dream from the previous night, he feels “feverish” (Mann 133), which makes the reader wonder if Aschenbach’s new life is an extension of his dream. At this point Aschenbach is fully aware that he is “condemned” (Mann 133) and imagines that the rain has left his food “tainted by infection”
Aschenbach falls ill, he experiences “dizzy spells that were only partially physical” (Mann 138): he is sick with love as well as cholera. He also feels anxious, but cannot find a reason within his experience that would explain the anxiety. These are his only physical symptoms before he dies on the beach just as Tadzio’s family leaves Venice. Golden states that “he dies of the disease that he has courted” (Golden 197), linking the disease and Aschenbach’s dreams of the exotic and the uninhibited. Aschenbach’s death is a relatively easy one compared to other of literary deaths, without suffering or disfigurement, and it is a blessing for a man who has spent his years living a life that brings him little pleasure. Now that he has become fully aware of the desires that he harbors, which can never be fulfilled without becoming a social pariah, death is the preferable option, especially since his last minutes are spent gazing upon his young obsession.
By the time André Gide wrote *The Immoralist*, tuberculosis had been established as a literary trope for centuries, as Sontag details. The novel is considered a semi-autobiographical work. Gide traveled to north Africa in the late 19th century, where he, like Michel, contracted tuberculosis and then returned to France. Despite being written a decade before *Death in Venice*, Michel’s story in *The Immoralist* continues where Aschenbach’s ends: Michel survives his illness and must learn to live with the new emotions and values that he has gained from the experience. While Aschenbach dies at the end of his novel, the bulk of Michel’s story takes place after he recovers from tuberculosis. Gide also provides less exposition before introducing illness into the narrative. Within a few pages of the start of his narrative, Michel is desperately ill and spends several days completely consumed by fever, not knowing who he is or where he is.

What the reader does learn about Michel’s life before he becomes sick is essential to understanding his transformation. Michel has been living a respectable life in Paris as a historian and writer who has recently married because marriage is normal for a person his age. In the open letter in which Michel composes his story, he tells friends that he considered his marriage to Marceline “this commonplace function” (Gide 13), telling them that both the institution of marriage and his wife are uninspiring and predictable choices made out of necessity rather than love. In fact, Michel is only moved by the presence of his friends and the emotion that they express at the marriage ceremony, showing that Michel feels no emotion unless he is mimicking others. Part of this cold bearing comes from Michel’s Protestant mother, who taught Michel a “kind of austerity” (Gide 15) that has remained with him since her death.
Like Mann’s Aschenbach, Michel is a scholar who has mostly ignored the outside world in favor of academic pursuits; Michel says that at the age of 25, he is left “having barely cast a glance at anything but books and ruins” (Gide 15). In the past, he “spent all [his] fervor” (Gide 15) on his work, but this passion does not extend to any other part of his decidedly unbalanced life. As Golden notes in his article “Archetypes and ‘Immoralists’ in Andre Gide and Thomas Mann,” Michel has no special insight into his interior working or feelings, which is what one might expect from someone who has willingly isolated himself from others. Much of the insight contained in this first section of the novel can be attributed to Gide’s choice of format: Michel is recounting his story to his friends at a later date, so he has a better grasp on the problems of his early life than he had when he was living in Paris as a bachelor.

As he reflects on his life before marriage, Michel claims that his careful upbringing, which was typical of other young men of his age and social class, both helped and hurt his health. Paris, the center of the bourgeoisie, is linked with a general lack of well-being for Michel, a kind of mediocrity that is carefully preserved and perpetuated, as he never fully heals nor falls desperately ill. Michel says that until his marriage, he did not know that he “had very delicate health” (Gide 16) because he had never tested his health before. His life up until this point has been sheltered, miserly, and guided by intellectual pursuits; Gide implies that none of these things could be a serious threat to Michel’s health – illness is something that occurs outside of the middle class, intellectual home to people who are not careful to protect their bodies and minds. Michel believes that his steadfast, boring life has made him both weaker and stronger, while he notes that Marceline “seemed strong” (Gide 16). We learn little of Marceline’s history except that she, too, was an orphan at the time of her marriage, so the reader cannot determine whether Marceline’s apparent strength is to be trusted. Mirroring his general malaise, before his
marriage Michel had floated through life without any ambitions or true pleasures. Though he is only 25 when he marries Marceline, Michel has a world-weariness that would be typical of a much older man.

Michel’s austere, quiet life has left him unaccustomed to feeling any sort of emotion, so the quick succession of his father’s death and his marriage render him exhausted as the newlywed couple leaves for their honeymoon in Tunis. Once at their destination, Michel rushes to visit the archeological sites that he has studied from afar, paying more attention to them than to his new wife. Michel is surrounded by ruins, a symbol of death and destruction; his academic research, too, involves the study of ruins, indicating that he is more interested in the past than in the present. In fact, on his honeymoon, which should have been a celebration of a new life and new possibilities, Michel admits that “in so new a country nothing attracted me except Carthage and a few ruins” (Gide 19), even his wife. He has not recovered from his exhaustion, but he believes it would be “shameful to give in to it” (Gide 19) and pushes onward despite his mounting symptoms, looking forward to traveling south, where he believes the warmth will bring him some relief. On the journey south, however, the couple faces cold winds that catch them off guard and worsen Michel’s cough. The Mediterranean wind is also to blame for Aschenbach’s poor health in *Death in Venice*, but those were hot winds; the Mediterranean is unpredictable, and as in *Death in Venice*, Michel sickens immediately upon reaching foreign soil. In contrast to Mann’s hot, pulsating, active Venice, Gide’s Tunisia is cold, grey, and dead; Michel describes the amphitheatre that he has looked forward to seeing as “ugly under the dreary sky” (Gide 20). The ancient world is very much present, but unlike in Venice, where history has been made a part of the lives of its current residents, history in Tunisia is associated with death
and emptiness. This marks Michel’s first rejection of the life and values that he has held dear, beginning with intellectual accomplishment, in favor of emotion and passion.

Michel has been raised by his Huguenot mother to believe that illness is a sign of weakness, so it is no surprise that his first instinct is to hide his increasingly severe symptoms from Marceline, including the fact that he has spent the night coughing up blood. However, after having successfully cleaned up the evidence, he is irritated that Marceline has not noticed his fatigue and reveals the details of his night to her. This scene demonstrates that Michel’s instincts are becoming stronger, to the point that he can no longer fight against them and act in the way that would be considered appropriate in his social circle. Marceline reacts to Michel’s news by fainting, which is an early indication of how closely their health will be intertwined throughout the novel. She summons a doctor to care for Michel.

When Michel believes from the doctor’s behavior that he will soon die, he is not particularly upset by the prospect of dying. He thinks, “After all, what had life to offer? I had worked faithfully to the end, resolutely and passionately done my duty. The rest… oh! What did it matter?” (Gide 23). The most important thing to do in life, he reveals in this scene, is to work hard until the end of one’s life, rather than have relationships with people or pursue life’s pleasures. Unlike Aschenbach, Michel does not realize that his life up to this point has been insignificant and lacking in real accomplishments. Immediately after hearing the doctor’s diagnosis, he thinks of the “frightful” (Gide 23) hotel he and Marceline currently occupy, and demands to move to a more beautiful location; Michel’s search for beauty – and the indulgence of physical pleasures – has begun as a result of his impending death. Marceline assures him that he will recover, but she still makes plans to move them to the town of Biskra. The journey is
once again long and difficult, and Michel arrives there “more dead than alive” (Gide 24). The
difficult journey is necessary, though, because in Biskra Michel will be reborn.

As the illness wears on in Biskra, Michel now understands that he has not been truly
living his life. He sits on the terrace with Marceline, time seems irrelevant as he finally clears
his mind of work and observes that “existing is occupation enough” (Gide 26). Without a
deadline to meet or research to perform, Michel allows himself to reflect upon life for the first
time. He recognizes that his illness forces him to live in the moment because he must take stock
of his body, his breathing, and his symptoms very often. Before his marriage, it was both
excusable and necessary for him to forget about the present as he focused his studies on antiquity;
now, for the first time, he is able to pay close attention to himself, becoming “self-centered”
(Gide 33) rather than worrying about his social or intellectual responsibilities.

Even though he is hundreds of miles from Paris, Michel cannot escape the judgment of
his peers. Parisian society links the medical with the moral, as demonstrated by the brochures
that a Parisian acquaintance sends to Michel, which resemble moral tracts that he encountered as
a child. These brochures speak plainly of tuberculosis, which is more than can be said for
Michel’s doctor, who refuses to name the disease. Michel believes that he cannot have a disease
as simple and banal as tuberculosis, even though the symptoms match the disease; at the very
least, he believes that he is recovering from tuberculosis and is no longer within the disease’s
grasp. He feels that his illness, whatever it may be, also has a component of “a general nervous
dérangement” (Gide 33). Though tuberculosis does not cause nervous agitation, the disease is
traditionally thought to strike those who are predisposed to anxiety (Lawlor 48), so Michel’s
association of tuberculosis and nervous energy is not unprecedented. Michel maintains that his
illness cannot be explained by anything, which is a rather progressive view of illness at a time when illness was often thought to reveal a fatal flaw in a person’s character.

After reading the medical pamphlets, Michel’s opinion on the origin of his illness changes, and he senses instead that “an active host of enemies was living within me” (Gide 30); he has fallen into his old pattern of feeling what society instructs him to feel, as at his wedding. He vows to battle the threat to his life, and sets about categorizing everything in his life as either healing or detrimental. This process gives his life direction, purpose and order, despite the disordered nature of illness. His impatience to begin this new diet indicates that Michel is beginning to lose some of his carefully maintained composure; when it appears that he will not be able to begin the diet immediately, he is unable to control his emotions and explodes at Marceline. His new health regiment represents a more active, independent attitude toward life which is further underscored when he asks Marceline not to pray for his recovery. Michel, who is technically Protestant but was raised by a father who proclaimed himself an atheist, wants nothing to do with a god who would take credit for his recovery: “it entails obligations,” he tells Marceline, and “I don’t like them” (Gide 32). Whether he lives or dies, Michel does not want to be indebted to any person or belief system. He does allow, however, that Marceline can and should help him in his pursuit of health. Eventually, he deems his quest successful, due especially “to pure air, to better food” (Gide 34), things that are tangible, quantifiable, and for the most part under Michel’s control.

Though Michel believes that he has cured his tuberculosis through his actions, there are lasting physical and emotional effects from the disease. During his convalescence, he is extremely sensitive to hot and cold, and even after his recovery, he says that “this sensation I kept and still keep, but now it gives me exquisite enjoyment” (Gide 34). His illness has
increased his sensitivity to sensation, which fits with Golden’s view that illness changes Michel into a more sensual being, especially since he embraces the new feelings he experiences. As Michel recovers, he senses that he is about to be reborn as a completely new person; he asks, “was that the morning that was at last to give me birth?” (Gide 39). His senses, which he has ignored until this point, “now remembered a whole ancient history of their own – recomposed for themselves a vanished past” (Gide 39); his illness has allowed him to revisit a part of his youth that he ignored, which is certainly a positive outcome. He says that his senses “had never ceased to live” (Gide 39), which implies that Michel is recapturing his true self rather than creating a new being. Apart from the inconvenient physical symptoms, Michel has only experienced benefits from his protracted illness, and the fact that he is abroad, in an unfamiliar situation, only increases his new ability to experience life fully.

Marceline decides that Michel needs company during his convalescence, so she pays a few young youths from the village to come to their villa during the day. Michel develops a particular interest in Bachir, and Marceline initially condones this affection. His innocent wife does not suspect that anything illicit will develop between Michel and the young boy, but Michel immediately senses the contrary. When Bachir does not return the next day, Michel laments his loss and wonders “what kind of thing had illness made me?” (Gide 27), obviously aware of his desires toward Bachir and blaming the change on his illness rather than any natural facet of his own personality. He explains away the desires the next time he meets Bachir by saying that he envies Bachir’s health and nothing more. When Michel spends more time with Bachir and comes into physical contact with him, he pays for his indiscretion with a relapse of bloody coughing. As on the night he coughed up blood and hid it from Marceline, Michel reacts passionately to the blood, but this time he is angry that he is not healing quickly because he has
begun “to love life” (Gide 29) against his better judgment. Bachir has become his example not just of health, but of a life lived free from the expectations of European society.

As in *Death in Venice*, bad weather brings ill health, and Michel sees a return of his symptoms during the frigid January rains even though he has been relatively healthy for a time. During this period, Michel is strengthened by the company of several boys from the village because “the presence of their good health did me good” (Gide 44), and he rejects any of the frailer children that Marceline takes in, growing increasingly angry at her seeming ineptitude. He confesses, however, that the real reason that these children upset him is that they frighten him because they represent what he currently is and could remain: physically imperfect. One of these children catches his eye when he steals a pair of scissors from Marceline’s table. Golden suggests that the childlike behavior appeals to Michel’s Dionysian side and represents what Michel now strives for in his own life. The young Arabs are almost always described as having animal qualities: they swing in the trees like monkeys or move in a feline manner. Whether childlike or animal, these children are unrestrained and live by their instincts, which Michel has never been able to do. Once Michel is able to venture outdoors, he spends most of his time seeking out gardens where young boys playing flutes remind him of scenes from antiquity. As Michel’s health improves, he no longer feels the need to have the “example of their health” (Gide 46) nearby, so he spends less time with the boys. Sontag claims that Michel recovers because he “accepts Life” (Sontag 21) after having “repressed his true sexual nature” (Sontag 21) for the early part of his life, even though Michel does not act on his desires toward the boys while he is in Biskra.

During his illness, Michel often lashes out verbally at Marceline, showing the immoderation brought on by illness, but this is also a sign of his growing resentment toward
everything that Marceline represents: emotionless marriage, false relationships, the promise of a 
return to Parisian society. Michel’s perception that Marceline cannot comprehend Michel’s 
internal sufferings, both physical and emotional, shows that Michel believes that what he is 
going through is unique and incomprehensible to others. As Michel regains his health, he 
apologizes to Marceline for not showing her any love, but he believes that his love will grow 
along with his health. Shortly thereafter, Michel compares life favorably to illness: “I felt myself 
burning with a kind of happy fever – the fever of life itself” (Gide 47). While the couple remains 
in Africa, Michel’s illness seems to have only positive effects on his spirit, causing him to value 
his life and experience it in a way that had been forbidden to him before. Marceline, too, is 
affected by Michel’s illness in a seemingly positive way: she has a newfound independence to 
explore her surroundings while Michel rests.

The couple must return to France, however, and resume their lives in Paris. On his final 
night in Biskra, Michel is struck by how “everything seemed dead” (Gide 47) in the town and 
reflects on the errors he has made in his life. He wants to cry out as animals do to lament his life, 
but he is unable to and settles for touching his own face to confirm that he is alive. Gide 
juxtaposes the ancient, dead city with the vibrant, lively young Arab boys, but in this scene it is 
clear that Michel exists between these two worlds. His task upon returning to Europe will be to 
learn to balance what he has learned about himself while sick with the social expectations that 
have remained unchanged. Aschenbach never reached this point in Death in Venice; he was 
much older than Michel, unencumbered by marriage, and could not imagine a way to return to 
his previous life. Michel’s youth and growing affection for Marceline tie him to life and force 
him to try to resume his previous career.
As the couple leaves Biskra, Michel continues to have recurrences of his illness, which he attributes mostly to “the condition of [his] nerves” (Gide 49) rather than tuberculosis, making his problems emotional rather than physical. He also notes that he has become “better armed” (Gide 47) against relapses, almost willing himself better. Thus, his assault on the disease has been both physical – good air and food – and psychological.

Before returning to France, Michel and Marceline spend time in Syracuse as a midpoint between Africa and Paris. As Michel arrives at Syracuse, he discusses how his illness caused him to behave in a way that would not be considered proper in his circle of friends.

> “Since the beginning of my illness I had lived without question or rule, simply applying myself to the act of living as an animal does or a child. Now that I was less absorbed by my malady, my life became once more certain of itself and conscious.” (Gide 60)

When he was too sick to function in the way to which he was accustomed, Michel was forced to model his behavior on the Arab boys he met in Biskra, living purely on instinct like an animal or a child. On the voyage home, he vows that a return to health and to France will allow him to recapture his previous way of thinking. He still expects to keep the lessons he learned about valuing his life when he returns to his academic work so that he can “reknit my present to my past” (Gide 49), not denying that “I was changed” (Gide 61) by the experiences. However, Michel finds the task of balancing his old life with his new soul to be a daunting task even before he sets foot in France.

When Michel attempts to begin his studies again in Syracuse, he finds that the past no longer interests him as much as the present. The past, like the town of Biskra, is dead, immobile, and terrifying; death is now terrifying to Michel, who professed that he was unconcerned about his impending death when he first fell ill. Michel realizes that his studies have given him a great deal of knowledge, but they have not taught him about life; he wonders, “inasmuch as I was a
man, did I know myself at all?” (Gide 51). He is now in search of “that authentic creature” (Gide 51) that is left when all of his knowledge is stripped away, who has been suppressed by teachers, parents, religious figures, and other keepers of society. While still abroad, Michel decides that his recovery is not simply a medical fact; rather, it has caused an “increase” (Gide 52) of his life, and he does not want to know what has caused his transformation for fear of disrupting it. He allows himself to live freely, rejoicing in being “a new self! A new self!” (Gide 64) and rejecting everything that he considers to be learned rather than natural. He recognizes that he is no longer the man that Marceline married and still loves, and he vows to hide these changes from her in order not to be judged for his new philosophy of life (Gide 71). More than an act of survival, his lies soon become pleasurable because he is doing something that society forbids.

As Mann would later agree, it is an empowering experience to be ill, away from the mores of a society which has long thought tuberculosis to be a social disease that reveals something negative about a person’s character. Michel instead sees disease as a natural process that brings him closer to what is right and innate in the world. He even regrets not suffering more or longer because he feels that he cheated by taking his remedies from a pamphlet that allowed him “ignorance of [his] physical needs” (Gide 54); he would have rather discovered through observation of his feelings what his body needed in order to heal itself. Thus he sets himself a new task that can be approached in a way more suited to his newly formed philosophy: he will independently cure his “nervous debility” (Gide 66), which has increased his sensitivity to cold without any help or advice from others. Even though he is proud of both his physical and emotional recovery, he is ashamed to look in the mirror at his nude form and see how pale and weak he appears, so different from the healthy bodies of the boys he spent time with in Africa.
To remedy his shame, he spends time in the sun and eventually deems himself “not yet robust … capable of becoming so – harmonious, sensual, almost beautiful (Gide 56) – in harmony with nature, able to feel and experience what is around him. As a final testament to his changed body, he shaves his beard, which brings him closer to his natal state and lifts the mask he feels that he has been wearing. In spite of Michel’s new philosophy, appearance, and physical relationship with Marceline, he feels happiest when he is not only thinking of himself: he says that he feels the best when Marceline is nearby and he can take care of her as well as of himself.

As Michel’s health returns, he considers returning to France and taking up his studies again. Though history now seems a “mere vanity” (Gide 64), he is drawn to the history of Athalaric, who became a king at 15 and died at 18. Like Aschenbach, Michel demonstrates a fascination with youth, though Michel, who is in his 20s, does not have to dye his hair or paint his face in order to embrace youth. In addition, Michel finds Althalaric’s violent life and death savage and inspiring, though he recognizes that he should instead find a warning in Althalaric’s untimely end. It is now obvious that Michel will not be able to forget the desires he experienced in Biskra, and he realizes that the conflict between what he should want and what he does want will not be eliminated easily.

While studying in Syracuse Michel accepts a position at the Collège de France even though he sees it as “slavery” (Gide 66) because he knows that it is the correct thing to do in order to maintain his social position and that it will make Marceline happy. To ease the transition from vacation in a less civilized part of the world, Michel and Marceline do not immediately set up home in Paris when they return to France, instead settling in Michel’s country home at La Mornière. Besides keeping Michel close to nature and away from Parisian high society, this location holds memories of his childhood spent at La Mornière with his mother.
Instead of beginning his research about another culture’s history, Michel is preoccupied by his own history, which surrounds him, and by his future, which takes the form of his child, who is soon to be born. Here Michel is able to be truly happy amidst “beauty, at once human and natural” (Gide 71): he believes he has found a balance in his life between his studies, his personal life, and his own needs. Michel still appreciates those whom he deems free from the binds of civilization, like Charles, the young man who comes to work on the grounds. Michel first notices that Charles is “exuberantly healthy” (Gide 73), which along with his suppleness and perfectly formed body places him in the same category as the young boys in Biskra. The only thing unnatural about him, the only sign of society or civilization, is Charles’s choice of formal clothes, which Michel finds repellant; on the other hand, Charles appears younger than his age and has a youthful innocence about him, which is very appealing. As Charles and Michel work on the farm, Michel finds that he is naturally addressing Charles by the informal “tu,” breaking down the constraints placed upon them by society.

Charles, in spite of his youth and lower social status, has practical suggestions for Michel regarding his management of the farms he owns at La Mornière. Michel should make sure that all of the farmland in his possession is being properly used and maintained, Charles suggests, which implies that humans should have dominion over the land. This is a contrast to Michel’s initial thoughts about the purity of nature, but he also thrives on the ideas of possession and dominance over other people and over objects. Charles teaches Michel that brute force does not lead to true dominance, as demonstrated by the horse who cannot be broken through beatings. These conversations encourage Michel to become a master of his own life, reinforcing what he learned about independence in Biskra.
During this time, Marceline is pregnant and stays in the house at La Mornière while Michel takes care of business on the farm. Marceline, Michel believes, “took as much delight, it seemed, in feeling me live as in living herself” (Gide 81). Though this statement appears innocuous, it foreshadows her imminent death; her life depends on Michel’s happiness, but he is already struggling to combine his two selves. The happiness that they feel is precarious and depends on Michel’s health and his ability to find balance in his life.

Michel sees Marceline’s pregnancy as an embodiment of purity and naturalness. Upon their return to Paris, however, Marceline immediately becomes worried about the state of their finances and becomes increasingly exhausted. Both of these symptoms are related to the couple’s return to polite society: money is necessary to live the life appropriate to their station, and Marceline must be a polite hostess when friends come to call on her, even if she is feeling unwell. Part of the problem is that Marceline is now “unused to society” (Gide 87) due to living away from Paris and its customs for so long and cannot find a way to politely turn away her guests. Michel somewhat grudgingly steps into the place that Marceline occupied in Africa, taking care of everyday tasks while allowing her to rest, but he is not happy with the role reversal and especially displeased with being forced to take part in salons and social gathering where he feels the need to put on a false personality for the sake of other participants. As he attempts to fit in with the crowd, Michel realizes that the society in which he takes part is inherently false because “one cannot both be sincere and seem so” (Gide 88). Sincerity now becomes a reason for suspicion and contempt. The colleagues he is forced to interact with, besides being boring, “did not really live – [they] contented themselves with appearing to live, and were on the verge of considering life merely as a vexatious hindrance to writing” (Gide 88). This description could well have been applied to Michel before his honeymoon and before his illness, which is perhaps
why he finds his colleagues’ behavior so troubling. He is still uncertain of what it truly means to be alive, despite his brush with illness and experiences living in other parts of the world; his philosophy is still not fully developed during these early days in Paris. When Michel was ill, there was no question about how to behave because all of his being was focused on surviving, but now there are many factors that must be taken into consideration, including Marceline, his career, and his future, in addition to his overwhelming feelings about his rebirth. Michel’s feelings and desires must often take a backseat to social concerns.

In spite of his growing resentment, Michel confides to his friends that during this time, “the future seemed to be absolutely assured and I had never thought myself more master of it” (Gide 87). Part of his confidence lies in his certainty that he is different from his colleagues, who all conform to the same lifestyle. Michel sees that the reason he is different from them is his experience with illness; he laments that “not one of them has managed to be ill” (Gide 89) and that “in their company I have ceased to be alive myself” (Gide 89). Clearly, Michel views having been ill as a blessing, not a curse, and he pities those who have not had their lives changed through disease.

In order to maintain the individuality he has gained from illness, Michel must limit his interactions with people who do not feel the same way that he does, and Marceline soon reveals that she, too, is one of the people who does not care if everyone is the same. She believes that one cannot “expect each of them to be different from all the others” (Gide 103), but Michel has finally put into words his desire to be an individual. He believes that he has value as his own unique person, that his personal thoughts are essential and cannot be spoken by anyone else. In his first lesson as a professor, he concludes his argument with his conception of “Culture, born of life, as the destroyer of life” (Gide 90), knowing that his view will be controversial. The class’s
reaction confirms that if Michel wants to live his life as an individual, he must be prepared for social isolation.

The reappearance of Ménalque in Michel’s life signals a new chapter in Michel’s development. Ménalque is the first to suggest that Marceline is weighing Michel down in his search for individuality; when Michel reminds Ménalque that he is married, Ménalque responds that he thought that Michel “might be free” (Gide 92), planting the idea that marriage is another vehicle by which culture restricts and oppresses the individual. Ménalque is also the first person to notice the changes that have taken place in Michel, observing that Michel lacks something in his life. Michel takes Ménalque’s opinion seriously, and Ménalque believes that Michel is not living his beliefs strongly enough. Even though Michel purports to reject culture and its institutions, Ménalque retorts that he is married, owns property, and lives well in Paris, which means that he is living in opposition to his beliefs. Though Michel detests men who imitate others because they are afraid of being alone in the world, he molds his own philosophy in order to please Ménalque. Michel knows Ménalque will be proud when he says he hates “people of principle” (Gide 101), just as he had agonized over disappointing Ménalque by repeating Marceline’s question about the necessity of individuality.

Ménalque and Marceline represent the dual desires acting within Michel after his illness. Marceline is the only reason that Michel holds his beliefs inside rather than living by them: she is his link to the civilized world. Ménalque, on the other hand, is an example that Michel wishes to follow, a man “of a certain reputation” (Gide 100) who still claims to have virtues; Ménalque can still interact with people within society, like Michel and Marceline, but he is never false in his motives and interactions. The result, which is seen in Marceline’s reaction to Ménalque, is that
Ménalque is not accepted by society, but many people are too polite and constrained by cultural expectations to reject him outright.

In spite of Michel’s efforts to relieve Marceline’s stress, her exhaustion only becomes worse, which Michel initially believes that this is natural during pregnancy. When Marceline develops new symptoms, including a fever, he calls a specialist who reprimands him for not calling him sooner. Gide takes a subtle jab at the medical profession by describing how the first doctor, who is “rather foolish – or rather ignorant” (Gide 102), assured them that nothing was wrong, while the second doctor aggressively changes Marceline’s diet and prescribes bed rest. Marceline reacts “very meekly” (Gide 103) to all of the doctor’s advice except his insistence upon quinine, which she believes will hurt her unborn child. Quinine is used to treat malaria, so it is unclear whether Gide wishes to indict the doctor for being incompetent and misdiagnosing Marceline. Marceline’s insistence that quinine will harm her child is a well-traveled old wives’ tale, and current medical research discourages pregnant women from taking the drug. Marceline’s instincts are correct, but the doctor’s supposed knowledge of her condition that comes with his status as a doctor is difficult to argue with.

Eventually, Marceline’s high fever forces her to take the medicine, showing that illness is more powerful than good human intentions or instincts and can force a person to make a choice they would not otherwise make. Marceline is distraught by this turn of events, which she sees as “mournfully giving up all hope of the future” (Gide 103). This choice to fight her illness while potentially harming her child gives Marceline a “kind of religious resignation” (Gide 103) and weakens her physical state; the physical and the spiritual are definitely closely linked for Marceline. For Michel, physical difficulties led to emotional changes, but Marceline finds that spiritual exhaustion exacerbates her physical weakness. Michel is more frightened by
Marceline’s extreme fear than by her physical condition, for he believes that Marceline will bounce back the way he did if only she would commit to fighting. Like Michel so many months ago, Marceline appears to have lost the will to live. This situation demonstrates the danger of depending too much upon hope in the future for one’s happiness when the future is never certain, Michel realizes. Michel finds comfort in living only for the current moment, but Marceline finds little to live for in the present.

Michel begins to approach his goal of living in the moment when he leaves the still-ailing Marceline in order to keep his promised meeting with Ménalque. Having spent weeks inside, feeling oppressed by Marceline’s illness, Michel slowly liberates himself from his responsibilities as he walks to his destination. Upon reaching Ménalque’s house, he professes that he is not happy: “I cut out my happiness to fit me…but now I have grown; I am not at ease in my happiness now; sometimes I think it is strangling me” (Gide 105). Ménalque’s solution to this problem of lost happiness is the “utter forgetfulness of yesterday” (Gide 106): always living in the moment affords him the benefit of never remembering any happier time. Michel lived in this perfect state when he was sick and had to focus on his health at every moment in order to survive, but he has not been able to recreate that state of being since recovering.

Michel, full of jealousy at Ménalque’s happiness and enraged at his own inability to make himself happy, returns the next morning to find that Marceline, who seemed on the mend when Michel left the night before, had suffered a miscarriage the night before. When he approaches his wife, Michel notes in horror that she looks as pale as death, marked by the terrible pain from the night before. Marceline’s miscarriage is a result of her illness and the medication to relieve it, so this event is a reflection of the havoc in Michel’s life caused by illness. When Michel learns that his child has died, he does not mourn the loss of a human life;
something even more significant has happened. He is shocked at “how suddenly the future had come upon” him (Gide 109). Michel had envisioned an unencumbered future, but now that the child that would have tied him to Marceline and society is gone, he does not know what to do.

Michel is dumbfounded. He stays close to Marceline, does his work, and generally attempts to play the role of the conscientious, proper husband, but his sudden transformation is not enough to prevent Marceline from taking a turn for the worse, this time as a result of an embolism. Michel has moved far from his initial impulse to welcome death, at least when it concerns his wife, and he hopes to infuse some of his strength into Marceline. Evidently, he has not fully accepted Ménalque’s opinion that Marceline is holding him back from true happiness, especially after the shock of losing the child, because Michel wishes for her recovery. He draws the line at wishing, though, and refuses to pray for Marceline’s recovery when she asks him to hand her a rosary, retorting “I got well alone all right” (Gide 110), wanting her to rely on her own inner strength in order to recover, rather than depending upon an external force like religion. Marceline, though, is still convinced of religion’s place in Michel’s recovery because she prayed for him despite his admonitions. When Michel learns that his own recovery may have been influenced by Marceline’s prayers, rather than being a product of his own will and strength, he is enraged because the possibility that he was not the sole source of his recovery throws all of his convictions into doubt.

Despite her prayers, Marceline’s condition worsens, lodging itself in her lungs. Michel becomes obsessed with blood again, cursing “the horrible clot” (Gide 111) that makes it difficult for Marceline to breathe. This rejected blood is curdled like the blood that appeared on Michel’s handkerchief in Africa and stands in stark contrast to the warm, richly flowing blood that Bachir drew from himself with a knife. Michel and Marceline’s blood is rejected by their bodies,
expelled from the places where it belongs. Michel uses the word “désordre” (translated as “troubles” in Gide 111) to describe the effects of illness on Marceline’s body; though he has previously professed an appreciation for chaos and the effects of illness on his own body, seeing the same quality in Marceline is repulsive for him. Michel has given up hope that Marceline will ever be healthy again, for “it had marked her, stained her” (Gide 111).

The way that Michel sees Marceline is couched in the same terms as a previous incident with Michel’s furniture. Before Marceline took the quinine, Michel reached a point at which he considered himself completely healthy and untouched by illness, and this realization changed the way he looked at his possessions. When his colleagues left stains on his furniture, he observed that these objects “lost all their value for me at the first stain; things stained were touched by disease, with the mark of death upon them” (Gide 98). Health seems now to be linked to a philosophical state rather than a physical state because Michel considers his friends’ touch to be diseased; these are the same type of men whom Michel believes to be the living dead. Illness of the soul must be just as contagious as illness of the body. Michel is doubly unhappy because he cares about his possessions while wishing that he did not own anything; the conflicts between what he aspires to and what he actually is are mounting.

Marceline now falls into the same category as Michel’s stained furniture, as he states brutally: “henceforth she was a thing that had been spoiled” (Gide 111). Michel has now given up on ever healing Marceline because a terrible change has occurred in his perception of her. This illness, rather than being transforming in a positive way, is active, aggressive, and ruining. Michel, who had previously considered his furniture only as something that could be stained and ruined, now sees his wife, who had so recently been the bearer of his pure, hopeful future, as something that cannot be saved from destruction. This is not a physical ruin, though, because
Marceline improves as the weather becomes more pleasant, with the doctor recommending “nothing more…than a change to purer air” (Gide 112), which was a standard treatment for tuberculosis patients of high social classes (Lawlor 104). Michel thinks that the mountains would be most beneficial, which also signals that Marceline has tuberculosis despite his reluctance to name the disease. Michel begins to feel sympathy pains for Marceline, becomes exhausted, and generally feels as though he too has fallen ill. Still, he does not consider himself irrevocably stained. Michel either has a double standard when it comes to illness or he believes that he is completely free from any lasting traces of sickness. Marceline has transformed into something untouchable, but he is a great man with a groundbreaking new philosophy that he wants to share with the world whose only traces of illness are positive: heightened sensitivity to stimulus and an awareness of the importance of the present. Michel determines that he must help Marceline recover so that they can be together again, but the result should leave them in a better position than before because Michel believes Marceline’s recovery will surely follow the same trajectory as his own.

In search of better air, Michel brings Marceline back to La Mornière. When Marceline is healthy enough, she begins to receive society friends there. This drives Michel to spend more time with his farm hands in an almost anthropological way: he wants to listen to and observe them and hates being around Bocage because Michel must “play the master” (Gide 133) when Bocage is present. In a stark about-face from the previous season, Michel actively seeks ways not to be in control, including not riding around the farm on his horse. In fact, Michel dreads the return of Charles, whom he so admired last summer, because Charles elicits too much respect from his workers, causing them to act differently than they would if unobserved, and Michel wants nothing more than to blend in with the workers.
Michel’s transformation occurs in La Mornière as well as in Africa; the farm may as well be a foreign country where Michel can observe new and different customs. The workers are as mysterious as the dark-skinned Arab boys who fascinated him in Tunis, and Michel wants to learn their secrets, especially those of one man whose animal instincts are particularly strong. This man is “fairly good-looking, tall, not in the least stupid, but wholly guided by instinct, never acting but on the spur of the moment” (Gide 115), but Michel wonders how a man with so little intelligence can live the way Michel has been trying, but fails to live ever since his bout of tuberculosis.

Charles’s return reinforces an idea that Ménalque has planted in Michel’s mind; Ménalque believes that memory is a useless entity that distracts a person from what is truly important: living in the present. Since Michel last saw him, Charles has transformed himself into someone closer to the society gentlemen that Michel knows from Paris instead of the raw, natural man of his memories. Living in the moment, without any recollection of the past, is the only way to be truly free. Furthermore, Michel doubts Charles’s sincerity, a quality which Michel also aspires to possess. Instead of spending time with Charles, Michel learns to poach rabbits at night from another of Bocage’s sons, which allows him finally to achieve one of his goals, that of being in tune with his body rather than his mind: “the only attention I found possible was that of my five senses” (Gide 125), but he cannot pay attention to anything else in the world except his senses. In order to develop these talents, he must leave Marceline unattended at night, abandoning his marital responsibilities.

Soon, Michel is spending every night with his hired help checking traps for rabbits, and quickly finds that he is being taken advantage of by these men. He writes this off as part of being accepted into their midst, but Charles takes him to task for his behavior, saying that Michel
must choose to be either the master of the farm or one of the workers, but not both. Charles questions Michel’s sincerity and truthfulness because Michel appears to be playing two roles at once, neither of which represents his true character; all of Michel’s efforts to become sincere have reinforced his earlier observation that one cannot appear sincere and actually be sincere at the same time. After this accusation, Michel decides to sell La Mornière and begs the newly ailing Marceline to leave France for a new location where, he claims, “I shall love you as I did at Sorrento” (Gide 131), where the couple spent time during Michel’s recovery. He knows that Marceline believes that he has changed irrevocably, but he assures Marceline that “anywhere else, you will feel that there is nothing altered in our love” (Gide 131). The way he phrases his reassurance shows that Michel believes that he has not changed; rather, the problem is actually Marceline’s perception of their relationship, which has been tainted by their residence in France. Thus, the two must escape both Paris and La Mornière, the latter of which has disappointed Michel with its own social code, in order for their love to live freely. Marceline’s health does not improve immediately, but Michel notes that she now possesses that dangerous emotion, hope.

Michel’s current relationship with Marceline hinges on illness, both his and hers. Despite the unpromising start to their marriage, he grew to love her after she stood by him during his bout with tuberculosis and could not consummate their relationship until the fever had ravaged his body, awakening his emotions. Likewise, Michel says that “it was to cure her that I loved her” (Gide 133), believing that his love should be enough not only to cure her illness but bring Marceline around to his way of thinking so that the two can live together, away from society, in their own natural, authentic world. Marceline must experience and come through her case of tuberculosis if Michel has any hope of a future with her.
The voyage through Switzerland, however, is too much for Marceline, and when a doctor is called to check on her, he confirms that Marceline, too, has tuberculosis. Michel refuses to admit that he himself has had the disease because “Marceline had never been ill before she nursed me” (Gide 134). He still does not want to name his disease, which shows that he still believes that what has happened to him can not be the result of an illness as common and banal as tuberculosis; tuberculosis was a fashionable disease for the upper crust in the nineteenth century, who represent everything that Michel currently despises about society. As was normal at the time for a tuberculosis patient, the doctor recommends transporting Marceline to the Alps, where the air is clean and crisp, and Michel immediately makes plans to continue on to Engadine, Switzerland.

Michel compares Marceline’s case of tuberculosis with his and decides that she is not as successful in fighting the disease as he was: “I feel as if I had coughed better than that. She makes too great an effort” (Gide 135). Her weakened state disturbs him because “one ought only sympathize with the strong” (Gide 135). Michel still has an aversion to anyone who can be deemed weak or physically imperfect, even his wife, and even sympathy can be construed as weakness. However, Marceline was never described in the opening of the novel as being strong; indeed, the impression Gide gives is that of a young, rather fragile woman. Clearly, Michel’s idea that Marceline is strong grew out of her caring for him when he was sick. Michel’s perception of Marceline’s weakness changes the way he thinks about her, and Michel is horrified to be near her because Marceline is now a vessel for infection in addition to being stained. To be fair, Michel also thought of himself this way when he was at his sickest. However, Marceline knows that Michel is horrified by her current state as Michel visibly recoils when she coughs; he is not afraid of falling sick again himself, but rather is terrified by Marceline’s weakness – not
out of any particular concern for Marceline’s life, but as a symbol of her frail character. When Marceline appears stronger, Michel credits this turn of events to his care, not to her strength of character, even though he believes his own recovery stemmed from his will.

Marceline’s illness leaves Michel completely confused and disoriented; he says, “I felt at the same time a horror of luxury and a craving for it” (Gide 136), which is only a small part of his conflicting desires. He gives up his study of history, leaving behind the hope of finding some insight into human psychology through the lessons of the past. Michel wants to believe that there are still new things to learn about life and human nature that have not been revealed by the past, but he senses that the only new things that could possibly exist in the world are “covered up, hidden, smothered by culture and decency and morality” (Gide 137). Even though he understands that Marceline takes comfort in the structure and expectations of the society in which she has been raised, he cannot hide “the new trend of my thoughts” (Gide 138) from her, which includes his new distaste for honesty.

Two months in the “honest Swiss nation” (Gide 138) bore Michel into “a kind of frenzy” (Gide 138), and he can think of nothing else but leaving. Marceline is healing, but she is not yet completely recovered when Michel determines that the clean Swiss air has done all that it can do and that she would benefit more from the warm Italian spring. In reality, Michel must return to Africa if he is to recapture what he has lost. As the couple makes their way to Italy, Michel calls the voyage “a descent” (Gide 139) and notes that he is now “leaving abstraction for life” (Gide 139) – that is, free from the honesty and lack of sincerity of France and Switzerland, Michel can now focus on living rather than on morals that have been established by others. The description of the lush vegetation and heavy air is similar to Mann’s descriptions of Venice and of Aschenbach’s dream, giving the voyage an ominous feel. Also, as in Death in Venice,
Marceline’s health takes a turn for the worse in Italy due to cold winter rain that makes the air humid and unhealthy.

Now that Marceline is no longer coughing and there is no chance of her producing any unwanted blood, Michel finds her symptoms incredibly beautiful. Later, Marceline strikes upon an important point with Michel when she asks him, “Don’t you understand that by looking at any particular trait, we develop and exaggerate it? And that we make a man become what we think him?” (Gide 147). Michel, for all his talk about observing life for what it is, sees what he wants to see in Marceline’s illness. While she wants nothing more than to recover and return to her life in Paris, Michel believes that she should feel the same way about illness as an opportunity to improve one’s life. This is not a new trait: when Michel criticizes Marceline for not being more attentive to his pain in Biskra, for example, he is in fact angry at himself for not being aware of his needs before he fell ill. He believes that he could have prevented his illness with proper care and awareness. Marceline tells Michel that she understands his “doctrine” (Gide 141) but does not like it because his philosophy “does away with the weak” (Gide 141), which Michel agrees is the case. Though he uses the neutral construction “and so it should” (Gide 162) to confirm his stance, depersonalizing the blow, the damage is done. Marceline is well aware that there is no room in Michel’s ideal life for her.

Michel is determined that if they follow the path of the voyage that led them to Africa, Marceline will recover, just as he did. It is no coincidence, however, that Marceline in fact grows sicker as they proceed south: for Gide, the south – Italy, the Mediterranean, and north Africa – represents a place where modern culture has not reached or has not been fully entrenched. For Michel, who was amenable to a major change in his life and way of thinking, the trip south was beneficial and awakened an essential part of his soul. However, Marceline
does not believe in Michel’s philosophy and clearly does not want to live completely isolated from her friends and acquaintances in French society, so she sickens and weakens as they approach what for her is a toxic location. Michel realizes this too late, lamenting the “obstinate blindness” (Gide 145) that led him to move Marceline further south in search of sun and warmth. With regret he realizes that if they had stayed at Palermo, where the air is cool, Marceline might have had a chance to recover, but his drive has overtaken his reason, and he asks his reader, “but had I the power to choose what I should determine – to decide what I should desire?” (Gide 145). This is a great blow to a man who aspired to be master of everything around him; he cannot even call himself the master of his own desires. Too late, Michel learns the negative side of following one’s desires without thinking of anyone or anything else, which is that other people are the victims of selfish choices. If he, like Ménalque, could claim not to care about anyone but himself, the casualties of his actions would not matter, but instead he watches in horror as his wife suffers from his decisions.

Michel feels at home in Syracuse, which, like Venice, is a port city filled with odors, sketchy characters, and winding roads; he professes that the dregs of society make him feel at home, whether he understands their language or not, and he wants to live their lives for a few days to see if their experience is as lively and passionate at his. Once again he thinks negatively about society’s need for physical possessions, which he interprets as “all the precautions one takes to preserve one’s body from the perilous contact of life” (Gide 146), and which he will not need if he has to live without Marceline.

When the couple finally arrives at Biskra, Michel notes that Marceline “is as changed as I” (Gide 149), but he realizes that the last time he was here, he was as ill as she currently is. Despite Marceline’s increasingly hopeless condition, Michel can still hope that she will recover
as he did, in the midst what he perceives as a pure, unsullied land. However, when he is greeted by the boys who had captured his attention two years before, he is horrified to see how they have aged; he wonders, “what fatigues, what vices, what sloth have put their ugly mark on faces that were once so bright with youth?” (Gide 149). These young men now represent many of the evils of society, including greed and stupidity. After risking Marceline’s health in order to reach the place that he remembers with fondness and passion, Michel agonizes over whether he will “find here the same things I hated so at home?” (Gide 150), causing the whole trip – and his new philosophy – to be taken in vain.

Michel’s greatest problem, which has been present since the very beginning of the novel, is that he is torn between loving his wife, who represents everything that he despises on a philosophical level, and wanting to live his life free from any constraints that he considers false. As he spends Marceline’s last days at her bedside, he laments, “how many passions and how many hostile thoughts may live together in the mind of man?” (Gide 142). He cannot chose which passions should be sacrificed, so he lives a double life. Since he does not have the strength to make the choice himself, fate – or perhaps Marceline herself – makes the decision for him.

Marceline knows her husband very well, perhaps better than he knows himself, and clearly feels hopeless about her place in his life. She does not try to convince him to change; rather, she simply acknowledges that “you like what is inhuman” (Gide 152). Stark observations like this demonstrate that Marceline has little hope of regaining the life that she had planned when she married Michel. In this way, tuberculosis is in fact an easy death because a premature death is easier to bear than a life subject to Michel’s ever-changing rules, just as Aschenbach’s death is an easy one because he does not have to face the task of balancing his newly-awakened
desires with society’s rules. Perhaps her refusal to take up her rosary on the night of her death shows that Marceline no longer believes either in the tenets under which she was brought up, nor in Michel’s libertine lifestyle – there is no life for her anymore. Ironically, it is Michel who anxiously tries to hand her the rosary, which represents everything that he despises; her refusal shows him that he has destroyed part of her faith. Though her death may be a small mercy, it is not easy in the sense that Aschenbach’s death was easy. Michel details Marceline’s final night, which is both physically and emotionally painful.

Michel defends his actions to his friends by saying that before he came to Africa, he had “a great stability of thought” (Gide 157) which could not survive “this climate” (Gide 157). He lives alone, save for a young boy who brings him his food and is “faithful as a dog” (Gide 158) and wants to rid himself of his fortune, but he admits that it is perhaps Ali, the boy, who keeps him in Africa. Michel loses control of his life while he is ill, but never regains the control that he once had. Michel survives because, according to Golden, he is able to embrace “the wholeness implied by his ability to be Dionysian as well as Apollonian, emotional and sensual as well as intellectual – Michel has experiences unknown to his erstwhile scholarly persona” (Golden 192). Unable to reconcile his ever-changing feelings on life, he never regains his footing, either in Africa or in Europe. Illness, despite its seemingly fleeting nature, leaves a permanent mark that can never be erased.
Conclusion:

Mann and Gide both send their protagonists abroad in order to discover the falseness of their European lives. A conjunction exists between the “symptoms” of foreign travel and of illness. Brennan argues that *dépaysement* – the state of being in a foreign, unfamiliar country – leads to a new sense of freedom for the protagonists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but few of these men can truly claim to be free after their liberating experiences abroad because they still lack mobility at the end of their novels. He links “a new susceptibility to the erotic” (Brennan 232) with being in a new country, not with illness, but these works show that illness can also be a catalyst for the discovery of the erotic. Once the shock of being in a new place eases, Brennan believes that displaced protagonists become aware of the capacity for freedom that does not exist in their homelands; they have been freed from the restrictions and expectations of their society (232). Aschenbach and Michel both fit well into this model because of the expectations of their careers and, in Michel’s case, family obligations. However, simple *dépaysement* does not explain the transformation that Aschenbach and Michel experience: illness is an essential part of this equation, because until they are threatened with disease, no internal changes take place. Brennan is on target, though, when he notes that though Michel attains and recognizes his freedom, “he does not know what to do with it” (233). Once Michel is able to achieve freedom from his responsibilities – after the death of his wife – Brennan says that Michel still lacks mobility and therefore never truly escapes from the binds of society (233). With freedom but no mobility, Michel will remain in a solitary purgatory until he can fully embrace either living completely apart from French society or completely within it, and it was his bout
with tuberculosis that made Michel aware that he wanted more from life than what he already had.

Aschenbach never faces the problem of mobility after illness because he realizes that it would be impossible to continue his life now that he has embraced his sensual side. He knows that what he feels for Tadzio is wrong, just as it was wrong not to warn Tadzio’s family of the impending epidemic. As Aschenbach allows himself to continue on this path of bad choices, he knows too that he will eventually succumb to the cholera epidemic. Based on these events, *Death in Venice* is Mann’s attempt to recapture the classical explanation for disease, which allows Aschenbach to be absolved of his sins through disease. Aschenbach’s death is a blessing for him because he will never be able to live.

Michel, on the other hand, is not being punished by his illness, so his disease does not result in any sort of absolution. The tuberculosis reveals a side of him that already existed but was hidden, as was typically thought about tuberculosis in the nineteenth century. As Aschenbach does, Michel embraces his newfound emotions, but because he has more ties to the society he now loathes than Aschenbach did, Michel faces a more difficult task in trying to live his life in a way that will make him happy.

For Gide and Mann, illness is an inevitable conclusion to an unbalanced life. Both Aschenbach and Michel are physically weak and somewhat sickly in their everyday lives, in which they give their whole being to the pursuit of intellectual goals at the expense of relationships, passion, and sensuality. When they travel to a foreign country, they become more vulnerable not only to illnesses brought by foreign climates, but also to customs that run contrary to the values imposed on them by their own society. It is no coincidence that both of these men must travel abroad to fall ill and experience a change of heart. Being abroad forces one to give
up the life that one is accustomed to and experience new things; illness is an extension of this loss of control. As Michel and Aschenbach embrace their newfound desires for the pleasures of the sensual, including the admiration of healthy, attractive young men, their lives remain unbalanced because they cast off the values that they have grown up with, giving illness a chance to take hold in their systems. Rather than making illness fully a punishment, though, Mann and Gide both use illness as an opportunity for their protagonists to live their lives more fully, embracing their sensual and passionate sides. Gide offers an ambiguous solution, leaving the reader wondering if a sensual life is worth the cost if it means losing everything that one held dear before falling sick, while Mann has decided that this sort of imbalance cannot be sustained, so his character dies before he has to attempt either to return to his previous life or start a new way of living. Susan Sontag writes that “illness is the nightside of life, a more onerous citizenship” (Sontag 3); in the case of Mann and Gide, illness is a privilege that allows the sufferer to understand a new side of life, but it is also a curse that their healthy peers cannot comprehend and that leads to isolation.
Works Cited


