Mirrors of Monstrosity: The Representation of the Outcast in Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* and *Death in Venice*

Mirrors of Monstrosity: The Representation of the Outcast in Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* and *Death in Venice*

By

Andrew Gavin

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Supervisor: Dr Jennifer McCay

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Abstract

The figure of the monster is at the heart of Benjamin Britten's operas. By orchestrating and dramatizing various outcast figures from the world of literature, Britten and his librettists have illustrated that the monster is uncomfortably close to common human experience in our modern world. This dissertation seeks to combine the sociological and philosophical definitions of monstrosity with an analysis of dramatic and musical elements of Benjamin Britten's first and last major operatic works, *Peter Grimes* and *Death in Venice*. This will establish the ways in which the monstrous characters found therein raise questions about the formation of social parameters regarding innocence and experience, the fragility and lamentable nature of the outcast, and the ways in which monsters function as vital foils to modern society.

Introduction

During his time in America in the 1930s Benjamin Britten began to articulate expressions of disenfranchisement and alienation from the status quo in song cycles such as *On This Island* and *Our Hunting Fathers.* In these works, the composer explores the creative energies that exist in the liminal space between political and sexual tensions. This form of musical expression represented quite a significant change for the composer, who was discovering new compositional energies under the tutelage of W. H. Auden. As Britten was a homosexual and a contentious objector to the war, he was not able to artistically flourish in his home country during the prelude and eventual outbreak of World War II. In the libretto of the 1941 'American' operetta *Paul Bunyan* Auden described the American Eden as:

> A forest full of innocent beasts. There are none who blush at the memory of an ancient folly, none who hide beneath dyed fabrics a malicious heart.[1]

The ideal of America as a 'new' world that was tolerant of difference and nurturing of creativity was shared by many European artists who moved there. Offering an artistic 'blank slate' to artists like Britten, America offered the composer a way to escape the parochial nature of the perceived English conservative mind set and to establish a new musical idiom for himself. The idea that nationality carries with it the weight of national transgressions is very important for the understanding of Britten's compositional mind set. These national transgressions range from colonialism to religious intolerance and constitute an identity that could be rejected by moving to America. It will become apparent that Britten was unwilling, or perhaps simply unable, to extricate himself from England as the imaginary landscape in which his art

[1] Herbert, David (ed.), *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: The Complete Librettos Illustrated with Designs of the First Productions*, (The Herbert Press, London: 1989).

flourished, and that the imagined weight of national guilt gave rise to the creation of several operatic characters who, while engaging and well-rounded, represented a new form of monstrosity on the operatic stage.

Auden encouraged Britten to embrace his sexuality and political tendencies in a more honest and apparent way in his art. This is manifested in a letter that Auden penned to Britten in 1942 that should be considered at length, as it establishes the context under which Britten composed some of his finest work:

> As you know I think you [are] the white hope of music; for this reason I am more critical of you than of anybody else, and I think I know something about the dangers that beset you as a man and as an artist because they are my own.
>
> Goodness and Beauty are the results of a perfect balance between Order and Chaos, Bohemianism and Bourgeois Convention.
>
> Bohemian chaos alone ends in a mad jumble of beautiful scraps; Bourgeois convention alone ends in large unfeeling corpses…
>
> For middle class Englishmen like you and me, the danger is of course the second. Your attraction to thin-as-a-board juveniles, i.e. to the sexless and innocent, is a symptom of this. And I am certain too that it is your denial and evasion of the attractions and demands of disorder that is responsible for your attacks of ill-health, i.e. sickness is your substitute for the bohemian.
>
> Wherever you go you are and probably always will be surrounded by people who adore you, nurse you, and praise everything that you do. […] Up to a certain point this is fine for you, but beware. You see, Benjy dear, you are always tempted to make things too easy for yourself in this way, i.e. to build yourself a warm nest of love (of course when you get it you find it a little stifling) by playing the lovable talented little boy.

> If you are to develop into your full stature, you will have to think, to suffer, and to make others suffer, in ways which are totally strange to you at present, and against every conscious value that you have; i.e. you will have to be able to say what you never yet have had the right to say – God. I'm a shit.
>
> This is all expressed very muddle-headedly, but try and not misunderstand it, and believe that it is only my love and admiration for you that makes me say it.[2]

This letter, among others, is part of what ultimately contributed to the breakdown of the friendship between Auden and Britten, but Auden had identified an aspect of Britten's character that the composer was initially unwilling to explore. Britten returned to England in 1942 with Peter Pears and, paradoxically, it was here that he found a way of expressing his social and political beliefs through opera. Claire Seymour writes about Britten's attraction to the medium of opera, saying that:

> A song is essentially a self-contained experience where the composer responds to a pre-existing and unrelated poetic idea. In contrast, the composer of opera is more intimately involved in the text, which he interprets and re-presents and the musical score is the embodiment of this personal involvement. Indeed, an opera libretto may positively require such interaction before it can be fully realised in dramatic terms.[3]

The malleability of opera as a compositional form allowed Britten to really establish his own interpretation of a text as a fully realised, dramatic composition. Exploring literary characters in this way enabled Britten and his librettists to expand on elements of those characters which would otherwise have remained sublimated in the text. As this dissertation unfolds, it will become apparent that Britten had a very particular way of representing his protagonists as pitiable and fragile, but also repulsive and monstrous. The dichotomy that exists in a character of this nature requires the audience to look outside of the normative parameters for observing

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[2] Mitchell, Donald and Philip Reed (eds.), *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten 1913-1976*, vol.2 (Faber & Faber, London: 1991), 1015-16.

[3] Seymour, Claire, *The Operas of Britten: Expression and Evasion*, (The Boydell Press, Woodbridge: 2004), 3.

an opera and to turn their gaze inward. Britten's monstrous protagonists are always the product of their intolerant societies, which the observer themselves is implicit in the construction of. Britten quite quickly identified opera as the most immediate way to communicate the plight of these operatic monsters who were close to his own sensibilities, and he was continually occupied with operatic composition until his death in 1976.

No longer attached to Auden's artistic circle, Britten found a way of exploring the issues that Auden had identified in him as an artist. Beginning with the composition of *Peter Grimes* and concluding with *Death in Venice*, Britten established characters and soundscapes that addressed the nature of the outcast from society and how one can reconcile oneself, with varying degrees of success, with an often cruel and intolerant society. Because Britten found it difficult to confront the issues Auden had identified in his own personal life, he instead 'dramatised them in his music, searching for a metaphoric utopia, a magical place where his sexuality and identity could be powerfully redefined'.[4] The idea of seeking a 'metaphoric utopia' illustrates the outcast nature of many of Britten's operatic protagonists. Britten seems to have been drawn to literary figures who are on the periphery of their own literary worlds who suffer to varying degrees because of their manifest difference from society. Seymour writes:

> A superficial examination of Britten's librettos reveals the obvious existence of a number of recurring themes – 'innocence', pacifism, social oppression, death – and symbols – the sea, the 'outsider', pacifism, social oppression, death – and diversity of the source texts chosen for operatic setting and would suggest that the chosen texts were in some way in harmony with the sensibilities of the composer, that they stimulated his imagination and allowed his personality to blend with the source.[5]

[4] Seymour, 3.
[5] Ibid. 5.

Britten's protagonists are constituted as socially divergent from their narrative worlds, which generally leads to their persecution. These socially 'unacceptable' characters emphasise the lack of self-reflexivity that their societies possess and the extent to which difference will not be tolerated if it compromises the societal norm.

In order to assess the ways in which Britten's operas represent and dramatically develop the outcast figure, this dissertation will be divided into three sections. The first section will consider the ways in which the figure of the monster is societally and philosophically constructed outside of the world of opera. Having established these parameters, it will then be necessary to examine the libretti of the operas and the literary texts upon which they are based. Finally, this dissertation will examine how some of the dramatic and musical elements of *Peter Grimes* and *Death in Venice* illustrate Britten's unique dramatic take on the role of the monster as an outcast figure in modern opera. The aim of this work is to assess the ways in which Benjamin Britten's first and last major operatic works illustrate the role of the monster as a central figure of modern society who is at once on the periphery of, and central to, an understanding of how society functions.

Chapter 1: The Making of a Monster

I. The Hero and the Monster

Monstrosity comes in many forms and is subject to constant cultural revision, but it can be characterised as an assumption that if there is some element of society which is misunderstood and feared then it can be transmuted into something monstrous. These monsters are a part of society that create a common ground of 'otherness' against which society can rationalise fear and hatred. Monsters have always had an imaginative function in society, as they are a convenient way of drawing attention away from the problems that manifest within a given society. In *Monstrosity from the Inside Out* Teresa Cutler-Broyles and Marko Teodorski write that,

> Such is the nature of the relationship between society and monsters that the liminal space between *us* and *them* is both essential and alluring. Drawn to that space as though to their own reflection, societies can't help but hope for a fleeting glimpse, something to get the heart racing and to reassure themselves that what's [sic] out there is far more frightening than what's inside; the *status quo* need not change so long as the shadowy creatures lurking on the other side draw the gaze.[6]

For the world of opera, monsters provide a musical vantage on moral corruption, physical deformity and other perceptions of otherness. The stereotype of opera is the tragic or happy ending; either the soprano kills herself and everyone is inconsolable or the soprano and the tenor get married, thwarting the bass/ baritone. These types of ending re-establish a conservative world order that is contingent with an enlightenment style of thinking that has persisted since the classical era. When we look at the operas of Britten, however, it is clear that he has no interest in a conservative world order. Britten ultimately achieves this by

[6] Cutler-Broyles, Teresa, Marko Teodorski, ed., *Monstrosity From the Inside Out*, (Inter-Disciplinary Press, Oxford: 2014), i.

experimenting with the nature of the hero and the nature of the monster in dramatic representation, ultimately fudging the lines between the two. Before assessing how Britten achieves this new kind of liminal operatic protagonist, it will first be necessary to define what we mean when using the term 'monster'.

Towards the end of his seminal book on the formation of the figure of the hero in literature, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* Joseph Campbell laments what he perceives to be the modern tendency to shrug off the importance of mythological pretexts as a rationale for understanding the human being in the modern day.

> For the democratic ideal of the self-determining individual, the invention of the power-driven machine, and the development of the scientific method of research have so transformed human life that the long-inherited, timeless universe of symbols has collapsed. In the fateful, epoch-announcing words of Nietzsche's Zarathustra: "Dead are all the gods." One knows the tale; it has been told a thousand ways. It is the hero-cycle of the modern age, the wonder-story of mankind's coming to maturity. The spell of the past, the bondage of tradition, was shattered with sure and mighty strokes. The dream-web of myth fell away; the mind opened to full waking consciousness; and modern man emerged from ancient ignorance, like a butterfly from its cocoon, or like the sun at dawn from the womb of mother night.[7]

For Campbell, there is nothing more fundamental to process understanding humanity than to understand antecedent mythologies as a source from which all grand narratives of life have come, and to which they all eventually revert. In many of the examples that Campbell uses throughout his work, it is in the conflict between the figure of the hero and the figure of the monster that, resulting in the victory of the hero, restores a form of order to the world in which

[7] Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* (New World Library, Novato: 2008, 1949), 333-334.

they dwell. The notion that a hero is a virtuous and just character, while a monster functions merely as an obstacle to the hero underpins almost all hero narratives in some shape or form. With the elimination of the monster the hero is free to progress on his journey, which is a vicarious metaphor for the advancement of humanity. In 'Interpreting the Variorum' Stanley Fish posits the idea of interpretative communities that the formal properties of literary works exist only as they are activated by constituent communities of readers. By this rationale, literature, and, by extension, art in general, is simultaneously a form of production and a form of consumption at one. Fish writes that 'both the stability of interpretation among readers and the variety of interpretation in the career of a single reader would seem to argue for the existence of something independent of and prior to interpretive acts, something which produces them.'[8] By applying Fish's critical rationale to the role of the hero in a story, for example, a community of readers can agree, in a sense, that it is the natural course of the hero's tale to eliminate the monster and move on to achieving his goals. The hero functions as the representative of what is good and admirable in a society, while the monster represents all that is negative and can be overcome. However, Fish's arguments also undermine the hegemony of any such normative position. In this sense the perception of what is 'right' or 'just' in society is simply a social contract that is formed linguistically. In a later work that further develops his reader response criticism, Fish quotes a passage from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*:

> The right thing in speaking really is that we should be satisfied not to annoy our hearers, without trying to delight them: we ought in fairness to fight our case with no help beyond the bare facts: nothing, therefore, should matter except the proof of those facts. Still, as has been said, other things affect the result considerably, owing to the defects of our hearers.[9]

[8] Fish, Stanley, 'Interpretive Communities', *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2004), 217.

[9] Fish, Stanley, 'Not so much a Teaching as an Intangling', Literary *Theory: An Anthology*, (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford: 2004), 195.

It is the defects that Aristotle was referring to which, in this case, contribute to the construction of the hero and the monster. It is these idiosyncratic defects of society that go towards the construction of the 'other', or in this case, the monster.

The word 'monster' has its etymological root in the Latin word 'monstrare', which means both to show and also to warn or advise.[10] The word itself is linguistically formulated on the basis of constructing otherness, as being separate from and inferior to normality. In his book *The Horrid Looking Glass,* Paul L. Yoder contends that the monster is construction of otherness, an embodiment of what society is afraid to perceive within itself. He writes:

> While we find a commonality in this *otherness,* [sic] we also discover time again, that the monster lurking in shadow, concealed in literal darkness or simply within the isolation of language, suggests the monster as one onto which we are free to project the most distorted and most unhuman features. We turn what we cannot fully see or articulate into the antithesis of whom or what we perceive ourselves to be. So the monster must remain confined, and we must not look upon its form lest we turn to stone in the sight of Medusa or blow away as salt dust after glimpsing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra.[11]

The hero figure exists in direct opposition to this monstrous construction and is as much an idealised expression of humanity as monstrosity is a debased one. Yoder contends that "the greatest horror of the monster is not that it stands apart, but that once we pull it from the shadow of our own projected imagination; we discover that the monster we fear is also bound to our own mirror image. To look at the monster, to name that what must never be named, is to look upon a reflection and embrace a part of our nature we do not wish to see."[12] The binary juxtaposition of the monster and hero is necessarily an arbitrary one if the two operate on the

[10] http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/monster

[11] Yoder, Paul L., Peter Mario Kreuter, ed., *The Horrid Looking Glass,* (Inter-Disciplinary Press, Oxford: 2011), i.

[12] Ibid.

same continuum. What remains in flux, though, is the extent to which the protagonist may be identified as a hero or a monster in their own story. On the issue of constituting such a protagonist, Alexa Wright says that "transgressive bodies directly and clearly illustrate the main historical purpose of human monsters – that is, to provide a tangible site for exploring the problem of what constitutes acceptable human identity."[13] Monsters in fictional narratives are commonly represented in some way as visually repulsive or otherwise different from conventional humanity. The act of stripping this difference away from the monstrous figure illuminates the shortcomings of the culture that has produced the monster. In reality, the production of the hero and the monster is simply an allegory for illustrating what a culture is most concerned about hiding or repressing from its own consciousness.

II. Necessary Monstrosity

If the hero represents a world-order that is rational and just, then the monster serves to pose a potent threat to that world-order. In typical tales of heroic endeavour, the hero overcomes the monster through various methods of cunning, bravery and strength in order to reassert the dominance of the 'common good'. Returning to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell suggests that the struggle of the hero against such a monster is contingent with the world today and resonates as much with life today as it did in antiquity. While certain elements of this grand narrative theory are relevant in modernity, it is entirely possible the roles of the hero and the monster have been incorrectly assigned as a result of the kinds interpretive communities that Fish illustrates. As both producers and consumers of culture, interpretive communities will

[13] Wright, Alexa, *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture,* (I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, London: 2013), 1.

naturally seek and produce narratives that affirm the societal norm. Within this binary distinction the hero and the monster are opposing figures who are destined to fight each other in some grand allegorical fashion. It is also the case, however, that the hero can have elements of the monster in their personality, or that the monster and hero are at once the same figure. As will become apparent from the interrogation of Britten's first and last operas, whether or not someone is considered to be a hero or a monster depends largely on the point of view of who is perceiving and judging them.

Such deliberate ambiguity of character has always existed in opera to a certain extent, looking as far back as Monteverdi's Nerone in 'L'incoronazione di Poppea', for example, one sees an unstable tyrant who espouses all of the romantic virtues of love, but is capable of despicable acts of violence and selfishness. Mozart's 'Don Giovanni' presents the perfect example of an unrepentant rogue who is at the same time alluring and despicable; a truly anti-heroic pícaro. While characters like Nerone and the Don have monstrous elements, they are generally more appealing than they are repulsive. The monsters created by a composer like Benjamin Britten in his operas are very different. Rather than presenting literary or historical allegories as operatic characters, Britten's characters may been seen as more politically charged and, indeed, troubling. Arnold Whittall writes that 'when artistic analogies for political beliefs are sought in the modernist era, ambiguities involving what is crucial and what is inessential are sure to result.'[14] The ambiguities that Whittall is talking about may be seen very clearly in Britten's operatic works. Britten's contentious objection to the war is well documented, as are his feelings of being an outsider within his own community. The ambiguities of his operatic works arise in the form of artistic intention and the troubled nature of his protagonists. Many critics

[14] Whittall, Arnold, *Exploring Twentieth-Century Music: Tradition and Innovation,* (CUP, Cambridge: 2003), 109.

have sought to relate the troubled nature of Britten's operatic characters to his own life experiences. In the introduction to his monograph on Britten, Paul Kildea marks a speech by Conservative MP Major Sir Jocelyn Lucas made in the Summer of 1940 where he asked "whether British citizens of military age, such as Mr. W.H. Auden and Mr. Christopher Isherwood, who have gone to the United States and expressed their determination not to return to this country until the war is over, will be summoned back for registration and calling up, in view of the fact that they are seeking refuge abroad?"[15] Britten was one of the British citizens that inspired this speech which was, as Kildea puts it, 'a distillation of the conflict between the Establishment and its critics that had grown out of war, the Depression and the disillusionment and decadence of the 1920s.'[16] Kildea maintains that it was this institutional animosity towards his pacifist lifestyle that drove Britten to write Peter Grimes, a self-exposing allegory about a man who is rejected by his community. However, while there may be several elements of this opera and others that point to Britten's personal life, there is also a very complex and sophisticated allegory being drawn by the composer of modern living in Britain at the time. As we begin to examine Britten's operatic opus we see that there are several uncomfortable truths to be uncovered that do not just relate to the composer's own life experiences. It becomes apparent, rather, that as we observe the protagonists of his works that the monstrous characteristics that they possess are mirrored in our own modern lives. Relating Britten's operatic works back to the critical theories of Fish, the culture that we are all implicit in the production and consumption of is responsible for the construction of Britten's monsters.

[15] Kildea, Paul, *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century*, (Allen Lane, London: 2013), 1-2.
[16] Ibid.

Chapter 2: Monstrous Texts, Monstrous Libretti

Having outlined a cultural context for identification of monsters in society, this dissertation will now asses if these monsters are to be found within two of Benjamin Britten's operas, *Peter Grimes* and *Death in Venice* in the form of the outcast protagonist. If monsters are culturally defined and created, then Britten very cleverly creates operatic characters who function as outcasts within their own society and as counterbalances to the prevailing conservative societies from which they grow. This chapter is in two sections, first dealing with George Crabbe's *The Borough* and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* as works of literature in their own right, and second with the libretti which were based on these texts.

I. Grimes and Aschenbach as Literary Monsters

George Crabbe's *The Borough,* published in 1810, consists of a series of twenty-four poems, arranged in the form of a collection letters, constructed in heroic couplets. The poems all deal with various aspects of rural life in the early nineteenth century in Britain and are universally bleak and brutish in their depiction of human existence. Peter Grimes appears in the twenty-second letter and remains the most acclaimed poem of the work. Francis Jeffrey championed Crabbe as the first great 'satirist of low life,' a poet whose primary objective was to describe 'the depraved, the abject, diseased and neglected' in the *Edinburgh Review*.[17] In his essay 'On

[17] Bewell, Alan, 'On the Margin of sea and society: Peter Grimes and Romantic Naturalism', in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 74, no. 2, spring 2005, 637.

the Margin of Sea and Society: Peter Grimes and Romantic Naturalism', Alan Bewell draws a relation between Crabbe's position as a botanist and his construction of the Borough, and of Grimes. 'There is a deep sense in his work that people are products of their social and natural environments'.[18] Bewell goes on to comment on the inhospitable nature of the world in which he situates his characters, 'Crabbe's world is not the fertile pastoral agricultural landscapes of a Constable, or the idyllic seclusion of Wordsworth's Lake District, but the landscape of margins – the beach, the fen, the wastelands. He is, as George Gilfillan deemed him, 'the poet of the waste places of Creation'. His focus is not on rich croplands, but on those places where it is difficult to put down roots'.[19] This inability for Crabbe's characters to put down roots shows a disunity of humans and nature, which earned him the title of the least 'romantic' of the romantic poets. In 'The Village' we see the kinds of hostile environments that Crabbe set his poems in:

> Lo! Where the heath, with withering brake grown o'er,
>
> Lends the light turf that warms the neighbouring poor;
>
> From thence a length of burning sand appears,
>
> Where the thin harvest waves its wither'd ears;
>
> Rank weeds, that every art and care defy,
>
> Reign o'er the land, and rob the blighted rye:
>
> There thistles stretch their prickly arms afar,
>
> And to the ragged infant threaten war;
>
> There poppies nodding, mock the hope of toil;

[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

There the blue bugloss paints the sterile soil;

Hardy and high, above the slender sheaf,

The slimy mallow waves her silky leaf;

O'er the young shoot the charlock throws a shade,

And clasping tares cling round the sickly blade;

With mingled tints the rock coasts abound,

And a sad splendour vainly shines around. ('The Village,' 1:63-78)[20]

There is a mock grandeur to Crabbe's description of nature here. There is very little nuance to the relationship of nature and humanity here. The image of the thistles that constantly threaten war on children is indicative of the lack of symbiosis that Crabbe sees between humanity and the rural landscape, effectively a counterbalance of the standard romantic view of humanity thriving within nature, as can be seen in the works of Wordsworth or Blake. Crabbe continues:

Here joyless roam a wild amphibious race,

With sullen woe display'd in every face;

Who, far from civil arts and social fly,

And scowl at strangers with suspicious eye. ('The Village,' 1:85-88)[21]

[20] http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173297
[21] Ibid.

In the above passage, Crabbe constructs humanity as an uncivilised mass that is just as wild as the natural world in which it finds itself. Civility does not feature particularly highly on the list of priorities for such a group. Bewell writes that, 'in Crabbe's writing, ugliness often prevails over beauty, and pathos often struggles with disgust. There is often expressed a depth of unalleviated suffering and pain that may ultimately be too real, too grim for poetry to survive contact with it. […] Pleasure and revulsion are close bedfellows in Crabbe's poetry, and he seems fascinated by ugliness as having its own aesthetic merits outside of the categories established by the norms of beauty'.[22] Out of this misshapen landscape comes a society that is equally misshapen in terms of its moral compass. In such a community one must ascribe to a single set of societal values or be viewed as an outcast. From this stifling poetic landscape emerges Peter Grimes, the fisherman.

Peter Grimes is in many ways the human manifestation of a cruel and vicious landscape. He is utterly brutish and selfish, with an insatiable need to control others. The way in which Crabbe constructs the character demonstrates the extent to which Grimes may be viewed as less of a human being and more like an amphibious creature that crawled out of the landscape into a human setting.

> With greedy eye he look'd on all he saw,
>
> He knew not justice, and he laughed at Law;
>
> On all he mark'd he stretch'd his ready Hand;
>
> He fish'd by Water and he filch'd by land.
>
> […]

[22] Bewell, 638-639.

…no success could please his cruel Soul,

He wish'd for One to trouble and control;

He wanted some obedient Boy to stand

And bear the blow of his outrageous hand;

And hop'd to find in some propitious hour

A feeling Creature subject to his power. ('Peter Grimes', 40-58)[23]

Three young boys are placed in Grimes care to be his apprentices, all of whom eventually die as a result of his negligence and selfishness. He is denied further access to apprentices by the Borough and becomes an outcast from society. The man who has exercised a sadistic control over his apprentices is now left to dwell in a societally enforced purgatory.

Alone he row'd his boat, alone he cast

His nets beside, or made his anchor fast;

To hold a Rope or a Curse was none, –

He toil'd and rail'd; he groan'd and swore alone. ('Peter Grimes', 167-170)[24]

Grimes is effectively cut adrift in a watery limbo where he is severed from the brutish 'grace' of the borough and is beyond the remit of Christian grace, which the inhabitants of the Borough espouse. The reader is not encouraged to sympathise with Grimes' position, as if he were some

[23] Crabbe, *Peter Grimes*, in *The New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse*, Jerome J. McGann ed., (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 1993), 284.

[24] Ibid.

kind of Byronic hero, but rather the reader is encouraged to pity what a terrible waste of life Grimes represents. Grimes' life eventually ends in madness, passing away at the local alms house with neither the sympathy of the borough or of nature. His life ends even outside of the grace of God. The Grimes of Crabbe's poem is a hateful creature who is punished in the most extreme way that the borough, through enforced loneliness. This highlights the powerful nature of the collective will when it is bent towards the destruction of the individual.

Britten's own take on the story of Peter Grimes the fisherman is markedly different in intention from Crabbe's. Britten's first introduction to the poetry of George Crabbe and the character of Grimes came via the novelist and critic E.M. Forster by way of a radio talk printed in an issue of the *Listener* in 1941. Although Britten was already living in California by this time, Crabbe's poetry intrigued him, partly because he described a landscape reminiscent of his own native Suffolk. Britten writes that: '[I had] such a feeling of nostalgia for Suffolk, where I had always lived, that I searched for a copy of [Crabbe's] works, and made a beginning with *The Borough'*.[25] It is indicative of the profound effect that Crabbe's poetry had on the composer to note that when Britten returned to England he eventually settled in Aldeburgh, which was Crabbe's hometown. It is apparent from the outset that Crabbe's Grimes and Britten's Grimes are two very different characters. While the former is reputed to represent the darkest depths to which a morally weak society can sink, the latter is a tragic hero who is rejected by society because he does not fit in to an ascribed social category. Britten's Grimes is identified as 'sensitive, touched by pity, stung by remorse, and corrected by shame', while E.M. Forster writes that Crabbe's narrative 'satirises but does not judge' society.[26] Unfortunately, neither of these readings of Grimes are flexible enough when it comes to unpacking the character of

[25] Bewell, 636.
[26] Seymour, 41.

Grimes. Both realisations of the character are more nuanced than these would suggest, with Crabbe's poem effacing a very subtle, yet present, critique of the apprentice system in rural villages and, in the latter part of the poem, criticising the way in which the mentally ill and infirmed are treated by an overly cruel town. Similarly, Britten's Grimes represents a lot more than just a tragic hero who is cast out by an uncaring society. The opera illustrates a very complicated relationship that Grimes has with the society that hates him so much. Britten's Grimes is disdainful of the people in the village, and yet he has an ardent desire to belong to society and to be accepted as a respectable man. An important indicator for the comparison of the operatic Grimes with the literary Grimes comes from an interview that Peter Pears gave to the *Radio Times* in 1946:

> In the opera, the Borough is very much the same as Crabbe's Borough […] Peter Grimes himself, on the other hand, is a more complicated character and considerably removed from the desperado of the poem. Grimes is not a hero nor is he an operatic villain. He is not a sadist nor a demonic character, and the music quite clearly shows that. He is very much of an ordinary weak person who, being at odds with the society in which he finds himself, tries to overcome it and, in doing so, offends against the conventional code, is classed by society as a criminal, and destroyed as such. Here are plenty of Grimses [sic] around, still I think![27]

Pears' account of the character of Grimes posits that he is not, in fact, at fault for the death of his apprentices and that he is instead an everyman. While this is still a somewhat reductive assertion of Grimes' identity, it does hint at something that is constantly being scrutinised throughout the narrative of the opera, which is the role of the protagonist in a modern opera.

While Pears may contend that Grimes is simply an unfortunate character, there is no denying that the brutality with which he treats his young apprentice is harrowing, nor the suspicion the

[27] Seymour, 41.

surrounds his whole life in the borough. The cruel Peter Grimes of the opera is no less repulsive than the Grimes of the poem, although his monstrosity is tempered by the redeeming qualities of Ellen Orford. There are two elements that mark Grimes out as a monster in his society: his brutal mistreatment of his apprentices and his attempts to become a respected citizen of the society that has rejected him so resolutely. He is painfully inarticulate, and his inability to express himself adequately leads to frustration, which in turn manifests itself into cruel violence visited on his apprentices. Clair Seymour writes that 'Grimes is only semi-articulate: despite his sporadic visionary outbursts it is his inability to adequately express his desires which leads to his defeat at the hands of the Borough'.[28]

In contrast to Crabbe's poem, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* does not generate its protagonist from an inhospitable physical landscape, but rather uses a jaded and stifled artistic environment as the impetus for the events of the story. Mann's novella is much more philosophical and intertextual in nature than Crabbe's poem, but in essence it also constructs a world which rejects difference of any kind. While Grimes is rejected by a society that cannot come to terms with his difference, Gustav von Aschenbach, the writer, rejects all form of artistic passion which would jeopardise the value he places on form when it comes to creativity. Upon seeing a foreigner propped up against a graveyard wall, Aschenbach becomes overwhelmed with a desire to travel abroad to help with his creative process while writing. Aschenbach's attitude towards creativity in the early part of the novel is summed up in the following passage:

> Perfection, of course, was something which even as a young man he had come to see as the innermost essence of talent, and for its sake he had curbed and cooled his feelings; for he knew that feeling is apt to be contented with high-spirited approximations and with work that falls short of supreme excellence.

[28] Seymour, 10.

> Could it be that the enslaved emotion was now avenging itself by deserting him, by refusing from now on to bear his art on its wings, by taking with it all his joy in words, all his appetite for the beauty of form?[29]

Aschenbach's emphasis on form as the primary quality of beauty establishes the philosophical quandary that rests at the heart of the novella. Aschenbach sees himself as something of an apostle of Apollo, the Greek god of reason and form. This focus on reasoned art has resulted in the stagnation of his artistic output, however. The reticence with which Aschenbach treats passion is indicative of his position as a celebrated writer within a conservative society. The majority of what ails Aschenbach is, ostensibly, self-imposed confinement to a rigid view of the world and of art in general. Eugene McNamara writes in his article '"Death in Venice": The Disguised Self' that:

> Mann seems to say that no one can live a splintered existence. A human being is not an angel; neither is he completely an animal. Being both spirit and matter, he must somehow reconcile these two diverse natures and live in harmony with them. Failure to do so ends in destruction of the self.[30]

It is this destruction of the self that we see befall Aschenbach as he travels to Venice, constantly meeting repulsive figures on his travels, such as the young-old horror on the ship, the gondolier, the hotel manager and others who all bear striking resemblances to the stranger he saw leaning against the graveyard wall in Munich. Through the narrative device of the oppressive sirocco and the bizarrely obscure threat of the encroaching cholera in Venice we see Aschenbach's ordered view of the world come apart at the seams as he gives into the bacchantic freedom which is so antiphonal to his own overly-reasoned world. Aschenbach's desire to commune with the ideals of beauty he perceives in Tadzio leads him to become a young-old horror in his

[29] Mann, Thomas, *Death in Venice,* 201

[30] McNamara, Eugene, '"Death in Venice": The Disguised Self', *College English*, Vol. 24, No. 3, Dec., 1962, 233.

own right; he is little more than a pariah in a foreign land that is progressively succumbing to illness, which is his eventual undoing.

Another reading of the text places great emphasis on the timeframe in which the story takes place. The events of the novella take place directly before the outbreak of the First World War. The novella begins with the words:

> On a spring afternoon in 19--, the year in which for months on end so grave a threat seemed to hang over the peace of Europe, Gustav Aschenbach […] had set out from his apartment on the Prinzregentenstrasse in Munich to take a walk of some length by himself.[31]

In this opening sentence Mann achieves something remarkable, he orientates Aschenbach at the very crux of a world on the brink of collapse from the outset. It is, of course, the external world which is under the threat of war, but this is mirrored exactly in Aschenbach's own life later in the text as the cholera becomes a grave threat that looms over his own conservative life and threatens to change him, and the world in which he lives, forever. The monstrous character of Aschenbach is painted against a backdrop of a world which is becoming unrecognisable in its monstrosity, much like the world of Grimes in *The Borough.* Claire Seymour writes about the novella that:

> Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* is a tapestry of unnamed secrets: sickness, sexuality, deviancy and danger are closeted in its pages, concealed by silence, self-delusion and self-denial yet simultaneously disclosed through Mann's symbolic patterns and ironic method.[32]

This secretive mode that is so apparent in Mann's novel is key for understanding Aschenbach as a monstrous figure. While he is a respected novelist in his own society, he harbours a dark

[31] Mann, *Death in Venice*, 197.
[32] Seymour, 296.

secret which gnaws at him throughout the story and eventually manifests itself into the cholera that develops alongside his own mounting obsession, eventually ending his life.

Having examined elements of the source material on which Britten's first and last operas were based, it will now be necessary to look at the process and ideologies that went into the construction of the libretti of these two pieces.

II. Grimes and Aschenbach in the Libretti

The libretti of Montagu Slater and Myfanwy Piper make several alterations to the original texts for dramatic and operatic reasons which, in conjunction with the music of Britten, create a new dramatic representation of the representation of different modes of monstrosity on the operatic stage. The process of adapting the literary characters of Peter Grimes and Gustav von Aschenbach to the operatic stage was undertaken by Montagu Slater and Myfanwy Piper respectively. The presentation of these characters in a dramatized setting begets a unique set of challenges to the librettist. Grimes and Aschenbach are largely silent characters in their respective texts, with the reader relying largely on omniscient narrator, for *The Borough,* and introspective narrative, for *Death in Venice,* as the primary methods of exposition. It would be incredibly difficult to set down a libretto for a piece in which the protagonist was entirely silent, and so Both Grimes and Aschenbach have quite a lot to say as a way of substituting the need for third or first person description with a more immediate form of exegesis. A problem with the setting of *The Borough* was, of course, the length of the piece and the relative obscurity of Grimes as character who appears quite far into the poem. Similarly with *Death in Venice* it would be almost impossible to tell the story of Mann's novel without having Aschenbach in

almost every scene, which places an incredibly difficult task on the part of the singer. This section of the dissertation will deal with how Britten and his librettists dealt with these unique challenges and the ways in which alterations to the source texts contributed to the construction of operatic monsters.

Before Montagu Slater began work on the libretto of *Peter Grimes,* Peter Pears had already begun to construct an operatic narrative for the piece as early as 1942.[33] This version of the libretto constituted the basic shape of the narrative as it remained for the remainder of the compositional process. In this version of the libretto, the piece begins with Grimes attending a trial for the negligent death of his apprentice at sea, similar to the finished libretto. The decision to cut straight to the scene in the courtroom eliminates the first establishing sections of Crabbe's poem where the twisted and uninviting nature of the landscape is introduced, but also cuts to the core of Peter's character. In presenting the audience with the court case about the death of the boy the audience is introduced to the monstrous ambiguity of Grimes' character. It is unclear as to whether Grimes is culpable for the death of his apprentice, and so the opera begins with a great malaise that persists throughout the piece. After this, Brett contends that Pears' rough scheme for the opera contends more issues of a distant father figure and overt references to homoeroticism which is not as overt, if present at all, in the final libretto.[34] However, one element that Pears introduced that remained was the character of Ellen Orford as a figure of redemption and rationality to act as a counterbalance to the stiflingly cruel borough and to Peter's anti-social and wild behaviour. Indeed, Grimes obsesses over the prospect of marrying Ellen Orford as a means of eliminating all of his social ills and as a way of gaining acceptance

[33] Brett, Philip, ''Fiery visions' (and revisions): Peter Grimes in progress', *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes*, (CUP, Cambridge: 1983) 47.
[34] Brett, 48.

in the borough. Ellen and Peter make a wonderful pair in a dramatic sense as no matter how well-intentioned or loving Ellen has the capacity to be towards Grimes, she is ultimately unable to save him from himself or the society in which he lives. It is Ellen that saves the Grimes of Britten's opera from the nihilistic state of half-existence that the Grimes of Crabbe's poem is subjected to. A fundamental part of how this relationship involves the role of the sea, which is an entirely orchestral character in this opera, realised through the interludes that intersperse the acts. These will be dealt with in greater dramatic detail in the next chapter.

The working relationship between Slater and Britten spans roughly ten years from 1935 to 1945, when *Peter Grimes* premiered.[35] According to Brett, the relationship was far from perfect, but that it 'was the first in which [Britten] set the pattern he followed in composing all the later operas'.[36] The libretto was praised from an early stage for its originality, but Slater was, by all accounts, a difficult collaborative partner. He was reticent to change, and wilfully delayed revisions to the libretto in order to preserve his sole vision for the piece.[37] Seymour quotes a letter from the composer to his partner Peter Pears: 'I am sure that it isn't fundamentally [sic] hopeless, there are too many things I like about it… I'm beginning to feel that Montagu may not be the ideal librettist; but who?'[38] It seems that Slater's original ideas for the libretto were an extension of his other theatrical work; realist with a heavy socialist message. Nonetheless, what Slater contributed to the piece was a kind of inarticulate and rough beauty, emanating from Grimes himself. We see in the opening courtroom scene that he is incapable of expressing himself adequately in front of his peers, who deeply distrust him. In a later scene we hear his 'Now the Great Bear and Pleiades', a deeply philosophical and artistic

[35] Mitchell, Donald, 'Montagu Slater (1902-1956): who was he?' Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes, (CUP, Cambridge: 1983), 22.
[36] Brett, 57.
[37] Brett, 60.
[38] Seymour, 44.

reflection on the nature of being an outcast which has a terrible quality of suffering and resignation. This aria is something that will be considered in greater detail in chapter three, but it is relevant for now to establish the way in which Grimes is constituted as a monster within his society. His poetic outburst of sorrow, the one moment in which he is adequately able to express himself in the whole opera, is greeted by the inhabitants of the pub with scorn and suspicion. In spite of Peter's haunting reflection on his troubled state, it is difficult to empathise with his state. Grimes is not a likeable figure, and his negligence of his apprentices along with his presumptions regarding Ellen result in a protagonist that is at once repulsive but fascinating. As we watch Peter sail out to into the sea to drown himself in the closing moments of the opera, there is an incredible sense of unease for the audience who is unsure of their own perspective on the scene. The piece essentially posits that given the right circumstances, anyone will side with the commonly held view of good and evil.

The process of working on *Death in Venice* seems to have been a much more collaborative effort for the composer and the librettist. The challenge of Bringing Mann's novella to the stage was arguably even greater than the challenge of adapting Crabbe's poem. Unlike *Peter Grimes*, *Death in Venice* trades much more heavily on the philosophical side of exposition, with large sections of the narrative given over to thoughts on the nature of platonic and erotic love. The introspective nature of Mann's protagonist meant that any faithful rendering of the story would necessitate Aschenbach's presence on the stage for almost the entire piece, which would require a huge amount of stamina on the part of the singer, along with a very subtle narrative in order to tease out the more philosophical elements of the story. Myfanwy Piper's own take on the scope of the project is pertinent to quote at length:

> In reorganizing Mann's story for music and the stage it was even more important to keep a just balance between the passionate-erotic and the poetic-symbolic. As we worked from the first analysis to the last

> words and notes it became clear that what we were doing, what indeed we had to do to make this 'celebration' work at all, was to amalgamate the dual hero Aschenbach-Mann: Aschenbach, the imagined casualty of genius, with Mann, the acutely self-conscious young writer. […] The action which is so often only intellectual reaction has to be described in words. Many of the words have several meanings – the obvious meaning within the terms of the action, a symbolic one in terms of the loaded story, and a literary, evocative one.[39]

It becomes immediately clear that the creative process between Piper and Britten was more streamlined than the one between Slater and Britten, probably the consequence of many such librettist-composer relationships over the years for Britten and having worked with Piper in the past. The figure of the 'dual hero' that Piper talks about is the site of monstrosity in this piece. All aspects of monstrosity in this opera emanate from Aschenbach's own perception of the world around him. An aspect of this is the role of the bass-baritone who accompanies the operatic Aschenbach through the narrative in many different guises, just like the traveller seems to follow the literary Aschenbach. One singer plays the roles of the Traveller, the Elderly Fop, the Old Gondolier, the Hotel Manager, the Hotel Barber, the Leader of the Players and the all-important Voice of Dionysus in the piece. This ubiquitous bass-baritone is vital to the construction of monstrosity in the piece as he introduces monstrous elements to Aschenbach's journey at every turn, spurring him on to turn his back on his conservative misgivings about passion. The near constant presence of the bass-baritone also has an operatic function, in that it creates a counterbalance to the role of Aschenbach. These two singers spend almost the whole piece on stage together, allowing the two singers to play off each other dramatically, but also contributing to the oppressive feeling that is so evocative in the novella. There is an ongoing sense in the piece that Aschenbach's descent into monstrosity is an inevitability, brought about by his own shortcomings and under the keen gaze of the bass-baritone. Indeed, there is a case

[39] Piper, Myfanwy, 'The Libretto', *Benjamin Britten 'Death in Venice',* (CUP, Cambridge: 1987), 45-48.

to be made that the chameleon-like bass baritone is a clearer representation of monstrosity than Aschenbach. However, the roles that the bass-baritone sings are more akin to the machinations of fate, and are there entirely to facilitate Aschenbach's descent into monstrosity.

Chapter 3 – The Monster and the Music

The transformation of a pre-existing literary text into an operatic libretto was a process that ran in parallel with the composition of the music for Britten's operas. The dramatic idiom of the music was often discovered by the composer in tandem with the realisation of the text which formed the basis for the dramatic elements of the work. In this way, the music and the text are inseparable from one another, both in their conception and in their realisation. Claire Seymour writes that:

> The source texts appear to possess inherent tensions or ambiguities which Britten dramatized both textually and musically, formulating a harmonic and structural method which embodied, supplemented and, paradoxically, occasionally contradicted the dichotomies in the text. In this way, the opera libretto may mark out a path which the music does or does not follow, and the tension between the two may increase the overall 'expressiveness' of the work.[40]

The overall flexibility of meaning that exists between the libretto and the music is what allows for the conveyance of the monstrous qualities of Britten's protagonists. This chapter will deal with the dramatic, narrative and musically idiomatic elements that feature in *Peter Grimes* and *Death in Venice* and examine the ways in which these fundamentally differently realised opera explore the same trajectory of monstrosity through many of the same narrative and dramatic elements.

[40] Seymour, 6.

I. Dramatic monstrosity

Peter Grimes and *Death in Venice* use many common dramatic elements to highlight the monstrous nature of their protagonists. Britten intentionally creates scenarios in which the audience is left feeling uneasy at the thoughts and actions of Grimes and Aschenbach, but he also ensures that they remain tragically human and at least partly relatable to common human experience. While there is no denying that Grimes is abusive and brutish and that Aschenbach's overly intellectual approach to art leads to a warped perception of his world, there are elements to each of these characters that render a commonality with their experiences. Fundamentally, these characters demonstrate that there is a problem with the societal status quo from which they are derived, and that while it is an uncomfortable experience for the audience to observe the degeneration of these characters, it is undeniable that there are fundamentally human aspects and reasons behind their 'monstrous' actions.

Grimes and Aschenbach are, in their own differing ways confronted with the innocence of young boys who function as counterbalances to the less palatable thoughts and actions of the fisherman and the writer. Grimes' new apprentice, replacing the one that perished at sea, lives in perpetual fear of Grimes, constantly afraid that any errant action or word might lead to a beating. This boy's apprenticeship, characterised by fear and abuse, illustrates two things about the character of Grimes. The first of these realisations is that the fisherman, who is himself inept at communicating with his own society, sees the exact same inability to communicate in the boy, and so he beats him to obfuscate the 'home truth' that this silent boy effaces. The second 'home truth' that is revealed by his interaction with the boy is that while his struggle against society is lamentable, he is fundamentally incapable of empathy. This character flaw

arguably comes about as a result of his own harsh treatment by a narrow-minded society, but the unforgivable way in which Grimes treats this poor child is what makes him universally monstrous, as opposed to just parochially monstrous. Grimes' materialistic designs on being made a part of respectable society render him a monster to his societal peers, but there is no way of overlooking the universally abhorrent abuse of a child, even if the abuser is keenly suffering in their own way. Aschenbach's interactions with youth are more celebratory than those of Grimes, but they are arguably as reprehensible as those of the fisherman. His praise of Tadzio as the manifestation of Eros is predicated on an unnatural admiration for the beauty of the Polish child that leads the writer to invent an entire persona for the child as his mounting obsession takes over his senses. The writer undergoes an extraordinary change from austere formalist to bacchantic aesthete in his pursuit of the Grecian ideal of beauty which ultimately leads to his demise. What renders Aschenbach as monstrous is his mounting obsession and, like Grimes, inability to communicate with the object of his desire.

II. Musical Issues Surrounding Monstrosity

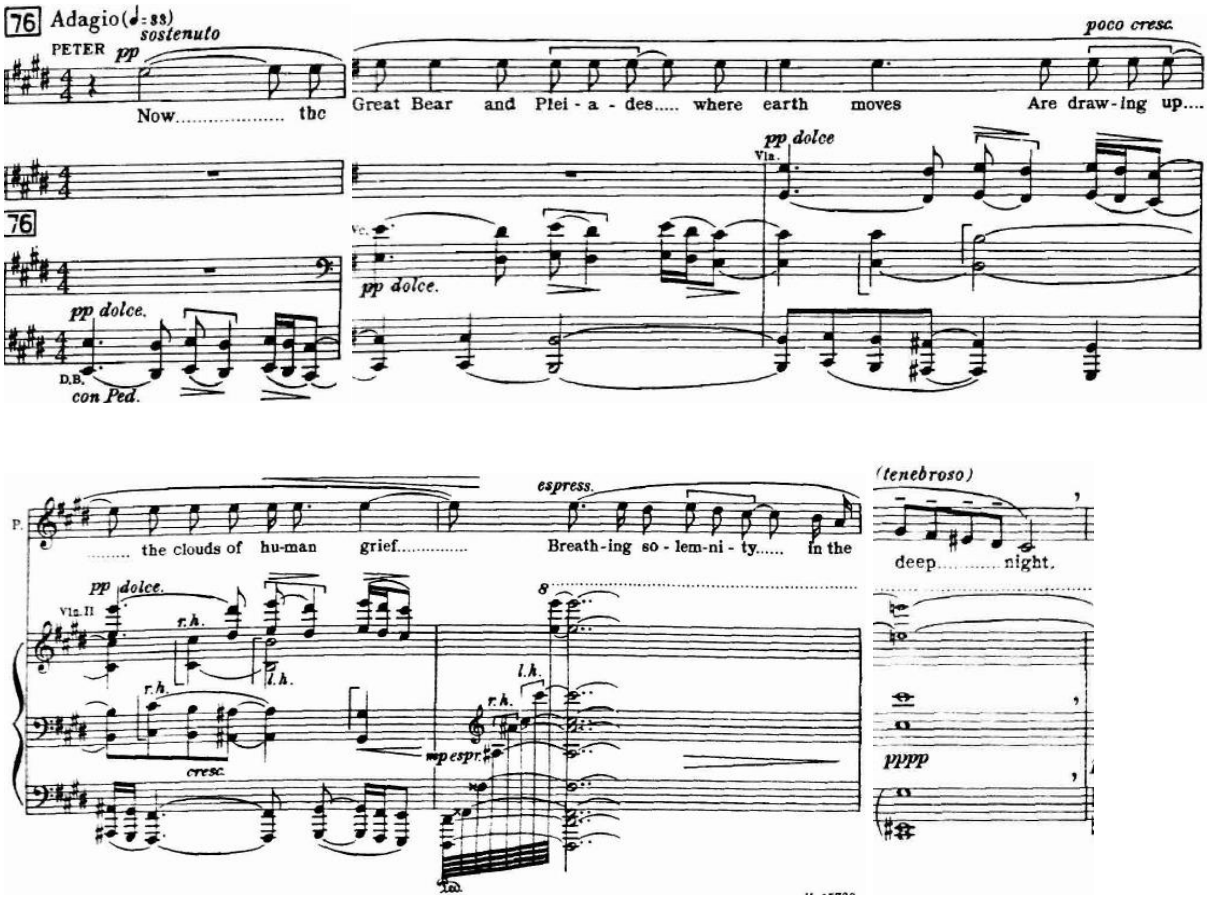
There are several key issues that are apparent in both *Peter Grimes* and *Death in Venice* that contribute to the representation of monstrosity in these operas. The most important of these issues are the ways in which the monstrous protagonists are confined within themselves, their understanding and reaction to childhood innocence and the ways in which they ultimately meet their demise. These elements of the operas demonstrate Britten's ability to produce the same dramatic effect in varying ways in the music of his operas. These two pieces come at the beginning and end of his operatic compositional career, and yet Britten's final operatic monster

still struggles against his fate in the same way that his first one did. Both Grimes and Aschenbach find themselves constricted musically and dramatically at various times in these operas. A fundamental aspect of what renders a subject as monstrous is a breakdown in societal channels of communication and understanding, recalling Yoder's sentiment that monsters can equally be 'concealed in literal darkness or simply within the isolation of language'.[41] This isolating language is two-fold in opera as there is both the language of the libretto and the musical language of the score to be considered.

Grimes' first real aria in Act 1 the opera is emblematic of character who is imprisoned within their own circumstance with no means of escape. 'Now the Great Bear and Pleiades' (Example 1a) is nothing short of a cry for help that falls on deaf ears, leading to monstrous acts of desperation. This role was, along with the role of Aschenbach, written for Britten's partner Peter Pears, who possessed a tenor voice of a very special quality. Pears did not have a lot a lyric height in his range, but he also did not have the usual change of timbre that occurs from around the pitch E♮. Quoting the great heldentenor Jon Vickers, Seymour writes that by writing the tessitura of Grimes' area in the *passagio* of the tenor voice that 'Britten exploited the smoothness of Pears' voice in this range, frequently centring the melody and harmony about this pitch or tonality at moments of dramatic importance'.[42] The vocal line of the aria is stretched out on this singular pitch, sitting in a place of vocal transition for the tenor, over a recurring descending major scale that always returns to the E♮. The simple and cyclical nature of this musical movement denotes two things about the character and his position within the work. Firstly, Grimes is unable to move beyond his own station in life, no matter how hard he wishes for it. It would seem that in spite of his philosophical outburst that he is condemned to

[41] Yoder, i.
[42] Seymour, 7.

always return to the same position of suffering, and to be perceived within his own community as a monster. Secondly, the persistence of the E♮ is significant insofar as Grimes is unable to extend into the higher more heroic register of his voice while he is calm and contemplative.



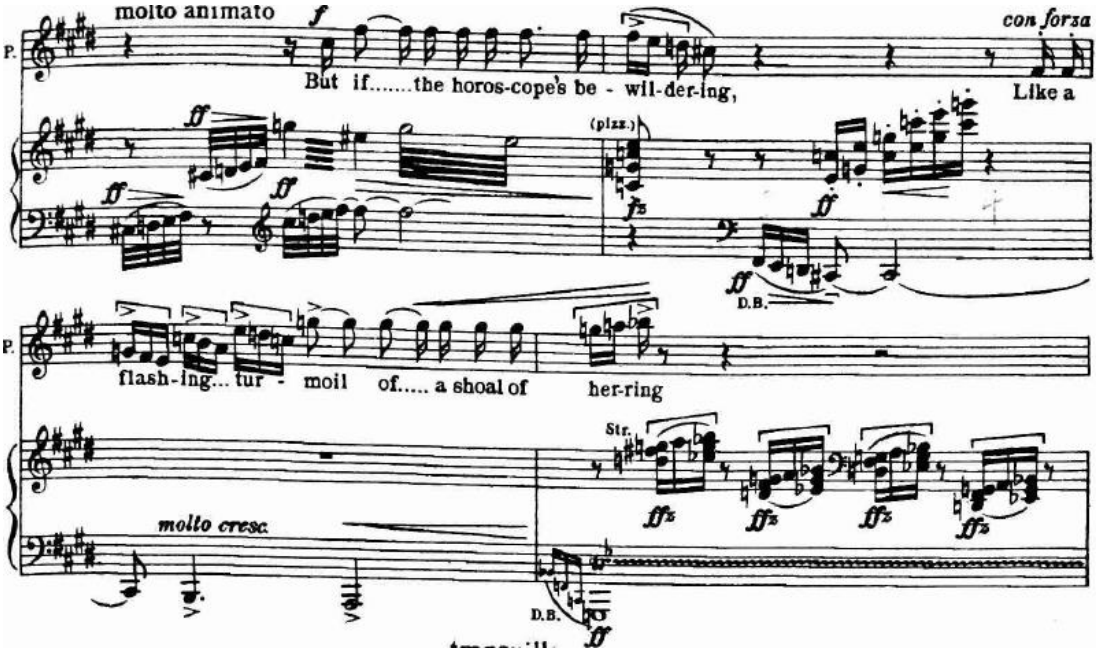
(Example 1a)[43]

Instead, the more turbulent second section of the aria, which draws upon violent imagery of the sea results in a more chaotic vocal line, which now extends up to a B♭. (Example 1b) This turbulant section forshadows Grimes' own demise at sea, where he is literally cast adrift in a choatic world that mirrors his own vocal line. The aria finishes by returning to the cyclical

[43] Britten, Benjamin, *Peter Grimes*, 139-140.

pattern of the first section of the aria and Grimes asks the chilling question 'Who can turn skies back and begin again'? This final line is an accusation as much as it is a cry for help. Grimes genuinely believes that he is not a bad person, nor that he deserves the scorn of his peers, but rather that he has been dealt a cruel fate and is destined to suffer at the hands of the borough for a crime they believe him to have committed. Seymour once again has a pertinent comment to make about the confluence of the musical construction of the piece societal fears surrounding the monster that this aria efectively explores:

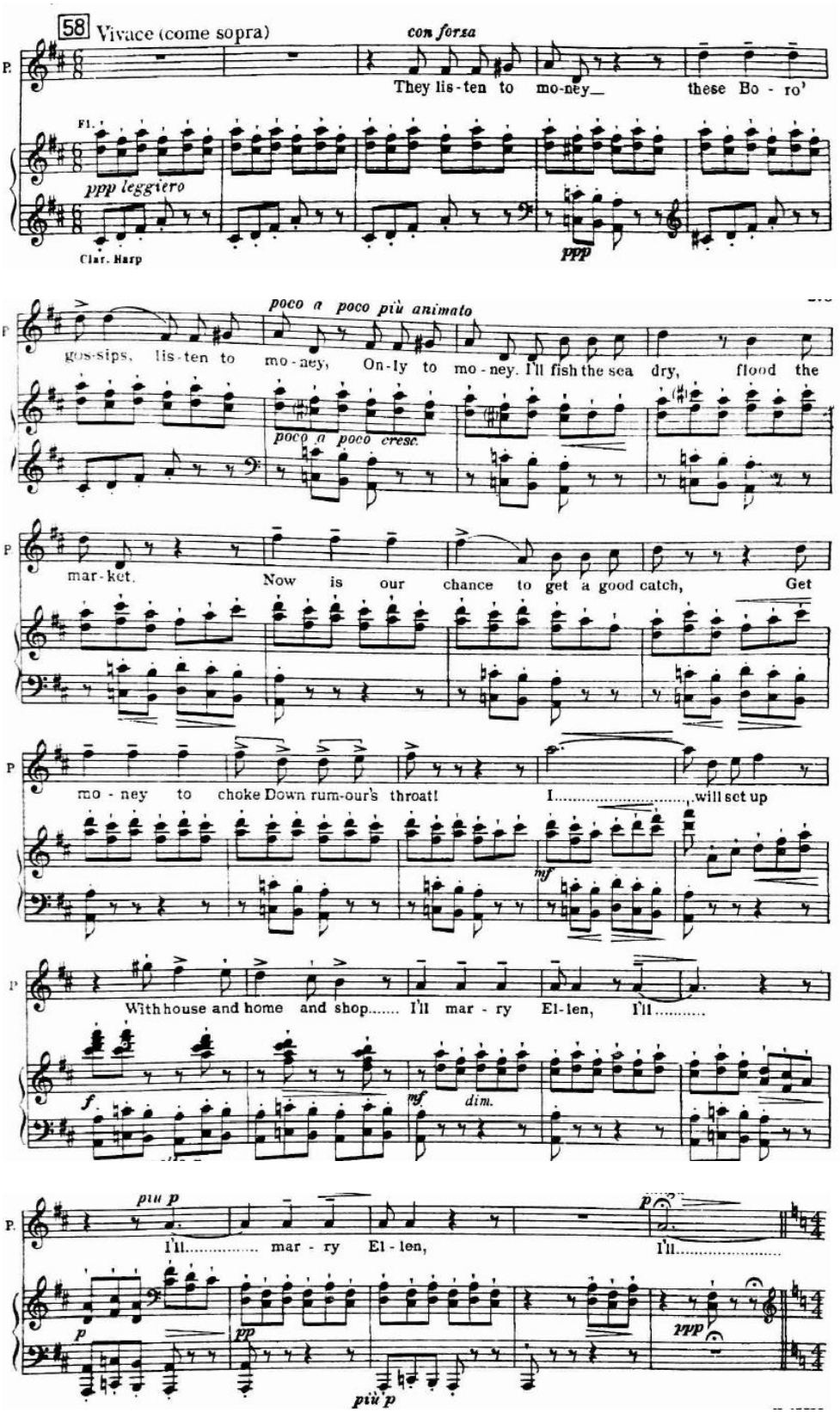
> The fragmentation of melody, harmony, textual syntax and vocal production in a scene such as Grimes's 'mad' soliloquy is a typical representationof the interruptions in performance which serve as ciphers for the disruptions andschisms which [monstrosity] provokes within both the social system and the individual.[44]



(Example 1b)[45]

[44] Seymour, 12.
[45] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 141.

In Grimes' other aria in Act 2, 'Go There!', we see the other key emelent of what constitutes him as a monster within his community, which is his voracious desire to be accepted by the very society that rejects him. The overpowering obsession that Grimes has to catch a big shoal of fish is linked to what he percieves to be the most certain route to social mobility in the borough, which is the accumulation of wealth. Interspersing the vicious threats that he levels at his apprentice, we see Grimes as an obsessive maniac, fixated on what he percieves society to be, a collection of money-grabbing gossips.

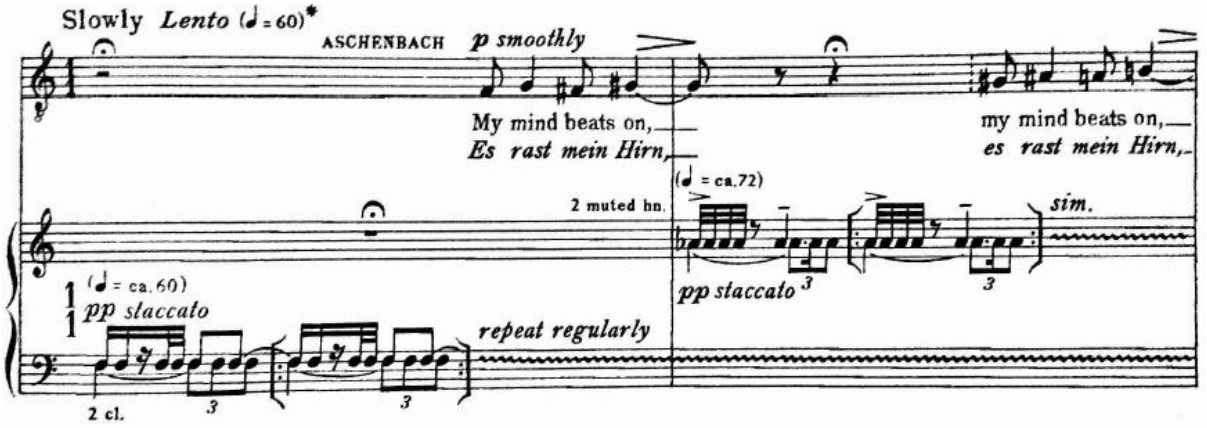


(Example 2)[46]

[46] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 272-273.

They unyielding obsession that Grimes has with achieving success is percieved as a monstrous act to the people around him. Grimes both loves and loaths the borough, and since he is unable to become a part of the society that so absolutely rejects him, he is instead forced to end his own life. The very acts that render Grimes monstrous to the community at large are what also make him such a pitiable figure.

In *Death in Venice* we see that Aschenbach is also musically constricted withinin his own sound world, representing his tortured position as a literary aesthete. From the opening bars of the piece Britten constructs the image of a writer who is frustrated at his own mental stagnation. The opening words 'My mind beats on' are set to a winding tritone melody, beginning on an F♮ and taking an arduous path of semitones to arrive at the B♮ in the next bar. Aschenbach's music is based on this compositional idiom for a lot of the first section of the work, returning to the words several times to illustrate his stagnated creative spirit. (Example 3)



(Example 3)[47]

Unlike in *Peter Grimes* where the oppressive borough directly contributed to the monstrous actions of Grimes towards his young apprentices, in *Death in Venice* there is no central

[47] Britten, Benjamin, *Death in Venice,* 1.

antagonist other than Aschenbach's own mental state. Indeed, the reocurring bass-baritone figure may in fact just be a figment of Aschenbach obsessive projection on the world. The reasons for Aschenbach's artistic stagnation are entirely self-imposed. He prioritises formal mastery of his artform over any idiosyncratic element of creative inspiration. This is seen in a later soliloquial passage where he describes his celebrated position as a writer of national imprtance.

> Yes, I turned away from the paradox and daring of my youth, renounced bohemianism and sympathy with the outcast soul, to concentrate on simplicity, beauty, form – upon these all my art is built.[48]

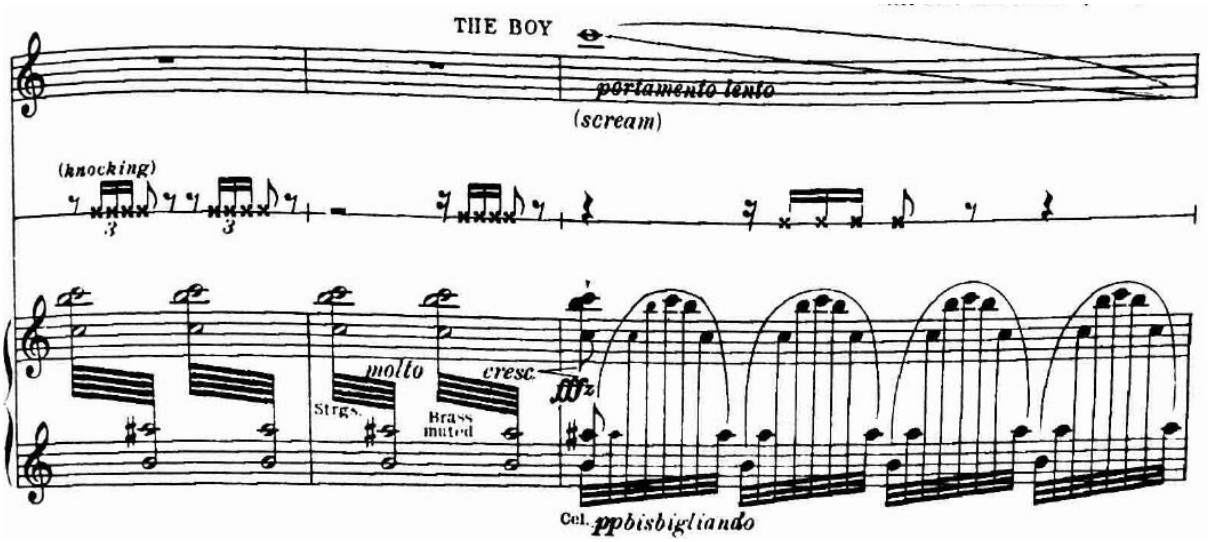
In relying on form in its entirety as a method for artistic creation Aschenbach has effectively betrayed himself. By denying his artistic expression any element of 'sympathy with the outcast soul' he has effectively constructed a life that exists outside of the parameters of sensual experience. Unlike Grimes who covets the acceptance of a society that loathes him, Aschenbach has been instrumental in influencing the way in which his society approaches literature, and in so doing has actually rendered himself as an outcast by alienating himself entirely from common experience and sensuality. This self-imposed isolation is what leads to the monumental collapse of his world view and his feverish obsession with the figure of Tadzio when he encounters the child at the Lido.

Another key way in which Britten emphasises the monstrosity of his protagonists is to present them in contrast to the innocent youths that form an incredibly important, and usually silent, role in the operas. The destruction of innocence is vital to the diachotomy that makes up Britten's monsters. Seymour writes about Grimes' relationship with his apprentice:

[48] Herbert, David (ed.), *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: The Complete Librettos Illustrated with Designs of the First Productions*, (The Herbert Press, London: 1989).

> Grimes is himself like a child who drifts between reality and fantasy. He subconsciously yearns for a lost innocence which, in his conscious state he acknowledges will be destroyed by experience. […] Grimes shows both cruelty and tenderness to the boy, a mixture which stems fromhis identification with the child's suffering.[49]

In Britten's operas, the passage from innocence to experience for children is quite a violent transition. The one utterance that Grimes' apprentice has for the entire opera is a high pitched scream as he falls to his death down the side of a cliff. (Example 4) The purity of the top C as it slides down through the vocal register represents the loss of innocence as the boy plummets to his death.

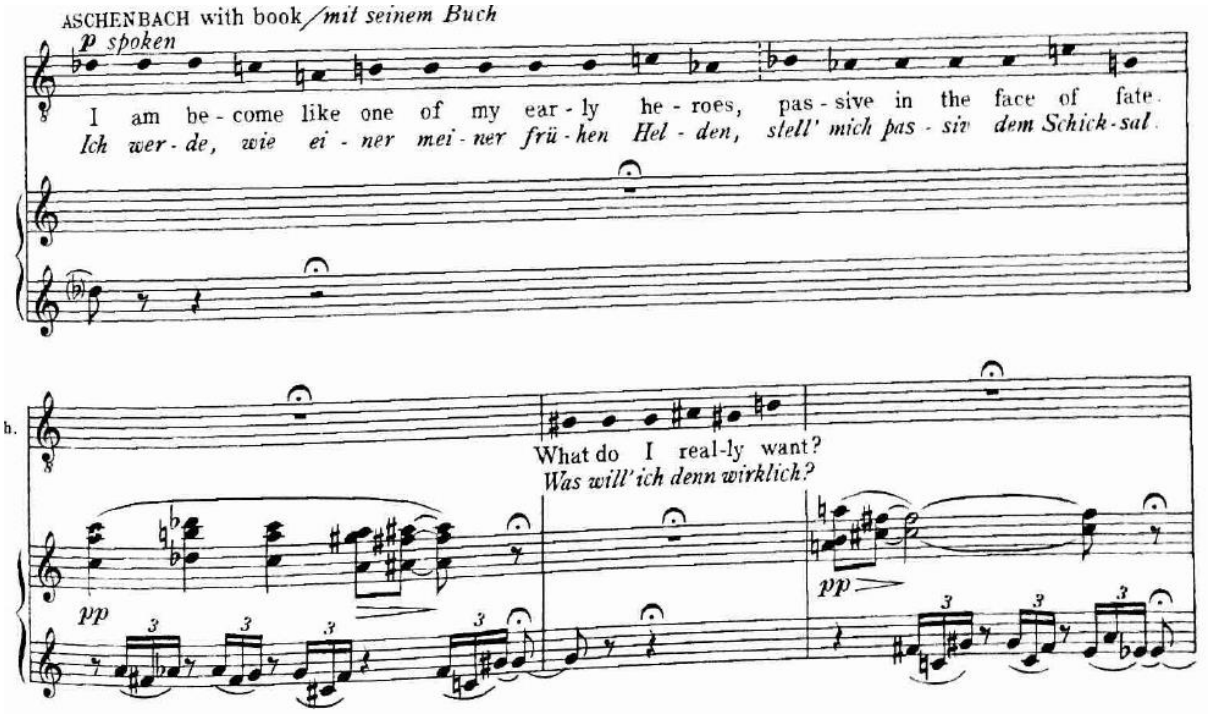


(Example 4)[50]

Similarly, in *Death in Venice* Tadzio remains silent for the entire opera, although he does express his character through the medium of dance. While Tadzio is less restricted than Grimes' apprentice, he is still subject to the same imagined reality that Aschenbach creates for him as the manifestation of Eros. What both Grimes and Aschenbach are guilty of is objectification of innocence. For Grimes it is a longing to understand the purity of innocence, which he is

[49] Seymour, 50-51.
[50] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 287.

incapable of and therefore suffers frustration, while for Aschebach it is a rarified and deific purity that is sacred. The objectification of innocence is not something that society is comfortable with so any version of this objectification is treated as monstrous. The passivity that is associated with silence is, in fact, reflected back on Aschenbach himself, who regularly feels powerless to resist his own fate. When he attempt to leave the Lido, his luggage is sent to the wrong location accidentally, and he finds himself required to return to the Lido, thereby extending his stay in Venice. Aschenbah exclaims his own passivity by likening himself to one of the literary heroes that he has himself created. (Example 5)



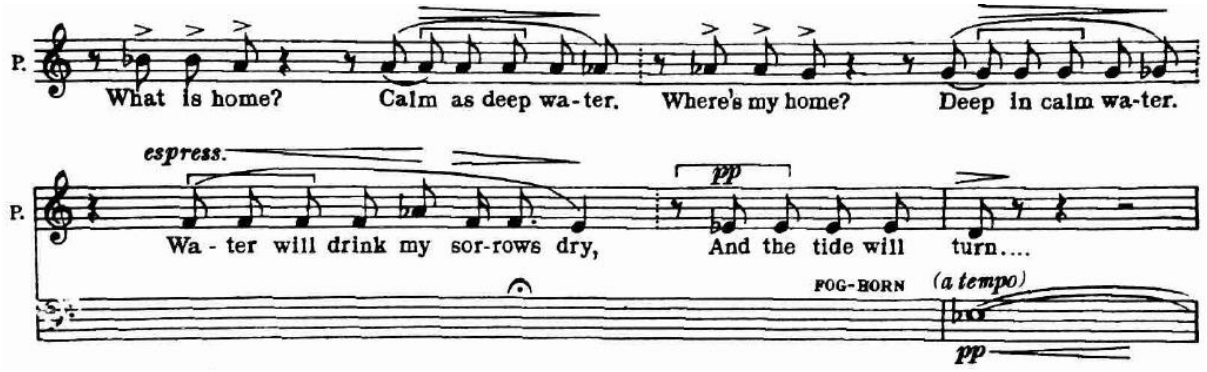
(Example 5)[51]

The representation of innocence and passivity is vital to the construction of monstrosity in Britten's operas as the monstrous protagonists who are the greatest threat to innocence in their

[51] Britten, *Death in Venice*, 109.

dramatic worlds are also themselves the most fragile and, ultimately, passive in the face of their own fate.

The final ways in which Britten's monsters are dramatically linked are through their mutual demise at sea. Grimes, who is being hunted down by the mob, is encouraged by Balstrode to sail out into the sea and sink his boat. It is impled by Balstrode that this suicidal act would be preferable for Grimes than to endure what the borough has in store for him. Aschenbach's death too is a kind of suicide by the water. He was offered plenty of opportunities to escape Venice and leave the cholera behind him, but his willing obsession with the boy Tadzio caused him to remain and, in so doing, die. The ambiguous power of the sea is forshadowed in both operas by the protagonists. Towards the end of the final scene of *Peter Grimes* the protagonist sings an unaccompanied line of recitative that encapsulates all of his sorrow and anguish. (Example 5)



(Example 6)[52]

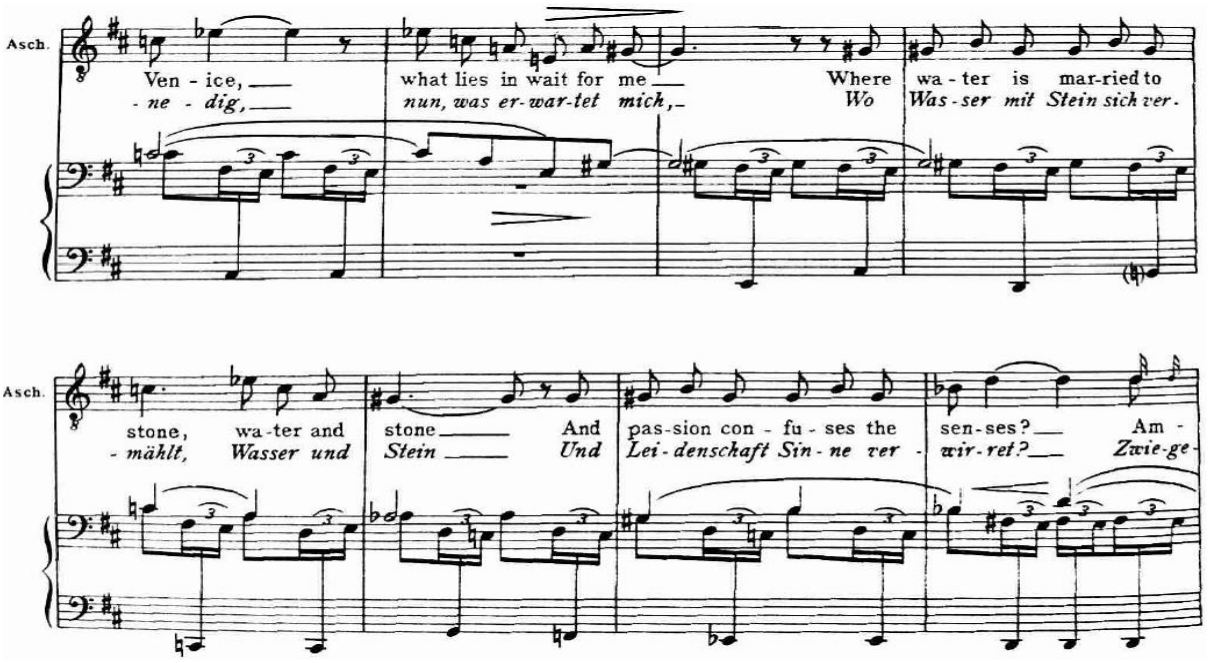
Here we can see the tortured Grimes unable to find any solace in the society that he so dearly wishes to belong to. This is the fisherman at his most Byronic in the piece, and arguably his

[52] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 363.

most pitiable. The melodic line is effectively an answer to his earlier line of 'who can turn skies back and begin again'. A similarly watery end awaits Aschenbach too at the end of *Death in Venice*. Seymour writes that Aschenbach:

> Shares his passive longing for watery oblivion with Britten's earlier operatic protagonist, Peter Grimes. Grimes had asked 'Where's my home? Deep as calm water': the grave which he welcomes will drown the borough's shrieks of persecution, and resonate with a wrodless music which he believes will harbour him from 'terors and tragedies'. It is necessary to go through the flood to reach salvation, and this is the music which soothes Aschenbach in his dying moments. […] The only possible end for Aschenbach is death.[53]

Ascenbach again forsees the danger of staying in Venice, and yet he remains passive in his desire to change this fate. The ambiguous and threatening city holds an incredible allure for Aschenbach, and he is entirely unable to extricate himself from his own fate. Even in his first ride in a gondola he identifies the danger that he is placing himself in. (Example 7)



(Example 7)[54]

[53] Seymour, 319.
[54] Britten, Death in Venice, 39.

Conclusion

The narrative and dramatic elements of the libretto and mise en scene compliment Britten's incredibly refined compositional style in these two operas. The original literary characters are transformed for the operatic stage. The combination of revulsion and pity that Grimes and Aschenbach evoke as monstrous outcasts in their own rightmake for very compelling operatic protagonists. For both of these doomed characters, the only way out of their plight is to perish in the sea. The sea represents a turbulant demise which is not founded on any solid base, but it also carries the significance of a cyclical recapitulation of suffering, which is what makes the the drama of these operas so compelling. If suffering is cyclical, then so is monstrosity. Society will always find a scapegoat onto which it can siphon all of its fears and hatreds. While the actions and intentions of Grimes and Aschenbach are monstrous and quite often repulsive, the operas are constructed in such a way that the figure of the monster is quite pitiable in the grand scheme of society. In other words, the monsters that exist in Britten's operas are very close to common human experience in terms of their relatability. Britten's operas illustrate musically and dramatically that the figure of the monsterous outcast is of central importance to understanding the ways in which our own modern societies function and protect themselves from their own insecurities.

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