

The Fly by Katherine Mansfield

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Summary

The story "Fly" throws light on the fact that time is a great healer and it conquers grief.

Mr. Woodfield comes to see his ex-boss. He is retired and is a heart patient. He praises the new setting and furniture of the office. Then the boss offers him whisky. After drinking it, Mr. Woodfield remembers what he has forgotten. He tells the boss that his daughters have visited the graves of the boss's as well as Mr. Woodfield's son. Actually, they have died in a war.

When Mr. Woodfield has gone, the boss remembers his dead son. He tries to have the same feelings of grief as he felt on the day of his death. However, he fails. For the last try, he decides to go to the photograph of his son, but a fly in an inkpot attracts his attention. He forgets all about his son.

He takes the fly out of the inkpot and puts it on a blotting paper. As soon as the fly is about to fly, he drops a drop of ink on it and enjoys its struggle. At last, the fly dies of drops of ink. The boss throws it away and orders for a fresh blotting paper. Then he tries to remember what he was thinking before attending to the fly. It means he forgets his dead son again.

1. What is the theme of the story "Fly"?

This is a quite established fact that the story "The Fly" is about the conquest of time over grief.

No doubt, this is quite established fact that the story "The Fly" is about the conquest of time over grief. This is the first theme of the story.

To show that time conquers grief the writer presents two characters, Mr. Woodfield and his ex-boss. Both of them lost their only sons six years ago. It was a long period and it had healed up their grief.

First, the writer tells us about the state of grief of Mr. Woodfield. He has forgotten everything. He is able to remember about the grave of his son after drinking whisky. He talks about his son and his grave, but does not feel any pang of grief. This clearly shows that the time has made him forget his grief.

Then the writer talks about the state of grief of the boss. The Boss believed that time would not make any difference to his grief. Now his present state of grief is different. After the departure of old Woodfield, he sits in the chair. He wants to feel the same pang of grief that he used to feel. The writer expresses his feelings very beautifully: "He wanted, he intended, he arranged to weep... But no tears came yet." This is the present condition of his grief. Time has conquered his grief.

He wants to feel the pang of grief. As a last try, he decides to get up and have a look at his son's photograph. However, a fly in the inkpot attracts his attention and he forgets about his son and the grief in a moment. He starts dropping drops of ink on the fly to enjoy its struggle. After the death of the fly, he tries to remember what he was thinking, but cannot. This clearly shows that time has conquered his grief. (303)

2. What is the second theme of the story "Fly"?

Discuss the writer's views about life, death, and fate as given in her story "The Fly".

“As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport.” Discuss. What does the Boss do to the fly at the end of the story and what does the death of the fly signify to him?

The second theme of the story “The Fly” is “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport.”

When we read the story carefully, we find that the fly in the story symbolizes helplessness of man before fate. Just like the fly, man tries hard and gets out of the grip of death for the time being, but fate captures him again. Man has no power to defy fate and fall an easy prey to it. When we read the story, we find that the writer and all the characters in the story stand for the fly.

To convey this idea, the writer tells a brief incident. A fly falls into an inkpot. The Boss sees it, puts it on a blotting paper, and enjoys its strength again. At last, the fly dies of those drops of ink.

This incident of the fly highly symbolic. The writer herself died of T.B that was incurable at that time. Many people were dying at that time. Later, man discovered a cure for the disease and thought that he had escaped death and had defied fate. However, just like the Boss, fate dropped another drop – AIDS. Now many people are dying of it. Now it is the last drop. Just like the fly, people cannot survive it. We hope that man will discover a cure for it. However, who knows what the next drop is like.

Therefore, we are just like the fly in the story and the Boss is just like a god who kills it just for his sport. This is the second theme of the story. (275)

3. **What does the fly stand for?**

Bring out the symbolism in the short story “The Fly” by Katherine Mansfield.

The fly in the story “The Fly” symbolizes helplessness of man before fate. Man may try hard to escape his death, but he is not given a chance to escape. Just like the fly, man tries hard and gets out of the grip of death for the time being, but fate again captures him. He has no power to defy fate and fall an easy prey to it. When we read the story, we find that the writer and all the characters in the story stand for the fly.

To convey this idea, the writer tells a brief incident. A fly falls into an inkpot. The boss sees it, puts it on a blotting paper, and enjoys its struggle. Just when the fly is able to escape death, drops a drop of ink onto the fly and enjoys its struggle again. At last, the fly dies of those drops of ink.

This incident of the fly is highly symbolic. The writer herself died of T. B that was incurable at that time. Many people were dying at that time. Later, man discovered a cure for the disease. He thought that he had escaped death and had defied fate. However, just like the boss, fate dropped another drop – the drop of AIDS. Now many people are dying of it. Now it is the last drop. Just like the fly, people cannot survive it. We hope that man will discover a cure for it. However, who knows what the next drop is like. (253)

4. **Describe the reaction of the Boss when he comes to know that Mr. Woodifield’s daughters have visited the grave of his son.**

The reaction of the Boss is that of a father over the death of his only son. However, he does not express his grief before Mr. Woodifield.

When Mr. Woodifield has gone, he sits in his chair. He asks Mr. Macey that he will see nobody for half an hour. He wants to feel the same pang of grief. The writer describes his condition, “He

wanted, he intended, he had arranged to weep..." It is a terrible shock to him when Mr. Woodfield mentions the grave of his son. He imagines his son lying in his grave. He groans, "My son!" However, no tears come yet.

In the past, in the first months and even years after the death of his son he could not control his tears. He thought that the time would never change the condition of his grief. He had developed his business for his son. Everybody liked his son. However, he went to a war and died. When he received a telegram about his death, he felt the whole place crashing about his head.

Now the situation is different. Six years have passed and he does not feel the same pang of grief. As a last try, he decides to get up and have a look at his son's photograph. He thinks that by looking at the photograph he will feel the same pang of grief as he used to feel. However, a fly in the inkpot attracts his attention and he forgets about his son in a moment. He starts enjoying the struggle of the fly by dropping drops of ink on it. After the death of the fly, he tries to remember what it was he thinking before attending to the fly, but cannot. (291

Mansfield's "The Fly" combines three episodes which seem quite disparate because very different actions and secondary characters are involved. Each episode, however, is a variation on a situation in which the boss dominates the other character but in the process reveals his own illusions and weaknesses. With old Woodfield, he is the vigorous [business](#) leader who needs his weekly meed of adulation; in his memories of his long-dead son, he is still the aggrieved parent who thinks of himself as the more tragic figure; with a fly struggling in an ink blot on his desk, he is the obstinate examiner of its will to survive and the strangely frightened witness of its failure. In each case, his attempts to assert himself end in frustration but do not bring him closer to reality. The connections between these thematically related parts, however, are shaky at several points, particularly in the transition to the more heavily symbolic third section. While the combination of a realistic account with elements of parable and exemplum is not unusual, the effect here is of individually strong renderings of the main character but in quite different styles. The story ends with a brief coda that repeats the contrast between strength and weakness, the boss bullying a subordinate but having an ambiguous lapse of memory.

"The Fly" Katherine Mansfield

The following entry represents criticism concerning Mansfield's short story, "The Fly." See also, Katherine Mansfield Criticism and "The Garden Party" Criticism.

INTRODUCTION

This disturbing tale has been the subject of considerable, often heated, critical debate, and there is little consensus on either the story's meaning or literary merit. The events surround a boss who is reminded of his son's death during a visit from an old friend. The man then rescues and causes the death of a common housefly. The story's simple action, which is understated but offers a telling description of character and place, is marked by a lack of humor and compassion. The story also makes a fascinating study of a psychological crisis that afflicts a man almost completely lacking in self-awareness. The story has elements found in many of Mansfield's other works, including the use of epiphany as the focal point of the narrative; greater concern with internal crisis than external crisis of plot; and use of symbolic patterning, with key ideas and images repeated to suggest the complexity of characters' motives and situations. Interpretations of [the work](#) abound, and is often interpreted as the author's autobiographical statement in her final months of life and how she viewed herself as a helpless victim of dark and unknown forces. The story also is a critique of war and patriarchy, as well as a metaphysical exploration of humans' place in the world. All interpretations, however, seem to concur that "The Fly" is perhaps the darkest and most haunting treatment of human corruption in Mansfield's literary oeuvre, as well as and one of the starkest expressions of post-World War I existential helplessness and despair.

Plot and Major Characters

The story begins with a retired man, old Mr. Woodfield, making his weekly visit to the office where he worked before suffering a stroke. Woodfield has made a habit of returning to visit his old boss on Tuesday afternoons—the only day of the week his wife and girls allow him out of the house. The boss, five years older, is stout and fit, a stark contrast to his enfeebled former employee. It does a man good, Woodfield thinks, to see the boss going so strong. Woodfield admires the office and the boss explains, as he has done for several weeks now, that he has done it up lately. He points to the new carpet, new furniture, and new electric heating.

Woodifield notices that the boss does not point to the photograph of a grave-looking boy in uniform. The photograph is not new; it has been there for the past six years.

As the two men enjoy their surroundings and each other's company, Woodifield says he cannot recall something he wanted to tell the boss. The boss feels sorry for the old man, thinking he is obviously "on his last pins." He encourages Woodifield to drink some of his excellent whisky to restore his memory, even if it is against doctor's orders. As they enjoy their drinks, Woodifield suddenly remembers what he had meant to tell the boss. His daughters had recently been in Belgium where they visited their brother Reggie's gravesite. They noticed while there that the boss's son's gravesite was nearby. Both plots, the girls reported, were well cared for, and the gravesites were in a beautiful place, with broad paths and flowers growing on all the plots. The boss is visibly upset and distracted as Woodifield gives him the details. Woodifield asks if the boss has been there; the boss says he has not. Woodifield carries on about how expensive the jam was at the hotel where his girls stayed, but the boss responds without listening and hurries to end the conversation. He shows Woodifield out.

The boss stares blankly for a time, then orders his clerk to make sure he remains undisturbed for a half hour. He closes his office door, slumps into his chair, and covers his face with his hands. Woodifield's announcement had come as a shock; when he talked of his son's grave it was as though the earth opened up and he saw his boy lying in the earth with Woodifield's girls staring down at him. During the previous six years he only thought of his boy, lying unchanged and unblemished in his uniform. He groans "My son!" but no tears come. In the first months and years after his son's death, he had only to say those words and he would begin weeping violently. He was sure that the passage of time would make no difference in the intensity of his emotion. Other men might live their loss down, but he would not. How could he? This was his only son, whom he had worked for, who was to have taken over his business, whom everyone loved. He was the only thing that gave meaning to the boss's life. Six years earlier he had received the telegram announcing his son was dead, leaving him a broken man.

Six years following his son's death, he is unable to weep and doesn't understand what is wrong. He decides to get up and look at the boy's photograph. At that moment, he notices a fly has fallen into his inkpot, struggling to get free. The boss lifts the fly out of the inkpot with his pen and shakes it on some blotting paper, then watches as it begins to clean itself. The boss imagines that the fly must be joyful knowing it has narrowly escaped death. The boss then has an idea, and plunges his pen back into the pot and drops a blot of ink on the fly. The fly seems stunned, but eventually begins to clean itself again. The boss admires the creature's fighting spirit, but then drops a second blot of ink. He is relieved when the fly again makes the effort to clean itself. He decides he will drop just one more blot of ink on the fly. But after a third inkdrop, the fly does not stir. The boss tries to move it with his pen, telling it to "look sharp" but to no avail; it is dead.

The boss lifts the corpse of the fly and throws it into the waste-paper. He feels wretched and frightened. He barks an order to his clerk to bring him fresh blotting paper, and to "look sharp" about it. Then he tries to recall what he was thinking about before the fly died and cannot.

Major Themes

Mansfield never explained exactly what she meant "The Fly" to signify, and the story has spawned a variety of interpretations. It is frequently seen as an indictment of the brutal horror of World War I, along with the hopelessness and despair left in its wake. Many scholars have remarked that the timetable that the story sets for the death of the two sons coincides with the 1915 death of Mansfield's brother, a victim of wartime fighting. The war dead, it is claimed, are likened to flies and innocently slaughtered by cruel forces over which they have no control. Some critics have pointed to references Mansfield made in her journals and letters about flies to show that the fly represents herself, struggling to fight the ravages of her tuberculosis, only to be crushed in the end by a selfish and cruel father much like the boss in her story. Other critics have resisted such autobiographical interpretations, insisting they detract from a more universally compelling existential message concerning the inevitability of death and man's unwillingness to accept this truth. These scholars see the story as essentially about the boss's brief realization of his own pitiful ambitions and mortality before he subconsciously tries to suppress this horrible knowledge.

Much attention has been paid to the central character of the boss. He has been seen as a symbol of malignant forces that are base and motiveless, a representative of the generation that sent its sons to their slaughter in a cruel war, and a god-like figure who, in the words of King Lear, toys with the lives of human beings for sport. Most critics agree that the reader's early good impression of the boss is continually undermined as the story unfolds. In the end, some have claimed, he can be viewed as a sadomasochist who

likely cowed his son as he does Woodfield and his clerk. He is a bully who torments the fly for boyish pleasure, and his sense of loss is no more than self-pity. However, some commentators claim that the boss should not be viewed as an unsympathetic character, but simply as a man whose experiments on a common housefly are manifestations of an unconscious metaphysical questioning about the meaning of life. The answer comes to him briefly, but he becomes frightened and quickly pushes it out of his mind. Other critics have seen the boss as a man coming to terms with his own selfishness and heartlessness, who recognizes briefly that his grief for his son has been based on a kind of self-deception. As a result, when the fly dies the boss suffers a spiritual death.

Critics have also remarked on the story's multi-layered symbolism. The vigorous boss is at first seen in contrast to doddering old Woodfield, but by the end of the story both men have forgotten about their son's deaths. Woodfield, in his dotage, is likened to a baby, and the boss to a greedy boy; both men are immature and lacking in real strength. Neither of them visits his son's grave because of their respective weaknesses, but while the frailty of Woodfield is immediately apparent, the deficiency of the powerful boss is revealed to be far more disturbing. The fly seems to be a symbol for, among other things, the men under the boss's control. The boss treats the fly condescendingly and benevolently as he does Woodfield who is "on his last pins." He also demands that the fly "look sharp," the same order he gives his clerk. This leads us to wonder if his son did not suffer the same unthinking treatment at the hands of his father, and if the boss's grief is in fact genuine.

Critical Reception

Mansfield wrote the "The Fly" in Paris in 1922 while undergoing X-ray treatment for tuberculosis, and it is clear from her letters and journals that she was not wholly pleased with it. It is likely that she was hard-pressed for money to pay for her medical treatment at the time, and was working under the additional pressures of market requirements and publication deadlines. In a response to her friend William Gerhardt, who had confessed to her that he disliked the piece, Mansfield herself admitted that she "hated" writing the story.

Mansfield died less than a year following the story's publication and did not witness the intense critical and popular interest in "The Fly." After its initial magazine publication in 1922, the story appeared in the highly regarded, posthumously published collection, *The Dove's Nest* and then again in successive volumes of Mansfield's works. The work began to receive serious critical treatment beginning in 1945, when a series of short articles in *The Explicator* sought to uncover the symbolic meanings and thematic concerns hidden in the deceptively simple tale. A 1962 essay by F. W. Bateson and B. Shahevitch in *Essays in Criticism*, remarking on Mansfield's use of realism to make the setting of the story authentic so as to draw readers in to the narrative, spawned a series of responses complaining that the complexity of the piece had been overlooked with this assessment. Later commentators took their cue from Bateson's and Shahevitch's critics and have tried to understand why the story has elicited such a range of interpretations. Ironically, most critics acknowledge that "The Fly" is not one of Mansfield's strongest works, and some have even suggested that it is the story's flaws that make it an interesting subject of scrutiny. However, the work continues to enjoy a reputation as one of Mansfield's most famous stories, and is regarded as a fine example of the complexity of method that is the author's great contribution to the short story form.

The Old Triumvirate: Katherine Mansfield has presented three old men in her story, "The Fly" - the old Boss, Old Woodfield and Old Macey. The Boss is the Central character in the story; Old Woodfield, an old and infirm man, who is only allowed to leave his house on Tuesdays and who lives with his wife and daughter, is a minor figure, but he is of much importance in the story. He fulfills some important function in the story. Farther his story displays sensitivity to emotion by giving attention to the inner conflicts of his character.



Woodifield: His Helplessness and Despair, a post-war Depression in “The Fly”: Katherine Mansfield has given a picture of post-war depression in Europe. After the First World War one might come across many unhappy old men like Woodifield in England. The Fly is a critique of such a war and patriarchy, as well as a metaphysical exploration of humans' place in the world. It is further one of the starkest expressions of post-World War I existential helplessness and despair. Woodifield's son Reggie died in the battlefield. Woodifield had a stroke. After his retirement he becomes absolutely helpless and depressed. His wife and daughter kept him confined in the house every day of the week except Tuesday. On a Tuesday he paid a visit to the Boss. During his conversation with the Boss Woodifield appeared as a pathetic figure. He did not remember what he wanted to tell the Boss. The Boss took pity on him and offered him a few drops of whisky to revive his account of the visit of his daughters to Belgium. The girls saw the grave of Reggie during their visit. They saw the grave of the Boss's son in the same graveyard. As Woodifield narrated the story of his daughters' recent visit to Belgium, he indulges in incoherent and irrelevant talk.

Woodifield's importance in depiction of the Boss's character: In this short story Katherine Mansfield has concentrated on the character of the Boss. But without Woodifield the character sketch of the Boss would remain incomplete. The Boss's conversation with Old Woodifield brings out the softness of his heart. The Boss's offer of whisky to his old friend is a gesture of tenderness and sympathy. The Boss was so sympathetic toward his old friend that at the time of his departure he followed him to the door and saw him out. Woodifield and the Boss had some similarities. Both of them were advanced in age and they had become victims of stupid war. Both of them had lost their sons in the First World War. As a weak man Woodifield had become a pathetic figure after the premature death of his son. But the death of his only son made the Boss, a man of strong personality, a tragic figure. So it is seen that the character of old Woodifield serves a foil to that of the Boss.

In Developing the Plot: The plot of Katherine Mansfield's “The Fly” is based on two events old Woodifield's visit to the Boss and the Boss's action in killing an insignificant fly. The two events are closely connected. It is Woodifield's visit that leads to the Boss's killing of the fly. While giving an account of his daughters' recent visit to Belgium Woodifield touched on the condition of the grave of the Youngman who died during the first World War. Even a casual mention of the grave of his son was enough to cause serious perturbation in the mind of the Boss. After the departure of old Woodifield the Boss tried to lighten the burden of his grief by Weeping, but he could not weep as his grief was too deep for tears. Then he became absentminded and began to think of his dead son. In that mood he killed the fly without knowing what he was doing.

Conclusion: Thus it is seen that Old Woodfield has performed some important function in Katherine Mansfield's, "The Fly". The pathetic condition of this old man helps us to understand the mood of post-war depression in Europe. He serves as a foil to the protagonist of the story and makes significant condition to the development of the plot