
Theme of Grief in Katherine Mansfield's *The Fly*

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Abstract:Katherine Mansfield is widely considered as one of the best short story writers of her period. She revolutionised the 20th century English short story. "The Fly" explores an elderly man's internal experience of grief over his son's death as he torments a fly attempting to escape an inkpot in his office. Published a year before the end of Mansfield's tragically short life, "The Fly" perfectly captures the writing style that made her an influential author in the Modernist movement. At a first instance the story seems to be a simple one but it has deep connotations.

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Katherine Mansfield is widely considered as one of the best short story writers of her period. She revolutionised the 20th century English short story. Mansfield had always been concerned with notions of authenticity. As an early devotee of Oscar Wilde, she was thoroughly versed in the idea of the 'mask'-the false self, the social self behind which the 'real' self sat watching and judging and rejecting. As a schoolgirl she had copied Wilde's epigrams into her notebook: 'Being

natural is simply a pose-and the most irritating pose I know.' She had taken from Wilde a kind of delight in the artificiality of the mask, if one had to hide, it may as well be cleverly and knowingly done.

The short story "The Fly" first appeared in the British publication *The Nation and Athenaeum* in 1922. Set in the shadow of World War I, "The Fly" explores an elderly man's internal experience of grief over his son's death as he torments a fly attempting to escape an inkpot in his office. Published a year before the end of Mansfield's tragically short life, "The Fly" perfectly captures the writing style that made her an influential author in the Modernist movement. At a first instance the story seems to be a simple one but it has deep connotations.

The Fly' is comprised of three distinct sections, which deal with old Mr. Woodifield, the memory of a dead son, and the death of a fly, respectively. The title derives from the last episode, which deftly incorporates the other parts into a narrative unity. The main character is a man called 'Boss', who, despite his relatively advanced age, runs a firm. Trendiness, comfort, and luxury are the dominant values, which undoubtedly serve to define the type of living the owner quests for. The renovation of the office is founded in his conviction that nothing

could prevent him from moving forward, that his passion for life and entrepreneurship knows no bounds.

Inevitably, his attitude tends to be pompous and his self-esteem unabashedly aggrandized, both at times to the point of sheer arrogance. There is, however, one thing that is 'not new' in his office, the 'old' photograph of his son who was killed in the war six years earlier. The story traces the process of an inner conflict which abruptly besets this ageing businessman and hints at what he has so far kept suppressed in the subliminal domain of his being. The idea of mortality looms large in 'The Fly'. An epitome of life force and worldly ambition, the hero appears to be far removed from the theme. Yet the two seemingly antithetical elements converge at the finale where the story unveils its narrative scheme and meaning.

The Boss is exposed to repeated onsets of the thoughts and images of death. The first assault is launched in the deceptive figure of the helpless Mr. Woodifield, who had a stroke some time ago. The most potent incident that signals his lethargy and forthcoming death is when he fails to recall the message he intended to convey to his friend when he left home in the morning. While Mr. Woodifield strives frantically to remember it, signs of his frustration and panic pathetically become ostensible: 'His hands began to tremble, and patches of red showed above his beard'. But nothing comes back to him, and time lapses relentlessly, to his embarrassment and to the Boss's pity. This patronizing compassion persuades him to seek some way to entertain his friend, to

warm him up, before he sends him out into the cold street. At the same time, basking in an overwhelming sense of superiority, the Boss wishes to flaunt more of his power and influence.

He takes out a bottle of whisky which he claims to be from Windsor Castle. He pours it into two tumblers and says, 'It wouldn't hurt a child' (354). Woodifield, as a matter of fact, sits in the hero's luxurious chair as 'a baby peers out of its pram'. This act of benevolence apparently pleases the doer more than the recipient. The Boss feels further elated by the sight of the miserable guy savouring a drink which is now entirely forbidden to have it at home. The meeting is expected to taper off at the emptying of the tumblers. But life is invariably unpredictable, punctuated with surprises and mishaps. Something beyond the Boss's imagination or anticipation takes place to his friend. Old Woodifield's half-dead brain, revitalized and set back at work by the fiery drink, retrieves the lost message out of oblivion. The loser then goes on to execute the least expected counterattack and catch the victor off guard. The retrieved topic thrusts to the Boss the very last thing that he would face up to. With his self-esteem restored, Mr. Woodifield relates with gusto and verve that his daughters recently made a trip to Belgium to pay homage to his son who had been killed in the war and also that they stumbled upon the grave of his friend's son.

The account instantly shatters the hero's high spirits and stems the smooth flow of his triumphant words and actions.

The tables are turned, and the vanquished roars back with a self-pleasing wisecrack and hearty laugh. 'Only a quiver in his eyelids' is all the immediate response the hero manages to make. In a hilarious mood, old Woodifield finishes his tale and his role in the story, while the Boss is left in a mixed state of shock and bewilderment.

The latter, in his attempt not to let the former notice the sudden change of his mood, merely utters, 'Quite right, quite right!' . The hero realizes further less that he is now not too different from what old Woodifield is. In the aftermath of old Woodifield's revelation, the Boss decides to confine himself in his room, somewhat like his friend who is 'boxed' at home. If his son buried in a foreign grave, Macey waiting all day in his 'cubby hole' (355), and the fly trapped in a tiny inkpot are taken together, who will be 'free' in this tale? All the characters are incarcerated in one way or another and eventually tied together by the mutual bond of mortality. The Boss walks with his 'firm heavy steps' and 'plump [s] down' his 'fat body' in his chair . An ambience of age and weariness suddenly thickens around him, although some of the quoted phrases can be construed as indicative of robustness and strength. At any rate, the vivid reality of his only son's death prompts the Boss to resort to the same old ritual that he has so far conducted at innumerable times. He knows that allusion to the boy, no matter how slight or casual it might be, instantly sets him in a tear-jerking mode. He used to think that time would never console his grief, that his sense of loss would never be

atoned, and that he would never cease to mourn over that bereavement.

But the ritual cannot be observed any more, with no tears rising in his eyes nor uncontrollable emotions overtaking him. Something has changed in him, and he is dismayed at it. The second occasion where things do not develop as the hero wishes allows for two explanations in the light of the theme and context of the story. First, his departure from mourning signifies that the span of six years has healed the traumatic suffering inflicted on him without his own realization. In other words, life ought to go on thus for the sake of its own preservation, forgetting death and deserting the dead. Secondly, it might be true that the hero, consciously or unconsciously, at all times dodges any reference to death out of his latent, morbid fear of it. If so, he has annihilated the memories of his only son and sacrificed his death in exchange for his own spiritual and psychological welfare. In this sense, the son has been killed twice, in the battlefield and in the heart of his own father. The first reading focuses on the Boss's positive, aggressive attitude toward life. In the second reading, light is shed on the delineation of him as a selfish, cold-hearted businessman who strives to delude himself under the illusory guise of immortality to forestall the approaching shadow of death. The first reading may be examined for its validity by the enquiry of what prevents the Boss from visiting his son's grave in Belgium. There is no question that he can afford the time, expenses and physical strength required for the trip. His son was once the driving

force for his success in the world of business. Now, six years after the boy's death, the hero is engrossed in his job as much as, or actually more than, when the boy was serving his apprenticeship. Despite the elimination of the only reason for his devotion to hard work, the Boss's motivation remains intact. Truly, the son's death at first narrowed down his scope of life to sad memories and tears. In due course, the Boss started to rebuild himself, like Phoenix, by fixing his attention exclusively on what he was best at - business. This crave, almost greed, for life on his part, however, does not really explain his alertness at old Woodfield's reminder of his son's death. Neither does he appear to have come to terms with it.

The negation of the first interpretation automatically shifts focus on the second possibility. At that moment, the Boss, as if to convince or persuade himself, decides to take a glimpse at the photo of his son on the desk. The boy looks like a stranger, not exactly the same boy he used to love. The change in his feeling, no doubt under the influence of the Woodfield effect, is congruous with the termination of his mourning ritual. Just as the tree clings to its last leaves, the Boss clings, with uncommon tenacity and determination, to the shore of life, from which he has perhaps shoved the dead boy away and driven him over to an unknown land which he thinks he has nothing to do with.

His mood of estrangement is generated by the complicated system which his instinct for self-preservation has cultivated for survival and prosperity over

the years. His exorbitant attachment to life, which borders on obsession or phobia, tutors him to deceive, if not deny, the reality and take his son as 'asleep', not dead: '---as lying unchanged, unblemished in his uniform, asleep for ever' (356). If the boy is considered merely 'absent' in the Boss's warped vision and twisted mentality, the issue of his visit to Belgium will not really torment his conscience but quicken the healing process of his bruised heart. Moreover, what lies under this mechanism of distortion is the stern fact that the hero lacks spiritual strength to face the theme of mortality when his flesh and blood are in question, and worst of all when his own life is at stake. It takes genuine courage to confront, fight or accept death, since no life can aspire for victory in its battle against death.

'The Fly' has a marked turn here. The Boss's attention is abruptly diverted from the son's photo, as if he had achieved psychological separation from him. The hero notices a little insect wriggling in the inkpot on his desk. The theme of death has so far been dealt with indirectly, through imagery, reference and implication. The death of the fly on the contrary, tackles it squarely and straightforwardly through visualization. Death is presented so blatantly in its plainest phase that its mystery, horror, and absurdity are all laid bare. As a result, it ceases to be a vague notion remote from reality and becomes a solid entity, a 'thing' equipped with presence and banality, with shocking corporeality and alarming emptiness.

The Boss is no longer allowed to dodge it, because he inadvertently shifts

his own position from a witness or bystander to a 'perpetrator'. Death has finally caught up with him. The fly in the inkpot assumes a triple role in its relationship with the hero: that is, primarily as a mirror image of him, then as a plaything for him, and finally as a ghastly messenger to him. Boss, the embattled creature seems determined to surmount any difficulty that falls on it and to pursue the glory and dignity of life. 'A plucky little devil' is the name he bestows on it with affection and admiration. Each time it bravely comes through the massive trial of dripping ink, his emotion is further elevated, his cheering more stimulated, and his expectation raised higher. Apparently, he begins to see his own endeavour of the past years reflected in the desperate struggle of the fly. His words of encouragement for its dauntlessness and resilience, 'You artful little b...' (358) , manifest his personal wish that it should not and will not give up but overcome any obstacle and keep going, exactly like him. After the unpleasant anecdotes of old Woodifield and the dead son, the Boss craves for a tangible and irrefutable exemplar of life which can prove vicariously for him that the shadow of death can be withstood, resisted and even pushed back. The tiny inkpot marks a crossroad where life and death meet, where an instinctive reaction for survival and an inveterate desire for release from the fear of death entangle each other. Secondly, the Boss has the fate of the fly at his mercy, although he has no intention at all to destroy it. It can be contended from the perspective of the manipulation of fate

that the insect is to the hero what he is to God. Pamela Dunbar (69) has pointed out the likelihood of allusion to King Lear: 'As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' gods, / They kill us for their sport' (IV. 1. 36-37). In offering whisky to Mr. Woodifield, the Boss mentioned a short while earlier that 'it is sacrilege to tamper with good stuff'. How sacrilegious would it be to tamper with life? Without much scrutiny or deliberation, the hero yields himself up to the temptation to test the fly's will power and life force. He thereby meddles with God's work and flirts with death. Unlike the Creator, however, the Boss is possessed of no knowledge about the range and boundary of life, beyond which death reigns. What ought to be added concerning the second role of the fly is the equation of the hero's status with that of the other characters. By allowing himself to play the naughtiness of boyhood, the Boss slips into a state of mind which, in the conceptual structure of the story, can be aligned with the babyhood in which Woodifield is placed and the puberty in which the dead son is remembered forever. The network of references and allusions to death nullifies the Boss's superiority and installs him abreast with the other two characters in terms of spiritual and psychological maturity.

The moral of this balancing act is that all humanity is equal before the grand leveller and as fragile as a helpless fly. The final role of the fly is to envisage Father Time, who visits the sick, the old, and the unfortunate without warning and ruthlessly mows them down. Submitted to the Boss's whimsical cruelty, the fly continues to

move its legs strenuously like a 'scythe' (357). It defies a heavy drip of the dark liquid once and twice, but thrice turns out to be unbearable. The final drip brings end to the Fly. The end comes all of a sudden, entirely independent of his plan of game. The fly now lies still, unresponsive to the hero's 'Come on' and 'Look sharp!' .

It has absolutely gone beyond his control and into the embrace of death. What is crucial in this scene is that the fly does not die for nothing. Either for retribution or as a token of their brief comradeship, it leaves its executioner in 'such a grinding feeling of wretchedness that he feel [s] positively frightened' . The cause of his fright is not specified in the text but can be tracked to his momentary encounter with death, which takes the shape of Father Time invoked by the combination of 'scythe' and 'grinding'. This personification of death conveys a silent but unequivocal message to the Boss, the message that any life is doomed to perish inevitably and that his turn is not too far behind. It can be presumed that, while he looks down at the sodden body of the fly, he perceives Father Time staring up at him with his newly-ground scythe in his hand, a kind of *deja vu* in reversal which recalls Woodifield's daughters looking down at the grave of the Boss's son. Before he attains courage to confront death, the hero discovers himself to be the object of its glaring gaze. Like old Woodifield and the dead son, the fly now becomes something detestable to him. The Boss roughly scoops it with a paper knife and flips it into the wastepaper basket. The way he disposes of the body suggests how he has

disposed of his friendship with Woodifield and the memories of his son. According to Saralyn R. Daly, "The boss has treated his son as he treated the fly, alternately assisting and encouraging, then crushing".

'The Fly' is a tale of *memento mori* whose ending produces a lingering aftertaste of gloom and anxiety. The Boss, stupefied in a cold sweat and wondering what he has been thinking about, becomes a perfect copy of old Mr. Woodifield. In this sense, the plot circulates and returns where it took off. Ever lacking in the ability for self-reflection and objective scrutiny of circumstances, the hero is never able to comprehend what drama of life has just been played before him and what part he has himself played in it, not to mention who he is and where he stands. He is surely to be immersed again in the business a few hours later, with Mr. Woodifield and his son clearly driven out of his mind. The moments of epiphany will never visit him. Neither is his original tender love for the son regained. Scared into temporary amnesia, the Boss is absorbed in his own personal fear of old age, degeneration and death. Having kept much of its emotional dimension untold, the story comes to a halt with its hero reduced to a defeated old man.

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