

# The Fly, Katherine Mansfield

## Introduction

### **“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.

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. Woodifield, making his weekly visit to the office where he worked before suffering a stroke. Woodifield 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, Woodifield thinks, to see the boss going so strong. Woodifield 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 Woodifield 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 Woodifield, but by the end of the story both men have forgotten about their son's deaths. Woodifield, 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 Woodifield 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 Woodifield 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 Gerhardi, 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.

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