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The Use of Symbolism in Katherine Mansfield's "The Fly"

"The Fly," by Katherine Mansfield, is a short story which can be understood best as social criticism. It has long been a staple of literature for authors to veil social criticism with allegory and symbolism in subtle ways, thus forcing the reader to determine for himself what a story may actually mean. For example, the act of the boss dropping ink onto the fly repeatedly to see what it will do makes little sense if taken at face value, but the scene begins to make sense once it is acknowledged that the boss and the fly, as well as the situation itself, are symbols best understood in the context of World War One. In fact, it can be demonstrated that the use of symbolism and allegory is carefully employed in "The Fly" in order to criticise the British military leaders and the elder generation of the early twentieth century who supported the first World War out of unthinking patriotism and a childish desire to win at all costs, themselves remaining willfully ignorant of the horrors of modern warfare into which they sent their nation's sons.

The fly, first and foremost, is a symbol of the young men who went to war not knowing what horrors awaited them. We are given a glimpse into the fly's point of view in the line which reads, "The horrible danger was over; it had escaped; it was ready for life again" (75). Likewise, no young men who are sent off to war believe that they are going to die. Just as the fly escapes one close scrape with death only to find itself doused with one blot of ink, then another, and another, many of the young soldiers in World War One were thrust forward into battle again and again until they, like the fly, were killed. As the fly is the boss's plaything, able to live or die based on the latter's whim, the soldiers were little more than pawns in a game waged by old men who knew nothing of what the war was truly like on the frontline.

The boss can be seen as a symbol of the elder class of British who blindly supported the war for the sake of war regardless of the fate of their sons and grandsons. This question must first be asked: Does the boss truly grieve for his son? It may be inferred from the following references that his attempt to mourn is done in order to prove to himself and everyone else that he is very patriotic and has more reason to grieve than anyone. In fact, the boss seems to have set himself up as chief mourner, as indicated in the text: "Other men perhaps might recover, might live their loss down, but not he" (75). After all, "his boy was an only son" (75) who died in the service of the British Empire. The line which reads, "'I'll see nobody for half an hour, Macey,' said the boss. 'Understand? Nobody at all,'" (74) is a strong indication that Macey and the rest of the office staff know full well that the boss has "arranged to weep" (74), indicating that the boss's grief is all for show and that he is trying to fool himself and everyone else that he remains in mourning for his son. His attitude concerning the death of his son seems very emotional on the face of it, but he seems to mourn in a very calculated way, as evidenced in the line which goes, "He wanted, he intended, he had arranged to weep" (74). However,

the fact that, after the episode with the fly, he has completely forgotten that he had “arranged to weep” (74) for his son is strong evidence that his surface emotions are not genuine.

The boss also keeps a photographic portrait of his son dressed in his army uniform in his office, despite the fact that he does not particularly like it. “The boss took his hands from his face; he was puzzled. Something seemed to be wrong with him. He wasn’t feeling as he wanted to feel. He decided to get up and have a look at the boy’s photograph. But it wasn’t a favourite photograph of his; the expression was unnatural. It was cold, even stern-looking. The boy had never looked like that” (75). If he wanted to remind himself of the way his son really was, then he surely could have picked a better photograph to adorn his office wall. This photograph seems to be there in order to properly motivate him to mourn when he “arranges” to do so, as well as to exhibit his patriotism. It also allows him to preserve the image of his son as a soldier unblemished by warfare. The truth of his son’s wartime death, which was likely very grisly and painful, is something he refuses to acknowledge, as indicated by the passage which reads, “It was exactly as though the earth had opened and he had seen the boy lying there with Woodifield’s girls staring down at him. For it was strange. Although over six years had passed away, the boss never thought of the boy except as lying unchanged, unblemished in his uniform, asleep for ever” (75). After all, “for various reasons the boss had not been across” (74) to visit his son’s grave in Belgium. To do this would shatter the image in his mind of his son being the type of valiant soldier popularised in wartime propaganda.

The boss is thus also symbolic of the inept military leaders who never saw the war firsthand but planned the battles from well behind the front and who did not care as much about the fate of the young soldiers who fought their battles as much as winning the war. Indeed, when the boss watches the fly struggle for life after having dropped a blot of ink upon it, his thoughts read like the type of patriotic, yet hollow-sounding, slogans a British military leader at the time would try to rally his troops with: “He’s a plucky little devil, thought the boss, and he felt a real admiration for the fly’s courage. That was the way to tackle things; that was the right spirit. Never say die” (75-6). He later adds “Look sharp!” (76) to this list of hackneyed phrases. The act of dropping ink upon the fly after watching it struggle back to life is itself symbolic of the way the young soldiers were sent off to various battles which served no purpose but to reduce the numbers of soldiers on both sides in that war of attrition. The boss treats the fly as a plaything, just as the British military leaders treated their soldiers in the “game of war.” He pushes the fly to its limit and, once he sees that the fly is beginning to recover from the last blot of ink, he drops just one more which, of course, ends up killing the fly. One may easily imagine that, if the boss is given an endless supply of flies to play within such a way, he will never grown tired of playing his game with each and every one of them, casually tossing aside their corpses when they prove to be physically and mentally unable to handle the challenges he sets before them, just as the British generals threw a seemingly endless supply of soldiers into the slaughtering grounds of World War One.

This short story is an excellent example of social criticism through symbolism and allegory. Furthermore, it holds a lesson within it which is as important today as it was when it was originally published in 1923: War is not a game. The last line of this short story which reads, “For the life of him he could not remember” (76), must be taken as a warning to all to remember the hard-won lessons of war “lest we forget” and find ourselves in a war which is much worse. Sadly, the war-torn history of the world in the eighty-five years and more since the end of the so-called “War to End All Wars” has proven that mankind has yet to learn the ultimate folly of war.