

MODULE- III

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KATHERINE MANSFIELD : *THE FLY*

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1.1 : AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

An eminent New Zealand modernist short story writer Kathleen Mansfield Murry was born and reared up in Wellington , New Zealand and became famous in her pen name Katherine Mansfield. She was born in 1888 in a socially decent family, her Grandfather Arthur Beauchamp , being a Picton electorate in Parliament and her father Harold Beauchamp was knighted in 1923. Katherine spent her happiest childhood days in Karori in 1893 and her first printed stories appeared in the High School Reporter and the Wellington Girls' High School magazine in 1898 and 1899. Katherine attended Queen's College in 1903 and getting inspired by the French Symbolists and Oscar Wilde , she became a dedicated editor of the college magazine which got much applause for her down-to-earth attitude and approach to life and works. After certain personal ups and downs she returned to London in January 1910 and published more than a dozen articles in A.R. Orage's socialist magazine *The New Age* and again in 1916 she contributed her most enchanting writings of several stories. In December 1917 Mansfield was diagnosed with tuberculosis and in 1922 she was moved to France for a rigorous treatment but in January 1923 after suffering a fatal pulmonary haemorrhage she died.

1.2: THE FLY AS A SHORT STORY

The Fly of Katherine Mansfield is a typically modern story in the Chekov tradition with plot as a subsidiary factor. Like some other Mansfield stories, like *Bliss*, *The Daughters of the Late Colonel*, so remarkable in their appeal, *the Fly* does not have much of a story to tell. It depicts a mood, gives us the drama in a little situation which is charged all the same with over-whelming significance. There is besides what is called "atmosphere" which often calls to mind a Lawrence story, sensuous and alive in detail.

It is a most casual happening the fall of a fly into the inkpot on which the story is made to turn. It brings to the surface how grief also eased by shedding of lonely tears quite often could dry up, how it could undergo a process of transformation and metamorphosis. It is a story of how suffering turns into animus or how the fountain head exhausting itself leaves behind, a heart arid, insensitive.

After Woodfield has left with a reference to the cemetery in Belgium in which his young son was laid in the course of the war, the Boss shuts himself up, preparing to disburden himself in the loneliness of his room. The sudden reference to his son has raked up his old sores. And now something happens, something apparently trivial not at all connected with the thoughts of his son or the host of associations which comes crowding back to him. The Boss noticed that a fly has fallen into his broad inkpot. He was absorbed by the struggle of this tiny little thing as it tries again and again to clamber out of the inkpot but falls off every time, so slippery are the sides of the inkpot. He can almost perceive the message of those struggling legs, "Help! Help! Said those struggling legs!" the fly must have represented to the Boss his own pathetic self- trying to struggle out of life's emptiness. He retrieves it by the end of his pen on to a piece of blotting paper, where it lies still for a fraction of a second. He finds it slowly coming back to itself, shedding the ink, clearing its own person.

Then he has a most perverse impulse. He dips his pen into the inkpot and drops on the fly a blob of ink. The fly is overpowered scared out of its wits, but the task of trying to recover is not given up. The Boss pours now a second drop. It is stunned, immobilized, for a while till it makes a feeble attempt to move again. He cannot but admire the courage of this assertion on the part of the fly. All the same he cannot resist pouring another drop of ink, be it the last drop. The fly does not make any more move. It died. The Boss plays fate to the fly, saving it from near-extinction and then dealing out at it one blow after another till its painful endeavor for survival is completely set at naught. And he himself is not quite aware why he did what he has done. "What was it? It was... He took out his handkerchief for the life of him he could not remember."

The Fly passes what a certain short story writer described as the chief-test of a successful story, "more is left in than is left out." The real story is in the essence of the situation, implied without being made obvious. It is not just the story of the Boss's sorrow over his dead son; it is a preoccupation with his own self, his agony, his grievance against his own woe which transmutes his role of sufferer into the role of one who can also inflict suffering. Unknowingly he undergoes a drastic temporary conversion as it were. The fly fallen in the inkpot is both a symbol and the motive for a second story, almost to ensue out of the initial tale of a suffering man whom Woodfield's observation left revealed to us.

The fly is a story which abounds in irony and reversal and as much it acquires its special complexity and tension. Full of suggestiveness it raises questions to which we do not have adequate answers.

1.3: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FLY-EPISODE AND ITS SYMBOLICAL MEANING

Although Katherine Mansfield has entitled her story, *The Fly*, one comes to the fly-episode only towards the end of the story, and, consequently, the connections with the first part of the tale, are not immediately apparent. Of course, it is obvious from the title that the authoress has a deflating or belittling motive as the story has not been named after its protagonist, the Boss. Although a large part of the story deals with the boss's actions and thoughts, Mansfield names the story after the fly, which is proverbially at the mercy of the 'wanton boys':

*As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sports.*

Shakespeare, *King Lear*.

The Boss is shown to be as powerless to control and to mould his own life and fate, as the fly is, when he plays with it. So, it is only in a deeper symbolism that one must seek the significance, both of these episode, as well as, of the title of the story.

In this story, the fly and its episode serve as a perfect analogy and an unconscious symbolic representation or externalization of the Boss's life and Character. Both of these entities are open to a number of interpretations, sometimes even contradicting each other. For instance, as the editor of the anthology, Michael Thorpe has said, in this story Mansfield's intention may either be to highlight the pathos and the tragedy of the Boss's life and character, or, her purpose may even be to impress upon the reader the essential meaninglessness of human life, even of all life itself. Besides these extremist positions, there can be other intermediate interpretations as well.

The incident centering around the fly is so simple, so ordinary that any reader would have to re-read the story a number of times, to discover its full significance. Some readers may even wonder whether the story had any meaning at all. Naturally,

depending upon the character and the circumstances of the individual reader , there would be a wide variations in the range of impressions and interpretations. However, one can narrow the margin of error by remembering that every good short story , to use Maugham's words, should aim at ' singleness of effect and impression.' In addition, a critic or a reader can also make his task easier by remembering Lukacs' stipulation that the short story is the most appropriate literary form for giving expression to the role played by Chance in human life. In other words , the function of accidents , coincidences and the random and uncontrollable sequence of events that we call life , are the chosen subject matter of the short story.

In this short story we are first introduced to the Boss , a prosperous, upper-middle-class man of ample means, good health and most importantly, a man still in the full possession of his faculties; however, one's sympathies are somewhat alienated by the realization that he is rather vain, a man with a stiff upper lip , ostentatious, colorless, tensed up and rather formal and also pugnacious and resilient. He is presented both as a man talking to himself , as well as, conversing with all his erstwhile colleague and contemporary , Woodifield, and his 'office boy', Macey. The story is told through three methods devices or voices – firstly, there are the Boss's monologues, then there are the conversations between him and his own crony Woodifield, and, lastly, there is the voice of the narrator which can be detected in the generalizations , the universal truth and the narrative descriptions , even though these are mixed up with the other details of the story.

Both the woodifield and the fly – episode , bring out the cruel and almost sadistic pleasure that the Boss gets out of playing around with creatures less powerful than himself. In addition , the fly gratifies and pleases the Boss more than Woddifield, particularly because of its utter helplessness and its being completely at his mercy; even the life and the death of the fly depend upon the idle passing whims of the Boss. The connotations of the word "Boss" always have an association of power. Like all bosses the Boss in Mansfield's story is a master , an employer , a domestic tyrant and something of a tyrannical parent. It is also remarkable that Mansfield has given the Boss only a generic or class name or identity. He has no individual name, neither a patronymic, nor a Christian name, nor even a nickname. Although one is given a considerable amount of information about his public and private life, one is not given either the name or the name of his son.

The fly in the story also presumably represents the Boss's unconscious self and its realization , an aspect of his personality that has always fascinated and eluded him. Therefore, every drop of ink spitted on the fly can be interpreted as a conscious effort on the part of the Boss to draw out or suppress the subconscious thoughts and realizations, which suddenly and embarrassingly surface to the level of his conscious mind , and , he stands perilously close to the fatal realization of his own real weakness and defeat.

1.4 CONCLUSION

Mansfield seems to join Voltaire , the cynical and mocking philosopher, when he points out the absurdity of man's pride in his famous view of the world as an atom of mud with maggots crawling over it. Life is equally meaningless , whether for the Ubermensch or for the hodman. *The Fly* by Mansfield , therefore, takes its place beside such similar 20th century works as Kafka's short stories , Sartre's *The Flies*, Baudelaire's poems (particularly *Le Gigantesse*) , and Genet's plays.

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1.6 QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Discuss the characters of Mr. Woodfield or Boss in Katherine Mansfield's short story "The Fly."
2. What is the central theme of "The Fly"?
3. In the short story "The Fly" by Katherine Mansfield, why was the boss unnamed?
4. Explain what the fly signifies in the story 'The Fly' by Katherine Mansfield.
5. What is the main theme of "The Fly" by Katherine Mansfield?