

# "the fly" by katherine mansfield essay sample

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## **“ The Fly” by Katherine Mansfield Essay Sample**

Humiliation and enslavement for the sadist are simply the means to an end. However, suffering is the sadist’s trademark as there is no greater power over another than that of inflicting pain and forcing them to suffer without the benefit of self-defence. In fact, the pure pleasure in the complete domination over another is the very essence of the sadistic drive. In her short, compelling story “ The Fly,” Mansfield details how a commonplace incident of fly killing defines the sadistic, arrogant, and shallow nature of a powerful businessman. The nameless boss’s cruel disrespect for this simple but valid life form parallels his disrespect for the greater community of man. To further highlight his character deficits, Mansfield contrasts the egocentric, ambitious boss to others who have formed close interpersonal relationships in their community. Moreover, the boss’s affluent lifestyle can never offset his absence of emotion. The fly also personifies the boss’s inability to genuinely grieve the death of his son and reconcile the loss of a family member at a deeply personal level.

The tragicomic aspect of the incident with the fly emphasizes the boss’s internal drama rather than plot. Therefore, the killing of a fly in this story, however banal, mirrors the way this sadistic, cruel, God-like boss treats others, and also illustrates the extent of his emotional disconnection to his surrounding world. As a successful businessman, the boss thoroughly relishes his status and the power he wields over others. He flaunts his prosperity and takes particular pleasure in impressing “ that frail, old figure in the muffler”(73), Mr. Woodfield, who counts his pennies and even

comments on the "price of jam." (74). However, upon closer scrutiny, the goal-oriented life of the aggressive business magnate compares poorly to the people-oriented one of the passive stroke victim, Mr. Woodfield. The senile retiree is cared for by a loving family who pamper and keep him "boxed up in the house every day of the week except Tuesday" when he is "dressed and brushed and allowed to cut back to the City" to visit "his friend," (73) the boss. Conversely, the boss does not consider Mr. Woodfield a friend at all; he just likes to assert his authority and "to have it [his room] admired." (73).

Although he offers the old man a drink of a fine whiskey from the "cellars of Windsor Castle", the boss only does so to position himself above the Woodfield women's regulations who don't permit him to "touch it [whiskey] at home" (74). Although both men's sons died in World War I, they respond differently to their respective losses. The senile albeit emotionally intact Mr. Woodfield has fully accepted the death of his son, Reggie, and speaks of his loss without reservation. He takes quiet comfort knowing that his son is buried in a "beautifully looked after" cemetery that is "neat as a garden" with "flowers growing on all the graves" (74). Contrarily, the self-absorbed boss does not speak of his own son and does not show any interest in visiting his grave. Throughout the story it is evident that the dominant boss has dehumanized his loyal messenger, Macey, who dodges "in and out of his cubby-hole like a dog that expects to be taken for a walk" (74) to a death-in-life existence.

In order to placate a cruel, powerful master, Macey had to surrender his dignity as a man at some time in the past, when he became the faithful dog. The contemptible boss does not show the grey-haired Macey any respect despite his years of service and his advanced age. His contempt is evident at the end of the story when the sadistic, omnipotent boss orders the dutiful "old dog" "to look sharp" (76) in the same way he orders the dead fly after he has destroyed it. Clearly, the boss's shallowness compromises his primary relations with others. Furthermore, his flat emotional affect prohibits him from adequately feeling genuine affection for others, including his own son. Alone in his office, the boss sets aside a half hour for his regular appointment with grief but is annoyed by his failure to emote because "he wanted, he intended, he had arranged to weep." (74). While he effectively mimics appropriate emotions in public and is highly skilled at pretending deep affection, genuine warmth, compassion, and grief are foreign to the boss. Elevating himself over others, he publicly claims that he has more grief than anyone else, and that he will never recover from the loss of his only son. He states that "time could make no difference" (75). However, privately he simply induces "a violent fit of weeping" at a convenient time. At best, the ruthless boss's tears are rooted in self-pity as he believes that he had "slaved, denied himself, kept going all those years without the promise of the boy's stepping into his shoes and carrying on where he left off" (75). He experiences shallow relationships with others like Woodfield, but the deep affection reserved by most of us for our loved ones is too vague and unimportant to him as evidenced by his amnesia at the end of the story. Instead of personalizing the loss of his son, the boss merely visualizes the "

boy" through other people's eyes. His insatiable ego enjoys " the congratulations he had received as the boy's father" as well as the boy's " popularity with the staff" (75). " Ever since his [son's] birth the boss had worked at building up this business for him"(75), so he interprets his son's untimely death as a failed financial venture, measurable by his son's inability to contribute to the company. The boy's personality was diametrically opposed to his disconnected father's as he related well to others and " was just his bright natural self, with the right word for everybody" (75).

The son's warm, " simply splendid" (75) view of life was far removed from the cold, " look sharp" philosophy of his domineering father. The boss's need to reciprocate love is virtually non-existent, as are his shallow emotional ties to family. Therefore, at an unconscious level, he sees no reason to maintain familial contact, especially with a dead, unproductive child. However, rather than recognizing that he cannot feel, the disconnected boss blames his son's photograph for his absence of emotion as " it wasn't a favourite photograph of his; the expression was unnatural" (75). Although he's had this photograph in his office for the last six years, he just now realizes how serious his son looked in it. This inattention to detail further highlights his shallow feelings for his son. Paradoxically, when he can no longer counterfeit emotion, the boss turns to tormenting a fly. This is a situation where he can succeed and remain powerful as " the boss". At first, the God-like boss rescues the fly, picks it out of the ink, and shakes " it on to a piece of blotting-paper" (75).

Mansfield skillfully uses the omniscient point of view in the story so that we can identify with the fly's feelings. We empathize with the little fly and rejoice as it rubs its legs " joyfully" thinking that " the horrible danger was over; it [fly] had escaped; it was ready for life again"(75). When the sadistic boss dumps another blot on it, we feel " absolutely cowed, stunned" (75) and join the fly as it " painfully" starts the slow cleaning and recovery process. In keeping with his unfeeling nature, the omnipotent boss irreverently cheers " the plucky little devil" (75) for surviving the second onslaught, but instead of respecting the valiant fly's " never say die" (75) struggle for life, he viciously applies another ink drop. Mansfield paints us a patently absurd picture of the cruel boss deriving pure pleasure from the torment he is inflicting while sadistically addressing the doomed fly tenderly as " you artful little b)"(76). In a God-like manner, the boss determines " that this time should be the last" and drops the last bomb for the kill. In the boss's world, he determines the fate of others. We are saddened to see the " dragged" fly die on the " soaked blotting paper." (76) despite the boss's ridiculous command to revive and " look sharp" (76).

The boss is consumed by feelings of " wretchedness" that " for the life of him he could not remember" (76) what he had been thinking prior to the fly incident, indicating he can't psychologically accept that his grief for his son is as dead as the fly. Despite feeling " frightened," the bullying boss soon recovers by ordering his " old dog" Macey to fetch some blotting paper. On one hand, the fly's fateful struggle in this story portrays the shabby treatment people receive from the omnipotent boss. On the other hand, the boss represents those tyrants in society who " like flies to wanton boys"

derive pleasure from causing others to suffer. In essence, his amnesia epitomizes just how little the death of his only child really affected the emotionally numb boss. Ironically, his memory loss also places him on par with the senile Mr. Woodfield, who has trouble remembering his daughters' visit to Reggie's grave, foreshadowing the ultimate death of his son's memory in his own mind.

In the end, it is the reader, rather than the self-interested protagonist, who detects the symbolic meaning of the fly. Despite his self-pity for the years spent on grooming a son who died without fulfilling the "promise" (75), the boss does not empathize with his age peers, Woodfield and Macey, or even the fly he kills. The pattern of his relationships with others parallels the suffering and death of the fly. Like the fly, other people in his life struggle, hope, and rise, becoming more feeble each time they confront him, until at last destabilized, they succumb to his domination. Although he is a vigorous, wealthy, and self-important man, the sadistic boss is dead to feeling. The perceptive reader concludes that perhaps he has always been too self-absorbed to have ever felt anything for anyone. The boss can basically be thought of as an emotional shell; the surface is all there, but there is no substance. He may know the words of emotion but not the music.