

# THE FLY

## ANALYSIS

In *The Fly* by Katherine Mansfield we have the theme of control, ignorance, sacrifice, responsibility and war. Taken from her *The Doves' Nest and Other Stories* collection the story is narrated in the third person by an unnamed narrator and after reading the story the reader realises that Mansfield may be using the setting of the story (the Boss' office) to explore the theme of control. The reader is aware that Woodifield has told the boss that the office is 'very snug.' Also we are aware that the office has been newly decorated on the boss' instructions. This may be important as it suggests that the boss is in control of his environment (the office). The reader also senses that the boss, while dropping the ink from the pen onto the fly is exerting a level of control. At first he places one or two drops of ink on the fly before eventually adding some more. At all times he appears to be in control. It is also noticeable that he orders Macey not to disturb him, again this would further suggest that the boss is in control. It is possible that by highlighting the fact that the boss is in control of his environment (and others) that Mansfield is not only showing the reader who (literally) is boss but she may also be likening the actions of the boss to those of the old generals who were responsible for trying to control and plan the outcome of World War I.

There is also some symbolism in the story which may be important. The fly can be seen to symbolise the young men who were sent to fight in the war and who like the fly died. The pen that the boss uses to drop the ink on the fly may also have some symbolic significance. It is possible that just as the boss uses the pen to drop the ink on the fly and finally kills it, likewise Mansfield may be suggesting that the continued signing of orders by generals during the war resulted not in any great advancement but rather in the slaughter of so many young men. Woodifield's remark that 'there is miles of it,' when describing the graves of his and the boss' son in Belgium may also have some symbolic importance as by including this remark in the story Mansfield may be highlighting to the reader the large volume of deaths that occurred during World War I. It may also be important that while the boss is looking at the photograph of his son he thinks that his son's expression is 'cold, even stern-looking.' It is possible that Mansfield is suggesting that even though the boss' son is dead, should he be alive he may look at his father in a different light, particularly if the reader accepts that the boss may be symbolism for the old generals of World War I.

It may also be important that despite the boss feeling sorrow about the loss of his son, later in the story when he begins to experiment with the fly, he easily forgets him. It is possible that Mansfield is suggesting that just as the boss has forgotten about his son, likewise a generation of older men (generals) after World War I may have forgotten about the sacrifices that the young men who fought in the war made in order for others to be able to live their lives in freedom. If anything the reader finds it difficult to sympathize with the boss mainly because he appears to be more focused on the success of his business (and his newly decorated office) than on the fact that he has lost a son during the war. There is a sense that the boss remains ignorant of the sacrifices that both his son and Woodifield's son have made. Even though the boss appears to show regret

and sorrow over his son's death the reader can't be certain that the boss is lamenting the loss of his son or the fact that there is nobody to continue his legacy.

It is also interesting that both Woodifield and the boss are at various stages of the story described as being old. This may be important as it is possible that Mansfield is suggesting that after World War I all that remained were old men, the young men who fought in the war having given their lives for their country. It may also be important that Mansfield attributes no wisdom to either man. Woodifield is compared to a baby at the beginning of the story and similarly the boss with his repetitive experiments on the fly, which the reader is aware results in the fly dying, does not come across (at least not to the reader) as being someone who is particularly clever. If anything he appears to be more child-like with his continued experimenting with the fly. This may be the point that Mansfield is attempting to make. Just as Woodifield and the boss don't appear to be bestowed with any wisdom, Mansfield may also be suggesting that the old generals who sent the young men to fight in World War I likewise have no wisdom.

The end of the story is also interesting as there is a sense that the boss has learnt nothing from his experiment with the fly. This may be the point that Mansfield is trying to make. She may be suggesting that just as the boss has learnt nothing, neither has any of the men (generals) who were responsible for sending so many young men to their death in World War I. The fact that the boss cannot remember that he was thinking about his son, after finally killing the fly, further suggests that the boss (and the generals) have learnt nothing from their actions. Mansfield may also be suggesting, particularly when the boss throws the fly into the waste-paper basket that likewise the generals are also disregarding (without any thought) the lives of the young men that they have sent to war and if anything they will continue to send young men to war while sitting comfortably (and in control) in their offices, just like the boss.