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The Fly As Symbol: Mortality And Psychological Conflict In Katherine Mansfield's Story

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Abstract : Katherine Mansfield's *"The Fly"* (1922) remains one of the most psychologically nuanced explorations of grief and mortality in modernist fiction. Beneath its seemingly trivial narrative—a businessman torturing a fly caught in ink—lies a complex allegory of human suffering, repression, and the inevitability of death. This paper interprets the fly as a central symbol through which Mansfield articulates the fragility of life and the persistence of psychological trauma. The boss's manipulation of the fly mirrors his unconscious struggle to confront the loss of his son in World War I, transforming an act of cruelty into an externalization of internal conflict.Drawing on psychoanalytic, existential, and modernist approaches, the study demonstrates how Mansfield translates private grief into universal symbolism. The fly's futile attempts to survive, the boss's mechanical gestures, and the sterile office setting together reveal the desensitization of a post-war generation and the moral void left by modern industrial civilization. Mansfield's minimalist technique—her controlled diction, silences, and irony—renders the story both emotionally restrained and symbolically profound.By situating *"The Fly"* within the psychological and historical contexts of early twentieth-century trauma, this paper argues that the story's true power lies in its transformation of everyday detail into a meditation on mortality and existential despair. The fly emerges not merely as a victim but as a mirror of human endurance and futility—an image of man's perpetual struggle against decay, time, and the emptiness of remembrance.

Keywords: Mansfield, mortality, grief, repression, symbolism, trauma, modernism

I. INTRODUCTION

Katherine Mansfield's short fiction occupies a distinctive place in early twentieth-century modernist literature for its ability to illuminate the inner lives of ordinary individuals through minute, symbolically charged moments. Her stories often reveal the hidden tensions between surface action and suppressed emotion, between social composure and psychological fragility. *"The Fly,"* first published in *The Nation and Athenaeum* in 1922, exemplifies this subtle interplay between the external and the internal, the literal and the symbolic. Set within the confined space of a businessman's office, the narrative follows "the boss," an aging figure who outwardly embodies authority and control but inwardly remains haunted by the loss of his only son in World War I.

The story begins with a banal social exchange between the boss and an old acquaintance, Woodifield, whose casual mention of the cemetery where their sons are buried disturbs the boss's carefully maintained emotional equilibrium. Left alone, he resolves to reflect on his loss but finds himself incapable of sustained grief. At this moment, the incident of the fly falling into the inkpot occurs—a seemingly insignificant event that becomes the story's symbolic and psychological fulcrum. As the boss rescues and repeatedly tests the fly's endurance, Mansfield externalizes his unconscious struggle with power, loss, and mortality. The fly's desperate efforts to survive mirror the futility of human persistence against inevitable

decay, while the boss's detached cruelty exposes the moral emptiness born of repression and denial.Mansfield's artistry lies in her ability to compress immense emotional and philosophical depth into a brief scene of quiet violence. Through precise imagery, ironic narration, and emotional restraint, she transforms the office into a theatre of existential confrontation. As Clare Hanson notes, "Mansfield's art lies in her ability to crystallize the emotional life of her characters in single, seemingly inconsequential gestures" (Hanson 114). Building upon this observation, the present study interprets *"The Fly"* as a meditation on mortality and psychological disintegration, where the symbolic act of cruelty reveals the boss's repressed despair and humanity's futile defiance of death. Ultimately, Mansfield's story exposes the paradox at the heart of modern existence: that in our attempts to assert control over life and emotion, we confront the very fragility we seek to overcome.

II. MORTALITY AND THE SYMBOLIC FUNCTION OF THE FLY

In Katherine Mansfield's *"The Fly,"* the tiny insect becomes the central metaphor through which the story articulates the inevitability of death and the futility of human resistance against it. The fly's ordeal—its repeated struggle to free itself from the ink and its eventual demise—mirrors humanity's perpetual battle with mortality. As R. A. York aptly observes, the fly embodies "the struggle against inevitable death" (York 59). Its desperate attempts to cleanse its wings, regain control, and persist reflect the universal human desire to endure, even in the face of suffering and decay. Yet, Mansfield denies both the fly and its tormentor any form of redemption or transcendence. The creature's repeated recoveries and final collapse dramatize the tragic cycle of hope and futility that defines mortal existence.The symbolic resonance of the fly extends beyond its immediate role in the story. In both classical and Christian traditions, flies have long served as emblems of corruption, decay, and the transience of earthly life. Mansfield's use of this image, therefore, situates *"The Fly"* within a broader cultural discourse on mortality. The boss's meticulously preserved office—kept "exactly as his son had left it"—functions as an extension of his psychological denial, a shrine to his refusal to acknowledge loss. This static environment mirrors his emotional stasis, where time has ceased to move forward. When he subjects the fly to its fatal test, the act becomes an unconscious dramatization of his repressed grief. The fly's death is, symbolically, the death of feeling—the final extinguishing of empathy and vitality within the boss himself.

Martin Scofield interprets this episode as a paradoxical assertion of control: "The fly's suffering provides the boss with a temporary illusion of mastery over death, but it also mirrors the cruelty of his denial" (Scofield 182). The boss's cruelty is not rooted in sadism but in his inability to bear the vulnerability that grief entails. His torment of the fly becomes a displaced enactment of what Freud calls "repetition compulsion"—the psychological drive to relive trauma in order to master it (Freud 23). Mansfield transforms this act of casual cruelty into an allegory of existential despair. The fly's death reveals not merely physical mortality but the spiritual death that results from emotional repression, making the story a haunting reflection on humanity's fragile and finite condition.

III. GRIEF, REPRESSION, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFLICT

In Katherine Mansfield's *"The Fly,"* grief operates not as an open expression of sorrow but as a suffocating repression that gradually corrodes the human psyche. The boss's inability to remember his deceased son—"For the life of him he could not remember"—is not a sign of mere forgetfulness but a manifestation of psychological defense. His amnesia is the mind's strategy for survival, a refusal to confront the depth of loss that might otherwise overwhelm him. As Vincent O'Sullivan insightfully observes, "Mansfield renders the tragedy of emotional incapacity: a father who cannot cry for the son he loved" (O'Sullivan 207). The story thus captures the paradox of modern grief: the more one seeks to suppress pain, the more it defines one's existence.The episode with the fly serves as an external projection of the boss's internal struggle. Each drop of ink he inflicts upon the insect symbolizes an eruption of repressed emotion, a repetition of the trauma he cannot verbalize. The fly's successive recoveries evoke the cyclical process of mourning—the alternation between despair and fragile endurance. Yet, like the fly, the boss ultimately succumbs to the exhaustion of repetition. When the fly dies, the symbolic mirror collapses, exposing the futility of the boss's emotional resilience. His mental blankness—"For the life of him he could not remember"—becomes an emotional death, a hollowing out of consciousness where meaning itself is extinguished.

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, Mansfield portrays the boss's repression as both self-preserving and self-destructive. The denial of grief offers temporary stability but ensures perpetual inner desolation. His treatment of the fly is an enactment of Freud's "repetition compulsion," in which unresolved trauma returns in disguised, repetitive behaviors (Freud 23). The boss's experiment becomes an unconscious performance of mourning, a ritualized attempt to master loss through control and cruelty.Angela Smith observes that "The story ends not with resolution but with obliteration—of both memory and meaning" (Smith 98). Mansfield's irony lies in this erasure: the boss achieves not catharsis but numbness. The more he strives for composure, the deeper his alienation becomes. The psychological violence inflicted on the fly reflects his own psychic disintegration. Thus, *"The Fly"* transforms private grief into a symbol of modern emotional paralysis, exposing how repression—far from healing—ensures the slow death of empathy and remembrance.

IV. MODERNISM, WAR, AND THE CRISIS OF MEANING

Katherine Mansfield's *"The Fly"* unfolds against the profound disillusionment that marked post–World War I Europe, capturing the modernist crisis of faith in human progress, morality, and emotional integrity. The story's atmosphere of repression and despair reflects a generation haunted by death and fragmentation. The boss's private grief over his son's death becomes emblematic of collective mourning—a symbolic representation of a civilization bereaved of meaning. Mansfield's observation in her letters of "a world grown old in pain" resonates through the story's quiet devastation, where the personal becomes indistinguishable from the historical.Formally, the story exemplifies the modernist aesthetic of restraint and psychological precision. Mansfield employs elliptical dialogue, ironic understatement, and meticulous control of tone to mirror the emotional numbness of a society recovering from trauma. The simplicity of her prose belies a deep symbolic structure: beneath the mundane setting of an office lies an allegory of postwar sterility. As Anthony Alpers notes, "Mansfield recreates the inner collapse of a civilization that has lost faith in its own values" (Alpers 245). The boss's meticulously ordered workspace, preserved "exactly as his son had left it," becomes a shrine to denial—a microcosm of a mechanized, spiritually exhausted world.

In this context, the fly's ordeal transcends the personal sphere to assume existential and political dimensions. The fly, trapped and tormented, mirrors humanity's condition in an age of mechanized warfare, where individuals were reduced to expendable bodies. Its futile struggle against death evokes both the soldier's helplessness in the trenches and the civilian's silent suffering in the aftermath. The boss's detached cruelty mirrors the impersonal violence of the era, suggesting that the capacity for compassion has eroded in a world governed by control and efficiency.Thus, *"The Fly"* emerges as a quintessentially modernist parable: it exposes the futility of human resistance in a universe stripped of transcendence. Mansfield's symbolic minimalism—her refusal of sentimentality or explicit moral commentary—intensifies the sense of existential void. The fly's meaningless death and the boss's emotional amnesia together dramatize the modern condition: a state of living death, where memory, empathy, and moral coherence have dissolved. In depicting this intersection of personal grief and collective trauma, Mansfield transforms a small domestic episode into a profound reflection on the spiritual aftermath of war and the enduring crisis of modern meaning.

V. THE SYMBOLIC STRUCTURE: INK, HAND, AND POWER

Katherine Mansfield constructs *"The Fly"* around a meticulously crafted symbolic network in which objects and gestures acquire psychological and philosophical resonance. The fly episode, though outwardly mundane, becomes a microcosm of existential struggle and moral inversion. Central to this symbolic design are three interrelated elements—the ink, the hand, and the illusion of power—which together expose the fragility of human control and the paradox of creation through destruction.The ink, a medium traditionally associated with writing and creativity, assumes an ambivalent significance in the story. It is both life-giving and life-destroying, representing the dual capacity of human imagination to construct and annihilate meaning. The inkpot, from which the boss drops fatal blot after blot, becomes a vessel of negation—a dark mirror of the mind's own depths. As the fly struggles within it, the ink transforms from symbol of expression into substance of suffocation. Mansfield's symbolic inversion is striking: that which enables articulation (ink) simultaneously becomes the means of erasure.

The boss's hand functions as the physical agent of power, alternately offering salvation and death. It embodies what William Atkinson terms "a parody of divine creation—the human will as destructive rather than redemptive" (Atkinson 56). The hand's oscillation between rescue and cruelty reflects the ambivalence of authority—an echo of both divine omnipotence and bureaucratic domination. In his godlike posturing, the boss exercises control over the smallest of creatures, only to reveal the impotence underlying all human attempts to master mortality. His supposed power culminates not in revelation but in oblivion.Yet Mansfield complicates this power dynamic by linking it to the act of writing itself. The ink-stained hand, the gesture of repetition, and the meticulous observation of suffering evoke the writer's own paradoxical position—one who shapes suffering into form. Mansfield's prose, spare and unsentimental, mirrors the same tension between creation and destruction enacted in the scene. The fly's torment becomes a metaphor for artistic struggle: meaning born through cruelty, order wrested from chaos.Ultimately, the symbolic structure of *"The Fly"* collapses the boundaries between life and art, creator and destroyer. In the boss's futile exercise of control, Mansfield stages a modernist meditation on authorship, mortality, and the illusion of mastery—a haunting reflection on the moral and aesthetic costs of power in a disenchanted world.

VI. EXISTENTIAL DIMENSIONS: THE ABSURD AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

Katherine Mansfield's *"The Fly"* resonates deeply with existentialist thought, anticipating philosophical ideas later articulated by Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and other twentieth-century thinkers. Beneath its surface realism, the story unfolds as a meditation on the absurd—the tension between humanity's desire for meaning and the silent indifference of existence. The fly's desperate struggle in the inkpot becomes a miniature enactment of this existential paradox: the unyielding will to live despite the inevitability of death.From an existential perspective, the fly emerges as a tragic yet dignified symbol of human persistence. Each time it cleans its wings and prepares to fly again, it embodies what Camus would later describe as the "absurd hero," who continues to act without hope of success. The fly's determination is both noble and futile, mirroring the human condition in a universe devoid of transcendent order. As Elaine Showalter notes, "Mansfield's fly anticipates existential modernism's concern with the absurd repetition of suffering" (Showalter 172). The creature's repeated trials and final death capture the essential rhythm of existence—struggle, recovery, and collapse.

The boss, meanwhile, represents the other side of this existential equation: the illusion of control and the failure to confront meaninglessness. His material success and social position mask a profound spiritual emptiness. By torturing the fly, he momentarily asserts power over death, yet this act only underscores his impotence before mortality. When the story closes with his inability to remember his son, Mansfield denies both character and reader any consolatory resolution. Forgetting replaces understanding; silence replaces redemption.Mansfield's stylistic restraint reinforces the existential tenor of the narrative. Her pared-down prose, absence of overt commentary, and clinical precision create a mood of emotional detachment that amplifies the sense of absurdity. The story's minimalist surface conceals immense philosophical depth: it captures the anxiety of modern existence in an age stripped of metaphysical certainty.In this light, *"The Fly"* becomes more than a story about grief—it is an allegory of the human condition. The fly's death and the boss's forgetfulness converge into a single insight: that to live is to struggle without assurance of meaning, to endure repetition and loss, and to confront, in silence, the absurdity of being.

VII. CONCLUSION: THE FLY AND THE HUMAN PSYCHE

Katherine Mansfield's *"The Fly"* stands as a profound exploration of the human psyche, where the ordinary becomes a mirror for the existential and psychological depths of modern life. What begins as a scene of quiet domesticity evolves into an allegory of mortality, repression, and the futility of control. The fly, small and seemingly insignificant, assumes monumental symbolic power—its repeated struggle against death becomes the emblem of humanity's own confrontation with loss, decay, and meaninglessness.At its core, the story charts the collapse of emotional integrity in a world numbed by trauma. The boss, unable to weep for his dead son, transfers his repressed anguish onto the tiny creature before him. His cruelty toward the fly is both unconscious and inevitable: an enactment of grief displaced, a desperate attempt to master the unmasterable. When the fly dies, so too does his illusion of control.

Mansfield's closing line—"For the life of him he could not remember"—rings with chilling finality. It signals not peace, but psychic erasure, the triumph of repression over remembrance.

Through this bleak psychological portrait, Mansfield achieves a modernist synthesis of form and meaning. Her minimalist prose, psychological precision, and symbolic economy reveal a universe stripped of certainty and consolation. The silence that follows the fly's death is not emptiness but revelation: an acknowledgment of the limits of human understanding and the inevitability of suffering.Philosophically, the story anticipates existential thought in its depiction of endurance without transcendence. The boss's struggle to impose order mirrors humanity's broader attempt to resist the absurd—only to discover that mortality is the ultimate equalizer. Yet, Mansfield's vision is not entirely nihilistic. In exposing the fragility of life and the futility of denial, she compels readers toward self-awareness.Thus, *"The Fly"* endures not merely as a story of one man's grief, but as a universal parable of the human condition. Mansfield transforms silence, cruelty, and death into artistic insight—showing that even in the face of meaninglessness, art can illuminate the contours of our shared vulnerability. Through the image of the dying fly, she confronts us with our own reflection: fragile, transient, and yet, in our struggle, profoundly alive.

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