The Fly

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Kathleen Mansfield was born to a prosperous English family of five children in colonial New Zealand, in 1888. She was an imaginative child who experienced a somewhat disruptive youth due to the social change occurring in her hometown of Wellington. In 1903, Mansfield and her two sisters moved to attend a prestigious girls' school in London, where she eagerly pursued music and literature. It was during these years that she fostered a deep love for Oscar Wilde. Returning home in 1906, Mansfield felt deep dissatisfaction with provincial New Zealand society, and begged to depart for England again; her parents granted her wish in 1908. Despite becoming an accomplished cellist, Mansfield abandoned music to pursue literary success. She spent her adult life moving between Britain, Germany, France and New Zealand, producing experimental, deeply psychological literature that became a hallmark of the modernist period. Modernist contemporaries influencing Mansfield's writing included Anton Chekov, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce. Throughout her lifetime Mansfield undertook numerous unconventional relationships, and married her editor John Middleton Murry after ten years of periodically dating, taking the name Kathleen Mansfield Murry. Although she died prematurely to tuberculosis at age 34, Mansfield's literary output was significant, and she achieved a reputation as a pioneer of the modernist short story. She produced a prolific number of works during the final years of her life, and it was her husband who posthumously published many of her pieces. Mansfield's writing was particularly influenced by her New Zealand upbringing, her flouting of social conventions, and the premature death of her brother in World War I.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Fly" is set in London, England in the years following World War I, which spanned from 1914 to 1918. While Britain was dealing with social upheavals and severe economic losses following World War I, Mansfield was grappling with the devastating loss of her beloved brother. Leslie Heron Beauchamp died in a training accident in 1915 shortly after he deployed for France. In the midst of her grief, Mansfield met with further adversity when she contracted tuberculosis in 1917, a disease she would die from six years later. In "The Fly" Mansfield directly explores the aftermath of warfare at both a personal and national level.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A number of acclaimed European modernist authors influenced Katherine Mansfield's writing. She interacted with many of her contemporaries in person, most notably her volatile friendships with Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence. The impact of Anton Chekov as a literary mentor is also significant; Mansfield greatly developed as writer after reading his translated works during her time in Bavaria. Like her modernist contemporaries, Mansfield's work is characterized by an intellectual and subtle exploration of the human psychology. "The Fly" expresses complex intertextuality due to specific literary influences and authorial biographical references. The short story demonstrates striking similarities to Chekhov's "Small Fry," in which a brooding clerk incinerates a cockroach in a candle much the same as Mansfield's character the boss tortures and kills a fly. The plight of Mansfield's titular fly is also closely linked to William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, where Gloucester laments "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport." William Blake's "The Fly" offers a similar thematic connection: "For I dance, And drink, and sing, Till some blind hand Shall brush my wing." In "The Fly," the boss draws parallels to some of Mansfield's characters from her other works, including the stern, patriarchal figures of Andreas Binzer in "A Birthday," Stanley Burnell in "Prelude," and the father in "The Little Girl." All are traditionally masculine characters likely based on Mansfield's domineering father, Harold Beauchamp. Finally, it is evident that Mansfield's short stories "The Fly" and "Six Years After" and her poem "To L.H.B (1894-1915)" were created in response to her brother's premature death during World War I.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Fly"
- **When Written:** 1922
- **Where Written:** Paris, France
- **When Published:** 1922 (first published in *The Nation and Athenaeum*, reprinted in the 1923 collection *The Doves Nest and Other Stories*)
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** A London office, some time after the end of World War I
- **Climax:** Upon killing a fly in his office, the boss experiences a moment of crushing misery that frightens him.
- **Antagonist:** War and death
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Nonconformity. Katherine Mansfield was a woman who defied early twentieth-century social norms, including her her unconventional romantic relationships and her sympathy for the plight of indigenous Māori in New Zealand.

Imitative art. The tremendous influence of Anton Chekov on Mansfield's literary success is an ongoing controversy due to the extreme similarities between many of their works. The narrative, thematic and stylistic echoes of Chekov's "Small Fry" in Mansfield's "The Fly" is one such example of uncanny resemblances between the authors' works.

PLOT SUMMARY

Two elderly men, the boss and Mr. Woodifield, are in the midst of their regular Tuesday social catch up at the boss's office in London. Having retired after a stroke, Woodifield enjoys visiting his former workplace to converse with the boss; this is the one activity in which his well-meaning wife and daughters still allow him independence. As with most of these weekly visits, the boss takes great satisfaction in pointing out his luxurious new office furnishings to the forgetful Woodifield. Woodifield meanwhile greatly admires the youthful vigor of the boss, who is five years his senior but as energetic as ever. As the men chat, Woodifield struggles to remember a specific detail that he wanted to tell the boss. The boss pities "old Woodifield's" frailties and offers him whiskey to cheer him up. Woodifield finally remembers that he wanted to tell the boss about his daughters' recent trip to Belgium, where they came across the boss's son's grave when visiting their brother Reggie's resting place. This reference to his son's death six years prior in World War I terribly shocks the boss, although he does not let on to Woodifield.

After Woodifield departs, the boss locks himself in his office after instructing his elderly clerk, Macey, that he is not to be disturbed for the next half hour. He plans to weep for his son, but is disturbed to find that he can no longer shed tears of grief as he did in previous years. The boss spends some time recalling how he developed a successful business for his son to inherit, but these succession plans were destroyed upon his son's premature death. The boss becomes further unsettled by the strangeness of his son's face when he considers his likeness in a photograph.

A **fly** drowning in his inkpot distracts the boss from his thoughts. Using a pen to rescue the fly, the boss shakes it onto a piece of blotting paper and watches it diligently clean the ink from its wings and face. Before it can take to the air, the boss drops a heavy blot of ink onto the fly to see how it will react. The boss is impressed by the fly's courage in dragging itself through the laborious task of re-cleaning itself. The boss then proceeds to continue torturing the fly, repeatedly submerging it in ink until it drowns on his desk, all the while yelling at it to "look sharp" and stay strong in the face of adversity. The boss disposes of the fly's body in a waste paper basket, upon which he feels such a moment of deep misery that he becomes frightened. Quickly ringing a bell for Macey, the boss demands the clerk bring him fresh blotting-paper at once. When Macey leaves, the boss suddenly cannot remember what topic he was thinking about prior to ringing for Macey. He nervously mops himself with his handkerchief, unable to remember what had just been bothering him so much.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Boss – The unnamed protagonist referred to exclusively as "the boss" is a successful London businessman and the former employer of Mr. Woodifield. The boss initially appears to be a man of action who has aged well, retaining a youthful countenance. He commands respect from all those around him, including Woodifield and the boss's loyal clerk, Macey. As the story unfolds, it is clear that the boss lost his son six years ago in World War I. Woodifield's reference to each of their son's graves unnerves the boss, as he is deeply affected by the memory of his beloved boy. After Woodifield's departure from the office, the boss reflects on his crushing loss but strangely finds himself unable to cry, even though the mere thought of his son would make him weep in years past. He quickly grows distracted by a fly floating in his ink pot and decides to torture it repeatedly until it dies, all the while barking at it to "look sharp" and be resilient. At the story's conclusion, the boss suddenly transforms into a nervous and forgetful character who echoes Woodifield's frailties.

Woodifield – The elderly Mr. Woodifield visits his former employer, the boss, every Tuesday in London for company. Having retired following a stroke, Woodifield is a trembling, forgetful, dim-eyed and shrunken man who spends most of his days stuck in the house and being bossed around by his wife and daughters. He admires how the boss, who is five years his senior, has somehow maintained his youthful vigor despite his age. The boss gains great satisfaction from Woodifield's weekly visit, as his unreliable memory means the boss can regularly boast of his new office furnishings. However, on this occasion, Woodifield's unexpected declaration that his daughters were recently in Belgium to visit his son Reggie's grave unsettles the boss. Woodifield's ramblings trigger internal conflict for the boss, as Woodifield's reference to the boss's son's own well-kept grave forces the boss to grapple with the painful repercussions of the war six years later.

The Boss's Son – The boss's only child and heir to the business. The boy's death during World War I results in the boss's loss of assured business succession—something the boss centered his whole life purpose around. Beyond considering the boy's death,

the boss does not share many details about his son, except that he undertook a year-long apprenticeship at the office where he was popular with the boss's employees. The boss's son's grave is in Belgium near that of Woodifield's son, Reggie.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Macey – An aged clerk who, like a loyal dog, obediently completes menial tasks for the boss. Like the rest of the staff in the London office, Macey was fond of the boss's son.

Reggie – Woodifield's son who was killed in World War I and is buried in Belgium near the boss's son.

Woodifield's Daughters – Woodifield's daughters, along with Woodifield's wife, demonstrate female control over the infirm Woodifield. They have recently visited their brother Reggie's grave in Belgium and discovered that his grave was near the boss's son's.

Woodifield's Wife – Along with her daughters, Woodifield's wife micromanages Woodifield's daily activities. This control arises from necessity due to his recent stroke and rapidly deteriorating memory, but it leaves Woodifield feeling stifled and bored.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CONSEQUENCES OF WAR

Katherine Mansfield presents numerous consequences of war in "The Fly," especially touching on loss, grief and change as resulting experiences. In 1922, when Katherine Mansfield wrote the story, Britain was recovering from its involvement in the brutal horrors of World War I. The narrative itself takes place in a London office about six years after the war, where the unnamed protagonist, the boss, speaks with his former employee, the elderly Mr. Woodifield. Both men lost their sons in combat, and Woodifield's reference to their sons' well-kept graves forces the boss to grapple with the painful repercussions of the war six years later. The theme of warfare and its lasting repercussions impacts Mansfield's narrative at personal and societal levels: the boss's memory of his deceased son highlights his anxieties around business succession and mortality, while also commenting on Britain's transformed gender dynamics in post-World War I Britain and critiquing national authorities' decisions to send their youth into armed conflict.

The brutalities of World War I intrude into the boss's orderly London office through multiple channels, including a physical photograph, vividly haunting memories, and Mansfield's use of militaristic language. In this way, Mansfield presents the effects of war as being inescapable, even six years later. A photograph in the office of "a grave-looking boy in uniform standing in one of those spectral photographers' parks with photographers' storm-clouds behind him" sharply reminds the boss of his familial loss. The photograph's physical materiality contrasts with the son's absence, signaled by ghostly adjectives such as "spectral" and "grave-looking." The aftermath of war also intrudes into the boss's professional life through Woodifield's unexpected declaration that his daughters "were in Belgium last week having a look at poor Reggie's grave, and they happened to come across your boy's. They're quite near each other, it seems." This well-meaning comment triggers a landslide of memories for the boss, who isolates himself in his workspace to reflect on his grief during the months and years following his son's death. Mansfield also signals the lasting impact of warfare through the militant language peppered throughout the story, which suggests that the effects of the war are inescapable for both the reader and the boss. Office phrases such as "charged her" and "dodged in and out of his cubbyhole" are suggestive of soldiers' movements in the field. The boss "at the helm" of his business issuing directives to his staff (and snapping at them to "look sharp about it") evokes naval military leadership. The boss also describes terrible news as "crashing about his head," gesturing to the unpredictable risk and chaos of warfare. Mansfield also references the violent capabilities of a sword or bayonet when the boss kills a **fly** in his office with a letter opener: the boss "flipped the *Financial Times* with a paper knife," "cocked an eye," "plunged his pen back into the ink" and "lifted the corpse [of the fly] on the end of the paper-knife and flung it into the waste-paper basket," as if it were a casualty of war.

The boss's anxieties regarding his business's legacy and his own mortality demonstrate impacts of war at a personal level. In losing his only son to war, the boss also loses the heir to his business. The boss claims that his son and the assured succession of his business were the precious driving forces in his life. The boss's encounters with death (as he reflects on his son before torturing a fly in his office) cause him to experience a "grinding feeling of wretchedness." Realities of the casualties of war and bodily decomposition also disturb his psyche. The thought of Woodifield's daughters peering down into his son's grave is particularly painful for the boss; imagining the grave from Woodifield's daughters' perspective somehow makes the boss confront the morbid reality of his son's state, overriding previous sugar-coated sentiments of his son lying "unblemished" and peacefully "asleep forever." The boss's discomfort furthermore highlights his deep anxieties surrounding mortality and impermanence.

The boss's personal struggles with his legacy and mortality, alongside his cruel treatment of a fly that happens to fall into his inkpot, also point more broadly to the devastating consequences of war at a societal level. The boss's drowning of a fly in ink on his blotting paper suggests the sadism and brutality of warfare. Mansfield's personification of the fly with its "little front legs" "waving" in a "cry for help" suggests the enormity of Britain's terrible loss of its sons. The fly's drawn-out suffering additionally speaks to the lasting psychological consequences of warfare for survivors and their loved ones. Many war veterans suffer psychological responses to their experiences of intense traumatic events, the most common of which is now defined as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (a term that became widely used after the Vietnam War). The fly's ongoing encounters with intense distress parallels soldiers' experiences of the stressful conditions of war, followed by psychological responses that society struggled to understand after World War I. Woodifield's deteriorating mental and physical health, perhaps a response to his son's death, further echoes this issue of trauma. Meanwhile, Britain's post-World War I workforce dynamics shifted, as a generation of missing male youth disturbed traditional gender roles. Female control of the infirm Woodifield's daily schedule signifies these changes. Mansfield also challenges patriarchal authority through the boss's and Woodifield's physical and mental frailties. Mansfield characterizes Woodifield as a trembling, dim-eyed, shrunken man with a "chill old brain" who regularly experiences memory loss. By the story's conclusion, she comparably describes the boss as nervous and sweating at his own memory's failures.

"The Fly" can therefore be read as a moralistic story that questions the ethics of warfare at personal and societal levels. Mansfield exposes the cruelties and brutalities of war on its participants, through a focus on the consequences back home where personal grief and a crisis of gender identities threaten to overwhelm social order. Mansfield injects warfare into a London office to perhaps suggest that war is a type of business transaction. She thereby critiques national authorities' seemingly callous decisions to involve their citizens in armed conflict.

PERFORMANCES OF MASCULINITY

"The Fly's" unnamed protagonist, the boss, commands respect and obedience from the story's small cast of characters. Despite the loss of his only son (and heir to the company) to the recent World War I, the boss heads up a successful business in London and projects a traditionally masculine image of a family man and strong business leader of commendable character. By the story's conclusion, however, Katherine Mansfield suggests that the boss is actually an objectionable individual driven by the desperate desire for power and masculine superiority. A sudden reminder of his late son destabilizes the boss's behavior, leading him to sadistically torture the story's titular **fly** in his office. This contrast between the boss's initial and concluding characterizations—and the fact that a mention of his son spurs this dramatic shift—implies that the boss performs a masculine identity in order to avoid the extreme emotional toll of his son's death.

Initially, the boss seems to be a family man and a strong, fair leader worthy of respect. The boss perceives himself as a superior man of action, likened to a ship's captain "still going strong, still at the helm" of his company. Macey, the clerk, demonstrates the way the boss commands respect; he obliges the boss's every request, respectfully referring to him as "sir." The boss's elderly former employee, Mr. Woodifield, also appears to greatly respect the boss and admire his strong leadership—especially considering the boss is five years his senior. The boss also has a portrait of his late son in his office, which has earned a spot on the table for six straight years, suggesting that the boss is a loyal and loving father.

However, as the story unfolds, the boss increasingly appears to be a hyper-masculine man whose power hinges on demonstrating his power and superiority to others. For instance, the boss constantly names his former employee "old Woodifield" despite Woodifield being five years younger than him. He also repeatedly refers to his current employee, Macey, as a "dog" who is eager to follow his master's bidding. The boss even refers to a fly in his office as a "little beggar," displaying classism in response to the fly's call for help as it drowns in ink. The boss also revels in a ritualistic show of wealth to the elderly and forgetful Woodifield as a means to assert his superiority and power. Each week, the boss points out the changes in his office that symbolize luxury and power. New furnishings including the "massive bookcase," "bright red carpet with a pattern of large white rings" and "table with legs like twisted treacle" are impressive in their grandeur. The boss boasts rare post-war food items such as sausages and whiskey, and Mansfield employs adjectives such as "pearly" and "glowing" to enrich office objects with treasure-like status. The boss enjoys showing off these treasures; he gains social standing by demonstrating wealth and providing rare goods to his chosen beneficiaries, consequently buying their loyalty, obedience, and respect.

Rather than resulting from strength of character, the boss puts on a performance of masculinity as a way to avoid his son's death and regain control in his life. The boss's constant verbal directives and physical control of all other characters demonstrates his desperate need to feel a sense of command. The boss refrains from sentimental thoughts about his son throughout the story, offering no detail about the boy except for his business apprenticeship and death at war. To consider more tender family bonds goes against traditional masculine expectations and could be deemed weak and effeminate.

Furthermore, the boss desperately tries control all reminders of his son on his terms, which is why Woodifield's remarks about their sons' graves shocks him so greatly. At the startling reminder of his son's death, the boss clears his calendar for half an hour, as "he wanted, he intended, he had arranged to weep…." The boss's inability to weep—and demand for total privacy just in case he does cry—cleaves to the strong and unemotional image of masculinity. It allows the boss to remove himself from the intense feeling of his son's loss, which appears to have not lessened with time. Instead of giving into sadness, the boss is compelled to establish absolute power over his immediate environment, even down to the minute detail of an insect (the titular fly) in his domain. In repeatedly dosing the fly in ink, the boss attempts to resume his performance of masculinity, where he is unemotional (he yells at the fly to "Stay sharp!" once it starts looking weak) and wholly superior and dominant (he has the power to decide if the fly lives or dies and ultimately kills it).

In "The Fly," Mansfield thereby reveals the boss as a power-hungry individual who performs displays of masculine superiority. Mansfield forces the reader to consider the decidedly strong and unemotional masculinity that British society in 1922 expected of successful fathers and businessmen. The boss's cruel torture of the fly exposes his weak character to readers. Readers can view this collapse of character as a direct result of war's extreme trauma; Mansfield additionally reveals the impossibility of post-war society's expectations of masculinity.

MEMORY

"The Fly," set about six years after World War I, opens with a man named Woodifield who returns to a London office for his weekly social visit with his former employer, the boss. During the visit, Woodifield—an elderly, frail, and forgetful man—becomes increasingly frustrated that he cannot remember a key detail he wants to share with the boss. Mansfield plays Woodifield's infirmity against the boss's youthful vigor as he commands attention in the office. However, after Woodifield finally remembers what he wanted to say—that their sons' graves are near each other—the boss increasingly appears to be a vulnerable individual who also struggles with memory loss. As the story unfolds, Mansfield suggests that the boss and Woodifield intentionally and subconsciously use forgetfulness to cope with the deaths of their sons at war—a tactic that is ultimately unsatisfying for the both of them.

Intentional forgetfulness and avoidance allows the boss to largely escape the emotional burden of his son's death. The boss attempts to control the grief of remembering his son; although he's kept a portrait of his son in his office for the past six years, the boss steers other people away from addressing his son's death in order to remember on his terms only. For instance, when pointing out significant furnishings in the office on one of their Tuesday get-togethers, the boss "did not draw old Woodifield's attention to the photograph over the table of a grave-looking boy in uniform." Later, the boss's sudden horror at killing a **fly**—thereby recognizing the cruel realities of his son's death—produces an almost deliberate experience of amnesia. After Woodifield makes a well-meaning but unwelcome comment about their sons' deaths, the boss tortures a fly to death and disposes of its body in a wastepaper basket, upon which "such a grinding feeling of wretchedness seized him that he felt positively frightened." He rings for Macey, the clerk, to bring him fresh blotting paper to remove all evidence of drowning the fly in ink on his desk. Immediately after this instruction, the boss nervously mops himself with his handkerchief and "fell to wondering what it was he had been thinking about before. What was it?" It is unclear whether he feigns forgetfulness or is truly at a loss to remember that he was just thinking about his son's death; regardless, this moment allows the boss to sidestep his grief.

Woodifield and the boss's struggles with memory loss show that life without memory—even painful memories—is empty and unsatisfying. The story opens with Woodifield's failure to remember something he wanted to tell the boss (that their sons' graves are near each other) and closes with the boss's lapse of memory as he forgets what was just troubling him (thoughts about his late son). This mirroring effect sets up the idea that both men's forgetfulness is a means of escaping the horror of their sons' deaths. Woodifield's limited memory, resulting from a stroke (perhaps induced by his son Reggie's untimely death), makes him feel trapped at home where his wife and daughters fuss over him and dictate his day-to-day life. Because of his memory loss, Woodifield also loses his independence and connection with the outside world, which leads to an unsatisfying existence. The story's concluding lines relate the boss's own sudden amnesia. The boss tries to recall the reason for his anxiety previous to instructing Macey to bring fresh blotting paper to his office, but it turns out that "for the life of him he could not remember." The statement poses a bigger question for readers: what is life without memory? For the boss, life becomes insubstantial without meaningful memories of his son. He attempts to fill this void by placing superficial value on his business success and his material possessions (which he points out proudly to visitors), simultaneously keeping grief at arm's length.

In "The Fly," Mansfield calls attention to functioning memory as a crucial foundation for a meaningful life. The boss's and Woodifield's avoidance of painful memories alongside genuine forgetfulness protects them from the overwhelming grief of their sons' unnatural deaths, but simultaneously empties their lives of meaning and satisfaction. Particularly leaning on the boss's failures of memory after killing the titular fly, Mansfield ultimately suggests that it is worth dealing with painful

memories in order to lead a fulfilling life.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE FLY

The titular fly, struggling for survival before succumbing to death at the boss's hand, is a symbol that offers multiple interpretations. The fly's victimization—the boss renders it helpless by repeatedly submerging the fly in ink on his blotting paper—suggests the sadism and brutality of warfare. Mansfield's personification of the fly with its "little front legs" "waving" in a "cry for help" represents the tragedy of Britain's sacrifice to the horrors of World War I. The fly's struggle for survival can be read as a symbol of the boss's son and Woodifield's son Reggie, who were both killed in World War I and now lie buried in Belgium. The fly's symbolic ambiguity also opens up interpretations of the boss and Woodifield "drowning" in grief and incompetence following their sons' deaths. The boss's "grinding feeling of wretchedness" after he kills the fly perhaps signifies an older generation's guilt at sending their sons to war; senior authorities committed Britain's youth to battle using ink penned on documents, while similarly the boss uses ink to drown the fly. Mansfield furthermore depicts Woodifield as vulnerable stroke survivor who is dominated by his well-intentioned family—they control his daily movements in a similar manner to the boss's control over the fly. At a broader societal level, the fly's suffering and death can also symbolize the human condition, as all creatures must grapple with mortality. In particular, the boss, Woodifield and the boss's clerk, Macey, are all aging men who are approaching the ends of their lives. At the time of writing "The Fly," Mansfield was nearing death herself, suffering terribly from tuberculosis and fighting for life like the fly doused in ink.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Stories* published in 1956.

The Fly Quotes

"Y'are very snug in here," piped old Mr. Woodifield, and he peered out of the great, green-leather arm-chair by his friend the boss's desk as a baby peers out of its pram.

Related Characters: Woodifield (speaker), The Boss

Related Themes:

Page Number: 343

Explanation and Analysis

In the story's opening line, Woodifield comments on the boss's comfortable office furnishings. Writing *in medias res*, Mansfield gains the reader's interest by beginning the story with two men in the midst of a conversation. She characterizes Woodifield as a vulnerable elderly man, which suggests that there is something amiss with Woodifield. He is too feeble to speak strongly, having a trilling voice that suggests infirmity and femininity—later played against the boss's youthful, masculine strengths of character. The fact that Woodifield is likened to "a baby in a pram" as he "peers" out of the great arm-chair further suggests Woodifield's impotence, implying he is undergoing a second infancy in his old age. Woodifield centers the boss as the subject of his comment, stating that the boss gets to work in the office's "snug" comfort. Promoting the boss as the subject of conversation demonstrates Woodifield's admiration and respect for his former employer.

So there sat old Woodifield, smoking a cigar and staring almost greedily at the boss, who rolled in his office chair, stout, rosy, five years older than he, and still going strong, still at the helm. It did one good to see him.

Related Characters: The Boss, Woodifield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 343

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Woodifield, who has remained in the office despite knowing he should return home, admires the boss's youthful vigor as they converse together. Mansfield crafts a tension between Woodifield's previously described infirmity and the boss's masculine power. Readers have learned that Woodifield suffered a stroke that has left him physically incapacitated. The narrator now evidences the boss's authority through physical descriptors such as "stout" and "rosy," suggesting the boss's imposing physical presence and youthful countenance. Despite being five years older than "old Woodifield," the boss is a man of action likened to a captain of a ship "still going strong, still at the

helm." He is relaxed and in control in his role as head of company. The narrator's rich descriptions offer useful clues to Woodifield's subjectivity, as he "greedily" drinks in the sight of the boss almost as a medicinal remedy, for "it did one good to see him." Woodifield obviously places the boss on a pedestal, and as the story unfolds, it's clear that the boss enjoys—and even needs—this kind of affirmation.

"It's whiskey, ain't it?" he piped feebly. The boss turned the bottle and lovingly showed him the label. Whiskey it was. "D'you know," said he, peering up at the boss wonderingly, "they wont let me touch it at home." And he looked as though he was going to cry. "Ah, that's where we know a bit more than the ladies," cried the boss [...].

Related Characters: The Boss, Woodifield (speaker), Woodifield's Daughters, Woodifield's Wife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 344

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Woodifield reacts to the boss procuring whiskey from a locked cupboard below his desk. Woodifield's wonder is twofold—he is not allowed whiskey at home, and the liquor is a rarity in post-war England. The repetition of the verb "piped" from the story's opening sentence emphasizes Woodifield's weak voice again, coupled with the word "feebly," which directly acknowledges the elderly man's infirmity. Woodifield's dialogue consists of questions, contrasting with the boss's firm command to drink whiskey. This emphasizes the hierarchal power balance between the two, where Woodifield is a questioning child to the boss's authoritative parental power. The boss desires to be obeyed, and Woodifield is happy to oblige. The boss furthermore claims superiority over Woodifield's wife and daughters, condescendingly stating that the men have greater intelligence than the women do. Ironically, the boss is in the wrong, as drinking alcohol increases Woodifield's risk of another stroke.

The door shut, the firm heavy steps recrossed the bright carpet, the fat body plumped down in the spring chair, and leaning forward, the boss covered his face with his hands. He wanted, he intended, he had arranged to weep....

Related Characters: The Boss (speaker), The Boss's Son, Woodifield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 346

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Woodifield exits the office, having made a jarring reference to the boss's son, who died in the war six years ago. After the boss instructs Macey that he is not to be disturbed for half an hour, he shuts the door and crosses the office, preparing to weep as he drops into his chair. This is a pivotal moment of character development, as the narrator largely describes the boss as a sprightly, composed, business-like individual up until this point. Now, readers see the boss showing his elderly age as he walks with "heavy steps" and plumps his "fat body" down into his chair. It is also surprising that he intends to weep, as the boss's previous behavior lacks any emotional depth. The unusual sentence structure viewed when the boss "wanted, he intended, he had arranged to weep ...." echoes the boss's unusual behavior. The sentence peters out with an ellipsis, which conveys the boss's drawn out experience of intense internal conflict. The quote simultaneously emphasizes the boss's desire for control over all aspects of his life, even grief's turmoil, for he makes a plan to cry.

His boy was an only son. Ever since his birth the boss had worked at building up this business for him; it had no other meaning if it was not for the boy. Life itself had come to have no other meaning. How on earth could he have slaved, denied himself, kept going all those years without the promise for ever before him of the boy's stepping into his shoes and carrying on where he left off?

Related Characters: The Boss (speaker), The Boss's Son

Related Themes:

Page Number: 346

Explanation and Analysis

After the boss's shock when Woodifield mentions his son's grave, the boss sits in his office and reflects on his son, his business, and his life motivations. He attributes all of his hard work developing his successful business to creating a legacy for his son to inherit, and states that since his son had died, life had lost all meaning. However, this claim does not

match up with the boss's current behavior. Despite losing his son six years ago, the boss currently takes great pride in his business success and the accompanying superior social status that he lords over his employees. Interestingly, the boss refers to his boy as an "only son" in this passage rather than an "only child," showing that he particularly prized the boy for his maleness. The boss also fails to mention of the boy's mother throughout the story. Coupled with the boss's earlier dismissal of Woodifield's wife and daughters as lacking knowledge, these facts suggest the boss holds patriarchal attitudes and devalues women.

Six years ago, six years.... How quickly time passed! It might have happened yesterday. 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.

Related Characters: The Boss (speaker), The Boss's Son

Related Themes:

Page Number: 347

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the boss reflects on how quickly six years have passed since his son's death, and feels confused by his inability to weep in grief when remembering his boy. Looking at his son's photograph to try and elicit an emotional reaction, the boss is further discomforted by his son's unfamiliar expression. The boss perceives his son's face in the photograph as "unnatural" and "cold," reflecting the boy's unnatural death by combat and the cold grave his body lies in. That the boy is "stern-looking" hints at memory's subjective and unreliable nature, for despite the boss's adamant claim that his son never looked that way, a photograph objectively captures a person's exact momentary expression. The boss has either forgotten his son's features or lost the favorable lens he once viewed the photograph with. These multiple factors cause the boss to deeply question his behaviors and memories, and the reader begins to question his reliability in truths and ethics.

At that moment the boss noticed that a fly had fallen into his broad inkpot, and was trying feebly but desperately to clamber out again. Help! Help! Said those struggling legs. But the sides of the inkpot were wet and slippery; it fell back again and began to swim.

Related Characters: Woodifield, The Boss's Son, The Boss

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 347

Explanation and Analysis

A fly in his inkpot distracts the boss from dwelling on memories of his son. The narrator describes the fly as "feeble," which recalls Woodifield's same characterization earlier in the story. The drowning fly, then, perhaps reflects the way that Woodifield feels suffocated due to his lost independence and deteriorating health ever since his stroke. The cry of "Help! Help!" and its "struggling legs" personifies the fly, intensifying its anguish and struggles. Readers can interpret the fly's trauma as signifying soldiers' experiences at war, where calls for help can go ignored and terrible risks materialize routinely. The fly's desperate struggles suggest the hopelessness and terrible ordeals of warfare, particularly evoking images of drowning sailors or soldiers trapped in trenches.

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; it was only a question of ....

Related Characters: Woodifield, The Boss's Son, The Boss

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 347

Explanation and Analysis

After the boss intentionally re-submerges the fly in ink, the fly's tenacity in responding to adversity impresses him. The boss fondly names the fly "a plucky little devil," reminiscent of a proud father complimenting his son for his tenacity. The boss has previously called the fly a "little beggar"—these

names suggest the boss's large physical stature over the small fly as well as his superior, even classist mindset. This behavior echoes the boss's relationships with his son and Woodifield, either of which the fly can symbolize, for the boss desires control over both characters.

The quote's final ellipsis alludes to human forgetfulness, as the boss's line of thought fades away. Readers can also interpret the ellipsis as standing in for a revelation that is too immense to consider—how can humanity "never say die?" Despite a common human preoccupation to find a way to defy mortality, all beings are on a journey towards certain death.

> The boss lifted the corpse on the end of the paper-knife and flung it into the waste-paper basket. But such a grinding feeling of wretchedness seized him that he felt positively frightened. He started forward and pressed the bell for Macey.

Related Characters: Woodifield, The Boss's Son, Macey, The Boss

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 348

Explanation and Analysis

The boss has tortured the fly to its death, and now disposes of its body in his waste-paper basket. However, an immense feeling of despair suddenly frightens him, which he tries to divert by calling for Macey. The boss's use of a paper-knife to dispose of the fly's body establishes a connection with Britain's paper-pushing authorities, as they committed their youth to warfare—and many to death—with the flourish of pen and paper. The story's climax now occurs, as the fly's death evokes memories of the boss's son, associations with the infirm Woodifield, and possibly the boss's personal fears of failure and mortality. For all his achievements and power, the boss cannot bring his son back to life and therefore cannot guarantee the succession of his name, family or business. The boss deals with this cathartic moment by calling on Macey, trying to once more establish his control and authority.

> "Bring me some fresh blotting paper," he said sternly, "and look sharp about it." And while the old dog padded away he fell to wondering what it was he had been thinking about before. What was it? It was…. He took out his handkerchief and passed it inside his collar. For the life of him he could not remember.

Related Characters: The Boss (speaker), Woodifield, The Boss's Son, Macey

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 348

Explanation and Analysis

Following a moment of absolute despair, the boss orders Macey to retrieve him fresh stationery. As Macey leaves on this errand, the boss finds he can no longer remember the cause of his anxieties. This forgetfulness causes another minor wave of concern. In this passage the boss pivots from absolute despair to total amnesia through a performance of masculine leadership, barking directives at the subservient Macey. The narrator once more characterizes Macey as a "dog" who pleases his master by efficiently following orders. Mansfield also compares Macey to the doomed fly, as the boss commands both to "look sharp" in their actions. All major characters, now, can be read into the fly's symbolism—the boss's son, Woodifield, Macey, and even the boss himself as he struggles against grief and mortality. The boss survives his intense internal anguish through the process of forgetting. However, Mansfield interrogates the value of lost memory in her final line, suggesting that life loses meaning if not for one's memories.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE FLY

On a Tuesday in an office in "the City," the boss and his former employee Mr. Woodifield are midway through conversation. "Old Woodifield" is seated in an immense armchair, looking out "as a baby peers out of its pram" to the boss who is confidently lounging at his desk. Woodifield, who retired after a stroke, knows he should head home to his well-meaning but domineering wife and daughters, who keep him "boxed up in the house every day of the week except Tuesday." However, he is greatly enjoying his weekly social visit with the boss, so he stays put in the office. Smoking a cigar, Woodifield comments on the office's comfortable décor, and admires the youthful vigor of the boss who is five years his senior.

The story begins in medias res, *launching the reader into the middle of a conversation between Woodifield and the boss. Woodifield immediately appears to be a vulnerable elderly man whose physical ailments leave him at the mercy of his family's direction. The comparison of Woodifield peering out from a large armchair like a baby in a pram suggests he has lapsed into a second infancy. The narrator plays Woodifield's infirmity against the boss's youthful strength. Woodifield's esteem for the boss sets up the boss as a visually powerful and authoritative character.*

The boss, idly flipping through the *Financial Times*, affirms Woodifield's comments about the plush office, smug at the attention—"he liked to have it admired, especially by old Woodifield." Due to Woodifield's failing memory, the boss once more points out new furnishings as he has in previous weekly visits. Highlights include new fittings such as the "bright red carpet with a pattern of large white rings," "massive bookcase," "table with legs like twisted treacle," and "electric heating" that is gently cooking "transparent, pearly sausages" that sit "glowing" in the office. However, the boss refrains from drawing Woodifield's attention to a photograph of the "grave-looking boy in uniform" that sits on the office table, unmoved for six years.

An earlier mention of "the City," coupled with the boss reading the Financial Times *(a London newspaper) in this passage, suggests that the men are located in London. It seems the boss enjoys the resulting power he bears over the vulnerable and increasingly forgetful Woodifield. Each week, the boss highlights the grand new furnishings in his office that symbolize luxury and wealth. Mansfield employs adjectives such as "translucent," "pearly" and "glowing" to elevate office objects as possessing precious worth. The boss gains great satisfaction from this weekly ritual, as it highlights his success and superior social status. During this passage, Mansfield piques reader curiosity by referring to a boy's photograph that the boss purposefully passes over during his description of office décor.*

Woodifield grows frustrated that he cannot recall a detail he greatly wants to share with the boss, becoming dim-eyed and trembling as he struggles to remember. Feeling generous, the boss offers Woodifield a bit of whiskey, procuring the liquor and glasses from locked desk drawer. Woodifield is shocked at the sight of the whiskey, and admits sadly to the boss that his wife and daughters "won't let me touch it home." The boss insists that he and Woodifield "know a bit more than the ladies," and encourages Woodifield drink it down without water, quickly throwing back his own glass.

The narrator again emphasizes Woodifield's forgetfulness and physical vulnerabilities, making the boss seem all the more energetic and powerful in comparison. The boss offers him whiskey, an apparent act of kindness that also affords the boss superiority and control as he provides a rare treat that he usually reserves for personal use. The boss further reveals his desire to demonstrate power and superiority over others when he condescendingly remarks that Woodifield's wife and daughters lack understanding about the effects of whiskey for Woodifield.

After a sip of whiskey, Woodifield suddenly remembers the detail he wanted to share with the boss: while visiting their brother Reggie's grave in Belgium, Woodifield's daughters came across the boss's son's grave. The boss sits still, making no reply to this revelation. Woodifield describes the well-kept graves, and then asks the boss for confirmation that he has not yet been to Belgium to visit his son's gravesite. The boss affirms that he has not made the trip "for various reasons." Woodifield then begins to ramble as he makes note of the outrageous price of a pot of jam at his daughters' hotel in Belgium, and how his daughter Gertrude stole the pot in order to "teach 'em a lesson. Quite right, too; it's trading on our feelings." As Woodifield finishes this rant, the boss escorts him out of the office.

A combination of clues suggests that the story takes place a few years after World War I, including the 1922 publication date, the fact that Woodifield is awed by sausages and whiskey as rare food and drink, and now Woodifield's unexpected reference to Reggie's and the boss's son's graves in Belgium. The boss's inability to dominate conversation as before suggests Woodifield's reference to his dead son deeply affects him. Woodifield's dialogue, meanwhile, evokes notions of female strength, as his daughter Gertrude stole a jam pot from her Belgium hotel to resist the hotel taking advantage of mourning tourists.

After Woodifield leaves, the boss stands for a long moment, staring at nothing. Macey, the elderly office clerk, watches the motionless boss while himself "dodg[ing] in and out of his cubby-hole like a dog that expects to be taken for a run." Declaring that he is not to be disturbed for the next half hour, the boss locks himself in his office. He sinks into his chair, covering his face with his hands and intending to weep for his son. The thought of Woodifield's daughters peering down into his son's grave is unsettling, and he compares the realities of his son's remains to his previous longstanding notion of his child "lying unchanged, unblemished in his uniform, asleep forever." The boss groans, but does not cry. He reflects on his violent weeping in previous years, when he had confidently declared that time would not soften the painful sting of grief.

The boss is so shocked by Woodifield's remarks about their sons' graves that he momentarily loses his vigor and confident air. Meanwhile, Macey anxiously looks on at his boss's abnormal behavior; the narrator likens Macey to a "dog" waiting for daily exercise, which suggests the boss's total dominance over his employees. In this way, Mansfield signals that power is a self-serving tool for the boss to gain social status and avoid confronting his son's death. In addition, the boss feels uneasy when he imagines his son's grave from Woodifield's daughters' perspective. The physical realities of a grave overrides his previous sentiments of his son lying "unblemished" and peacefully "asleep forever." The boss's discomfort with this reality perhaps suggests that he is anxious about his own mortality.

The boss recalls how ever since his son's birth, the boss had built up a successful business so that his son—his "only son"—could one day take over. After all, the business and life itself "had no other meaning if it was not for the boy." Before the war, the boss took great pride in his son's apprenticeship at his company, where the boy was competent and popular with all the staff. However, everything changed when, six years ago, a telegram arrived informing the boss of his son's death at war. The boss had left work "a broken man, with his life in ruins."

Despite opening in medias res, *Mansfield is gradually filling in narrative detail through dialogue and memories.The boss's memory of his deceased son reveals his hopes for business as well as family succession. Despite the boss professing his total commitment to his son and subsequent life-shattering devastation at his loss, his thoughts do not match up with his actions—readers view the boss taking great pride in his life due to his business success and superior social standing. Interestingly, the boss only acknowledges his son's role in the business and his premature death. It seems that the boss commits to a performance of traditional masculine leadership, as to consider more affectionate family bonds goes against societal expectation and could be deemed weak and effeminate.*

Reflecting on how quickly the six years have passed, the boss is dismayed by his current inability to grieve for his son. The boss feels that something is "wrong with him," because he isn't feeling the way he thinks he should. Gazing at the photograph of his son, the boss becomes further unsettled by the "unnatural," "cold" expression on his son's face.

Dismayed by his lack of outward mourning, the boss tries to prompt an emotional connection by viewing his son's paragraph. However, the boss is increasingly disconcerted by the strangeness of his son's expression. Mansfield represents memory as strange and unreliable, as readers wonder if the boss has forgotten his son's features or if he is seeing the photo in a new light.

A **fly** drowning in the boss's inkpot suddenly draws his attention away from memories of his son. The boss watches the fly slips back down the sides of the inkpot each time it tries to escape: "Help! Help! Said those struggling legs." Using a pen to rescue the fly, the boss shakes it onto a piece of blotting paper and watches it diligently clean the ink from its wings and face. The boss imagines that the fly's movements are now "joyful," as "the horrible danger was over; it had escaped; it was ready for life again."

The drowning fly is the story's key symbol, and sharply pulls the boss's attention away from dwelling on memories of his son. The narrator and the boss's personification of the fly—giving it human-like qualities as it cries for help and experiences emotions while it suffers trauma—serves to highlight the dangers and consequences of warfare. The boss demonstrates compassion and a generosity of spirit as he rescues the fly and shares in its salvation.

However, before **the fly** can take to the air, an idea strikes the boss to test the fly's response to further adversity by engulfing it in a blot of ink. The boss is eager to note that "the little beggar seemed absolutely cowed, stunned, and afraid to move because of what would happen next." After its momentary terror, the fly slowly begins to pull itself out of the ink. The boss is impressed by the fly's "never say die" attitude in dragging itself through the laborious task of re-cleaning itself: "He's a plucky little devil, thought the boss, and he felt a real admiration for the fly's courage."

In his sharp pivot to purposefully torturing the fly, the boss demonstrates the sadism and cruelties of war. The boss feels admiration at the fly's ongoing bravery and judges that it demonstrates the right way to handle adversity—unemotionally and dutifully, with a "never say die" attitude. In this moment, it almost sounds like the boss is thinking about his son at war rather than a mere fly on his desk. Additionally, the boss once more shows his elitist superiority and classist attitudes when he discredits the fly as a "little beggar."

Upon **the fly**'s second moment of freedom, the boss quickly refills his pen and drips another blot of ink on his victim. The boss feels "a rush of relief" when, after a great pause, the fly once more begins waving its legs to clean itself. He has "the brilliant notion" to breathe on the fly to help it dry out. As the fly finishes re-cleaning itself, the boss recognizes that the fly is now growing "timid and weak," and decides to submerge it in ink just one last time. This time, the drowned fly "lay in it [the ink] and did not stir." Despite the boss's prodding it with his pen and barking command to "Look sharp!" the fly remains lifeless with its back legs splayed against its body and the front legs "not to be seen."

Mansfield morally undermines the boss's character as he continues to torture the fly. It's also important that the boss acknowledges the fly's increasing weakness but, instead of stopping the torture altogether, decides that this fourth drop of ink will be the last—but this is the drop that kills the fly. As the fly struggles, the boss barks at it to "Look sharp!" in yet another moment that reveals the boss's authoritative and controlling character. Through his interactions with the fly, the boss develops traditionally masculine traits of callousness, stoicism, and emotional restraint. The fly's faltering at each drowning foreshadows the boss's own wretched feelings at the story's conclusion.

The boss disposes of **the fly**'s body in a waste paper basket, upon which he experiences "such a grinding feeling of wretchedness" that he becomes frightened. Quickly ringing a bell for his clerk, the boss demands that Macey bring him fresh blotting paper and "look sharp about it." When the "old dog pad[s] away," the boss struggles to remember what he was thinking about prior to ringing for Macey, and anxiously mops at his collar with a handkerchief—"For the life of him he could not remember."

The boss's sudden horror having killed and disposed of the dead fly—and thereby accepting the harsh realities of his son's death—brings about an almost intentional occurrence of amnesia. The boss distracts himself from grief as he issues Macey with crisp directives, again likening his employee to a submissive dog. Immediately afterwards, "for the life of him" the boss cannot recall his previous anxieties, suggesting memory is intrinsically tied to human life and meaning. At the story's conclusion, Mansfield likens the boss to Woodifield by describing the boss as nervously sweating at his own memory's failures.

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