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Fragments of Grief and the Mechanics of Memory: Trauma and Modernist Consciousness in “The Fly”

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Abstract

This paper examines “The Fly” by Katherine Mansfield as a profound exploration of grief, trauma, memory, and the fractured consciousness that characterizes literary modernism. Situating the text within post-war European anxieties and early twentieth-century psychological discourse, the study investigates how Mansfield transforms an apparently simple office encounter into a dense meditation on mourning, repression, and existential instability. Through close textual analysis, the paper argues that the Boss’s interaction with “The Fly” becomes an unconscious reenactment of unresolved paternal grief following the loss of his son in war. Drawing on psychoanalytic frameworks associated with Sigmund Freud, trauma theory developed by Cathy Caruth, and memory studies informed by thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, the paper reveals how the narrative stages the collapse of rational authority before the persistence of suppressed memory. It further examines the symbolic function of “The Fly” as a projection of vulnerability, resistance, and the absurd struggle for meaning within a mechanized modern world. By engaging with contemporary Mansfield scholarship, including critical insights from Vincent O’Sullivan, Angela Smith, and Gerri Kimber, this study identifies a critical gap in understanding “The Fly” as an intersection of trauma aesthetics, power performance, and existential modernity. Ultimately, the paper positions Mansfield’s story as a psychologically layered critique of masculine authority, memory, and the human confrontation with loss.

Keywords

Katherine Mansfield, “The Fly”, Modernism; Trauma; Memory; Mourning; Existential Modernity; Psychoanalytic Criticism.

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Katherine Mansfield’s “The Fly” has long occupied a significant position within discussions of literary Modernism, not only because of its stylistic economy but because of its capacity to condense complex psychological, historical, and ideological tensions within an apparently simple narrative structure. First published in 1922, the story belongs to a cultural moment profoundly shaped by the aftermath of World War I, when European intellectual and artistic consciousness was confronted with unprecedented forms of violence, mass death, and the erosion of inherited moral certainties. The war did not simply alter political boundaries; it destabilized the philosophical foundations through which individuals had traditionally understood progress, authority, masculinity, memory, and historical continuity. Within this altered intellectual climate, modernist writing increasingly turned inward, privileging fractured consciousness, emotional discontinuity, symbolic density, and epistemological uncertainty as formal responses to historical rupture. Mansfield’s fiction participates deeply in this modernist reorientation, yet her work often resists the monumentalism associated with many of her contemporaries. Rather than representing historical crisis through expansive social canvases, she frequently locates the violence of modernity within intimate spaces—drawing rooms, gardens, domestic interiors, and seemingly ordinary social encounters. It is precisely this compression of scale that gives her fiction its critical force. In “The Fly”, the office of the Boss becomes more than a professional setting; it emerges as a symbolic site where grief, authority, memory, and violence intersect. The narrative’s apparent simplicity conceals a far more unsettling engagement with the psychic afterlives of war and the disciplinary structures through which emotional experience is mediated.

Existing scholarship on Mansfield has contributed substantially to our understanding of her narrative technique, gendered consciousness, and emotional subtlety. Critics such as Gerri Kimber have emphasized the instability and unresolved emotional textures of Mansfield’s fiction, while scholars including Sydney Janet Kaplan have foregrounded the fragmented structures of subjectivity that characterize her modernist aesthetics. Such readings have established Mansfield as a writer deeply invested in the psychological dimensions of memory, loss, and identity. Yet “The Fly” has often been approached primarily through biographical or psycho-emotional frameworks, particularly in relation to Mansfield’s

personal experiences of bereavement. While such approaches remain valuable, they risk narrowing the story's broader ideological implications.

This study proposes that "The Fly" demands to be read not solely as a narrative of private mourning, but as a critique of the institutional and cultural systems through which grief is organized, contained, and displaced in modernity. By situating Mansfield alongside thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, and Michel Foucault, this paper argues that the story reveals how traumatic memory operates not merely within the individual psyche but within structures of power, labor, masculinity, and historical consciousness. In doing so, "The Fly" emerges as one of Mansfield's most incisive meditations on the relationship between emotional repression and the violence embedded within modern social institutions. Yet, as Gerri Kimber argues, Mansfield's fiction resists interpretive finality precisely because it inhabits emotional spaces that remain unresolved, "Mansfield's narratives frequently refuse conventional emotional closure, compelling the reader to inhabit instability as a mode of consciousness" (Kimber 57).

Kimber's observation is central to understanding "The Fly", for the story does not narrate grief as an event that can be resolved or transcended. Rather, grief is structurally embedded into the rhythm of the narrative itself. Silence interrupts speech, memory disrupts present time, and emotional release remains perpetually deferred. Mansfield does not describe trauma from outside; she constructs a narrative form through which trauma becomes the very architecture of consciousness. The opening encounter between old Woodfield and the Boss immediately establishes a visual and ideological contrast. Woodfield appears physically diminished, domestically controlled, and psychologically fragile. The Boss, by contrast, appears economically secure, physically robust, and institutionally authoritative, "So there sat old Woodfield, smoking a cigar and staring almost greedily at the boss, who rolled in his office chair, stout, rosy, and still going strong, still at the helm" (Mansfield 3).

At first glance, this appears to be a simple contrast between weakness and vitality. Yet Mansfield quickly destabilises this binary by drawing attention to the Boss's office. The newly installed carpet, the electric heating, the polished furniture, and the arrangement of objects all construct an atmosphere of material permanence. These objects are not neutral details. They represent the ideological language of capitalism—renewal, productivity, accumulation, and continuity. This material architecture invites a reading through Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history. In *Illuminations*, Benjamin writes, "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism, carrying the marks of violence within itself" (Benjamin 256).

The Boss's office functions precisely in this way. It is a space of apparent order and professional success, yet beneath its polished surfaces lies the unresolved violence of history. The room is modern, but its modernity is haunted. The most revealing object within this carefully arranged space is not the furniture, but the photograph of the Boss's dead son, preserved in military uniform, "But he did not draw attention to the photograph over the table of a grave-looking boy in uniform. It had been there for over six years" (Mansfield 3).

This image exists outside the logic of economic circulation. It cannot be updated, replaced, or commodified. Unlike the furniture, it remains fixed in traumatic suspension. The son is preserved in uniform, eternally young, eternally absent, eternally unavailable to history. Mansfield here captures one of the defining features of modernist temporality: the inability of consciousness to move linearly through traumatic loss. This concern with emotional fragmentation also resonates with the work of Sydney Janet Kaplan, who notes,

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“Mansfield repeatedly locates identity within emotional spaces where experience exceeds available structures of articulation” (Kaplan 104).

Kaplan’s observation becomes crucial when Woodfield casually mentions visiting military graves in Belgium. The seemingly ordinary conversation suddenly ruptures the emotional stability of the scene, “The girls were in Belgium last week having a look at poor Reggie’s grave, and they happened to come across your boy’s” (Mansfield 4).

They’re quite near each other, it seems. Belgium is not merely a geographical reference. It invokes the trenches, the mud, the mass graves, and the industrial slaughter of a generation. Yet Mansfield does not dramatise this revelation through emotional excess. Trauma enters through banality. The horror lies not in what is said, but in how casually it is said. The Boss’s response reveals a deeper psychic collapse, “He wanted, he intended, he had arranged to weep. But no tears came, and no release followed” (Mansfield 4). The word arranged is perhaps the most devastating in the entire story. Mourning has become procedural, almost bureaucratic. Emotion itself has been subjected to institutional logic. The Boss does not spontaneously grieve; he schedules grief. This moment strongly aligns with Sigmund Freud’s theory of melancholia, “The lost object is not abandoned but incorporated into the ego, and mourning becomes an internalised conflict” (Freud 245).

The Boss’s grief is not absent; it has become psychologically immobilised. His inability to cry reveals not emotional emptiness, but emotional paralysis. The son represented not merely paternal affection but succession, inheritance, and futurity. “Ever since his birth the boss had worked at building up this business for him. It had no other meaning” (Mansfield 4).

This passage transforms the son into an economic and symbolic object. His death does not merely destroy emotional intimacy; it destroys the very structure through which the Boss understood his life. Masculinity, fatherhood, business, and futurity collapse simultaneously. Unable to process this grief directly, the Boss displaces his psychic violence onto “The Fly”. “The Fly” sequence remains one of the most philosophically complex symbolic episodes in modernist fiction, “A fly had fallen into his broad inkpot, and was trying feebly but desperately to clamber out again. Help! Help! said those struggling legs” (Mansfield 5).

Initially, the Boss appears compassionate. He rescues “The Fly” and places it on blotting paper, allowing it to recover. Yet this rescue quickly transforms into experimentation, domination, and violence. He repeatedly drops ink onto “The Fly”, forcing it to relive its struggle. This sequence invites a reading through Michel Foucault. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes, “Power proceeds through observation, repetition, correction, and control. The subject becomes visible precisely in order to be disciplined” (Foucault 170).

The office now becomes a disciplinary chamber. “The Fly” becomes an object of surveillance. The Boss observes, intervenes, tests, and ultimately destroys. Yet what makes the scene ideologically disturbing is that he admires “The Fly” while simultaneously producing its suffering. “He’s a plucky little devil, thought the boss. That was the way to tackle things” (Mansfield 5).

This admiration exposes one of Mansfield’s deepest critiques of modernity. Systems of power often celebrate resilience while obscuring the structures that produce suffering. The Boss praises endurance precisely because he controls the conditions of pain. Kimber’s insight becomes relevant again, “Mansfield’s fiction often reveals how ordinary social performances conceal profound psychological contradictions” (Kimber 63).

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“The Fly”’s struggle also evokes existential philosophy, particularly the absurd labour described by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “The struggle itself toward meaning becomes enough to fill the consciousness of existence” (Camus 78). Yet Mansfield’s vision is darker than Camus. Sisyphus struggles against an indifferent universe. “The Fly” struggles against a conscious authority. This transforms existential absurdity into institutional cruelty. Mansfield’s modernity is not merely meaningless; it is actively disciplinary. The Boss unconsciously reenacts the violence of war. Each drop of ink resembles bombardment. “The Fly” survives, regroups, and is attacked again. The battlefield has not disappeared. It has migrated into domestic and professional life.

This reading also reveals the fragility of patriarchal masculinity. The Boss appears strong, rational, and emotionally disciplined. Yet beneath this performance lies profound psychological disintegration. Kaplan’s insight is particularly illuminating here, “Mansfield portrays consciousness not as coherent identity but as emotional fragmentation under historical pressure” (Kaplan 112). The Boss is not a stable subject. He is an emotionally fractured consciousness performing institutional authority while internally collapsing. The story’s final moment is devastating in its simplicity. “For the life of him he could not remember. What was it? What had he been thinking of?” (Mansfield 6).

This final forgetting is not incidental. It represents the collapse of memory itself. The Boss cannot remember because memory no longer functions as a stable structure of identity. Trauma has fragmented consciousness beyond coherence. This moment resonates deeply with Friedrich Nietzsche’s articulation of nihilism, “What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devalue themselves, and meaning collapses inward” (Nietzsche 9).

The Boss’s forgetfulness marks the endpoint of unresolved mourning, institutional masculinity, and emotional repression. Memory fails because the structures that once produced meaning—family, work, history, masculinity—have all been destabilised. Existing scholarship on Mansfield, particularly the work of Kimber and Kaplan, has significantly enriched our understanding of her emotional aesthetics, modernist form, and gendered consciousness. Yet “The Fly” remains insufficiently examined as a critique of capitalist temporality, disciplinary power, and institutionalised masculinity. Trauma in Mansfield has often been treated as psychological or biographical, but rarely as ideological and structural. What remains underdeveloped in Mansfield studies is the recognition that her fiction does not merely represent grief; it interrogates the modern systems that produce, regulate, and suppress it. Mansfield does not simply write about loss. She writes about what modernity does to the experience of loss.

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