

Trauma and Literature
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Lecture – 8
Mansfield's The Fly – Part 3

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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.

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. The boss took up a pen, picked the fly out of the ink, and shook it on to a piece of blotting-paper. For a fraction of a second it lay still on the dark patch that oozed round it. Then the front legs waved, took hold, and, pulling its small, sodden body up, it began the immense task of cleaning the ink from its wings. Over and under, over and under, went a leg along a wing as the stone goes over and under the scythe. Then there was a pause, while the fly, seeming to stand on the tips of its toes, tried to expand first one wing and then the other. It succeeded at last, and, sitting down, it began, like a minute cat, to clean its face. Now one could imagine that the little front legs rubbed against each other lightly, joyfully. The horrible danger was over; it had escaped; it was ready for life again.

But just then the boss had an idea. He plunged his pen back into the ink, leaned his thick wrist on the blotting-paper, and as the fly tried its wings down came a great heavy blot. What would it make of that! What indeed! The little beggar seemed absolutely cowed, stunned, and afraid to move because of what would happen next. But then, as if painfully, it dragged itself forward. The front legs waved, caught hold, and, more slowly this time, the task began from the beginning.

<https://commapress.co.uk/resources/online-short-stories/the-fly>



This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Katherine Mansfield’s short story “The Fly”. The boss or the protagonist in the story locks himself in his room in his office space and wants to perform the mourning, hysteria, and trauma.

They become performative categories in the story and the whole point of the performance is to get satisfaction. There is a complex equation here in the story between trauma and privilege or trauma and agency. The trauma becomes an ability. He is able to feel traumatized. He is able to mourn. He is able to hystericize himself at will that is the whole point in the story.

It is related to masculinity as well as a masculine agency at some level. This is the crux in the story in some sense. The thing about trauma in the story is that there is a combination between grief and satisfaction, cruelty and satisfaction, cruelty and joy because at some level the boss attempts to traumatize himself or to make himself hystericized again.

There is a degree of satisfaction, joy, and some sense of agency about it. It has a state of masochistic quality about it. He is trying to project his trauma and also trying to internalize the trauma. There is inward outward movement that happens all the time at this particular point.

The final episode where it becomes a drama of the boss' own sadomasochism that gets played out in this little scene can be seen in the end. Then, a fly falls. The boss notices a fly had fallen into his inkpot and he brings out the fly with this pen and puts it on a blotting paper and drops a lot of ink on it. He sees the fly struggle to come out of the ink and manages to do it.

And then the boss drops another blot of ink and he the fly has another go in terms of drying itself and the boss does it one more time and the fly dies. And then of course the boss feels very scared because at the same time what was happening when he was dropping the blots of ink on the fly a part of him wanted the fly to come out of the predicament. In some sense, the boss was playing the god as well as the sufferer.

The boss was playing the perpetrator as well as the sufferer. The dropping of the blots of ink on the fly is an element of torture by him. But he also identifies himself with a fly. He also empathizes with the fly. It becomes a very complex torture scene wherein he is also able to empathize with the tortured person. He is a torturer as well as an empathizer.

It becomes an example of deep empathy where he is not able to carry out the torture without feeling for the torturer self. The fly becomes in a way a microcosm of the boss's own self. The fly becomes the projection of the boss's own self because like the fly the boss also is dropping this blot of ink on himself.

He wants the trauma. He wants the original moment of trauma to sustain in himself and he wants it to define himself as mentioned earlier. There is a quality of sadomasochism in this entire episode where the boss is the perpetrator as where the torturer like the fly struggles to come out of his predicament. It is also in a way the boss struggles to carry on the predicament of his son, the death of his son.

It is already seen how the boss wants to stay in the trauma zone, the boss wants to stay in the original moment of trauma. He does not want to move on. It has been equated with agency and masculinity. The whole fly episode also becomes a sustainability test for the boss. He is trying to sustain himself. He is trying to see if it can be sustained, he is trying to see if in this predicament can be moved out by a lesser creature.

In a way he becomes the lesser creature, he projects his own grief, he projects his own fantasy, and he projects his own predicament onto the fly. The fly dies in the end. Here, death also becomes symbolic for the boss's own agency because that very clearly shows him that there is a point after which this cannot be carried out or there is a point after which this cannot be borne out.

The fly's death also becomes a closure for the boss, a very dark closure because he is unable to move on. He is unable to think beyond that point and the story will end as he will feel extremely wretched, extremely helpless and he does not quite know what to think. He does not quite know what to look forward to. He essentially becomes a futureless person with nothing to look forward to.

The fly is dead. The entire fly episode is a metonymic representation of the boss's own predicament and trying out his own predicament onto a lesser creature. He becomes the torturer, he becomes the perpetrator as well as the sufferer and the whole thing becomes very sadomasochistic which is also related to the boss's own sadomasochism.

The masochism is he enjoys his trauma in a sense because it gives some agency, it gives him a degree of masculinity. He can boast about it, he can tell other people that in other men might live the loss down, other men might move on but not he and he would always inhabit the original moment of trauma, he will never move on from that point and that became a prestige marker that became a status marker for the boss.

The fact that he actually permanently inhabits that particular moment of trauma, the original moment of trauma with a degree of masochism about it he takes pleasure out of his suffering. He takes pleasure in the ability to suffer all the time because that ability to suffer all the time

at will becomes a prestige marker for the boss. There was that masochism about it. He is also very sadistic because in a way that he projects it to other people.

Hence, the fly episode becomes the sadomasochistic episode that the boss has been played on inside him, the one that is internalized inside him. Now, it is being exteriorized, it becomes split out in a different space. So, this is what the episode is all about and let us take a look at how that is described by Mansfield. So, this should be on the screen. 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.

It becomes quite cinematic, with a close-up on the fly where its limbs, movements, arms and legs can be seen how it is trying to get out of the inkpot. "Help! Help! said those struggling legs. But the sides of the inkpot were wet and slippery; it fell back again and began to swim." It is almost like a Sisyphean quality.

"The Myth of Sisyphus" is referred to here where someone is doomed to push a rock on top of a hill and the predicament is that the rock is going to come down again with gravity. He is doomed forever to keep pushing it on top of the hill knowing fully well that it is never going to stay there. It becomes a spectacular exercise of futility and some sense. There was a Sisyphean quality about this episode as well.

In the meanwhile, the fly is trying to get out of the inkpot, but it is slipping and it is falling back again. "The boss took up a pen, picked the fly out of the ink, and shook it on a piece of blotting paper." He put it out and in a piece of blotting paper. For a fraction of a second, it lay still on the dark patch that oozed around it. Then the front legs waved, took hold, and pulling its small sodden body up, it began the immense task of cleaning the ink from its wings."

The whole episode, the whole exercise started again. It started cleaning the ink from its wings. "Over and under, over and under, went a leg along a wing as the stone goes over and under the scythe." The stone image is an addition to the Sisyphean image. And the scythe has always been traditionally a marker of death. Dead and medieval drama morality plays always a pace which the scythe.

Scythe is a traditional archetype, a symbol, a marker of death. The stone, scythe image is important over here. So, over and under, over and under, went a leg along a wing as the stone goes over and under the scythe. Looking at the magnification happening over here. The leg of the ant or the leg of the fly has been described as it was the human leg. The fly is being so humanized through this magnification process.

The whole idea, the whole visual gram of the entire visual image, the visual gaze over here magnifies the fly in some sense. "Then there was a pause, while the fly, seeming to stand on the tips of its toes." Toes are a very human metaphor. Toes, legs normally do not use these words to talk about a fly. On the tip of its toes, tried to expand first one wing and then the other. "It succeeded at last, and sitting down and began like a minute cat, to clean its face."

The cat image becomes important. The fly has been magnified at different levels. It has a limb, it has a toe, and it looks like a cat. "Now one could imagine that the little front legs rubbed against each other lightly, joyfully. The horrible danger was over; it had escaped, it was ready for life again." The whole idea of readying yourself for life becomes important.

The fly rubs itself in a piece of blotting paper, energizes himself and now it is ready for life again. "But just then the boss had an idea." This is the point it where it becomes sadomasochisms, but before that he was just being a benevolent person. He picked the fly from the inkpot, put in the blotting paper and now the fly is ready for life. The fly has managed to dry itself and the boss has an idea of dropping another blot of ink on the fly.

"But just then the boss had an idea. He plunged the pen back into the ink, leaned his thick wrist on the blotting-paper, and as the fly tried its wings down came a great heavy blot. He drops another blot on the fly. What would it make of that? What indeed! The little beggar seemed absolutely cowed, stunned and afraid to move because of what would happen next." Here, the fly is described as a little beggar.

The whole idea that beggar becomes a metaphor of agencylessness, someone is helpless, someone is agencyless, someone does not have any resources. The boss drops another blot of ink on the fly. "But then, as if painfully, it dragged itself forward. The front legs waved,

caught hold and more slowly this time the task began from the beginning.” The fly makes another attempt to dry itself.

Now when we find that and we will see that how the visual drama gets played out. We notice that the image of the fly being a human, becoming something like a human being with limbs, legs and toes, trying to get out of the predicament, becomes interesting in the context of the First World War. So, the fly could be seen very much as a metaphor of the soldier in the First World War.

Someone is getting bombed all the time, someone is getting pushed all the time, someone is getting traumatized all the time and how does a soldier try to come out of it and the final images would corroborate this idea. The front legs waved, caught hold and more slowly this time the task began from the beginning.

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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... But the fly had again finished its laborious task, and the boss had just time to refill his pen, to shake fair and square on the new-cleaned body yet another dark drop. What about it this time? A painful moment of suspense followed. But behold, the front legs were again waving; the boss felt a rush of relief. He leaned over the fly and said to it tenderly, "You artful little b..." And he actually had the brilliant notion of breathing on it to help the drying process. All the same, there was something timid and weak about its efforts now, and the boss decided that this time should be the last, as he dipped the pen deep into the inkpot.

It was. The last blot fell on the soaked blotting-paper, and the dragged fly lay in it and did not stir. The back legs were stuck to the body; the front legs were not to be seen.

'Come on,' said the boss. 'Look sharp!' And he stirred it with his pen in vain. Nothing happened or was likely to happen. The fly was dead.

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.

'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.

“He is a plucky little devil, thought the boss,” and again if you take a look at the vocabulary, it is a very masculine boy-scout vocabulary. Just admiration, almost grudging admiration, manly admiration 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...”

It is a very manly line of courage, admiration, pluckiness, resourcefulness, etc. which is going to play around the boss's head. “But the fly had again finished its laborious task and the boss

had just time to refill the pen, to shake fair and square on the new-cleaned body yet another dark drop.” He is putting another dark drop, it is another blot of ink on the fly. “What about at that time?”

This time a painful moment of suspense followed. The boss is also getting attached to the fly. When the fly does not move, it becomes a painful moment of suspense for the boss. He is beginning to empathize with the fly. He is associating, he is relating to the fly, at the same time he is torturing the fly. It becomes very complex torture scene.

“But behold, the front legs were again waving; and the boss felt a rush of relief. This becomes a rush of relief. The boss is relieved that the fly is able to move now, which means he wants the fly to move. He is torturing the fly. He also wants the fly to come out of the torture because the fly's movement outside of torture or coming out of the torture becomes will become an inspiration for the boss in terms of how he can control his own mourning of grief.

“He leaned over the fly and said to it tenderly, “You artful little b...”” it could be any swear word and the manly swear would. “You awful little b”, he is admiring the fly. And he actually had the brilliant notion of breathing on it to help the drying process. It really gets complicated. He is torturing the fly, putting of blots of ink on the fly, but the fly is making an effort to come out of the torture and by drying itself.

The boss is also breathing on it. He becomes a torturer, he also becomes a sufferer. He can relate to the suffering of the fly, at the same time he is perpetrating the torture. It becomes this classic sadomasochistic scene, sadism is cruelty on others, masochism is a pleasure by torturing yourself. So, he himself becomes the fly at some levels, he becomes hopefully sadomasochistic.

“All the same, there was something timid and weak about the efforts now, and the boss decided that this time should be the last, as he dipped the pen deep into the inkpot.” The boss realized that the effort of the fly is becoming weaker because the fly is getting weaker, so the

boss said okay one more time. So, he dipped pen back in the inkpot to refill it to put his one last drop on it. "It was."

There is a degree of finality about it. It is a closure about it. "It was." It is ended, was it happened it became a thing of the past so he died. It was. The last blot fell on the soaked blotting paper and the dragged fly lay in it and did not stir. The back legs were stuck to the body and the front legs were not to be seen. It crushes a fly. It is almost like a bombed soldier.

The final bomb falls and the body just crushes, the limbs just crash and the bodies dies in the crash. The back legs were stuck to the body, the front legs were not to be seen. This is not a normal way to talk about a fly using legs as a metaphor. So, it is very much become a human corpse at some level. So, the visual grammar, the visual vocabulary is very much a wartime horror image of a soldier being dragged by a bomb.

The soldier is being crushed by a bomb. The bomb fells and the entire body of soldier just crashed, the body became crashed, the limbs become crashed, etc. "'Come on', said the boss. 'Look sharp!'" He is trying to encourage the fly using very manly vocabulary. "And he stirred it his pen in vein." He began to stir the body of the fly in vain to try to put some image, put some energy into it, and put some life into it.

"Nothing happened or was likely to happen. The fly was dead." This is the finality about it which was anticipated by the word by the sentence it was. Nothing happened it was likely to happen, nothing happened and the fly was dead. It is finished, it consummated. It has come to an end. "The boss lifted the corpse." The use of the word 'corpse' over here. It is a traditional word used for human bodies, dead human bodies.

It is not normally used for dead animals or dead flies for the matter. It is obviously an example of magnification and humanization of life become a human body. "The boss lifted the corpse on the end of the paper-knife and flung it into the waste-paper basket." Here, the act of flinging the fly with his paper knife into the water paper basket again becomes a very traditional image of flinging the dead body of a soldier using a bayonet.

The horrible images of the First World War are very recursive, a pile of dead bodies and more bodies being flung into the pile using a bayonet, a big bayonet which is used to pick up the dead bodies or soldiers and fling it in a heap of dead bodies. This horrendous image, this graphic image of human horror, something similar is happening here.

The fly's corpse is picked up using a paper-knife, the image of a bayonet over here and flung in a waste-paper basket. So, the degree of waste becomes important and the whole production of waste becomes important where the fly becomes the waste, the fly becomes a wasted body just like the human corpse is example of a waste of human life, wasted human body.

So, the organicity of waste becomes important over here, it becomes organic waste. The fly which is living, the fly which is breathing, the fly which is moving has now become waste. It is now just become trash and this conversion of human body into trash which was at the entire First World War. The entire program of the First World War was entirely about this, converts the human body into trash, conversion of human organic-self into trash.

Everything became trash. The quality of converting everything into trash is now is exercised over here. It is enacted over here. The body of the fly is flung in the waste-paper basket. "But such a grinding feeling of wretchedness seized him that he felt positively frightened." There is an oxymoronic quality about it, positively frightened. It is almost like fear becomes all-consuming quality.

It just begins to consume him, he is frightened now. "He started forward and pressed the bell for Macey", the office person, the messenger person. "'Bring me some fresh blotting paper', he said sternly and look sharp about it." He just desperately wants to go back and resurrect his authoritative image. He desperately wants to hold back to his authoritative self. He is just asking for some fresh blotting paper, but look at the way in which he is asking him.

He just wants to go back to his manly authoritative tyrannical self which he is desperate to go back to it. So look sharp about it, just go and get some fresh blotting paper normally would not care so much about blotting paper. "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.”

The story ends away, an example of memorylessness. He cannot remember what he was thinking about before the fly episodes. It becomes a complete blank vision and the desperation with which he wants to resurrect or connect back to his manly authoritative self is a Sisyphean exercise, it is just going to end with a failure.

There is absolutely nothing for him to go back to and retain his authority with. All he can ask is some fresh blotting paper which the blotting paper becomes the image of absorption, everything is absorbed away. It just becomes something which is a clean slate, there is nothing in it. It becomes an image of nothingness, a marker of nothingness as it goes on.

Something which absorbs away everything and just converts everything into nothing, the blotting paper and he wants that and that is the only resource left for him. “Bring me some a fresh blotting paper” that is the final instruction given to the messenger person. His final desperate attempt to get back some of the agents, some sense of masculinity, some sense of order and authority is pathetic in quality.

He sort of descends into pathos, descends into being a pathetic self quite clearly, and then very interestingly at the end he is trying to remember what he was thinking about with the fly episode, before the fly episode happened. And he gets frightened, the shivering, he is sweating and for the life of him, he cannot remember what he was thinking before.

He becomes a lot like Woodfield because at the beginning of the story when Woodfield comes to see the boss he wants to say something to the boss and he cannot remember. At that point, the contrast between the boss and Woodfield was so spectacular, Woodfield had no sense of motor agency. He couldn't remember, his legs were trembling, and his arms were trembling.

Patches of red were showing above his pad and something similar is happening here. The boss is losing control, not just about his life, not just about his capital itself, but also about his motor agency. He cannot remember anymore and this lack of remembrance and lack of

memory quite clearly becomes a marker of loss of agency, his motor self is falling apart. His motor self is disintegrating.

But also at a very temporal level, further he cannot remember what happened before the fly episode, further, he cannot remember what it was that he was thinking even before. He becomes a memoryless man, he becomes past less man and we also know by now he becomes a future less man, nothing to look forward to for him. His son is dead, there will be no more bosses. There will be no one to step into his line.

There will be no more heir for him. He becomes the future less man as well. He is future less as well as past less. He cannot remember what was happening before and there is nothing for him to look forward to. So, in that sense he becomes a very perversely speaking timeless man, the time was liquidated, time was departed from him. He is completely emptied out by time.

He becomes the fly ready to be flung into a waste-paper basket. He becomes like the fly just a piece of trash, left alone by time, debris of time as it were. The movement from being the stout, rosy, authoritative boss into being a fragile figure who cannot remember something which has happened ten minutes ago that becomes a very spectacular descent and that descent is becoming important.

This whole story is about descend, the whole story is about deconstructing, certain performative kind of masculinity. It almost castrates them completely. He is clinically castrated off his masculinity, he cannot remember anything, he cannot have any control of his motor self, his memory, and everything is falling apart. The entire story over here becomes an example of disintegration.

He was trying to hold on to things, just trying to bring in new gadgets, just trying to renovate his office by looking spectacular but looking authoritative but now we know he is just a fragile figure fallen into pieces. The entire story becomes an example of how trauma is performed obviously, but the real example of trauma over here is when a trauma goes away. The emptiness which comes in a post-trauma self becomes a real trauma.

When one cannot control one's trauma anymore because for so many years the boss had been trying to control his trauma, the boss had been trying to perform his trauma, then trauma became something that one can have ownership on and that gave him a sense of agency. The ownership on his own trauma made him feel unique that his son is dead and he is not like any other father who can move on.

His son is very special to him and he is a very special father. Trauma was equated with agency and prestige in his mind for such a long time because of a sense of ownership, but now we see towards the end that he cannot cry anymore because he does not feel traumatized anymore, the trauma has left him. So, like everyone else, time has also left him that the time of trauma that temporarily has gone away from him.

He has nothing else to look back, nothing else to look forward to. That trauma which gave him some kind of meaning, some kind of agency, some perverse sense of prestige that trauma has departed, that trauma has left him, liquidated him, he is just debris in time. The real trauma comes out of emptiness and a post-traumatic self.

It is a post-trauma story. When trauma is gone, like everyone else, he is emptied out of trauma and that becomes the real problem, that becomes a real crisis for him, the fact that he cannot remember, he cannot go back to that point of time and traumatize himself again at will. He cannot go back in that point of time and have ownership on his trauma that unique ownership is lost, it is denied to him.

And that denial, that entire disintegration becomes a real crisis, real predicament in the story, that emptying out of the self which becomes in the post-traumatic self becomes the emptying self where there is nothingness, nothing to look forward to, and nothing to look back upon. He becomes a nothing man, a hollow man in some sense and holding out becomes important over here.

The entire story is about disintegration, about the production of hollowness, the experience of hollowness, but also it is a take in trauma where the control over trauma and trauma as a

prestige marker that completely goes away and the real crisis, the real trauma comes at a post-trauma self. The performative quality trauma goes away and the emptying out quality trauma comes into being.

It is about temporality, it is about trauma, it is about masculinity, it is about agency, it is a very complex story. Despite its brevity it is a fantastic story about masculinity, memory and mournability. The mourning becomes the prestige performance, mourning becomes the prestige marker in the story and the fact that he cannot mourn anymore, he cannot remember anymore becomes a real crisis in the story.

So, I hope you enjoyed reading the story. I hope this lecture is useful to you and I hope this allowed you to have a pretty interesting take on trauma as represented in literature. So with this, we conclude Katherine Mansfield's short story "The Fly".