

**Trauma and Literature**  
**Prof. Avishek Parui**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology - Madras**

**Lecture – 7**  
**Mansfield’s The Fly – Part 2**

**(Refer Slide Time: 00:16)**

'The girls were delighted with the way the place is kept,' piped the old voice. 'Beautifully looked after. Couldn't be better if they were at home. You've not been across, have yer?'

'No, no!' For various reasons the boss had not been across.

'There's miles of it,' quavered old Woodfield, 'and it's all as neat as a garden. Flowers growing on all the graves. Nice broad paths.' It was plain from his voice how much he liked a nice broad path.

The pause came again. Then the old man brightened wonderfully.

'D'you know what the hotel made the girls pay for a pot of jam?' he piped. 'Ten francs! Robbery, I call it. It was a little pot, so Gertrude says, no bigger than a half-crown. And she hadn't taken more than a spoonful when they charged her ten francs. Gertrude brought the pot away with her to teach 'em a lesson. Quite right, too; it's trading on our feelings. They think because we're over there having a look round we're ready to pay anything. That's what it is.' And he turned towards the door.

'Quite right, quite right!' cried the boss, though what was quite right he hadn't the least idea. He came round by his desk, followed the shuffling footsteps to the door, and saw the old fellow out. Woodfield was gone.

For a long moment the boss stayed, staring at nothing, while the grey-haired office messenger, watching him, dodged in and out of his cubby-hole like a dog that expects to be taken for a run. Then: 'I'll see nobody for half an hour, Macey,' said the boss. 'Understand! Nobody at all.'

'Very good, sir.'

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

24

This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Katherine Mansfield’s short story “The Fly”. It is seen how this story is interestingly about equating trauma with privilege. In other words, the ability to be traumatized, the ability to experience trauma at will is equated with privilege and a sort of masculinity.

The boss who is the protagonist in the story was never named but he is just called the boss, an indication of his masculine privilege. He prides himself at being able to feel traumatized and weep at the loss of his son at will. Trauma is a performative category is in this story.

Hysteria is a performative category. The association of hysteria is normally with femininity according to stereotypical sexist logic. But, here, we find that there is a masculine appropriation of hysteria and the boss takes over hysteria to become a mourner.

He is someone who wants to mourn the loss of his son at will. He has not moved on from his loss and does not want to, as well. His refusal to move on and to hold on to the original moment of trauma as equated with privilege is his struggle.

There is a complete counterpoint to the character Woodfield who appears in the story as senile, decadent, and almost dead. His mobility or his agency have been compromised as opposed to while he has had a stroke, making him very sick and unwell. He is boxed up and confined in his house by his wife and girls.

His mobility is compromised, both his social agency and motor agency are compromised. His motor control is severely compromised in the sense that he shivers all the time, he cannot make movements at will, etc., and how that becomes complicated. But then, he is an important character in the story.

He mentions something that the boss wants to completely be in denial of and that it has been 7 years since he lost his son in the war. His wife and his daughters go and visit the grave in Belgium. The description of the grave is very touristy with a gaze. It is very consumer's kind of a gaze.

It becomes almost like trauma tourism where people go to the graves of their beloved sons and daughters who had lost their lives in the world and see the graves in the far-off land, in Belgium in this particular case. The boss's son is also buried there, but for several reasons, he has never been across and the reasons are very indicative.

It is very loaded. It is also a suggestion to the fact that the boss does not want to move on. The boss does not want to go to the site of trauma but wants to retain the psychological experience of trauma. Hence, looking at the actual site of trauma will dilute the experience of trauma that he suffered many years ago. The ability to re-suffer and re-experience is equated with manly privilege in the story.

The whole point is that he wants to hold onto the original traumatic moment. The ability to hold on, the refusal, and the defiance of time is equated with his manly privilege. Woodfield mentions this trauma site to the boss.

Readers get to know that it is the same graveyard where the boss's son is buried. This begins to turn the events in the story. This begins to form some kind of a peripeteia, an Aristotelian sense reversal of events or a turn of events. The boss begins to get more and more cracked up and fragile. The fragility of the boss becomes very obvious.

The fragility beneath the tough manly masculinity to stop the manly exterior begins to become very obvious over here. The entire embodiment of the boss is constructed. The idea or the embodiment of the boss performing the appearance of the boss as tough manly appearance beneath which he is very vulnerable and insecure.

This is a point in the story where Woodfield departs after delivering the report. Readers get to know that the boss's son and Woodfield's son are dead and buried together. Although at the very beginning of the story when the boss was showing off his gadgets, his new office, his furniture, electric heating, bookcase, etc. there was a little glimpse of something is up.

It was a blink a miss situation where there is a little photograph of a boy in a soldier's uniform on the table and that photograph was not new. It was there for 6 years. Readers are supposed to wonder what that photograph meant or whose photograph that was and what was it doing amiss all this new architecture in his office.

It was a very quick and subtle point towards to come now. It is known that Woodfield and the boss lost their son in the war, connecting the dots and guessing that the photograph may have been the boss's son who is now dead in the war. So maybe he is kept in the office amidst all the new architecture, new gadgets, and new machines that he is surrounded by at this point in time.

Woodfield goes after departing this news. This is the point of the story where it begins to get very psychological. "For a long moment the boss stayed, staring at nothing." The blankness

in stare becomes important and his staring at nothingness is very nihilistic, emptying kind of a gaze. He is staring at nothing, the blankness of stay and also stays at nothingness.

“While the grey-haired office messenger, watching him, dodged in and out of his cubby-hole like a dog that expects to be taken for a run.” There are animal metaphors in the story of the dog, the rabbit. Woodifield was infantilized. The point is everyone is sort of sub-humanized or dehumanized in different degrees in the story. So amidst other things, the story is also about the loss of humanity.

The story states the crisis in humanity in the western world. The white man's toughness, the white man's supremacy is being questioned increasingly and the boss becomes in a way the archetypal white man in the western world who is still trying to hold on to his post-war privilege, trying to hold on to his post-war superiority, supremacy, racial, gendered supremacy.

He is becoming more and more crushed at the moment. “The white-haired grey office messenger, watching him, dodged in and out of his cubby-hole like a dog that expects to be taken for a run. Then: ‘I’ll see nobody for half an hour, Macey’ said the boss. ‘Understand! Nobody at all.’”

The boss gives very clear instructions that he will see nobody for half an hour. He wants to be alone, he wants to sort of isolate himself in his room, close the door and perhaps re-experience his original moment of trauma. The office messenger has a name, Macey.

Woodifield has a name, Woodifield’s son has a name, Woodifield’s wife has a name, but the boss and the son do not have names. Readers never get to know what the names were and many interpretations are possible out of this. But one obvious interpretation is the unnamed condition of the boss and the son gives it some kind of an archetypal structure.

The boss is that patriarch, the western white male patriarch who wants to control the business, the family, the war, the capital, the finance, the family, culture, etc. And the son

who is also unnamed as the next in line, is supposed to be the next boss. So, instead of the boss, they have some kind of a dialectical relationship in some sense.

The son is supposed to become the boss and the boss is performing the idea and the embodiment of the boss. The son and the boss become very archetypal performative figures trying to fit into these masculine roles in a western capitalist world. The boss becomes the patriarchal structure, the patriarchal figure in this story. The grand patriarch, the grand capitalist, the western patriarch in the story.

The point is the line of the patriarch is now interrupted with the son being dead. It becomes tragic because it is now permanently interrupted. So, the son will never become the boss. In other words, there will be no boss again. The boss is essentially dead as a concept, as an involvement, he is a dead man, he is just a hanger-on in time. He is essentially futureless because the son being dead.

There will be nobody to take over his business. There will be nobody to become the next boss. There is nothing to look forward to, no future in terms of what the boss is right and that temporal crisis becomes interesting because the whole idea of defiance in the story is defiance against time.

The boss had promised himself that other men might live the loss down, other men might move on with time, but he will never move on. His defiance to move on in time becomes the assertion of his masculinity, the assertion of his manly privilege, his agency which will not get more and more deconstructed.

This is the point where he very ceremoniously tells Macey, the office messenger that he will not see anybody for half an hour and then he gives instruction and goes to his room.

**(Refer Slide Time: 10:55)**

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....

It had been a terrible shock to him when old Woodfield sprang that remark upon him about the boy's grave. It was exactly as though the earth had opened and he had seen the boy lying there with Woodfield's girls staring down at him. For it was strange. Although over six years had passed away, the boss never thought of the boy except as lying unchanged, unblemished in his uniform, asleep for ever. "My son!" groaned the boss. But no tears came yet. In the past, in the first months and even years after the boy's death, he had only to say those words to be overcome by such grief that nothing short of a violent fit of weeping could relieve him. Time, he had declared then, he had told everybody, could make no difference. Other men perhaps might recover, might live their loss down, but not he. How was it possible! 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?

And that promise had been so near being fulfilled. The boy had been in the office learning the ropes for a year before the war. Every morning they had started off together, they had come back by the same train. And what congratulations he had received as the boy's father! No wonder, he had taken to it marvellously. As to his popularity with the staff, every man jacked of them down to old MacEÿ couldn't make enough of the boy. And he wasn't in the least spoilt. No, he was just his bright natural self, with the right word for everybody, with that boyish look and his habit of saying, 'Simply splendid!'

“The door shut. The firm heavy footsteps 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...” The sequence here is a concatenation of gestures and intentions. He goes back to his spring chair. He covers his face with his hands.

The very performative quality of mourning becomes very interesting. He goes to his office, shuts the door, gives very clear instructions, very ceremoniously that he will not see anybody for half an hour and he prepares himself to cry right. The performative quality of mourning is equated with the performative quality of masculinity.

He becomes the ideal manly mourner because he can mourn at will, historicize himself at will, and his ability to hystericize himself becomes the marker of agents and becomes a marker of masculinity for the boss which is what makes the story interesting. The sequence he wanted, he intended, he arranged to weep. It is very artificially arranged.

The door has been shut. The office has been decked out, he has created, and he has engineered this isolation around himself. His engineering of isolation becomes part of the performative process that he is going to isolate or alienate himself, and then he will weep. There is a flashback in time, we get to know about the boss and his intention.

Readers get to know about the son and how was the son brought up and the tragedy of the incident of the son's death. It had been a terrible shock to him when old Woodifield sprang the remark upon him about the boy's grave. It was exactly as though the earth had opened and he had seen the boy lying there with Woodifield's girls staring down at him. The visual image becomes interesting.

The graphic virtual image where he almost imagines that the grave of the son gets opened up and Woodifield's wife and daughters are gazing at him, gazing at the son. Now obviously that means as if the grave is a trauma, if the grave is a symbolic traumatic sight of the trauma site for the boss, it suddenly becomes open for public gaze and that is unnerving him.

He wants to protect it and solemnize it. He wants to solemnize his loss, his trauma and wants to be completely private. He does not want that to be accessible by the public, but now this whole idea of Woodifield's wife and girls staring at the boss's son. The boss's son becomes a marker of the boss's own trauma. So, there is also a gendered quality about this case.

It was as though the earth has opened and he has seen the boy lying there with Woodifield's girls staring down at him. It almost becomes a Medusa-like stare, it converts into a stone and this is a literalization of a metaphor because it is literally a stone, there is literally a coffin and the boss's son is dead for many years.

The women staring back at the men almost compromises his masculinity, almost castrates as a man because the whole idea of his masculinity was premised on privacy, mournability, and inaccessibility. He is inaccessible to the public, he is inaccessible by time, by the public temporal gaze which is equated with femininity over here. Other men who are not man enough might live the loss down.

Other men who are not man enough might travel, do tourism around the trauma, but not him. He wants to retain the original amendment. So now with the image of Woodifield's daughters and wife staring at the boss's dead son is essentially the women staring at his manly grief that compromises masculinity. It opens him up, it cracks up the coffin and the earth opening up becomes again it is like a strengthening armor.

The armor opening up and that becomes engendered invasion in the boss's psychology. For it was strange. Although over 6 years had passed away, the boss never thought of the boy except as lying unchanged, unblemished in his uniform, asleep forever. This is the point where we get to know the ideal image that boss has in his mind that his son should be there asleep forever. He has retained the original moment of trauma.

He has retained the original dead body or the original moment of death. It has been 6 years but the boss always wanted to think of the boy his son as lying there unblemished in his uniform, so nothing has changed, nothing has decayed. The deadness is fresh in his mind, it is almost an organic quality about deadness. It is fresh in his mind forever. "My son! groaned the boss."

It becomes an almost a tragic-comic, it becomes very dark. He wants to cry, he wants to relieve himself, he wants to have the catharsis or the satisfaction of catharsis by crying, but then no tears are coming. He is performing and trying his best to perform. He is desperately trying to perform his catharsis, perform his mourning, but no tears came yet.

"In the past, in the first months and even years after the boy's death, he had only to say those words to be overcome by such grief that nothing short of a violent fit of weeping could relieve him." He only had to say those words, "My son!" and the violent fit of weeping which would relieve him. The whole idea of weeping becomes very cathartic in quality, very selfish catharsis.

He wants to relive the moment of trauma. The whole entanglement of relieving and reliving becomes interesting. He wants to relive the original moment of trauma. It gives him relief, a sense of solid manly satisfaction that he is able to sort of relive it at will. He is able to go back in time, transport himself back in time and re-suffer the original moment of trauma.

And that gives him a sense of pride and which will become hubris over here. Hubris is a Greek term that means pride that brings about your downfall, that pride which essentially flattens you and ruins you, essentially the vanity, the selfish pride, the dangerous pride. That hubris is becoming quite evident over here as is mentioned in the next sentence.



“Time, he had declared then, he had told everybody, could make no difference. Other men perhaps might recover, might live their loss down, but not he.” This has become a classic hubris on the boss. Other men were lesser men, might recover, move on, and live their loss down but not he. He is a big man, he is a patriarch and his loss is special, unique, and most traumatic.

He can never live down his loss. He can never live down his trauma. He can never live down his personal grief and that is something which he takes pride in. It is almost like a very pathological quality over here of pride and his hubris becomes evident. But he could never live his loss down that was something he declared publicly to everyone.

He made a public statement very ceremoniously. His boy was his only son. It is almost as if he is the only father to have an only son to die in World War I. The uniqueness of his trauma is telling himself that his loss is unique. His trauma is unique that his mourning must be unique and able to perform his mourning ad infinitum.

He must never stop, he must be able to perform his mourning over and over again. Ever since his birth, the boss had worked at the building and the business for him. The capitalist patriarchal framework is beginning to make his presence felt. Ever since the son was born, the boss had built this empire for the son to take over later subsequently. It had no other meaning if it was not for the boy.

Life itself had come to have no other meaning. The whole production of meaninglessness becomes important over here, that is, the tragedy of the boss. The production of meaninglessness, they experience meaninglessness. The father has the son's life, the son's death sounded as become a tragedy for the boss at an existential level, but also becomes a temporal and business meaninglessness.

Time has stopped for him and he wants to believe that. He wants to hold onto that believe that and there is no time for him at all because the son's death is the end of time for him. He is

almost apocalyptic in his momentum. His magnitude in his mind is with an apocalyptic quality of tragedy over here. Life itself has no other meaning as expressed here.

It is completely meaningless and production of meaninglessness becomes important for him. It was impossible for him to have slaved, denied himself, kept going all those years without the promise of forever before him, of the boy's stepping onto the shoes and carrying on where he left off. The son's death is essentially the death of the boss because the son was supposed to be the next boss.

And the fact that both of them are unnamed gives the degree of archetypal quality, they become the allegorical archetypal figures. The son of the boss is an excellent line to become the boss and he will have his own son presumably who will then become a boss. So, the death of the son is the death of the line. There is an interruption of this temporal quality and that is the biggest tragedy for the boss.

The fact that it has got no other meaning, it has got nothing to look forward to, is how the whole production process has now been permanently interrupted. That productive process is the collusion between kinship and capitalism, as well as patriarchy and capitalism because the boss over here is quite clearly a capitalist. He is a hyper-capitalist patriarch.

He has built an empire, has got financial structure, his magnificent office but then the whole point is to transfer that, to his next male heir. So, it is almost like a kinship system of maleness where the next male carries on from where the older male leaves and it just extends the empire. But that possibility of extension is now interrupted, the possibility of extension is now is gone, completely gone.

And that is the tragedy in the boss's capitalist patriarchal imagination. A tragedy that there is no possibility of a new boss taking over. Symbolically that is the death of the boss. So, the promise was before him of the boy's stepping into his shoes and carrying on where he left off.

**(Refer Slide Time: 21:44)**

live their loss down, but not he. How was it possible! 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?

And that promise had been so near being fulfilled. The boy had been in the office learning the ropes for a year before the war. Every morning they had started off together; they had come back by the same train. And what congratulations he had received as the boy's father! No wonder; he had taken to it marvellously. As to his popularity with the staff, every man jack of them down to old Macey couldn't make enough of the boy. And he wasn't in the least spoilt. No, he was just his bright natural self, with the right word for everybody, with that boyish look and his habit of saying, 'Simply splendid!'

But all that was over and done with as though it never had been. The day had come when Macey had handed him the telegram that brought the whole place crashing about his head. 'Deeply regret to inform you ...' And he had left the office a broken man, with his life in ruins.

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.

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

“And that promise had been so near being fulfilled”. It was so close to being fulfilled. “The boy had been in the office learning the ropes for a year before the war. Every morning they started off together, they had come back by the same train.” It became a routine the boss had been training the son to become the next boss. Every morning they come together, sit on the same train, come back in the same train.

“And what congratulations he had received as the boy's father! No wonder, he had taken to it marvelously. As to his popularity with the staff, every man jack of them down to old Macey could not make enough of the boy. And he was not in the least spoilt. No, he was just his bright natural self, with the right word for everybody, with that boyish look and his habit of saying ‘Simply splendid!’”

This is the back story that the boss had been training his son to become the next boss. He had brought his son. He used to bring his son every single day in the office for him to learn the ropes and the boy was picking everything perfectly. He was not spoilt, he was very popular, and he was very charming. Everyone loved him and he had his boyish look and his way of saying “simply splendid.”

He had this manly boyish optimism about productivity and masculinity. That optimism, the “simply splendid” thing is a very masculine expression. It is like a boy-scout expression and

that the boy-scout quality is very evident. So, the boss had been scouting the son or grooming the son, engineering the son to become the next boss and the son was almost there.

He was very close to becoming the next boss. He was very close to taking over as the next capitalist. So, the productive process that engineering process, the grooming process becomes very evident over here. He will come every single day, learn the drills, go back in the same train, everyone loved him, he was very popular among staff, and old Macey loved him. He was not spoiled at all.

He would just carry on with his bright productive optimism and say “simply splendid” every time he was pleased. But all that was over and done with as though it never had been. It had all come to a ground halt, a ground suspension, one massive ending, one fall swoop everything down. “The day had come when Macy had handed him the telegram and brought the whole place crashing about his head. ‘Deeply regret to inform you...’”

The letter has the very common template where parents and family would be informed of the death of the soldiers, just one template but the same thing for everyone with “deeply regret to inform you”. It is a very bad expression, it is very matter of fact. The “deeply regret to inform you” expression is a very military expression, like a template for everyone that was sent out disseminated, indiscriminately to everyone.

Everyone who lost their sons and daughters and beloveds family members in the war was sent the same template “deeply regret to inform you.” It is very business-like with a detached quality above that template and that carried the news of the son’s death. The son was dead in the war and maybe died in the one in tragic circumstances that were conveyed to the boss.

The telegram had come in. Macey brought that telegram in his office and that essentially brought the whole place crashing about his head. The entire space fell. The entire architecture fell, collapsed because the son’s death is a very symbolic decimation of the entire architecture. The entire empire, the son and the boss have been building is about this patriarchal project of the son taking over subsequently.

And with the son's death, the entire project collapses. The spatial quality becomes interesting over here. The spatial metaphor becomes interesting over here. The entire space crashes on the boss's head. The space metaphor is that it crashes the entire building, the empire, the episteme, the structure.

The entire projection, the fantasy of the boss that the son will take over from where he left off, and that fantasy, the projection is now just completely killed, completely decimated with the biological death of the son. And he had left the office a broken man with his life in ruins. There is a bombing metaphor.

It is almost like a bomb fell on the building, the bomb fell on him, the entire space collapsed, the entire building collapsed, the entire building was crashed, it is like a bombing. The violence of war is projected and described in different terms, not just about the people who are dying on the war front but how that death is generating its own violence, its own unique violence in a civilian space.

When the message comes in civilian space and the message comes in the office space the entire building collapses symbolically and essentially because of the bombing metaphor. So the whole place was crashed about his head. He just left the building as a bombed man. He left the building office a broken man with his life in ruins.

Ruins and the crash all these, becomes spatial metaphors. Ruin is a spatial metaphor, it is a metaphor space, a ruined space, an abandoned space, a spatial quality. The temporal quality is that there is no future for him to look forward to. There is no son to take over his business.

The entire tragedy has spatial and temporal qualities. The spatial temple quality crisis becomes important because it is an interruption on time. There is no time for the boss to look forward to it, it is nothing for the time to flow into. The entire space, the architecture, the building, the empire was collapsed and the episteme has collapsed.

The knowledge system of the boss has collapsed. He left the office as a broken man, his life in ruins. Six years ago. How quickly time passed. It might have happened yesterday. So

again, the temporality is interesting. How quickly the time had passed. The boss took his hands from his face. He was puzzled. Something seemed to be wrong with him. He was not feeling as he wanted to feel.

The debility, the aspiration to control his feelings, the desire to control his entire temporality feeling, emotion is part of the manly package. He wants to control how he feels, but then he is beginning to realize he is not in control of his feelings anymore. He has begun to feel a bit strange out of his comfort zone, something seemed to be wrong with him. This is the beginning of the fall of the boss, the fall of his hubris.

The false pride that he can control time, his emotions, his mournability, his tragedy. That false pride is now beginning to get decimated. He was not feeling as he wanted to feel. He decided to get up and have a look at the boy's photograph. He wants another trigger. It is almost like he wants the trigger to come to him for the satisfaction to happen, for the catharsis to happen.

But it was not a favorite photograph of his. The expression was unnatural. It was cold, even stern-looking. The boy had never looked like that. He does not get the desired satisfaction. It is almost an erotic quality about the psychological situation. He wants to get sadness and grief out of this, but there is also a pleasure component in the grief.

As soon as the sadomasochistic quality above this entire aspiration, the entire psychological situation and the sadomasochism will now be dramatized in the next episode in the story of "The Fly" So, we can begin to see how it is beginning to become very psychological, very complex. He wants to get the grief out of it.

But the same grief will also give satisfaction of the knowledge that he can still control his emotions, he can still control his mournability, he can still control his tragedy and that knowledge will give him satisfaction. So, there is a very interesting entanglement between grief and satisfaction, between cruelty and pleasure.