

**Feminist Writings**  
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**The Fly –Part 1**

So hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled Feminist Writings where we will begin with a short story today it is called The Fly by Katherine Mansfield. We have just finished covering Donna Haraway's essay uh in a book A Cyborg Manifesto prior to which we covered Bell Hook's essay Understanding Patriarchy.

Uh so those were works of non-fiction, so this particular text that we start today is obviously work of fiction. And in this course as you know by now is a combination of fiction takes and non-fictional takes uh like essays, and uh political writings.

So the reason why this short story is important is because it is raised from feminist critique of patriarchy. It is raised from feminist critique of certain kind of patriarchy which is violent, which is unemotional, which places a very high value on masculinity, and muscular masculinity, (1:07) masculinity, plucky masculinity. So it has a certain code of conduct for men, certain code of conduct for women.

And what is interesting is how this essay deconstructs that stereotypical understanding of uh masculinity and femininity. And in a way it is very dialogic with the Bell Hook's essay of Understanding Patriarchy because you know if you remember that essay where Hook's says very clearly saying that patriarchy is not just a construct, it is homo-sapathological construct. It is almost a disease which affects men and women because everyone is consumed and affected by this disease, everyone is expected to perform in certain kind of narrative, through embodied practices, through language, through rituals, through social norms etcetera.

And that becomes uh a form of closure which more certain that not we can't deconstruct, we can't come out of. Now what this story does is it gives you, uh seemingly strong man, someone who is seemingly strong, someone who is seemingly superior, seemingly bossy. So we have the figure called the boss, whose name we don't know. It is never revealed what his real name is.

So we have this figure of boss who is the protagonist of this particular short story. And the setting of the story is important, the setting is first world war. So its immediately after the first world war, it is giving you a very interesting demography. Uh after the first world war, as will be unfolded when we destroyed, but it is important that when we read writer like Mansfield, that language is a very important thing. Because you know it's a very coded kind of a language that she is using.

Symbols become very important, metaphors become very important, because if you read the story, as we will in a moment, we will find that it's a really short story. Its one of the shorter story that were written, perhaps in English literature, but what is interesting is how much she packs into the story in terms of content and in terms of cultural content, content, and how she connects to a boarded, wider narrative of the war the destruction of the war, the violence of the war etcetera which is all there without being spoken about directly.

So this indirect disclose or representation becomes very important, the form of narrative strategy in this story. So let's start, lets dive into the story and see how it unfolds before us in terms of very powerful feminist text. So there is this Katherine Mansfield's short story The Fly.

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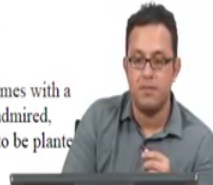
## The Fly - Katherine Mansfield

Katherine Mansfield

'Y'are very snug in here,' piped old Mr. Woodifield, and peered out of the great, green-leather armchair by his friend the boss's desk as a baby peers out of its pram. His talk was over; it was time for him to be off. But he did not want to go. Since he had retired, since his ... stroke, the wife and the girls kept him boxed up in the house every day of the week except Tuesday. On Tuesday he was dressed and brushed and allowed to cut back to the City for the day. Though what he did there the wife and girls couldn't imagine. Made a nuisance of himself to his friends, they supposed....Well, perhaps so. All the same, we cling to our last pleasures as the tree clings to its last leaves. 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.

Wistfully, admiringly, the old voice added, 'It's snug in here, upom my word!'

'Yes, it's comfortable enough,' agreed the boss, and he flipped the Financial Times with a paper-knife. As a matter of fact he was proud of his room; he liked to have it admired, especially by old Woodifield. It gave him a feeling of deep, solid satisfaction to be planted there in the midst of it in full view of that frail old figure in the muffler.



'Y'are very snug in here.' Piped old Mr. Woodifield, and peered out of the great, green-leather armchair by his friend the boss's desk as a baby peers out of its pram. So the very opening sentence is full of metaphors, full of simile's, full of figurative expressions which are obviously conveying you something without telling you directly.

So we have this figure called Mr. Woodifield, so that adjective old comes before his name all the time, almost all the time. And he is sitting in a great green leather armchair, alright by his friend the boss's desk. So the boss is sitting on the desk and Woodifield was very old is sitting on a great green leather arm chair by the desk of the boss and interestingly he is looking at the boss in a way as a baby peers out of its pram.

So this baby metaphor is interesting, the baby over here is not of innocence, is not suggestive of beauty, is not suggestive of hope or optimism, it is suggestive of helplessness in a sense because the baby quality over here is equated with the senility of Woodifield. He is a senile character, and the senility is described in metaphors which are infantilized, I mean Woodifield is infantilized throughout the story. He is constantly compared to a baby, he is constantly compared to a helpless person, someone who doesn't have an agency. And the question of agency will come back later and we will discuss and unpack how agency is described and dramatized in the story.

For the moment let's pay the attention to the opening sentence because as I mentioned when you deal with writer like Mansfield, language becomes very important, expressions, the economy of expressions becomes very important, it is very economical but at the same time its quite pac turn in terms of content.

So he is looking at the boss with envious eyes and as the baby peers out of his pram, as in perambulator, his talk was over it was time for him to be off, but he did not want to go. Since he had retired, since his... stroke, the wife and the girls kept him boxed up in the house every day of the week except Tuesday.

So again if you look at the verbs over here which are important, we get to know that Woodifield has had a store, Woodifield has retired, uh now he has obviously come to visit his boss, it could have been his boss, it could have been his friend who is the boss we don't quite know, but we get to know that he, he gets locked up in the house, boxed up in the house.

His wife and the girls kept him boxed up in the house. So this is interesting, if you look at the gender dynamic at play over here, we have Woodifield who is obviously a man, he is an old man, he is senile man, he is infantilized man, but who really doesn't have, or doesn't seem to have, or doesn't appear to have much of an agency. Because even his moment, his mobility is controlled, dominated by his wife and girls.

It is interesting we have presence of female characters over here, there is no mention of any son as yet, the wife and girls kept him boxed up in the house. Locked in the house, confined in the house essentially everyday of the week except Tuesday, so Tuesday is the only day of the week when in which he was allowed to go and visit his friends, but apart from that he was essentially locked up in his house by his wife and girls, the daughters.

On Tuesday he was dressed and brushed and allowed to cut back to the city for the day. So again if you look at the verbs over here they are telling you a lot, without really spelling out for you. He was dressed, and brushed and allowed. So again we have this entire idea of agency which really doesn't belong to Woodifield apparently. So he was dressed up by the girls, brushed up by the girls and then he was allowed by the girls to go to city.

So again the metaphor is very very you know childlike metaphors, childish metaphors, babyish metaphors, so in the sense of this connection with the baby keeps happening throughout this story. Woodifield keeps getting connected, keeps getting equated with the baby figure essentially in the story, so he was allowed he was dressed, he was brushed like baby would be brushed.

Though what he did there the wife and the girls couldn't imagine. So it was unimagined by the girls and the wife to to even think of what he must have done, what he must be doing in the city. Made a nuisance of himself to his friends, they supposed... Well, perhaps so. All the same, we cling to our last pleasures as a tree cling to its last leaves.

So again this idea of decadence is important over here, tree we have this image of tree losing its leaves which is compared to Woodifield, Woodifield's condition. So uh you know we cling to our last pleasures as the tree clings to its last leaves, so the arrival of winter, the arrival of death which is symbolized metaphorically by winter on many occasions, so that is being compared to Woodifield. So immediately in the story we have Woodifield being compared with infantilized metaphors, with decadent metaphors, there is metaphors of decadent, metaphors of infantilization etcetera.

Uh this comparison, this tree image becomes important, tree losing its leaves clinging on desperately to its last leaves and the equation over here is Woodifield desperately clinging on to his last bits of pleasure which includes coming and seeing the old friend the boss. 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. 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.

So if you look at again the entire gaze over here they gave becomes important because Woodifield is sitting on a chair, and smoking a cigar, and chairing almost greedily at the boss. So he is greedy, he is envious, he is jealous of the boss and now we get to know that the boss if you compare in contrast to the boss's body over here, the way it's described the embodiment of the boss, and embodiment is a very crucial thing, uh in gender as we know. And I will talk about embodiment in more details later but what is being essentially told to us is that the boss is rolling in his office chair, stout, rosy, five years older than him. He so he is stout, he is still very rosy, he is healthy and we are also told that he is five years older than Woodifield which is obviously uh, it's a reflective of a fact that boss is taking care of himself in a much better way than Woodifield has done.

Despite being biologically older than Woodifield by five years, the boss appears much more in control, much more smart, much more healthy, much more rosy, in quality still going strong, still at the helm, still going strong, still healthy. It did one good to see him.

So Woodifield feels that a uh sense of inspiration, sense of being invigorated, or re-vigorated looking at the boss uh or rejuvenated looking at the boss. Because you know he stares at the boss greedily at the same time admirably. So there is degree of admiration and envy mixed together in Woodifield's gaze of the boss.

Wistfully, admiringly, the old voice added. Again look at the word old, which keeps coming back, uh keeps associating itself with Woodifield. The old voice added, 'It's snug in here upon my word!'. It's comfortable, uh you have got a good office over here, you have got a comfortable setting over here, its snug in here upon my word.

'Yes, it's comfortable enough.' Agreed the boss, and he flipped the Financial Times with a paper-knife. Now you just look at this one sentence its packed with very meaningful suggestion over here. Now Woodifield is using the word snug which is a colloquial word for comfort and the boss is obviously being more formal. Its comfortable enough and that's a very formal way of expressing his situation. And that obviously goes to show that the boss is very formal in his language, boss is more imperious in his activity, in his embodiment because language becomes very much part of embodiment, how you speak, what you say, the content of your language becomes, it represents you as a person, it represents your body, yourself as a person.

So if you use very imperious words, your know like comfortable enough, imperious expressions, that goes to show that your embodiment is quite imperious, quite, strong at the same time. And he flipped the Financial Times with a paper knife. So again if you look at the metaphors, the symbols used over here, Financial Times is a very much business newspaper, so the boss is about the to read a uh business newspaper and he looks the flip the paper with a paper knife.

And this moment of flipping open a paper with a paper knife, is moment of vigor, moment of activity, moment of agency, the boss is about to read the business newspaper having opened it at one go with a paper knife, that goes to show, that becomes indicator to a certain extent of his masculinity. An enactment of his masculinity, uh the codes of masculinity are creeping in very very strongly already.

As a matter of fact he was very proud of his room; he liked to have it admired, especially by old Woodifield. It gave him a feeling of deep solid satisfaction to be planted there in the midst of it in full view of that frail old figure in the muffler. And so this uh and I mentioned already how gazed is a very important thing, the way the stares are happening, the way people are looking at each other becomes very important, it gives you some idea of privilege, and lack of privilege over here.

So the boss over here obviously enjoys privilege, he is occupying a position of privilege, and he was proud of his room, he wanted to have it admired, he liked to have it admired, especially by the old Woodifield, and that gave it a sense of superiority, so he feels superior in comparison to Woodifield, who is obviously this senile, infantilized, and quite weak and agency less in comparison to the boss.

So it gave him a feeling of deep solid satisfaction, but again the solidity of the satisfaction is important over here. It is almost like a material thing, it is almost like a tangible thing. It is not something which is abstract in terms of feelings only, something which is palpable in its quality, something which is material and fleshy in its quality. Now he is very satisfied to be planted in the midst of it in full view of a frail old figure in the muffler.

That is how Woodifield is described, frail old figure in muffler. That description obviously is a very negative description, he is frail, old, you know muffled up in the pieces of cloth, he is not really human being, he is mummification which is suggested over here. Woodifield appears more as a mummy, rather than as a human being. He is completely covered in muffler, he is frail and is old compared to the stout and rosy boss who is five years older than him and despite the biological age of the boss, he is much more in control of his life and his activities.



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'I've had it done up lately,' he explained, as he had explained for the past how many weeks.

'New carpet,' and he pointed to the bright red carpet with a pattern of large white rings. 'New furniture,' and he nodded towards the massive bookcase and the table with legs like twisted treacle. 'Electric heating!' He waved almost exultantly towards the five transparent, pearly sausages glowing so softly in the tilted copper pan.

But he did not draw old Woodfield's attention to the photograph over the table of a grave-looking boy in uniform standing in one of those spectral photographers' parks with photographers' storm-clouds behind him. It was not new. It had been there for over six years.

'There was something I wanted to tell you,' said old Woodfield, and his eyes grew dim remembering. 'Now what was it? I had it in my mind when I started out this morning.' His hands began to tremble, and patches of red showed above his beard.

Poor old chap, he's on his last pins, thought the boss. And, feeling kindly, he winked at the old man, and said jokingly,

'I tell you what. I've got a little drop of something here that'll do you good before you go out into the cold again. It's beautiful stuff. It wouldn't hurt a child.' He took a key off his watch-chain, unlocked a cupboard below his desk, and drew forth a dark, squat bottle. 'That's the medicine,' said he. 'And the man from whom I got it told me on the strict Q.T. it came from



'I have had it done up lately,' he explained, as he had explained for the past how many weeks. So he is not about to show up his office and he declares that he has repaired it, he has renovated it, he has done it all recently. 'New Carpet' and he pointed to the bright red carpet with a pattern of large white rings, 'New furniture,' and he nodded towards the massive bookcase and the table with legs like twisted treacle.

'Electric heating!' he waves almost exultantly towards the five transparent pearly sausages glowing so softly in the tilted copper pan. So you know he is showing off his amenities, he is showing off his objects to old Woodfield. Now this obviously becomes a very male thing, we have two males sitting together, one obviously stronger than the other, in a more assertive position than the other, one in a more privileged position than the other and the boss over here is showing off his objects, and the entire objects, entire list of amenities around him, that becomes, it becomes his distributed embodiment.

So his embodiment becomes more distributed in quality, he is showing off his new carpet, new furniture, book case, electric heating, sausages, you know sausage like heaters in his pan etcetera, so all this becomes examples of extensions of his embodiment, strong stout, rosy

embodiment. Uh compare in contrast to which Woodifield appears much more senile, much more tantalize in quality.

So at the very outset of the story we have two different models of masculinity pitted against each other, or just (( ))(15:19) of each other. So we have Woodifield who is senile, who is weak, who is helpless who is controlled and dominated by the women in the house. And in a complete reversal of stereotypical gender rules he is allowed to go to city only on certain day of the week, he is dressed up, he is brushed by the women, so he is uh essentially a child, an infantilized figure who is dominated by a women.

Now compare in contrast to which the boss is obviously bossy in quality, he is imperious, uh stout man, big strong man, who is very happy with his surroundings, he is apparently very happy with his surroundings and he is quite content to show off his objects, it is almost like showing off one's toys, you know newly acquired toys, as figures of embodiment you know signifiers of embodiment, signifiers of prestigious embodiment, so embodiment is a very crucial thing in the story, like I said embodiment is under some of the body, it is about how you represent yourself through language, through objects, through acquisitions, through property, etcetera.

So the boss obviously over here enjoys higher form of embodiment, higher order of embodiment than Woodifield, compared to Woodifield. So he has just showed of his you know carpet and furniture and electric heating. And now comes the important section of the story, But he did not draw Woodifield's attention, old Woodifield's attention that adjective never leaves him by the way.

He did not draw old Woodifield's attention to the photograph over the table of a grave looking boy in uniform standing in one of those spectral photographers in the parks with photographers storm clouds behind him. It was not new, it had been there for over six years.

Now this is an important, almost like an insertion into the entire array of object (( ))(17:02) over here. So he is saying, the narrative voice is telling us that boss is very happily showing of his objects, his trophy's as his toys as it were, to Woodifield but he did not draw his attention, Woodifield's attention to the photograph on the table.

Now that photograph is that of a boy, a grave looking boy, now the word, the adjective grave looking over here takes up multiple meanings, because we have this idea of spectral photograph of spark, and spectral carries a death like quality, a ghostly quality, a ghostly shadowy quality. so grave looking boy could mean, serious looking boy which is more literal meaning, grave as in serious, but it can also carry connotation of death, of uh durian spectrally, shadowy deathly presence, because in other words spectral appears immediately after grave looking boy.

One of those spectral photographers park with photographers storm-cloud behind him. It was not new, it had been there for over six years. So suddenly we have this description of little photograph of a boy in uniform, presumably soldiers uniform, and we are also told that it is not a new object in the boss's office; it had been there for over six years. And then it is departed from. Uh we don't get any more descriptions of it at this point.

Now it is a very interesting example of narrative complexity, because you know we have a certain kind of linearity of narrative which is going, and we are having certain kind of gendered identity of the boss being fleshed out before his (( ))(18:33) Financial times, uh very phallic paper knife with which he opens, flings opens the Financial Times and then obviously showing off of continuation, consolidation of his masculinity, of his dominant, muscular, masculinity in control of everything. Hence the term boss fits in perfectly over here.

But we certainly have a sense of a superficial, at least superficially contrast which comes in because the narrative voice tells us he is trying out all these things but it doesn't show off and we don't quite know why, out of all photograph. A six year old photograph which has been in his office for quite a while, for over six years old, and the photograph is of a grave looking boy in uniform, a young man, in uniform standing in a very shadowy death like photographers park, and we are not quite told, we don't know what he is doing here and then the narrative moves on quickly from that point.

And we just told it is not new, it had been there for over six years. Okay, and that's something that uh very important object which we will come back to later in the story, but this point, it just appears to be some kind of narrative interruption. If there was a continuation of a narrative which was obviously designed to make the boss look more stout, more masculine, more dominant in quality, and suddenly we have a bit of narrative, interruption.

And we don't quite know what interruptions is doing over here so we need to come back to the object later, and the story obviously will come back to the object later and we will find out later how that becomes the central object in the story and everything else, the electrocuting, the furniture, you know the book case those becomes secondary or peripheral in quality.

So it is also important when we talk about gender, when we talk about gender mapping, so gendered embodiment, how one does navigate with the object, so working definition of embodiment could be, navigation with your surroundings, your representation of yourself. So how do you represent and navigate at the same time, so embodiment has a neural quality, embodiment has a inner quality, and psychological quality, at the same time embodiment has a material quality, how do you navigate the apparatus around you, how do you control the apparatus around you, the objects around you, the things around you. So those become part of the embodiment as well.

So there is this inside quality of embodiment, as well as the extended quality of embodiment, and that extended quality is something which we are seeing over here in terms of how the boss is throwing up very proudly his office objects and how he is in better control of his language, he is more imperious in quality, he is more formal in quality, compared to Woodifield, and Woodifield comes as a very interesting counter point, a very convenient counter point. Uh pitted against the boss in terms of making the boss look more superior, in terms of his masculinity.

So we stop at this point today, we will continue with this very complex short story in the lectures to come. But I do request you to do read the entire story, just so we can follow it more closely in the lectures, coming lectures to come. Uh so thank you for your attention.