

Katherine Mansfield's 'The Fly': A Critical Exercise

F. W. BATESON and B. SHAHEVITCH

'THE FLY' is probably the shortest *good* short story in modern English. Its two thousand words therefore permit, indeed encourage, the kind of close analysis that has been so successful in our time with lyric poetry but that is impossibly cumbrous or misleadingly incomplete when applied to the novel or the *conte*. The object of this exercise is to demonstrate that, granted the difference of *genres*, exactly the same critical procedure is in order for realistic fiction as for a poem. 'The Fly' was written in February 1922 and was included later that year in *The Garden Party and Other Stories*. It is reprinted here by permission of the Society of Authors, who are the literary representatives of the Estate of Katherine Mansfield.

THE FLY

'Y'are very snug in here', piped old Mr. Woodifield, and he 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 up 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, upon 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.

'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 Woodifield'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 Woodifield, and his eyes grew dim remembering. 'Now what was it? I had it in 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 the cellars at Windsor Castle.'

Old Woodifield's mouth fell open at the sight. He couldn't have looked more surprised if the boss had produced a rabbit.

'It's whisky, ain't it?' he piped, feebly.

The boss turned the bottle and lovingly showed him the label. Whisky it was.

'D'you know', said he, peering up at the boss wonderingly, 'they won't let me touch it at home'. And he looked as though he was going to cry.

'Ah, that's where we know a bit more than the ladies', cried the boss, swooping across for two tumblers that stood on the table with the water bottle, and pouring a generous finger into each. 'Drink it down. It'll do you good. And don't put any water with it. It's sacrilege to tamper with stuff like this. Ah!' He tossed off his, pulled out his handkerchief, hastily wiped his moustaches, and cocked an eye at old Woodifield, who was rolling his in his chaps.

The old man swallowed, was silent a moment, and then said faintly, 'It's nutty!'

But it warmed him; it crept into his chill old brain—he remembered.

'That was it', he said, heaving himself out of his chair. 'I thought you'd like to know. The girls were in Belgium last week having a look at poor Reggie's grave, and they happened to come across your boy's. They are quite near each other, it seems.'

Old Woodifield paused, but the boss made no reply. Only a quiver of his eyelids showed that he heard.

'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 Woodifield, '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 around 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. Woodifield 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 cubbyhole like a dog that expects to be taken for a run: 'I'll see nobody for half an hour, Macey', said the boss. 'Understand? Nobody at all.'

'Very good, sir.'

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 Woodifield 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 Woodifield'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 these 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 spoiled. 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 broken 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 onto 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.

'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 into the inkpot.

It was. The last blot fell on the soaked blotting paper, and the draggled 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 wastepaper 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.

'The Fly' assumes in its readers a readiness to accept and respond to two parallel series of symbolic conventions: (i) those constituting the English language as it was spoken and written in the first quarter of the twentieth century, (ii) those constituting the realistic narrative in prose of the same period. That this story is written in modern English is immediately apparent, and the initial display of irrelevant descriptive de-

tail is an equally clear signal to the critical reader that the narrative *genre* to be employed here is realism. Why *Woodfield* (dozens of other surnames would have done just as well)? Why a *green* armchair (rather than light brown, purple, dark brown, etc.)? Why the cut back to the City on *Tuesdays* (rather than Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays or Fridays)?

That the critical reader does not in fact ask such questions is because of his familiarity already with the realistic formula. The particular suspension of disbelief that realism demands is an acquiescence in the author's limited omniscience provided his external setting 'looks' historically authentic. The reader must be able to say, 'On the evidence provided, which seems adequate, this series of events could have taken place in real life as I know it.'

It follows that to look for allegorical symbols in 'The Fly' is to accuse Katherine Mansfield of a breach of her chosen convention. Specifically 'The Fly' is not a beast-fable, like Blake's poem with the same title in *Songs of Experience*. In this story the confrontation of the boss with the fly is only subjectively anthropomorphic. It is the boss who attributes human courage—and the human necessity to suffer pain under torture—to the fly. The boss's corrupt imagination has blown this fly up into the semblance of a human being, but objectively, as the reader knows, the fly is just an ordinary house-fly. Some earlier critics of 'The Fly' have gone astray by ignoring the story's technical limitations, and various abstract 'themes' have been read into it, like 'time', 'cruelty' and 'life'.¹ Middleton Murry's own comment—'the profound and ineradicable impression made upon her by the War . . . found perfect utterance in the last year of her life in the story "The Fly"'²—may have encouraged such misinterpretations. It is certainly tempting to relate the story to Katherine Mansfield's tuberculosis and to her dislike of her father, who was a New Zealand banker. But such elements are of the nature of 'sources'. No doubt without them the story could not have been begun, but they are not *inside* the story. The realistic convention is resistant both to abstractions and to strict autobiography. The story must appear to tell itself; it must be the sort of concrete human situation that might have happened just so. And once the reader begins to detect the intrusion of

abstract concepts or moral attitudes, such as the hatred of war, or alternatively of obviously autobiographical episodes, his confidence in the writer's omniscience will be weakened. An unnecessary strain is being put on the realistic suspension of disbelief.

The irrelevance of allegorical interpretations in this case can be clarified by contrasting the proverb, an even shorter narrative *genre*, with the realistic short story. The concrete details in a proverb are all functional. Nobody wants to know what kind of stone it is that gathers no moss, or that is thrown by the inhabitants of glasshouses. The exact size, colour, weight and shape of the respective stones are irrelevant, because a proverb demands immediate implicit conceptualisation ('Restlessness is unprofitable', 'Guilty parties should not accuse others of guilt'); it is in fact allegory in capsule form. But in a realistic short story the particularity is a large part of the meaning. Suppress Mr. Woodifield's name, the colour of the armchair, the day of the week allotted to his City visits, and the convention collapses. They are indispensable signals from author to reader; they also assume a common interest and confidence in the concrete detail of the phenomenal world. (We are on Dr. Johnson's side against Berkeley in the matter of the stone.)

But 'The Fly' is something more than narrative imbedded in slice-of-life realism. Some sort of general statement about modern life is implicit in it. How has Katherine Mansfield managed to evade the limitations of the realistic convention? How can a value-judgement emerge at all from what appears to be a temporal sequence of particularities? These are the essential questions the critic must ask.

One answer, an important critical one, is that the medium of a narrative sequence is language, and that it is always possible to exploit the generality inherent in both vocabulary and grammar so that a value-judgement emerges. This is just what Katherine Mansfield does, but discreetly, tactfully. A simple linguistic device is to use descriptive epithets to hint at a generalisation. Thus at the beginning of 'The Fly' the boss is 'stout' and 'rosy'. In combination with the 'snug' office to which Woodifield pays a tribute twice in the first two paragraphs, the epithets produce an impression of luxuriant good health, of self-indulgence perhaps, though at this stage in the

story the indulgence is not apparently censured in any overt way. Later, in the mounting tension of the passage when the boss, having sent Woodifield on his way, returns to the office, he treads with 'firm heavy steps'. These, especially in contrast to Woodifield's 'shuffling footsteps', loom rather ominously. The boss who 'plumps' down in the spring-chair is no longer merely stout, he has become 'fat'. Still later, when he suddenly 'has an idea' and plunges his pen into the ink, before we quite know what he is up to we get a premonition of it as he leans his 'thick' wrist on the blotting paper. The harmless stout and rosy figure has turned out to be physically coarse, even brutal.

Similarly we get an inkling of the boss's character from the colouring of the verbs long before we are introduced to the decisive situation. When he is still 'stout and rosy', he 'rolls' in his chair. Soon he 'flips' his *Financial Times*—a slightly arrogant gesture. By this time he is 'planted' there, 'in full view of that frail old figure', and the adjective qualifying his satisfaction is 'solid'. Later on we suddenly see him 'swooping' across for two tumblers ('Coming down with the rush of a bird of prey . . . making a sudden attack', *Oxford Dictionary*).

The adjectives and verbs serve to 'place' Woodifield too, who never speaks but 'pipes' (three times) or 'quavers'. He does not look, he 'peers'. The wife and girls keep him 'boxed up' in his home. On Tuesdays, he did not dress but *was* 'dressed and brushed' and then 'allowed' to go to town—all images reinforcing the simile in which he is originally introduced, that of a baby in a pram.

But the crucial linguistic device in 'The Fly' is the protagonist's anonymity. He is always referred to as 'the boss', twenty-five times to be precise, or approximately once every eighty words. The word is etymologically an Americanism (adopted from the Dutch *baas* = master in the beginning of the nineteenth century), which passed into British English about the middle of that century and had certainly lost all its foreignness by 1922. The dictionary meaning then as now is 'a master, a business manager, anyone who has a right to give orders'. The word has still an unpleasantly vulgar connotation, which is perhaps heightened by its use in U.S. political jargon, where 'boss' means the 'dictator of a party organisation'. Used with a capital it turns into a particular, not a general, word,

in fact, from a common noun into a proper noun, thus making the connotation depend on what we know of the person so named. Thus 'Boss' may often have a kindly ring. But in 'The Fly' Katherine Mansfield persists in spelling the word with a minuscule, that is, as a common noun, at the same time refusing to alternate it with any synonym or other appellation. She even refuses to let us know what the boss's actual name is. 'Mr. Woodifield', 'Gertrude' Woodifield, 'Macey', but the 'hero's' names (and his son's) are resolutely excluded. Katherine Mansfield cannot, of course, altogether prevent the process by which a common noun becomes a proper noun, but she does her best to keep in the reader's mind the more general significance of the word. Each time we read it, the general somewhat repugnant idea of the term is again imprinted in our consciousness, even after it has almost become a proper name. The boss, clear-cut individual as he is in the realistic narrative, is *nominally* an allegorical figure simply by virtue of the word's insistent repetition.

The other linguistic device deserves notice. This is Katherine Mansfield's habit here of allowing direct description to merge into reported speech. Here are a few examples: 'His talk was over; it was time for him to be off. But he did not want to go. Since he had retired. . . .' Up to this point the description is in straightforward narrative prose, but in 'since his . . . stroke' the short break which the three dots denote—so expressive of the reluctance of a sick man to call his complaint by its frightening real name—turns author's statement into semi-direct speech. The reluctance is now Woodifield's, not the narrator's.

A few lines later an inversion occurs. 'Though what he did there, the wife and girls couldn't imagine' may still be taken as objective statement with emphasis causing the object-clause to be put first. But the following clause, 'Make a nuisance of himself they supposed' has the full effect of direct speech. Again the object-clause is given first, but the main clause does not seem to be the author speaking; it is as if between concealed quotation marks, a comment really spoken in the first person instead of the apparent third person.

A little later the boss's 'he explained, as he had explained for the past—how many?—weeks' seems to be another bit of

direct speech that is masquerading as narrative statement. In a story within the realistic convention the author is supposed to know all about how often one of the characters did this or that. The slight uncertainty here, the momentary ignorance—perhaps only half genuine—belongs to everyday speech. The boss, not the author, is speaking.

Again in '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?' the complete sentence in the form of a question is not introduced by any main clause, nor is it in quotation marks. But can it in fact be anything but a question asked by the boss himself?

This mixing of direct statement with indirect or concealed dialogue is used all through the story—by interpolating exclamation in otherwise regular narrative, by putting complete sentences in the form of questions not introduced by main clauses yet impossible to be taken otherwise than as questions asked by the characters, by breaks in the line, and by inversions of a colloquial nature. The result is that we have very little regular narrative. Instead, in a frame of thin lines of this quasi-narrative, which could almost be spoken by a chorus, we have the effect of drama. In this setting the repeated recurrence of the two words 'the boss' has the impersonality of a stage-direction, a datum, as it were, outside the narrative. It reiterates so as to become an alternative title to the story: 'The Fly [Boss]: a Short Story'.

The point at which a linguistic device, either of vocabulary ('the boss') or syntax (the indirect speech), becomes a rhetorical figure should not be detectable in realistic fiction. The reader has suspended his disbelief on condition that the naturalistic particularities are maintained, as they certainly are in 'The Fly'. What could be more reassuringly particular than the story's penultimate sentence? 'He took out his handkerchief and passed it inside his collar.' But in some of the devices here analysed language has unquestionably become rhetoric. The repetition of *any* phrase or construction will give it, if repeated often enough, a new semantic dimension. A similar process occurs if some parallelism establishes itself between the separate episodes in a narrative or drama. Gradually an unstated

generality superimposes itself on the sequence of particulars. A narrative pattern emerges.

The most memorable episode in 'The Fly' begins when the boss, having completed the rescue operations from the inkpot, conceives his 'idea'. This is the story's *peripeteia*, the point of dramatic reversal in the reader's attitude to the protagonist. We began with a distinct liking for him. Woodfield was expected by his family to make a nuisance of himself to his old friends on the Tuesday excursions into the City; and in general, from the specimen provided us of his conversational powers, their gloomy anticipations seem likely to be fulfilled. But the boss's reaction is different. The boss is genuinely delighted to see Woodfield, and he produces his best whisky to entertain him, 'feeling kindly', as the narrator (apparently it is the narrator) informs us. At this early point in 'The Fly' the tone is light and almost comic: the bars in the electric heater are compared to sausages, and Woodfield couldn't have been more surprised, when the whisky bottle appears, 'if the boss had produced a rabbit'. This boss—in spite of his descriptive label—cannot be taken very tragically because of the disarming atmosphere of cordiality in which we make his acquaintance. Moreover his son has been killed in the war (of 1914-18), and we are naturally sorry for him. It is true some disturbing elements in the boss's character already contradict the generally good impression he creates. Some of the pleasure he takes in Woodfield's company seems to derive from the contrast he cannot help drawing between his own excellent health and the younger man's frail condition. And the ritual of immediately available tears in his son's memory, if pathetic, is also distasteful. But these reservations—the list could be extended—do not affect our general liking for him and sympathy with him until he turns his experimental attention on to the fly.

As the three blobs of ink fall the reader's attitude changes from considerable sympathy to total antipathy. The admiration the boss professes to feel for the fly's determination is no doubt real, but it does not prevent him from proceeding with his appalling 'idea'. The horrifying thing is that this admiration makes the experiment all the more entrancing for him. As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport. If the victim did not show some spirit, the gods would

lose half their sport. (A half-consciousness of Gloucester's dictum is no doubt expected in the reader.)

In the light we now possess of the boss's other nature we can see how ambiguous the boss's earlier words and actions were. From this moment therefore the story takes on a two-way pattern. It is read as mere 'story', so that we can discover what comes next, but with each step forward a mental step is also taken back into earlier more or less parallel episodes, and so we correct our first impressions in the light of the new information. A dual element reveals itself at this point in the boss's relations with both Woodfield and his son. The tenderness with the one or admiration for the other is not to be denied, but it is a sadistic tenderness, unconscious of course, but almost that of an executioner for his victim. Woodfield was not allowed whisky at home, and the boss must have known that drinking it might precipitate a second stroke. But the 'generous finger' is enthusiastically provided. The son was no doubt genuinely loved and mourned, but the son's death provided the boss with a splendid opportunity to demonstrate his superiority to other bereaved parents, like the Woodfields. *His* tears were Niobeian; hence the shock of aggrieved disappointment when they finally dry up.

A second *peripeteia* presents itself, therefore, at the fly's death. The grinding and frightening feeling of wretchedness is not what either the boss or the reader had expected. This emotional reversal in the boss creates a new reversal in the reader's attitude to him. Had the boss perhaps glimpsed, briefly and startlingly, the abyss of moral nihilism into which he had unconsciously descended? Katherine Mansfield leaves the question unanswered, almost unasked, and the answer proposed by a recent American critic³ does not convince ('he thought his grasp on his last pleasure was gone'—the pleasure of his office routine). But the framework of parallel episodes that has built itself up in the reader's mind forces us to half-formulate some ghost of a conceptual conclusion. What *had* the boss been thinking about before the fly entered his life? 'For the life of him he could not remember'. And so the reader dismisses him, finally, with some contempt. Early in the story we had quite liked the boss, then we had discovered that we detested him, and now we can merely despise him. The boss's

final gesture with the handkerchief, which he passes inside his stiff collar to cool and dry the hot sticky skin, 'places' him with superb economy and precision. The intensity of the battle the mighty boss has waged with the minute fly has left him physically exhausted, mere weak brutal oblivious flesh.

In terms of plot, then, though there is dramatic progress (shifts in the reader's sympathies, a mounting intensity, a transition from the near-comic to the near-tragic), there is also dramatic repetition. The episodes combine similitude with dissimilitude in a kind of extended metaphor. If the Woodfield episode is called Act I, the re-enactment of the son's death Act II, and the murder of the fly Act III, then the parallelism works out as follows:

(i) in each of the three acts the boss holds the centre of the stage, and the three subsidiary characters' dramatic function is to throw light on him as the protagonist;

(ii) in Act I Woodfield's feebleness illumines the boss's image of himself as a man of affairs, in Act II it is the boss's image of himself as father that is illumined, in Act III the image is of the boss as animal-lover;

(iii) in each act the boss's image of his own altruism is found to be contradicted by his actions;

(iv) the cumulative effect of the parallelisms is to superimpose on the boss's image of himself in Act I the self-images of Acts II and III, but the image of the hospitable man of the world is blurred by that of the proud heart-broken father and the cheerer-on of flies in difficulties (the images do not cohere);

(v) contrasting with this blur is the clear-cut outline that emerges from the superimpositions of the essential boss as he really is all the time—an ordinary decent human being irretrievably demoralised by the power that corrupts.

A final critical corollary remains to be drawn. Katherine Mansfield's realism has begun with a tactful introduction of the story's setting. The reader, encouraged by the apparent authenticity of the details, tends unconsciously to identify himself with the *dramatis personae*, as though they were being presented by living actors in a West End theatre. They—that is, Katherine Mansfield's accounts of her characters—accept identification. Under the make-up and the costume a

living heart is beating, but it is the actor's heart—in the case of a realistic short story, the reader's heart—not the *persona's*. The authenticity is confirmed, re-created, guaranteed, by the reader. But the judgement that he passes on these impersonations of his, who are technically the characters of the story, is the author's contribution, not the reader's, because the reader is not aware that a moral attitude is gradually forming itself within his consciousness. The test of the good short story is therefore the degree of the reader's surprise when he discovers in himself the judgements that have been forced upon him. But the surprise has also to be followed by conviction. This is what the particular words and the particular word-orders *must* mean; this is what the significance of the dramatic episodes in their sequence of parallelisms *must* add up to.

It will be remembered that Dr. Johnson's discussion of poetic wit proposed a similar criterion: a good poem is 'at once natural and new', because what it is saying, 'though not obvious, . . . is acknowledged to be just'.

Oxford and Jerusalem Universities.

¹Brief critiques of 'The Fly' have appeared in *The Explicator* (April 1945, Feb. 1947, May 1947, Feb. 1954, Nov. 1955, Oct. 1958).

²*Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, 1954 ed., p. 107.

³Thomas J. Assad, *The Explicator*, Nov. 1955.