

SHORT STORY 7

The fly
By Katherine Mansfield

About Katherine Mansfield (1888 – 1923)

Katherine Mansfield was born in Wellington, New Zealand, in 1888. She was educated in New Zealand and London. Apart from a short stay in New Zealand from 1906 to 1908, she spent the rest of her life in Europe.

In 1915, during World War 1, she met up with her soldier brother, Chummie. Shortly thereafter he died in the war, which left her shocked and traumatized, and she sank into depression. Mansfield suffered from ill health most of her life and travelled round Europe seeking treatment. She died of lung complications in France in 1923.

Mansfield published her first piece of writing when she was nine. Although she wanted to become a musician, she established herself as a writer instead. Undaunted by the lack of success of her first volume, she persevered. When she submitted a lightweight story to the editor of a magazine, he asked for something 'darker'. It was this that set her on the path to becoming a Modernist writer, avoiding positive, romantic topics and focusing instead on the 'darker side of life. She produced numerous novels of short stories, even some – regarded as her best – shortly before her death, despite her ill-health. She is considered one of the best short story writers of the period and had a major influence on the development of the short story as a form of literature.

Background to The fly

The story takes place in an office in England some years after the First World War (1914 – 1918) during which millions of young men lost their lives, many in the brutal trench warfare that took place mainly in France and Flanders. Wilfred Owen, a war poet, described the soldiers "dying like cattle". You will see what he meant if you get the chance to visit the enormous graveyards near the battlefields, where there are rows upon rows of graves marked with a white cross. This is a sobering sight and gives you some idea of the terrible slaughter that took place. Imagine the effect these losses must have had on the families and other loved ones of the dead men.

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 it's 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 kids 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 the 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 the grave-looking boy in uniform standing in one of those spectral photographer's 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 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'll tell you what. I've got a little drop of something here that'll do you good before you get 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 whiskey, ain't it?" he piped feebly.

The boss turned the bottle and lovingly showed him the label. Whiskey 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 more 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 of his, pulled out his handkerchief, hastily wiped his moustache, and cocked an eye at old Woodifield, who was rolling his in his chops.

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're quite near each other, it seems.

Old Woodifield paused, but the boss made no reply. Only a quiver in 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." quivered 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, quite right!" cried the boss, though what was quit 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 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."

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 his 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 marvelously. 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 bit 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 though it never had been. The day had come when Macey 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 away 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 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 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 a stone goes over and under the scythe. Then there was a pause, while the fly, seeming to stand on the tips of his 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 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 it painfully 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 ...". And he actually had the brilliant notion of breathing on it to help the dying 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.

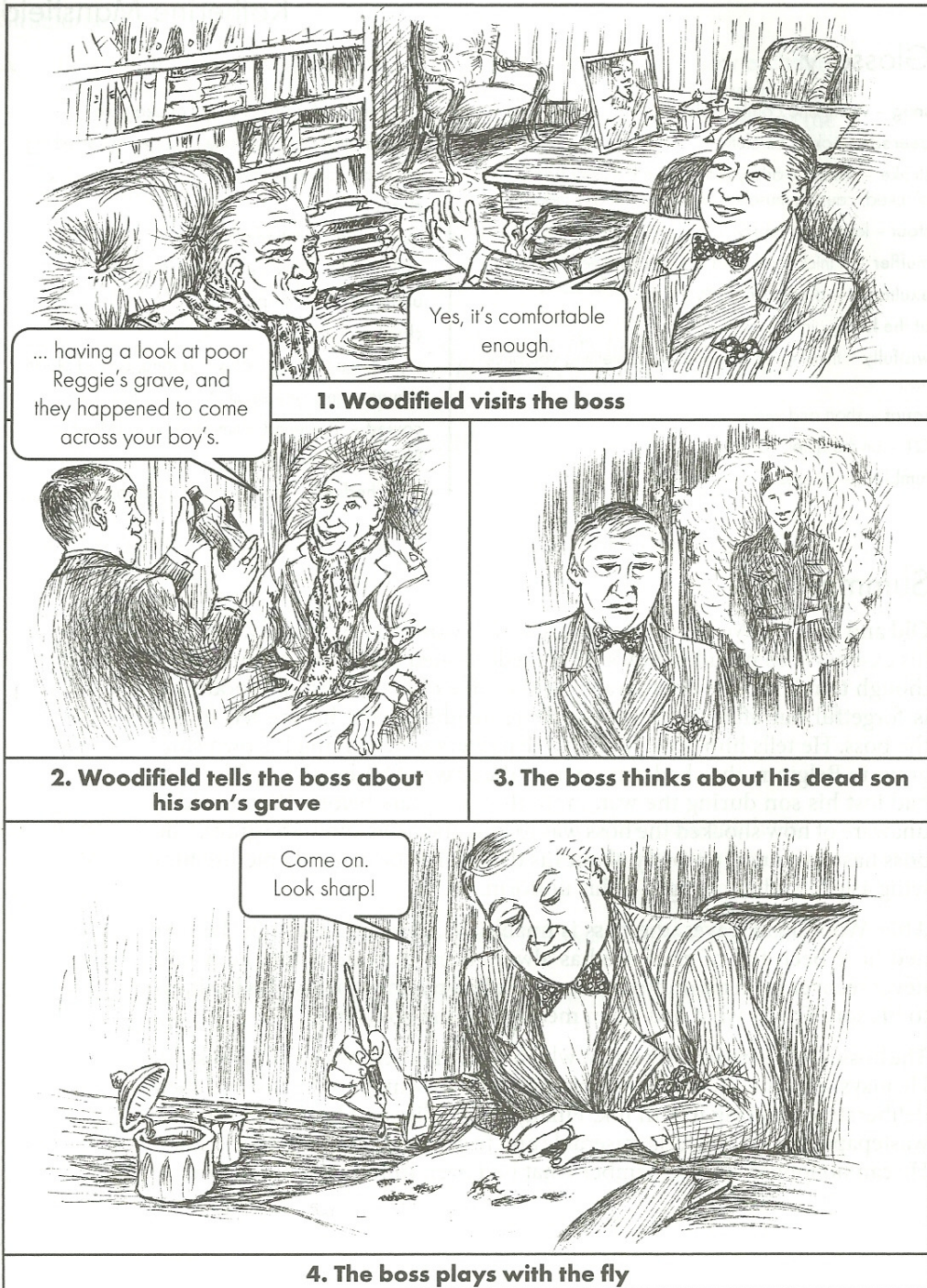
It was. The last blot fell on the soaked blotting-paper, and the dragged fly lay in it and did not stir. The back legs were stuck to the body; the front legs were not to be seen.

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.

Summary in pictures



The Fly

Katherine Mansfield

Glossary

snug - warm and comfortable

peered - looked carefully

stroke - when an artery in the brain bursts or becomes blocked, causing muscles not to function any more

stout - large and heavy

muffler - a thick scarf used to keep your neck warm

exultantly - proudly, happily

at the helm - in charge

wistfully - thinking longingly about something you once had

squat - short and wide

QT - on the quiet, in secret

tumblers - glasses

sacrilege - disrespectful, not acceptable

tamper - to touch or make changes to something

cocked - looked carefully

chaps - mouth

quiver - a slight trembling

quavered - the voice shook or trembled

unblemished - unspoilt

clamber - climb

scythe - a farming tool with a long, curved blade

minute - tiny, very small

cowed - frightened, intimidated or subdued

laborious - difficult, tiring

wretchedness - misery, great unhappiness

Summary

Old and frail Mr Woodifield has retired from work. Every Tuesday, he visits his ex-boss who proudly shows off his redecorated office. The boss neglects though to refer to the photograph on the table of his dead son. Woodifield is forgetful but after some whisky he remembers what he wanted to tell the boss. He tells him how, when his daughters were visiting his own son's grave in Belgium, they had come across the grave of his boss's son. The boss had lost his son during the war, more than six years before. Woodifield is unaware of how shocked the boss was to hear the news about the grave. The boss hasn't thought properly about his dead son – he can only picture him lying asleep and unchanged in his uniform.

After Woodifield leaves, the boss is unable to cry, even though in the past he'd have been full of grief. He has always been convinced that he would never recover from his only son's death. He had planned to leave his business to his son. This is what had given meaning to the boss's life.

The boss is then distracted by a fly, which is trying to climb out of the inkpot. He plays with the fly, at first rescuing it from drowning in the ink and then deliberately covering it with ink. Finally the fly dies and he throws it in the wastepaper basket. He feels miserable and frightened at the end of the story. He can no longer even remember what he'd been thinking about before.

Explanation and analysis

Katherine Mansfield, born in 1888 in New Zealand, is widely regarded as one of the world's best short story writers. Her first writing was published when she was only nine years old. Much of her adult life was spent in Europe, where she mixed with other writers such as Virginia Woolf and DH Lawrence. She was deeply affected by the death of her brother in 1915 in World War 1 – which explains the theme in 'The Fly', written in 1922. She contracted tuberculosis and died at the early age of 35.

Background and setting

- **After World War 1**
- **An office in the city**

This story is set not long after World War 1 (1914–1918). The entire story takes place in an office in the city, where the retired Mr Woodfield pays a weekly visit to his ex-boss.

Plot

- **Two parts**

The plot is made up of two parts: The first part focuses mostly on the character of retired old Woodfield who visits his ex-boss once a week. In the second part we discover more about the boss and how his son's death affected him.

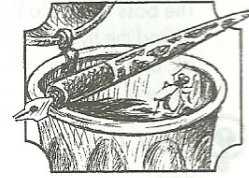
Characters

- **Woodfield:** retired and feeble
- **The boss:** seemingly strong, distracts himself from feelings about his dead son

Mr Woodfield and the boss – the two main characters in the story – are contrasted. They have in common the fact that both of them have lost their sons in the war.

Woodfield is retired and feeble after a stroke. He looks like a baby in a pram, as he sits in the big armchair. His wife and daughters control his life, only allowing him to go out on Tuesdays. His boss is condescending (talks down) to him, believing that Mr Woodfield's life is almost over – "he's on his last pins".

The boss, although five years older than Woodfield, is fit and strong and proud of his redecorated office. He has often shown his new office to Woodfield. His character develops as the story unfolds. When Woodfield leaves, we see a very different side of the boss. While his son was alive, the boss's life had meaning – he'd planned to hand over the business to his son. We see the boss's inner conflict – he can't cry anymore, nor can he even feel properly. The fly distracts him from his feelings. He cruelly rescues and finally kills



Key quote

"Y'are very snug in here," piped old Mr Woodfield, and he peered out of the green, green leather armchair by his friend the boss's desk as a baby peers out of its pram.

Key quote

"There was something I wanted to tell you," said old Woodfield, and his eyes grew dim remembering.

Key quote

"My son!" groaned the boss. But no tears came yet.

Key quote

The boss took up a pen, picked the fly out of the ink, and shook it on to a piece of blotting-paper.

Key quote

"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 fly – taking out his anger and frustration on it. When he finally throws the fly away, he can't even remember that he was grieving for his son! He prefers not to be aware and face the truth.

Themes

- Helplessness and despair
- Cruelty

A sense of helplessness and despair comes across in this story. Both characters have lost their sons and feel powerless. The powerlessness in Woodifield is partly due to his aging and illness, but also as a result of the cruel war where both men lost their sons.

The boss's cruelty to the fly represents the cruelty of war, which leaves you helpless in the face of its destruction.

Exam preparation

Sample contextual question

This question contains TWO extracts. Answer the questions set on both extracts.

Extract 1

Read the extract from "*Yare very snug in here,*" piped old Mr Woodifield" to "*Only a quiver in his eyelids showed that he heard.*" and answer these questions.

- 1.1 What image is used to depict Mr Woodifield in the first sentence of the story? (1)
(Remember that an image is a word-picture – often a simile or metaphor.)
- 1.2 What impression is the reader given of Woodifield from this image? (2)
(In other words what does this image tell you about Woodifield?)
- 2.1 Quote TWO clauses from the first paragraph that show that old Mr Woodifield did not have much say or control over his life any longer. (2)
(Remember, a clause has a finite verb.)
- 2.2 Suggest TWO reasons why this had happened to him. (2)
(Read the extract closely to find the reasons.)
3. Which of the following words gives the meaning of the adverb "wistfully" in the second paragraph: (1)
 - a. showing a touch of desperation
 - b. indicating a fondness
 - c. having a feeling of sad longing
 - d. experiencing a feeling of envy
 (Cross out the answers you're sure are incorrect before you decide on the correct answer.)
- 4.1 Suggest an adjective to describe the boss when Mr Woodifield was there. (1)
(Look at the extract for a descriptive word.)
- 4.2 Was this the first time that Mr Woodifield had seen the office since it had been redecorated? (Quote to substantiate.) (2)
(Read the extract carefully to answer this and to find the quotation.)

5. What do we learn later in the story that explains why the boss did not point out the photograph on the table? (2)
(You won't find this answer in the extract. You must know the whole story.)
6. What made the boss offer Mr Woodifield some whisky? (3)
(Read what happened just before the boss made this offer.)
7. "And the man from whom I got it told me on the strict QT it came from the cellars at Windsor Cassel."
7.1 What does QT stand for? (1)
7.2 What is a Cassel and why is it spelt in this way here? (2)
7.3 What tells you that the boss is boasting? (2)
(If you can answer 7.2, you should be able to work out 7.3.)
8. Complete the following sentence using your own words:
Mr Woodifield was surprised to be offered whisky because ... (2)
(Be careful not to use the same words as the text.)
- 9.1 Why was the story Mr Woodifield remembered such a sensitive subject for the boss? (2)
- 9.2 Quote five consecutive words that show that Mr Woodifield's words upset the boss. (1)
(Look at the extract to find the quotation.)

[26]

AND

Extract 2

Read the extract from "It was. The last blot fell" to "For the life of him he could not remember." and answer these questions.

10. What two things – described in the first paragraph of this extract – make it obvious that the fly is dead? (2)
(For this answer you'll need to read the extract carefully.)
11. What caused the fly to die? (2)
(You should know this answer, if you've read the story properly.)
12. Explain the irony of the boss saying to the fly: "Look sharp!" (2)
(If you are not sure what irony is, look it up in the glossary on page 230.)
- 13.1 Which of the following words best describes how the boss treated the fly: (1)
 - a. strangely
 - b. cruelly
 - c. indifferently
 - d. childishly
- 13.2 Why do you think the boss behaved in this way? (2)
(This question requires you to give your opinion.)

[9]

Total marks: 35

Sample essay question

Write the following essay as well as the two paragraphs.

Structured essay

- A Explain how the boss's son died six years before. Discuss why the son had been important to his father and how the son's death affected the boss. (Length: 100–120 words) [15]

Before you write, draw a mind map to help you think about different aspects of your answer. Think about:

- *how the boss's son died*
- *where he was buried*
- *what part the son played in his father's life*
- *how the boss dealt with the death*
- *how the death affected him in the story.*

AND

Paragraph questions

- B Write a paragraph of 80–100 words in which you describe how the boss treated the fly. [10]

Before you start your paragraph note down:

- *how the boss first saves the fly*
- *how many times he puts ink on it*
- *what happens and how he feels in the end.*

AND

- C Write a paragraph of 80–100 words in which you discuss the theme of loss in the story. [10]

In your paragraph think about both characters:

- *What had Mr Woodifield lost in his life?*
- *What loss had the boss experienced?*

Total marks: 35

The Fly (page 103)

Contextual question

Extract 1

- 1.1 He is depicted as being like a baby. ✓ (1)
- 1.2 It suggests his small ✓ as he looks out from the large armchair. ✓ OR It also suggests an innocence or a powerlessness ✓ (even ignorance) in his boss's office. ✓ (2)
- 2.1 "...the wife and the girls kept him boxed up in the house every day ..." ✓ and "On Tuesday he was dressed and brushed and allowed to cut back to the City ..." ✓ (2)
- 2.2 He no longer worked because he had retired; ✓ he had had a stroke. ✓ (2)
3. c ✓ (1)
- 4.1 Proud (1)
- 4.2 This was not the first time ✓ "as he had explained for the past – how many? – weeks." (2)
5. We learn that the photograph is of his son ✓ who died in the war. ✓ (2)
6. He felt sorry for him ✓ when he noticed how forgetful he became ✓ and how he trembled. ✓ He realised that Woodfield wouldn't last much longer. ✓ (Any three points) (3)
- 7.1 Quiet (1)
- 7.2 A cassel is a castle. ✓ The spelling tells you how the boss pronounces the word. ✓ (2)
- 7.3 He is boastful because he is telling Woodfield that he was important enough ✓ to get whisky from Windsor Castle. ✓ OR that he had important connections ✓ who gave him things on the quiet. ✓ (2)
8. ... because nobody at home ✓ would let him drink any whisky. ✓ (2)
- 9.1 It was a sensitive subject ✓ because it referred to the boss's dead son ✓ OR the grave in Belgium where the boss's son was buried. ✓ (2)
- 9.2 "a quiver in his eyelids" ✓ (1)

[26]

Extract 2

10. The fly did not move ("stir"); ✓ the back legs were stuck to its body and you couldn't see the front legs. ✓ (2)

11. The ink✓ that the boss had covered the fly with had killed it.✓ (2)
12. It's ironic that the boss should be asking the fly to "look sharp" and live✓ when he has just deliberately killed it.✓ (2)
- 13.1 b✓ (1)
- 13.2 He was trying to distract himself✓ from the painful loss of his son✓ OR He was angry✓ and treated the fly in the way his son had been treated in war.✓ (OR any other suitable explanation) (2)

[9]

Total marks: 35

Essay question

A Structured essay

We learn that the boss's son was killed during the war. He was buried in Belgium. Just before he leaves, Mr Woodifield talks about the grave and it is clear that the boss is very distressed by this. He has never even been to see the grave and he imagines his son to look exactly as he did six years before.

The boss always got the meaning for his life from his only son. He had built up the business especially for him to take over. For a year before the war started, his son had come with him to the office and had been very popular with the staff. All that had come to nothing.

In the past, when his son was mentioned, the boss would be filled with grief, He would always cry and this would bring some relief. However, this time he distracts himself with a fly that had fallen into the inkpot. By the time he has killed the fly, the boss has distracted himself long enough to forget that he had been thinking about his son. [15]

Paragraph questions

B

The boss noticed that a fly had fallen into the inkpot. He saved it by picking it out with his pen and putting it on some blotting paper. The fly managed to clean the ink off its wings. Twice more the boss put more ink onto the fly to see what it would do. He admired the courage of the fly as each time it cleaned itself free of the ink. The fourth time was meant to be his last test for the fly - but this time it did not survive. It did not move, despite the boss insisting that it come back to life. [10]

C

In the beginning, the theme of loss relates to retired Mr Woodifield. He is compared to a baby, as he wistfully admires his ex-boss's office. He seems lost

without his job. His wife and daughters constantly tell him what to do and he is very forgetful. The boss appears to be powerful and confident until Mr Woodfield refers to his dead son. The loss of his only son has made the boss's life meaningless. He cannot accept this loss, often crying bitterly about it. In the story he distracts himself with a fly, rather than think about this tragic loss. [10]

Total marks: 35

Taken from Oxford Exam Success

Storyline:

Mr Woodifield has had a stroke but is still able to visit his old boss once a week. Although older, the boss is successful and still in control of affairs, while Mr Woodifield is frail and feeble, and needs looking after.

Mr Woodifield admires the boss's redecorated office, which is clearly a sign of his success in business. He even has electric heating. Mr Woodifield is about to leave but still wants to tell the boss something. To help him remember, the boss takes pity on "the poor old chap" and gives him a glass of whisky "from the cellars at Windsor Cassel". Mr Woodifield is warmed by the drink and remembers what he wanted to tell the boss. His daughters recently visited their brother's war grave in Belgium, and were impressed by how well looked after all the graves were. They saw the grave of the boss's son too, as it was nearby. After Mr Woodifield leaves, the boss tells Macey, the messenger, to leave him alone for half an hour. "He wanted, he intended, he had arranged to weep ..." Mr Woodifield's telling him about the grave upsets the boss badly. He has not been able to come to terms with his loss. He lost his only son in the war, the one for whom he built up his successful company. However, he now finds he cannot cry, as he has planned, and he doesn't feel sad. This makes one wonder about whom or what he really grieves for. Initially he wept violently for the boy, and told people he would never recover. His life was dominated by the idea of his son taking over his business. This was *his* reason for living.

He remembers the year his son spent in the business before the war, and how promising the future looked, until he received the telegram notifying him of his son's death. He decides to study the photograph of his son in his office, but is distracted by a fly in his inkpot. He watches the fly struggling to escape, and flicks it on to the **blotting paper** with a pen. He watches as the fly cleans the ink from its body. Then he decides to drop ink onto the fly as it sits on the blotting paper. He does this three times, admiring the fly's fighting spirit as it cleans its body every time. The third blot is too much for the fly and it lies still in the ink. The boss drops the corpse into the wastepaper basket and calls for Macey to bring clean blotting paper. As he waits for it, he finds he cannot remember what he was thinking about before. When his son died, he declared firmly "Time could make

no difference." It now appears that Time can and does make a difference, as he has even forgotten that he was thinking about his son.

Setting:

- Somewhere in London's business district
- The boss's newly renovated office
- A Tuesday, the day Mr Woodifield usually visits the boss
- About six years after World War One

Themes:

- The nature of grief
- Loss and the process of healing
- Self-centredness
- The futility of war

Narrative technique:

- Third person narrator (omniscient)
- Dialogue and descriptions of two men's actions define their social standing. (Mr Woodifield is feeble, he "piped" and is wistful; the boss "stout, rosy ... still at the helm.")
- Referring to the boss only by his title makes him seem important
- A reference to both men's sons' war graves in Belgium upsets the boss and causes him to torture the fly

Characters:

- The boss – successful businessman; enjoys being in control of all things; grieving father but more for loss of own ambition, than for loss of son
- Mr Woodifield – retired colleague of the boss; frail old man; also lost a son in the war but seems to accept this loss
- Macey – dutiful office messenger
- The boss's son – remembered positively by his father
- The fly – helpless against the boss, but courageously struggles against his torturer; reflects the boss's struggles to come to terms with his loss; also said to symbolise all the helpless young men who died in a war they did not create or believe in

Contextual questions

1. a) Explain clearly what Mr Woodifield and the boss have in common. (2)
- b) How do the two men differ on the issue in Question 1a? (2)
2. What is the effect of naming Mr Woodifield, but referring to the boss only by his title? (2)
3. Why does the boss refer to the whisky as “That’s the medicine”? (2)
4. Name three features that Mr Woodifield appreciates about the war graves in Belgium. (3)
5. What is the effect of including Mr Woodifield’s story about the expensive jam in Belgium? (2)
6. Explain why the boss does what he does to the fly. (3)
7. It has been said that the fly is a symbol of the young men who died in World War One. Explain the similarities that allow this to be said. (3)

Essay questions and other activities

1. In an essay of 250–300 words explain how each man deals with his grief and experiences the healing that comes with Time. (35)



Word check:

blotting paper: absorbent paper used to soak up ink, excess ink, or blots and spills from fountain pens or dip-in pens



Did you know?

World War One (1914–1918) was also known as the *Great War* and *The War to End All Wars*. It was the first global war of the industrialised age and trench warfare, poison gas, tanks, and machine guns were some of the strategies and weapons employed. Although the war was fought in Europe, countries from around the globe became involved in the war. Britain and the Allied forces won the war, and the toll on human life was huge: over 15 million people were killed in this war. Soldiers who died in Europe were buried there, and grave stones were erected later in remembrance of them.

MEMORANDUM

**The fly – Katherine Mansfield
(page 48)****Contextual questions**

1. a) Both men lost sons in World War
One. ✓✓ (2)
b) Mr Woodifield is able to accept his son's
death and speaks about it. ✓ The boss has
not come to terms with his son's death
and doesn't like to speak about it. ✓ (2)
2. By naming Mr Woodifield, he becomes an
ordinary person with feelings. ✓ By using the
boss's title, we are reminded of his position
and importance, but he is not presented as an
ordinary human being with feelings. ✓ (2)
3. Calling the whisky "medicine" suggests that
it will make Mr Woodifield feel better in the
same way that medicine is supposed to make
one feel better. ✓✓ (2)
4. The graves are all well looked after, ✓ there are
flowers on all the graves, ✓ and there are nice
broad paths between the graves. ✓ (3)
5. The story of the jam provides a bit of humour
amidst tales of death. ✓ Mr Woodifield has
accepted his son's death and can talk about it;
it is a fact of life like expensive jam. ✓ (2)

6. The boss is feeling strange as he cannot control his feelings. ✓ He wants to mourn his son, but can't do it now. (Time has made a difference.) ✓
However, he can control what happens to the fly, so uses his strength to torture it. ✓ (3)
7. The fly is helpless against the boss and although it struggles, it is not strong enough to escape him. ✓ In the same way the young men at war struggle against forces much more powerful than they are, ✓ but die because of the greater power of their opponents. ✓ (3)

Essay questions and other activities

Question 1

- Mr Woodifield seems to have accepted his son's death.
- Time seems to have healed his sorrow.
- Mr Woodifield is able to talk about his son, and name him: "poor Reggie".
- His daughters have visited the war graves in Belgium and reported back to the family on the condition of the cemetery.
- This means that they talk about their lost son and brother as a family.
- Mr Woodifield has a caring family at home to look after him, which has probably helped him come to terms with his loss.
- Mr Woodifield seems to be getting on with his life, in spite of his son's death and his own health problems.
- The boss doesn't want to talk about or be reminded of his son's death.
- His son is a photo in his office, never lovingly named.
- Initially the boss claimed Time would make no difference to his grief and he seems to be trying to make this come true.
- He felt his life was ruined by the boy's death, but actually he was upset that his plans for his son's future in his company would not work out now.
- His son was an only son, and he doesn't seem to have a family life to help him come to terms with the boy's death. (35)