

**ASSESSING MEANINGLESSNESS OF LIFE BY STUDYING THE
SHORT STORY, “*THE FLY*” OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD IN THE
LIGHT OF ALBERT CAMUS’ EXISTENTIALISM THEORY**

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Abstract

A philosophical outlook concentrating on an individual’s experience of comprehending the world is known as existentialism. There is a literary reliance that every person is on a quest for creating and designing meaning and purpose in life. However, sometimes situations make the creation of the meaning of life difficult, and there, the meaninglessness of life is originated. The present paper highlights life's meaninglessness in the short story, “*The Fly*” written by Katherine Mansfield. The writer proficiently shows that some unforeseen and unexpected situations wreck the entire purpose of life of a person and after encountering the harsh circumstances, one can realize that life is totally meaningless and searching for a purpose for living is nothing but a preposterous pursuit. In “*The Fly*”, the two central characters, the boss and the fly, both suffer from an existential crisis; though the insect gets free from the battle with living, the boss’ existential crisis lingers. The absurdity of life is interpreted in this paper by thoroughly studying the mentioned short story with the consideration of Albert Camus’ “*theory of existentialism*”.

Keywords: Existentialism, Meaning, Fly, Boss, Existential crisis

Introduction

People’s literary and philosophical standpoint of originating the meaning of lives is known as existentialism. Existentialists believe that meaning of the life of human beings is not regulated by external forces like certain authorities, rather the purpose of human lives is written by themselves. Many philosophers worldwide have shared their perspectives on existentialism; for instance, Jean Paul Sartre, an existentialist philosopher, states that individuals are responsible for everything they do in this world. However, some of these

people suffer from an existential crisis for not fitting themselves in this magnitude of the world.

Many existentialists opine that life itself is meaningless and it is ludicrous; but with amalgamating a contradictory tone to this opinion, Albert Camus states that the absurdity of life is not an end, however, it is a new start. People who persistently grapple with the chaos generated by absurd life can find innumerable possibilities, opportunities, purpose, and meaning to live. But some individuals who become lost in this disarray start to encounter a robust control of the existential crisis. This crisis can be found in *“The Fly”* written by one of the best short story writers and major figures in British modernism, Katherine Mansfield.

In this story, Mr. Woodifield, a retired employee, works as a catalyst for his boss' sorrow and his existential crisis. The boss who loses his son six years ago is unexpectedly remembered by his employee, Mr. Woodifield. The words of Mr. Woodifield shake the Boss' heart which wants to suffer pain from his son's death; however, the boss' ego and self-confinement restrict him to weep freely over the death of his only son. After the departure of Mr. Woodifield, the boss is drowned into the sea of deep thoughts related to his son who could be the next Boss in this office. At that time, a fly's survival to pull itself from the inkpot interrupts the boss' thoughts and to some extent, the boss can find a similarity between his suffering and the struggle of this little insect. Therefore, the boss wants to measure the courage of the fly, and hence, blots of ink are put on this "artful little" fly four times; but in the end, the fly stops its struggle and accepts death and the demise of the fly pushes the boss into the cave of existential crisis.

Discussion

Interpreting meaninglessness of life in “The Fly”

Meaninglessness of life which can also be termed existential nihilism refers to the absence of purpose or meaning in life. The existentialism school where own purpose or meaning for living in this chaotic world is created focuses on exploring life's meaninglessness. Katherine Mansfield's many existential creations including *“The Fly”* portray that life has zero meaning and these literary works also unfold the reverberations of death. Many people can live in this chaotic world as these individuals find the meaning and objective to live; however, some unpredictable situations give birth to a sense related to the meaninglessness of life in human beings. Catastrophic consequences of war bring an existential nihilism to the boss, one of the major characters of the story; and Katherine Mansfield proficiently draws the boss' despair created by the offerings of life.

Present work shows that people are just puppets in front of the disastrous effects of the war. **“During the war, people are affected differently, by personal loss, death of beloved and the death and injury of the soldiers whether that is physical or psychological”** (Mahmood). In the present story, the boss has not only lost his only son in the war but also, he loses his descendant. The boss thought that after his retirement, his son would take all responsibilities followed by the boss currently. This thinking of the boss can remind the reader of one line from Dryden's *“Mac Flecknoe”* – *“Shadwell alone my perfect image bears”* (Dryden 1). But the aftermath of the war makes the boss empty with no son left.

Though the boss overcomes his deep sorrow caused by the death of his son, a sudden reminder from the boss' subordinate Mr. Woodifield impels the boss to think that life is meaningless. **“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”** (Mansfield 3). A thorough reading of the text highlights that the boss is given no name in “The Fly”; here Katherine Mansfield intentionally does this as she desires to portray that the boss loves his official position more than anything else. Hence, the death of the boss' son pushes him into a profound torment as the business built by the boss has no meaning in case it is not for his son.

As mentioned earlier that in this world, a meaning or a purpose for living is found by individuals and here the boss' purpose of living is his business. Therefore, the meaning of life has come to an end for the boss with his son's death. But here readers can raise a question that boss' son died six years ago and after this long time in case it is possible for the boss to suddenly realize meaninglessness of life. The answer must be yes because the hopelessness felt by the boss was not so much intense before. Mr. Woodifield accelerates the boss' pain by telling him that the boss' son's grave is kept beautifully. **“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”** (Mansfield 2). The old pain devours the boss again and with the leaving of Mr. Woodifield, he is submerged in this deep ocean of anguish. The boss starts to suffer from this unexplained affliction and at this point, he notices that a fly struggles to “clamber out” of the inkpot.

Scuffle of the fly compels the boss to help this insect. Hence, **“The boss took up a pen, picked the fly out of the ink, and shook it on to a piece of blotting-paper”** (Mansfield 3). The fly then engages itself in cleaning its “sodden body” and within a few minutes, it is able to prove its existence again. But here a twist comes; the fly's struggle to live gives pleasure to the boss and he puts several drops to examine the fly. This strange behaviour of the boss can bring questions to the reader's mind; however, a deep reading of the text aids to understand that boss finds himself in the fly's struggle. The fly's repeated triumphant against the obstacles of life provides solace to the boss who is grasped by the existential crisis. Therefore, at a moment, he says to the fly **“you artful little b...”** (Mansfield 4). In this portion, Mansfield puzzles the reader as here readers can say that the boss indicates the bee in this sentence. However, a close observation showcases that there are *three dots* after the letter “b” that signifies the word “boss” because in the word “boss” there are *three letters* after “b”.

At the end of the story, the fly stops its fight against the odds of life and this incident throws the boss into an inscrutable fear of existential crisis. As stated earlier that a resemblance is found by the boss between him and the fly, the death of the fly stresses the meaninglessness of life suffered by the boss. In this world, many human beings are persistently suffering from an unknown fear to confront the obstacles that life has planned to offer. The boss sinks in the sea of impenetrable trepidation caused by two unexpected deaths of his son and the fly. Therefore, instead of breathing, the boss is converted into another victim of an existential crisis.

Albert Camus' theory of existentialism and assessing "The Fly" considering Albert Camus' perspectives of existentialism

Albert Camus, an "existentialist philosopher", states that the life of people is objectively meaningless. **"Camus argues that man desperately demands meaning and clarity of the world around him but finds himself confronting a universe that is irrational and meaningless"** (Raskin 157). As mentioned by Camus in *"The Myth of Sisyphus"*, the tragedy of this myth lies in the consciousness of Sisyphus. As per the story, Sisyphus is punished by God to involve himself in the same task every day; Sisyphus' task was to roll a rock to the zenith of the mountain daily and this never-ending task of Sisyphus is termed as Sisyphean task or the labour of Sisyphus. He is aware of his laborious task and hence, this is tragic. However, there are so many human beings in this world who are engaged in this laborious task. But in this case, the story is not tragic as these people are not aware of their ceaseless task.

At the beginning of the present story, an apparently side character (who plays the most crucial role), Mr. Woodifield, the boss' subordinate is amazed by the boss' pride integrated with every new materialistic thing in the room. The boss starts to exhibit new furniture, new carpets to catch the attention of Mr. Woodifield and prove himself worthy than Woodifield. After showcasing all new materialistic things, Mr. Woodifield is offered whisky by the boss. But this whisky brings an unpredictable catastrophe in the boss' life.

Woodifield's slumbered thoughts awake after getting some drops of whisky and he plays the role of a catalyst in bringing back the boss' old painful memory. To some extent, it can be said Mr. Woodifield is the conscience of the boss. After the exit of Woodifield, the boss starts to panic and remember his old desires related to his son. The business is built by the boss just for his son, but the war causing his son's death also destroys the boss' existence and his purpose to live. As Camus says that every human being seeks meaning for living. While the boss reminisces about his old memories and planning related to his son, suddenly a fly's skirmish with odds for living catches his attention. At that moment, the boss replaces himself with that fly.

The boss puts one by one drop on the fly and watches its unstoppable courage to confront those barriers coming on the path of its living. Therefore, the boss says – **"That was the way to tackle things; that was the right spirit. Never say die"** (Mansfield 4). The boss who is not given another name by the writer always loves to win in the battle of life. Hence, the fly's persistent winning after going *"laborious task"* uplifts him. This laborious task is also faced by the boss as he becomes another machine in this world and he involves himself in the same laborious task every day. Unlike Sisyphus, the boss is not aware of his laborious task as the fly. But the death of the fly creates an unexplained terror in the heart of the boss and he enters into the black hole of existential crisis.

Conclusion

Katherine Mansfield has proven her excellence in *"The Fly"* by representing the juxtaposition of existentialism and nihilism. In this world, many people have found the purpose of life, but some of them who do not have found this already enter into an existential

crisis. An incomprehensible shadow of nothingness and meaninglessness of life follows them each moment. In the present story, at first, the boss was unaware of his laborious task and the big hole that is created in his existence. However, as mentioned earlier, the catalyst and the boss' conscience, Mr. Woodfield, awakes the concealed pain of the boss. This subordinate pushes the boss one step closer to an existential crisis. The boss' son's death is again remembered by him and an inscrutable torment devours him.

The fly's struggle with cleaning its body from ink suddenly breaks the dark and painful thoughts of the boss and to some extent, the fly reflects the boss' situation. The boss is inspired by the fight of the plucky insect against the stumbling blocks offered by life. But at last, the fly takes its last breath and compels the boss to enter into an unknown darkness and unspeakable agitation. In this world, optimism should be there in every human being to confront any odd situation, unless their condition can be like the boss.

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