

The Masculine Trauma in Katherine Mansfield's the Fly: the Boss' Traumatic Memories

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Abstract

This study applies Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of trauma to Katherine Mansfield's (1922) work called 'the Fly'. It discusses the ways in which the protagonist of the story called the Boss attempts to deal with his traumatic memories. Freud in his *Studies on Hysteria* characterized the individual trauma as when a person is unable to react to a traumatic or affective memory in a way that successfully "discharges" those feelings, and therefore feels powerless in the situation. It is this feeling of powerlessness that leads to the trauma. This relationship between trauma and a lack of power manifests in the boss, which can be seen in his attempts to exert his hegemonic masculinity through the dominance and ownership at any given point of time. The idea of ownership is established throughout the story. The Boss wants to be able to feel traumatized at will or to have ownership on his own trauma so trauma becomes a part of the commodity economy in this particular narrative. It is concluded that although normally we associate trauma with loss and inability but trauma becomes the loss that has equitation of ownership.

Keywords: Trauma, The Boss, Masculinity, Repression, Freud

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1. Introduction

In Katherine Mansfield's short stories, the level of subtlety and psychological insight is striking. This research study makes an attempt to discuss Mansfield's art in creating the inner world of characters in *The Fly* (1922). Katherine Mansfield is a master in penetrating into the characters' psychological world. Her works concentrate on the inner mood, which is revealed to the reader vividly by her successful dealing with the story. The interior life like human isolation, disillusionment, paradoxes of idealism and reality, beauty and ugliness, joy and suffering are impressive in her stories. No matter what kind of character, innocent adolescent, man and woman in happy or unhappy marital life, old lady or man in his advanced age, Katherine Mansfield can show their complicated and subtle inmost feelings in depth.

First, instead of using strictly structured plots of her predecessors in the genre, Mansfield's stories are free from conventional plots (Kimber, 2015). Internal crisis has replaced external crisis. Mansfield skillfully diverts the readers' attention away from plot and invites them instead into the human mind. Second, when Mansfield shows her main character's feelings, she often uses her minor characters as a foil to her main character's psychological world. The minor characters either form distinct contrast with the protagonist or have close connection with the main character in terms of inner feelings. Third, Katherine Mansfield's peculiar gift also lies in her interpretation of subtle and unsayable feelings which lie hidden under men's everyday behavior and trivial events.

With much attention to small details of human behavior, Mansfield's stories of delicate plainness present exquisite inner feelings. Finally, the character's psychological world is presented to the reader also through the application of symbolism. Symbolism is constant and largely psychological in Mansfield's work. Abstract feelings are conveyed through numerous kinds of concrete symbols from material things to characters' habitual actions. In this way, Mansfield's stories offer an entrance to ordinary lives and subtle feelings (Kobler, 1990).

The word trauma comes from the Greek word meaning a physical wound, a corporeal wound, something which is inflated on the body. It is later used particularly in a medical and psychiatric literature. In Freud's stakes, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted

not upon the body but upon the mind. Freud believed that trauma was caused when a person experienced an event to which he/she was unable to react fully. In response, the individual attempts to repress the memory of these traumatic experiences; however, he or she is rarely successful. Instead, the memory resurfaces in the form of flashbacks against the individual's will or control and the individual is left seeking some kind of energetic reaction to the memory - some way to react in order to correct the traumatic memory. In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), Freud describes a pattern of suffering that is inexplicably resistant in the lives of certain individuals. Whole idea of ontology and experience of trauma seems to suggest some degree of agency-less-ness one loses control, the motor control, the cognitive control, the experiential control and it extends into social political and other forms of control.

The backdrop of this particular story is the First World War. It is mostly about psychological violence of the war. Trauma becomes a very interesting category in the story. There is an equation which is established in this narrative between trauma and privilege. In other words, trauma becomes the ability by which one is able to feel traumatized and able to perform the trauma. This ability is connected to a sense of privilege, in the sense that one seems to have some ownership on his trauma. It is his own trauma which is more wounding and grieving compared to other people's trauma. So trauma becomes a category of agency, a marker of agency, and a marker of privilege which differentiates one particular traumatic person from the other people. The whole idea is about the hubris or the false pride, which an individual has in terms of being able to have ownership on his own trauma, in terms of having connected trauma with privilege, in terms of this equation between trauma and individuality. The protagonist of the story called the Boss is never named in the whole story, which is obviously quite symbolic because the whole idea of the boss is a degree of hegemonic masculinity about the character. So he wants to be the hegemonic male. He wants to be the dominant male establishing dominance. There is also the ability to feel traumatized at any given point of time.

The significance of this study is that I intend to explore how and in what ways Sigmund Freud's concept of trauma intersects with concept of masculinity in Katherine Mansfield "The Fly" (1922). In what follows, I will try to show that trauma in the boss can be

seen through his anxiety about insufficient masculinity and because of that he believes his son has died in the war, so he begins to test the masculinity of the fly. Additionally, his trauma is demonstrated by his efforts to suppress the emotions triggered by recollections of the traumatic event, as he strives to maintain his sense of masculinity despite feeling powerless in the face of the trauma. Both aspects of the story will be explored.

2. Review of Literature

Kaplan (1990) reads the fly in this story as meaninglessly killed by the boss, with the comment that this “unnerving portrait of victimisation, grief and suffering” might result from Mansfield’s identification of herself with a fly. Considering that Mansfield’s “The Fly” “incorporates a despair” Mansfield has experienced, Sylvia Berkman (1971) did not give a proper place to the fly.

In comparing “The Fly” with “Misery”, May (1994), argues that “The Fly” explores “the latent significance of the boss’s emotional state” (p. 202). He believes that this story emphasizes “the transitory nature of grief,” and his comment is restricted to only one character, the boss. His perspective, however, well captures the similarities between Mansfield and Chekhov, emphasizing on character as a mood, the “minimal dependence on the traditional plot,” and the “focus on a single situation in which everyday reality is broken up by a crisis” (p. 201).

Scholtmeijer (1993) observes that the nameless boss indicates his being merely as “one anonymous boss among others” who runs an undefined business typical in the city, while the nameless fly “holds steadier ownership of its individuality than the man, despite its depending for its life upon human caprice” (p. 165). However, her view—the fly, not being a symbol of “the power of life,” for its being finally drowned and thrown away, “extinguishes” “simultaneously the luxuriance in pathos and the hope of a moral cure”—appears to require reconsideration.

Kobler (1990) argues that the fly is “a replacement for [the boss’s] own wretched state” (p. 61). He believes that a parallel line between the boss’s dead son and the dead fly can be easily drawn. The son and the fly both are killed due to a pointless inhuman motive.

Though the boss has thought he could never recover from the loss of his son and told everybody that “[t]ime . . . could make no difference” (p. 359), he has overcome the death of his only son in less than six years, and so does he quickly forget the death of the fly, despite his meticulous attention to every detail of the fly’s movements, and even his consideration of “breathing on [the fly] to help the drying process” (p. 361). Like the old photograph of his son, “a grave-looking boy in uniform,” to which the boss does not want to “draw old Woodifield’s attention,” the existence of the fly appears out of place in the boss’s office where “the bright red carpet,” “the massive bookcase,” and “the table with legs like twisted treacle” give the boss “a feeling of deep, solid satisfaction”.

Harvey (2011) argues, interestingly, that the fly in this story “provides a *trompe l’oeil* effect just as it was used in fifteenth-century paintings” (p. 206); the fly makes this story truly real, by making this story as quotidian as possible, and, at the same time, by making us notice the existence of the fly in our human-dominated world. She believes that “The real mystery of this story is not what the fly signifies but what the fly is doing diving into the inkpot in the first place” (p. 207).

Parui (2017) highlights the boss’s refusal to confront his traumatic memory except as a means of ego preservation, portraying his rituals of mourning as a facade of strength and control. The boss's struggle to internalize and ritualize his loss is depicted as a constructed performance aimed at perpetuating his perceived manly authority. Interacting with a fly trapped in ink symbolizes the boss's futile efforts “to regain a sense of power and masculinity in the face of profound loss”. The narrative unfolds as a critique of masculine preservation projects and the inherent anxieties surrounding memory, mourning, and gender roles in the post-war era.

In the critical study of Boyle (1965), "The Fly" (1922) deals with the spiritual death of the boss and his replacement of material things with human things, as well as the similarities between Old Woodifield and the boss, and the parallels between the sufferings of the fly and those of the boss. The boss's encounter with the fly supports the idea that he is no longer spiritually alive and that his existence is just as sterile as old Woodifield's. The boss's troubles with his son's death are similar to the struggles the fly has with the ink blots. The boss had

anticipated being overtaken by sadness when Old Woodfield had described the boss's son in the first half of the story. However, at this point, he is unable to reply to the trigger for his sorrow. "My son," the boss moaned. The boss no longer reacts to the memories of his son, just as the fly no longer reacts to the blots of ink that land on him. The boss is so unperturbed by the thought of his son—a thought that used to cause him to experience sorrow spasms—that he is diverted by a fly in his inkwell. The boss is grabbed and startled by a "grinding feeling of wretchedness" after killing the fly.

3. Method

Freud is one of the earliest theorists of the mind. The psychologist who actually looked at art, literature, fiction, and stories in terms of having a more complex and fuller understanding of the mind and as something which is more complex in the brain. By his theories, literature becomes simply a complex representation of the mysterious mind. It does not become passive reflection of the human mind, rather; it becomes a representation. Both literature and psychoanalysis are engaging with the interplay of knowing and not knowing, between known and the unknown, and in doing. The idea of what remains unknown in actions and language becomes central to the ontology of trauma. Recognition of reality especially through the tragedy of trauma can be represented and not just reflected.

Freud also discussed the way individuals experience trauma, hysteria, and neurosis in much of his work including *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905) and *'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness* (1908). For this article, we will be working with theories which were explained by Freud in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), and they were summarized by him in an early manuscript called "On the Theory of Hysterical Attacks". This is the key thing that one cannot leave behind the traumatic moment and it is always with oneself. It is internalized in a way that it almost becomes a part of one's flesh and blood, a degree of corporealization. We corporalize trauma and make that into part of one's body. The idea of traumatic neurosis can be described as an unwritten reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind. Freud believed that the violence never goes away, the trauma never goes away, and that original moment of trauma is revisited again and again. That revisiting or reconnecting to the traumatic moment is exactly what is being

referred to by Freud as a traumatic reputation. It just takes one to the original experience of trauma and it is almost like a bodily experiential connection at that point where one touched the moment of trauma quite literally and that corporeal connection is exactly what makes us repetitive in quality.

According to Freud's theory, the way the experience of a trauma repeats itself exactly and unremittingly through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his will would be to move away from trauma but then there is a certain degree of fixation which is a certain degree of being imprisoned to the traumatic moment. The subject seems to be stuck in some bubble of time where the traumatic moment keeps visiting him and all kinds of scenes and sounds around him remind him of the original traumatic encounter or the sight and movement of violence repeatedly.

As the author intends to explore the ways in which Sigmund Freud's concept of trauma intersects with the concept of masculinity in Katherine Mansfield's *The Fly*, here it has been tried to figure out how men work in this story. Our way of looking at masculinity studies in this particular story is to ask a very simple question, which is when a male character is working, how much of his actions or how much of his thoughts and his words are influenced consciously or unconsciously by his awareness of being a man that is to say, how much does he believe in what society has constructed as masculinity?

Masculinity studies are also very much predicated on a certain poststructuralist way of thinking which is to say that masculinity studies expose a binarity and then tell us that this binarity is untenable. It is not just one binary issue, there are several binary issues, on which masculinity is predicated. The most obvious binarity that we all recognize is male and female. There are so many other binarities. Therefore, when it is being said that this will separate the boys from the men, the boys therefore, are being attributed no masculinity. So the boys are not male, it is the men who are suitably male. So there is some kind of an adulthood that is automatically associated with masculinity. So the men are adults. And if one is not an adult, then he is a boy who is infantilized., there is a way in which the boy becomes infantilized in the same way that in a patriarchal society, women are infantilized. Thus, this concept will separate the boys from the men. It is basically saying that the boys have not acquired

masculinity yet. This is something that they must acquire. Having to go through trials or going through tribulations and that is when one acquires masculinity. Raewyn Connell is one of the critical figures in the field of masculinity studies. She describes four types of hegemonic masculinities for men: hegemonic, complicit, subordinated, and marginalized. Hegemonic masculinity describes the hierarchical interaction amongst multiple men and explains how some men make it look normal and that they do dominate most women and men. The second type of masculinity for men is complicit masculinity. As mentioned earlier, in a particular society, few men can live up to hegemonic masculinity ideals, but many support it. The concept of 'hegemony' normally suggests a large amount of consent. The other type of masculinity is subordinated masculinity. Masculinities encompass beliefs, values, behaviors and attitudes that fall outside the dominant meaning of what it implies to be man (Connell, 2005). It is in opposition to the hegemonic masculinity.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Performances of Masculinity in Characters

The term that Katherine Mansfield uses for the boss is "at the helm". If one is going to think about masculinity as comprising three levels, there are hegemonic masculinity, complicit masculinity, and input subordinate masculinity. We can certainly say that the boss as an embodiment of hegemonic masculinity is "at the helm", the way in which men should be at the helm. Woodifield belongs to the complicit masculinity. That is to say, he does not have masculinity himself, but he is at least supported because he says, "oh it is not in here". So this is the kind of masculine environment that Woodifield perhaps aspires to, but he knows that he will never have it. It is the boss who makes him aware of the fact that he is never going to have that, his masculine sense of authority like the upholstery, the furniture. Katherine Mansfield also reminds us that Woodifield is a frail, old figure (Mansfield, 2008, p. 359). So having to look at the way in which Katherine Mansfield, through her use of adjectives is creating Woodifield in the image of the inadequately masculine Woodifield is frail.

He is under the control of his wife and daughters clearly, everything that a true man should be. At the very beginning, there is a binarity that is drawn attention to because we do not know whether Katherine Mansfield believes in the binarity of the boy and the man. That

is certainly something that becomes very clear in the short story because the readers' feelings are important when Woodifield is described sitting in that chair opposite the desk from the boss. "The baby" is the word that the narrator used to describe what the Woodifield is. Very soon afterwards, the narrator tells us that he is under the control of his wife and daughter. So look at the way in which Woodifield is being constructed. As somebody who is inadequate in masculinity. Therefore, Woodifield is described as a baby and the readers are also told that he is basically under the thumb of his wife and daughters. What the audience gets to know about Woodifield is that he is a baby, so he has inadequate masculinity or he has no masculinity. Moreover, he is ruled by his wife and daughters, which means that this further exacerbates the lack of masculinity that he has. The whole hegemony of the boss is established by contrasting characters that are not hegemonic like old Woodifield. Although he is biologically younger than the boss, he is a faithful loyal servant, whose whole idea and old presence is establishing the boss's dominance.

Then, readers are introduced to another kind of masculinity. There is also another male spectrum, the dead male, boss's own son, who has been killed in the first world war, one whose loss was such a grieve for the boss. That morning he wants to perpetrate. In that sense, that becomes a very interesting equation between masculinity and vulnerability. Normally, we associate trauma with loss, with the inability but here it has the equations of ownership. That is why the whole idea of mobility and commodification becomes interesting in the story. But this is a very still masculinity because this masculinity is made available to us through a photograph of the son of the boss.

It is a staged photograph. It is very important to note that when the boss looks at the photograph, he says that, "my son wasn't like this" of course his son was not like this. It is very clear for us to figure out that the son of the boss was forced into a life that perhaps the young man did not want. Therefore, his son was a victim of the kind of pressure that society brings to bear on young men. In that photograph, we have the image of a victim of patriarchy. The boss goes on to show power and wealth and because he brings out that bottle of whiskey. He says that, "if you promise not to tell anyone, I'm going to tell you that this whiskey comes from the sellers of Windsor Castle" (Mansfield, 2008, p. 360). Windsor Castle, of course, is

the oldest castle that is used by the British Royal Family. So if one is talking about Windsor Castle, he is also talking about an extremely patriarchal kind of setup. The boss says that “this is where the whiskey comes from”. It can be understood that Woodifield is regarded as a very British name. The British royal family acquired the name of Woodifield only during the First World War. When King George the fifth realized that if they continued to retain the surname which was saxe-Coburg-Gotha, which was a German surname, then British people may actually start to suspect that their royal family has got German inclinations or that they are somehow favorably disposed towards the German, in order to create a sense of Britishness and consider themselves as being properly British and being not German but as British as Windsor. So there is a way in which patriotism was created by a very patriarchal man, George V. So when the boss says that the whiskey comes from Windsor Castle, Katherine Mansfield is also invoking a very patriarchal tradition of the way in which naming happens, and the way in which naming is used to consolidate patriarchy.

4.2. Masculine Trauma in “The Fly”

Freud believed that trauma was caused when a person experienced an event to which he/she is unable to react fully. In response, the individual attempts to repress the memory of these traumatic experiences; however she/he is rarely successful. Instead, the memory in the form of flash backs against the individual’s will or control and the individual is left seeking some kind of energetic reaction to the memory. This results in actions that the individual’s consciousness is unable to control or prevent. Trauma in the boss can be seen first through his anxiety about his insufficient masculinity making him believe that his son has died in the war, so he begins to test the masculinity of the fly. Second, his trauma is manifested by his struggle to control his emotions evoked after remembering the traumatic memory because nothing should weaken his masculinity even the trauma which we know it by feeling powerless in the situation. I will discuss the story in both ways.

4.3. The Death of the Fly and the Crisis of Masculinity

The Fly begins by introducing Mr. Woodified, an elderly retired man who, due to a stroke, is confined by his wife and daughters in a suburban home (ibid, p. 357). On Tuesdays, when he is briefly liberated from their care, he ventures to "the City" (ibid, p. 357) to visit his friend

known simply as "the boss" at his office. During the visit, Mr. Woodifield recounts his family's trip to the grave of his son Reggie and unexpectedly stumbles upon the grave of the boss's, who also perished in the war six years prior. After a casual conversation about family matters, Mr. Woodifield leaves the boss's office. The narrative then shifts to the boss preparing for a cathartic moment triggered by thoughts of his deceased son brought up by Mr. Woodifield. He instructs his employee Macey who has "dodged in and out of his cubby hole like a dog that expects to be taken for a run" (ibid, p. 359) to ensure no interruptions as he reminisces about his son, the future of his business, and his dashed hopes. However, as he anticipates a wave of sorrow, he realizes "he isn't as he wants to feel" (ibid, p. 360). In a perplexing turn of events, he notices a fly struggling in an inkpot and proceeds to inadvertently cause its demise by dropping ink on it out of curiosity. This unexpected distraction leaves the boss unable to recollect his previous thoughts.

There are different opinions on this horrible last part where the boss actually rescues the fly from the ink bottle and puts it on a blotting paper, allows the fly to get dry and then keeps on dropping little drops of ink till the fly can't survive that onslaught of ink drops anymore, by which time Woodifield has left. A parallel between the boss's dead son and the dead fly can be easily drawn (Scholtmeijer, 1993). The son and the fly both are killed due to a pointless inhuman motive. Though the boss has thought he could never recover from the loss of his son and told everybody that "[t]ime . . . could make no difference" (Mansfield, 2008, p. 359), he has overcome the death of his only son in less than six years, and so does he quickly forget the death of the fly, despite his meticulous attention to every detail of the fly's movements, and even his consideration of "breathing on [the fly] to help the drying process" (p. 361) (Kobler, 1990).

As said before I believe that the boss does the fly scenario because he is trying to test the fly to see how masculine the fly is. The fly of course is not interested in gender. The fly is not interested in proving his masculinity. The fly is simply interested in living. But the boss has to see that the fly succeeds in proving its masculinity. The boss is doing this because after the son's grave is mentioned, the boss is completely shattered inside. He is really troubled. He realizes that he has not mourned his son's passing in the war actually. So loss of the son is

something that the boss is troubled by. The part of that grief may be that the boss is obviously losing somebody that he loved but that is not the whole story. In losing the boy, the boss also lost that very patriarchal thing that somebody needs to continue his business, somebody who inherits the property. Therefore, the son was of value to the boss, not the boss is obviously losing somebody that he loved. The boss lost that very patriarchal thing, somebody to continue his business, somebody to inherit his property. The son not as the human being but the son was a value to the boss as somebody who is going to continue the boss's legacy. Thus, the boss loved his son for purely selfish reasons.

We are not very sure whether it was love at all. So, in dying, the boy seems to have actually tricked the boss through death. The son seems to have told the boss I will not be a part of your game, I will not take on your business, and this is something that I refuse to do. What is really happening over there is when the boss thinks that he wants to cry. He wanted, intended, and arranged to weep but of course he cannot weep. He cannot weep because of various reasons. First of all, he cannot because his grief is not entirely genuine. But the second reason why he cannot weep is because he has taught himself that emotional repression is a sign of masculinity. And now, he actually envies Woodifield because Woodifield, in spite of his being a baby, frail and old, is in touch with his emotions, which is something that the boss is incapable of doing. That is why when the boss actually starts to and really arranges to weep, he cannot, because the repression has become so solidified. It has become so deeply embedded that he cannot weep. And then of course, the fly episode happens and when the fly fails, the boss throws away the fly.

The throwing away of the fly is also the boss performing his contempt for a creature who has not succeeded in overcoming adversity, because the boss prides himself on overcoming adversity. What the boss perhaps realizes but then again, he capitulates, he returns back to his old self, he realizes that this overcoming of adversity has come to him at a great price. It has been a very expensive overcoming, he realizes that, but now of course it is too late. So instead of admitting to himself that in spite of his very posh office and his whiskey from the cellars of Windsor Castle, the boss is actually a failure as a human being. The boss throws away the fly, and by throwing away the fly, he reestablishes his masculinity

that had been cracked a little bit in the presence of Woodifield, not only in the presence of Woodifield, but when Woodifield has mentioned his son's grave. Therefore, when he forces those tears, the tears do not come. After the fly has been thrown away, the boss tries to remember what was it that he was intending to cry about but the story ends when he could not remember.

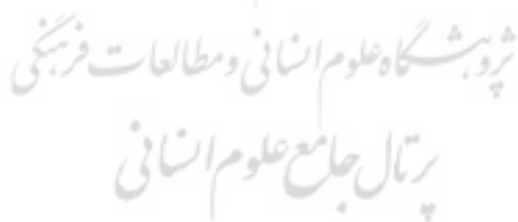
4.4. Horror of Loss of Beloved Ones

Everything in the story is also very complex, because normally as we know, the whole idea of hysteria is seen as a female malady. The very sexist definition of hysteria, as a female malady sometimes happens all the time to a woman, a woman who is more hysteric naturally. But hysteria becomes a performative category in the story that one is able to feel hysteric for this story because he is so manly. Thus, it becomes an interesting equation between masculinity and hysteria. So one's masculinity privileged masculinity and hegemonic masculinity is determined by the ability to be hysteric. Thus, hysteria becomes ability. The boss in the story wants hysteria to become a performative category. He wants to perform hysteria at will; he wants to be able to feel traumatized at will (Parui, 2017). In this way as discussed earlier, therein lies the privilege masculinity that he wants to embody. So his privilege as a male, the fact that he is a privileged male is determined by his ability to be hysteric at any given point in time. His privilege as a male is determined by his ability to feel traumatized at any given point in time. That really makes the story very complex and bizarre at many levels. The strangeness in the story is about how trauma becomes a male category and male commodity to some extent that one is able to acquire trauma, able to have ownership on his own trauma, and his property. That is why there is commodification of trauma and hysteria, when it becomes a commodity owned by a man The boss is sitting in his own office, he owns a lovely office. He owns all the gadgets around him. He owns the capital that flows inside the office. Therefore, in that sense, trauma also becomes part of the commodity economy in this particular story. So he wants the ability of going back to the original hysteric traumatic moment and wants to replay it very professionally.

5. Conclusion

In her story “The Fly”, Katherine Mansfield (1922) has chosen a figure as a representative of conventional masculinity: the boss is authoritative, gross, boorish, callous, combative, competitive, proud and self-complacent. He needs to feel that he must have a control over all his affairs, even superiority and power over two inevitably uncontrolled matters; the mortal condition and emotional responses to the past traumatic memory. In spite of the dislike the readers develop towards him, they also feel sympathetic to the boss's existence who is torn apart because of the strict rules of hegemonic masculinity.

In this story, Katherine Mansfield implemented the boss to show the readers this is what men become if they believe in masculinity so much. They become so emotionally stunted. They become so emotionally repressed that even when that repressed emotion threatens to bubble up, they push it down. After pushing it down, they tell themselves that they cannot remember what had just bubbled up and what had just been pushed down. They even forget that they are repressed. So a part of being masculine is to forget your own emotional repression. Mansfield is taking a very critical distance in this story to look at masculinity in this incredibly remarkable way.



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