

The Death of the Moth || Virginia Woolf

1 Moths that fly by day are not properly to be called moths; they do not excite that pleasant sense of dark autumn nights and ivy-blossom which the commonest yellow-underwing asleep in the shadow of the curtain never fails to rouse in us. They are hybrid creatures, neither gay like butterflies nor sombre like their own species. **Nevertheless, the present specimen, with his narrow hay-coloured wings, fringed with a tassel of the same colour, seemed to be content with life.** It was a pleasant morning, mid-September, mild, benignant, yet with a keener breath than that of summer months. The plough was already scoring the field opposite the window, and where the share had been, the earth was pressed flat and gleamed with moisture...

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- These are the first three sentences of Woolf's personal essay.
 - She is considered one of the most innovative writers of the last century.
 - experimental style
 - explores the definitions of 'reader' and 'writing'
 - psychological concept applied to literature
 - collective unconscious in print
 - Paragraph one establishes the "main character" of the essay.

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- It is important to first note the title. It shows the death of *the* moth, a specific insect within her environment, not just any moth in particular.
 - Likewise, this opening series of sentences establishes three types of writing patterns:
 - first three sentences use both the Definition and the Description patterns
 - fourth sentence begins a personal Narration, establishing a specific time, a moment in her life
 - likewise these sentence establish mood and tone in order to display her under-current theme
 - The statement “*seemed to be content with life*” shows a hints with foreshadowing for the closure of the piece.

1 ... **Such vigour came rolling in from the fields** and the down beyond that it was difficult to keep the eyes strictly turned upon the book. The rooks too were keeping one of their annual festivities; soaring round the tree tops until it looked as if a vast net with thousands of black knots in it had been cast up into the air, which, after a few moments sank slowly down upon the trees until every twig seemed to have a knot at the end of it. Then, suddenly, the net would be thrown into the air again in a wider circle this time, with the utmost clamour and vociferation, as though to be thrown into the air and settle slowly down upon the tree tops were a tremendously exciting experience.

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- The thesis is broken up and carried throughout the entire essay in small chunks, in progressive segments/installments.
 - Throughout the demo, text highlighted in **blue** will show the crucial developing statements which combine into Woolf over-all thesis. This experimental approach is difficult to mimic.

Thesis: Woolf's main purpose is to show:

- that the moth's actions embody our own actions.
- Nature is powerful.

2 The same energy which inspired the rooks, the ploughmen, the horses, and even, it seemed, the lean bare-backed downs, sent the moth fluttering from side to side of his square of the window-pane. **One could not help watching him.** One was, indeed, conscious of a queer feeling of pity for him. The possibilities of pleasure seemed that morning so enormous and so various that to have only a moth's part in life, and a day moth's at that, appeared a hard fate, and his zest in enjoying his meagre opportunities to the full, pathetic. He flew vigorously to one corner of his compartment, and, after waiting there a second, flew across to the other. What remained for him but to fly to a third corner and then to a fourth? That was all he could do, in spite of the size of the downs, **the width of the sky**, the far-off smoke of houses, and the romantic voice, now and then, of a steamer out at sea. What he could do he did. **Watching him, it seemed as if a fibre, very thin but pure, of the enormous energy of the world had been thrust into his frail and diminutive body.** As often as he crossed the pane, I could fancy that a thread of vital light became visible. **He was little or nothing but life.**

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- Although the piece is largely *descriptive*, the *narrative* pattern takes control in the piece:
“One could not help watching him.”
 - Woolf contrasts the small insect against the immense sky to emphasize his frailty.
 - —and she continues the theme of the life-force found in nature.

3 Yet, because he was so small, and so simple a form of the energy that was rolling in at the open window and driving its way through so many narrow and intricate corridors in my own brain and in those of other human beings, there was something marvellous as well as pathetic about him. It was as if someone had taken a tiny bead of pure life and decking it as lightly as possible with down and feathers, had set it dancing and zig-zagging to show us the true nature of life. Thus displayed one could not get over the strangeness of it. One is apt to forget all about life, seeing it humped and bossed and garnished and cumbered so that it has to move with the greatest circumspection and dignity. Again, the thought of all that life might have been had he been born in any other shape caused one to view his simple activities with a kind pity.

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- Theme of life-force continues.
 - Throughout the piece she switches between personal narratives and narratives of the moth's struggle with death; a contrasting action in itself. Relating back to herself adds emphasis of the moth's size contrasted to her own, yet both contain the same energy.
 - The moth is personified as a "he" in order to establish a common bond; the reader can relate better to the insect's plight visualizing him with human characteristics.

4 After a time, tired by his dancing apparently, he settled on the window ledge in the sun, and, the queer spectacle being at an end, **I forgot about him.** Then, looking up, my eye was caught by him. He was trying to resume his dancing, but seemed either so stiff or so awkward that he could only flutter to the bottom of the window-pane; and when he tried to fly across it he failed. Being intent on other matters I watched these futile attempts for a time without thinking, unconsciously waiting for him to resume his flight, as one waits for a machine, that has stopped momentarily, to start again without considering the reason of its failure. After perhaps a seventh attempt he slipped from the wooden ledge and fell, fluttering his wings, on to his back on the window sill. **The helplessness of his attitude roused me.** It flashed upon me that he was in difficulties; he could no longer raise himself; his legs struggled vainly. **But, as I stretched out a pencil, meaning to help him to right himself, it came over me that the failure and awkwardness were the approach of death.** I laid the pencil down again.

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- Momentarily she forgets him for awhile until she realizes he is having difficulties; she considers helping but resists—there is nothing she could do to help him.
 - She begins to hint at the resolution for the story: struggle for life even in a small figure of an insect.
 - A major shift begins in her thesis at this point.

5 The legs agitated themselves once more. I looked as if for the enemy against which he struggled. I looked out of doors. What had happened there? Presumably it was mid-day, and work in the fields had stopped. Stillness and quiet had replaced the previous animation. The birds had taken themselves off to feed in the brooks. The horses stood still. Yet the power was there all the same, massed outside indifferent, impersonal, not attending to anything in particular. Somehow it was opposed to the little hay-coloured moth. It was useless to try to do anything. One could only watch the extraordinary efforts made by those tiny legs against an oncoming doom which could, had it chosen, have submerged an entire city, not merely a city, but masses of human beings; nothing, I knew had any chance against death. Nevertheless after a pause of exhaustion the legs fluttered again. It was superb this last protest, and so frantic that he succeeded at last in righting himself...

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- Notice how the theme intensifies progressively throughout the piece; it motions from life- force to the conflicts between life and death to the inevitable death. This passage in red contrasts sharply with the opening images of the rooks in paragraph one.
 - Within this last interior monologue, she looks outside her window for an explanation, but returns her gaze to the moth and reconsiders extending her pencil to help, despite the unavoidable consequences.

5 ...One's sympathies, of course, were all on the side of life. Also, when there was nobody to care or to know, this gigantic effort on the part of an insignificant little moth, against a power of such magnitude, to retain what no one else valued or desired to keep, moved one strangely. Again, somehow, one saw life, a pure bead. I lifted the pencil again, useless though I knew it to be. But, even as I did so, the unmistakable tokens of death showed themselves. The body relaxed, and instantly grew stiff. **The struggle was over.** The insignificant little creature now knew death. As I looked at the dead moth, this minute wayside triumph of so great a force over so mean an antagonist filled me with wonder. Just as life had been strange. The moth having righted himself now lay most decently and uncomplainingly composed. O yes, he seemed to say, **death is stronger than I am.**

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- The moth's narrative ends mid-paragraph.
 - At the close of essay Woolf realizes death is unavoidable; she also reconfirms her thesis that the life-force in herself is in all humanity and likewise is in all aspects of Nature.