THE DEATH OF THE MOTH

VIRGINIA WOOLF

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Born Adeline Virginia Stephen in London in 1882, Virginia Woolf is one of the most important writers not just of her time but of all literary history. A modernist, Woolf, along with contemporaries such as James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein, revolutionized literature by inventing new forms that explored the rich inner lives of their subjects. She is known especially for the novels Mrs. Dalloway (1925) and To the Lighthouse (1927), but also for the nonfiction and feminist A Room of One’s Own (1929).

“The Death of the Moth” was published in The Death of the Moth and Other Essays (1942) after Woolf’s suicide. While the essay should and does stand on its own, how might what we know about Woolf’s life and death color the way we read this piece?

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 somber like their own species. Nevertheless the present specimen, with his narrow hay-colored wings, fringed with a tassel of the same color, seemed to be content with life. It was a pleasant morning, mid-September, mild, benignant, yet with a keener breath than that of the 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. Such vigor 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 clamor and vociferation, as though to be thrown into the air and settle slowly down upon the tree tops were a tremendously exciting experience.

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 meager 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 fiber, 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.

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 of pity.

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
collapsed, 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 awk-
wardness were the approach of death. I laid the pencil down
again.

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 midday, 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-
colored 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. 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 them-
selves. 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 a few minutes before, so death was now as
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.

For Discussion and Writing

1. What is the connection Woolf makes between the moth and the other
   things she sees outside her window?

2. When thinking about such large subjects as life and death, why does
   Woolf take as her immediate subject such a small creature? Reread
   the essay with that question in mind, focusing on the most descriptive
   passages, and try to answer by imagining alternative ways she might
   have written it.

3. connections Both Woolf's "The Death of the Moth" and E. B. White's
   "Once More to the Lake" (p. 431) deal with nature and contemplate
death. How are their descriptions and the themes they develop from
those descriptions different?

4. Remember a time when you saw an animal die or saw a recently dead
   animal. What did it make you think of?