

## Die on your feet

What I find most interesting about “Death of a Moth” is the disconnect between the story Virginia Woolf tells and how she interprets it. The last sentence of Woolf’s piece is, “O yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am” (Woolf 3). To Virginia the moth has lost his struggle, defeated by the unstoppable tide of death, but interpretation exists only from a perspective lacking an understanding of honor or pride. As perhaps the man’s man of history Ernest Hemingway offers insight into the moth’s death “Every man’s life ends the same way, and it is only the details of how he lived and how he died that distinguishes one man from another” (Morris). So how did the moth die and why is it important? Woolf’s moth fell across the window sill as much as it could before running out of energy and falling onto its back. Then the moth expends the last bit of its energy getting back on its feet, just to fall dead moments later. Whether or not the moth righted itself, it was going to die, but the moth did not give up on life, instead it used its least bit of energy to die on its feet. The fact the moth did not give up grants its death the highest honor. The moth had a goal, to be free in the sky’s beyond the window, and it places this goal above its own life and the moth’s life ended without the moth’s conviction wavering. The moth is an unintentional metaphor for soldiers and heroes.

If there is nothing a person values more than their life then that person can not die honorably because their life has no meaning. Soldiers go off to fight in droves to protect their nation and their family from outside tyranny. What Woolf gets wrong that Hemingway gets right is what the living are fighting for and struggling against. In Woolf’s eyes the moth, and by extension people, are battling against death. On the other hand, Hemingway acknowledges that death is inevitable and thus frames beings as battling for a meaningful life. Going back to the soldier, it is true that on the battlefield each soldier is facing down death and so they appear to be

fighting to stay alive, but in fact they are fighting to complete a goal. They are fighting to make their life meaningful in the context of something greater than themselves. If soldiers merely fought to stay alive then retreat would be the only logical outcome of any battle. Now in some cases soldiers do fight just to stay alive, since commanders will shoot their own men if they retreat, but this should be seen as an expedition not the rule.

The fight for meaning is a rule in all lives, not just the lives of soldiers. James Van Tholen's piece is a great example of someone not fighting against death but fighting for their life. Tholen writes that while dying scares him, "My real fear has centered somewhere else. Strange as it may sound, I have been scared of meeting God" (Tholen 1). The christian God is an all knowing and perfect being, and a large part of the faith is the acknowledgement that humans are unworthy of the grace granted to them. This is because God's grace does not exist in a vacuum, since, as a loving father, God is the ultimate judge and before him all of a person's sins are laid bare. Tholen recognizes he lacks the time to right all of his wrongs, but instead of falling into despair embraces the grace of God. By embracing God's grace and leading others to an understanding of grace Tholen's life is given purpose before death.

Tholen, much like the moth, chooses to not be consumed by death but to keep living and striving for something greater than himself regardless of death's approach. Woolf tragically did not keep fighting. She didn't place anything above life itself. She fought to stay alive, but with no reason to stay alive and death being inevitable she gave up. It is a tragedy, but ultimately she appears weaker than the moth in the story, because she didn't stand up to life and die on her feet.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I want to be clear. Mental illness is very serious and you can't just tell people to toughen up or try harder. Woolf clearly needed serious help, but nihilism and a lack of purpose as displayed in Woolf's writing likely exacerbated, or worked in tandem with, other mental illnesses leading to her death. But it also need to be said that nihilism or purposelessness alone can lead to suicide, for example breadwinners who loose their jobs with no hope of replacing them.

## Works Cited

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