

THE FLY by William Blake

Little fly,
Thy summer's play
My thoughtless hand
Has brushed away.

Am not I
A fly like thee?
Or art not thou
A man like me?

For I dance
And drink and sing,
Till some blind hand
Shall brush my wing.

If thought is life
And strength and breath,
And the want
Of thought is death,

Then am I
A happy fly,
If I live,
Or if I die.

'The Fly' runs as follows: Blake's speaker addresses the fly which his hand has just brushed away, putting an end to the fly's 'summer's play' by presumably killing it. The speaker wonders whether he and the fly are, in fact, the same. Like the fly, the speaker dances and drinks and sings (all things which a fly does: its 'song' is its buzzing) until some 'blind hand' will kill him, snuffing out his existence. The speaker of 'The Fly' ends by reasoning that if life means thought, or consciousness, and the absence of thought or consciousness is death, then the speaker is, like the fly, happy whether he lives or dies.

How should we interpret this poem, and particularly the final two stanzas? One analysis we might venture concerns the idea of whether we should fear death or not. The speaker's 'thoughtless' killing of the fly ('thoughtless' will come to be a somewhat ironic word by the end of the poem) leads him to muse

upon the meaning of life and death to himself. When we are dead, we do not know we are dead: consciousness ends when our life ends. So we will be 'happy' to be dead because we won't know otherwise. If this strikes a somewhat atheistic note, which seems at odds with Blake's own religious beliefs, then we should remember the parallel with the fly, and Blake's own provisional word 'If'. If we will not have 'thought' when we die, at least not of the same kind that we have when living, we have nothing to fear from death.

Alternatively, we might think of 'thought' in Blake's poem as referring to the action of the speaker (swatting the fly) and the higher power (such as God) which determines the speaker's own fate. In this analysis, the 'want of thought' (i.e. lack of thought) is not the poor fly's (or the poor speaker's even) but the thoughtless deity which determines whether someone will live or die. So 'the want of thought / Is death' in that as soon as a god performs a thoughtless action upon us, it means death for us.

The Fly by Blake is about a casual destruction of a fly. While reading the poem keep in mind the fact that 'Man' is put in the position of power, in a godlike stance; he sees the fly as powerless and disposable at first, only to realize that another class of being would perceive humans in that manner.