There is nothing more beautiful than the intentional, methodical, complete and utter destruction of beauty. Likewise, there is no better way to deal with one’s grief at violent injustice than to commit violent injustice oneself. These are the viewpoints presented by the apparently motiveless demolition of Mr Thomas’ house in Graham Greene’s short text ‘The Destructors’, and by the grieving Boss’ ostensibly pointless murder of a fly in Katherine Mansfield’s ‘The Fly’. Both texts make use of techniques of juxtaposition and symbolism to develop their respective messages about the function of violence.

BERGER FOR BOT

In ‘The Destructors’, a gang of youths known as the Wormsly Common Gang plan and execute a plot to systematically demolish an old house, built by the famous architect Wren. Their motivation for such actions is not purely entertainment. Instead, their destruction of the house is for the sake of the beauty of destroying it. This is explored through the juxtaposition of descriptions of the house from before and after the destruction. Beforehand, it is described as “a beautiful house”, while afterwards, the reader is told “an odd exhilaration seized [the Wormsly Common Gang] as they looked down the great hollow of a house”. So while the house is confirmed as being generically beautiful at the beginning, the description of the house after it has been ravaged implies the latter is considerably more impressive. Despite being completely wrecked, or rather, because it’s completely wrecked, it’s still described as a “great” monument. Beforehand, it is simply beautiful, while afterwards, it is powerful enough to seize them with a “great exhilaration”. The difference is that this time its power and beauty comes from its destruction, and status as a “hollow”. This forms and reinforces the suggestion that the function of violence can be to reveal this beauty in destruction. The systematic and thorough destruction of the house’s beauty is beautiful in itself. The source of its beauty has been inverted; paradoxically, it is beautiful because it is not.

BERGER FOR BOT

Katherine Mansfield’s text ‘The Fly’ takes a different approach to the idea of violence. Instead of violence being a means to expose the beauty inherent in destruction, it is used as a way of dealing with one’s emotions. The violence is ‘The Fly’ is not considered beautiful in the slightest. However it is shown to be a cathartic release for the Boss, who has lost his son in the war. After being unable to release his misery and sense of loss at his son’s death through crying, the Boss notices a fly in his ink pot, and begins to torture it to death, pelting the reader with vivid description of the killing. The reader is told, “The last blot fell on the soaked blotting-paper, and the draggled fly lay in it and did not stir. The back legs were stuck to the body; the front legs were not to be seen.” Immediately, parallels are drawn to a human, due to the personification of the fly via focus being placed on the fly's limbs, a characteristic shared by humans, as opposed to something inhuman, such as the wings. However more is drawn from the method of death. There is nothing heroic or elegant about being 'draggled', which carries strong connotations of helplessness and inability, which is further exemplified by the imagery of tangled limbs. This is highly reminiscent of the wars in that time period, in which young men died slow and painful deaths, smothered by the dark ambitions of others, similarly to how the fly is smothered by the blots. Such a metaphor is highly disturbing, as it draws the implication that the fly is an allegory for the Boss' son. The Boss has a great sense of loss due to his son's unjust and unfitting death, and he is seen torturing a creature extremely similar to his son to death, and then experiencing a great feeling of emotional release afterwards. The reader is led to the conclusion that by mirroring the violence done to his son, the Boss can experience cathartic release, meaning the function of violence in the text 'The Fly' is one of catharsis.

BERGER FOR BOT

Returning to 'The Destructors', imagery symbolism plays an important part in developing the underlying theme of violence being used to create as well as destroy. When describing the house pre-demolition, T, the leader of the Wormsly Common Gang, says “It’s got a staircase two hundred years old like a corkscrew. Nothing holds it up.” Firstly, it helps establish the initial beauty of the house by presenting a feature that is extremely old, a trait often viewed as desirous. It also portrays the house as being awe-inspiring due to how there's a direct defiance of nature's order. By committing violence against nature's natural rules that require there to be something to support the construction, the reader is impressed with the fact that destruction and violence underpins all aspects of beauty. Such a concept is only consolidated the symbolism included in the very structure of a staircase. A staircase can be used for both ascent and descent, and its beauty doesn't depend on how it's being used, or whether it's swirling upwards or curving downwards. In this way, the symbolism of the staircase affirms the initial judgement of the function of violence: There is a beauty inherent in violence, such as the hollowed out house, and there is violence inherent in beauty, such as the staircase. The symbolism of the staircase makes the assertion that the two are the same, and that they are never without each other. Furthermore, because the staircase is a direct violation of the laws of physics, there is a certain aspect of frailty to it. Symbolically, it is extremely easy to change directions when walking on a staircase. In the same way, it is a small matter for the source of the staircase's beauty to switch from being beautiful for the sake of beauty into something beautiful for the sake of destruction.

BERGER FOR BOT

Similarly, 'The Fly' draws attention to the frailty of beauty and effort by developing a linguistic tone of irony in relation to the life of the Boss. All through his career, the Boss was building up a business empire with the intention of passing it onto his son, yet “[the hope of his son inheriting the company] was over and done with as though it had never been. The day had come when Macey had handed him the telegram that brought the whole place crashing about his head. 'Deeply regret to inform you...' And he had left the office a broken man, with his life in ruins.” The ironic tone present in the text is due to the disproportional power of a single moment. His entire life's work is ruined in a single moment of war, in which his son's life was unceremoniously cut short, be it by a stray bullet or by sickness, malnutrition or some other means of falling foul of fortune. The irony is revisited in the language of the quote. The telegram, a small piece of paper, has the ability to make the whole place metaphorically crash about his head and make him leave the office “a broken man, with his life in ruins”, demonstrating how the impact of a mere piece of paper is able to completely destroy someone's life. This sets up for the Boss' actions later, by establishing that life is unfair, and that there is nothing the Boss is able to do to change the outcome of a quirk of fate. Despite all his effort, his son still ends up inconsequently dead, and there is nothing he can do about it. Such a revelation, that's one is completely powerless before the unjust violence of life, is often impossible to recover from. Ultimately, the Boss is forced to accept and embrace the irony of effort in life. He does so by being the facilitator of violence in the life of the fly, by killing it senselessly, for no cause. In a spectacular twist of irony, only by immersing oneself in the cruel, luck-based violence of the world can one find cathartic release from one's own traumas.

BERGER FOR BOT

Violence as a force has been present since the dawn of society, and has been put to work as a tool in order to create many wonders. War is the oldest and most obvious of the uses of violence. It creates opportunity for societies to grow and expand, while sacrificing lives to do so. However violence underpins everything creative, like how the staircase is beautiful because of violence committed against nature. Violence is present in all aspects of creation, be it the creation of a house, in which trees' lives are ended in order to create a thing of beauty, the creation of jewelry, in which the precious stones are violently mined, or the creation of a child, in which the act of sex in inherently violent. Even though violence is present in all of creation, and indeed, all of life itself, it is almost purely viewed as a negative force, which is not the case. Where there is violence in beauty, there is the duality of beauty in violence, as 'The Destructors' demonstrates, when the 'beautiful house' becomes even more awe-inspiring when it is hollowed out. Ultimately, such an attitude in society will lead to an inability to create, for fear of committing violence. Likewise, if cathartic violence is discouraged, then people will be unable to reconcile themselves with the inherent violence and injustice of life.

BERGER FOR BOT

The function of violence is to create beauty through destruction. It is present in destruction and creation, and beauty is the result of both, as shown in the symbolism of the staircase and the juxtaposition of the perspectives on the house in 'The Destructors'. Violence can also be used to reconcile oneself with the senseless injustice of life by passing one's own pain onto another by inflicting violence upon them to attain cathartic release. Violence is often considered 'bad', but that is incorrect, because violence is present in everything. If society continues to take such a stance, there will be repercussions for humanity in future, which we should focus on dealing with now.

Harry Berger