

A Critical Analysis of D.H. Lawrence's "The Odour of Chrysanthemums"

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Abstract

In the short story "The Odour of Chrysanthemums", impressionistic and symbolic, dense with figurative language, the recurring symbolic object is chrysanthemums round which the whole story revolves. The chrysanthemum is the guiding spirit of the story—it starts the story's plot and produces a pungent cold smell at the climactic situation to proclaim the departing soul of Walter. The flower is inextricably related to the protagonist. Elizabeth whose marriage voyage was started accepting this flower from intoxicated husband ends with its faded, cool Odour. The chrysanthemum is the symbol of lost happiness, symbol of impending danger, death, desolation, decay, icy atmosphere and the emblem of deserted Elizabeth. It was a beacon light of hope at the advent of Elizabeth marriage life but eventually it turns into an element of nightmare. The 'Odour' is nothing but fatal to Elizabeth. The vase of flowers is clumsily knocked on to the floor, leaving nothing tangible behind suggests that the fragile soul of Walter has departed for the world of eternity. The chrysanthemums symbolize a spot of beauty unrecognized by the myopic Elizabeth.

Keywords: Suffocation, death, desolation, detachment, decay, isolation, alienation.

Symbols and Imagery: Impressionistic and symbolic, dense with figurative language 'The Odour of chrysanthemums' by one of the finest short story writers D.H. Lawrence is purged with variety of symbols and achieves its effects through suggestion and nuance. Actually, Lawrence belongs to the line of pastoral narrative tradition of Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, who celebrated rural life, discovering in nature something profound spiritual significance. However, the rural environment was being transformed from the mid-eighteenth century up to the time of Lawrence by industrialization, which blights the environment of the Elizabeth Bates' family home at the beginning of the short story. The story opens with the image of an awkward, stumbling train startling a young colt and frightening away birds—even it traps a woman between it and the hedges. So, if we minutely observe over it, we find that here the locomotive engine is the symbol of negative aspects of progress rather than that of positive which is, such as, found in George Eliot's Novel Felix Holt. A vine clutches the cottage of Bates that suggests the sense of suffocation—the symbol of annihilation. Chrysanthemums are found

‘disheveled’-even when little boy John comes out of the hedge, he scatters the petals of it on the way to the cottage—that is the symbol of something upheaval, not properly arranged. The chrysanthemums are the driving spirit of the story. It starts the plot of the story and produces a cold, pungent faded smell at the climatic situation of the story to proclaim the departing life spontaneity. The chrysanthemums are the talismans of change—the way of life—the tragic spirit of the story. They are the markers of marriage, life—and—inevitably the death. So, the chrysanthemums are the symbol of lost happiness, symbol of faded personality, symbol of impending danger, death, desolation, decay and icy atmosphere—it is the mediator/ incubator of Elizabeth’s wry recollection. At the dawn of Elizabeth’s life, it is like a beacon light of hope, but eventually it turns into her nightmare. The chrysanthemums are the companions of deserted Elizabeth, of her bleak, bitter, nauseating, tragic, fragile relationship with husband. In the end of the story, the vase of the flowers falls upon the ground, leaving nothing tangible behind, only a cool, faded smell. It symbolizes a spot of beauty, unrecognized by the myopic Elizabeth. Even the timeline of the story leads from the late afternoon to the night. Darkness represents detachment, ignorance, separation, dark passions. A recurring motif in the story is that of being trapped. Walter is smothered to death, Elizabeth is trapped in such bitter relationship, Annie and John are under strict supervision. The deeply reflective short story is set in a rural coal-mining village. Here in this short story along with many themes the author depicts the effects of environmentally, unfriendly industrial practices. Here he portrays that the natural beauty has been faded up due to the industrial hazard. Here a local coal-mine represents the total atmosphere of England. A dull, drab & jejune picture of mechanical life is reflected in this story. If we minutely study the story, we find the unnamed, bitter relationship between Walter and Elizabeth Bates though they are tied in a legal marriage procedure. Walter finds his soothe at pubs—indifferent, inarticulate and drink-obsessed miner. Elizabeth feels bitter and suffocating in such relationship where there is nothing but only sexual attraction of body and physical existence without psychological understanding. Industrial practices make the lives emotionless, detached and artificial. At colliery the locomotive engine suggests the suffocating element and the winding machines crush the balming passions of human heart. The winding engine and its cacophonous sound represent the life’s complexity and din and bustle of the dwellers respectively. The verb ‘sinking’ suggests the relationship has become submerged and suffocated. The dead body of Walter is laid upon parlour which is like “darkness visible”—that represents their mysterious, unnamable relationship. The war between the organic and the hard, machine world of the mind reflects the conflict between the characters. Walter is associated until the end with the murderous, mechanical domain of the mine and Elizabeth with the ‘disheveled’ chrysanthemums—that suggests that they are poles apart. Thus, the symbols and imagery take an inevitable role throughout the story and makes it a unique one.

Significance of Title: A title ties the tale—so goes the proverbs. A novel, poem, essay or short story may have different themes, but the title ties them up and provides the readers in a nutshell of what is going to happen next. It is a key to the door, a lamp to the darkness and an entrance into the unknown world. Let’s discuss about its title significance. At the very outset of the story, we find that John, Elizabeth’s son plucks the chrysanthemums from hedges and scatters the petals on the way to cottage—

that is described by Elizabeth as ‘nasty’. Later, Annie, Elizabeth’s daughter appreciates the flowers in her mother’s apron and feels its beautiful smell. Elizabeth comments—“No, not to me”. The flowers are inextricably related to the protagonist—Elizabeth whose marriage life is started smelling the ‘Odour’ of it from her inarticulate, drink-obsessed husband and ends emitting a cold, faded ‘Odour’. It works as auspicious during their marriage, but eventually it turns into an ominous, nightmarish symbol. The ‘Odour’ is nothing but ‘fatal’ to her. So, the chrysanthemums are the symbol of lost happiness, symbol of impending danger, death, and desolation, decay, bleak and cool ambience. When Walter’s dead is laid upon the red table cloth in the parlour, the vase of the flower falls on the ground, leaving nothing tangible behind, only cool, faded, withered smell. It proclaims the departure of Walter’s soul—the life-spontaneity. What Walter presents Elizabeth as their nuptial-bonding; Elizabeth can’t nurture that properly through her love, affection, compassion. Domination, cynical attitude, her motif over class distinction, monetary pursuit and bitter glance on the marriage relationship make Walter find out his pleasure at pubs. Lack of mutual understanding and trust causes to plunge them into the pool of frustration, desolation, isolation and alienation. So, chrysanthemums are the talismans of change—transition into a new way of life –a tragic way of life. They are markers of marriage, birth, and—inevitably—death. It also symbolizes the spot of beauty unrecognized by myopic Elizabeth. The ‘disheveled’ chrysanthemums represent an ambience of topsy-turvy, not in order. The characters are indifferent, alienated to each other, victim of the deadly clutches of industrialization, are trapped in the grip of unavoidable circumstances. Chrysanthemums take a pervading role to elevate the story into a symbolic one. They are the guiding spirit and ominous germs of their unnamable, fragile relationship. Through his daring jugglery of words and fine orchestration of symbols and imagery, Lawrence makes this story impressionistic and over-whelmed. So, the title of the short story is appropriate both on semantic and semiotic level.

Significance of the Story’s last two sentences

One of Lawrence’s brilliant accomplishments in “Odour of chrysanthemums” is to create the crackling tension between husband and wife without the men appearing. The heroine-protagonist, Elizabeth feels a detached, bitter relationship with her husband due to his excessive possession over drink. Till the late evening when Walter does not arrive home, her anger has changed to horror, frustration has become despair. Viewing the cold, heavy, inert, physically void and unresponsive body of Walter, Elizabeth becomes flabbergasted. The ordinary, bitter wait for the drunken man has become an extra-ordinary facing of death. he is impregnable now. But she slowly comprehends that their relationship was fragile like a broken-chord—based solely on an unnamed attraction having no mutual understanding and fellow-feeling. She was deposable for such bolt from the blue—that is realized by her. In that moment her rigid, stern personality, anger, aggressive mentality, societal class awareness has dissolved and she yearns to feel a connection with her husband. But she feels detached while counteracting with the deceased. Even her philosophical/ mythical bent of mind alarms that in the next world she will be stranger to him. Her mournful self-reproach and

introspection make her feel an infinite distance between the husband and herself. Physical existence without psychological understanding may lead to devastating consequence. Elizabeth's repentance and lamentation (way to purgation) evoke a sense of pity and horror in our mind.

The whole fabric of desolate commonness so carefully represented by the author in part I now contrast with a moment so powerfully charged that the old blinders of familiarity are lost; Elizabeth enters into the rich but devastating perceptiveness of her husband's world. As she stands and looks at Walter's body, she sees the absolute separateness of their existence. The life of each has been foreign to the other—completely mysterious and unnamable relationship. Elizabeth realizes her over-domineering, detached mentality towards Walter. She is familiar to him, but stranger; she can sense him, but can't feel him—Walter now to her a familiar stranger of unreachable shore. Elizabeth faces the cruel truth of life. Lawrence through his brilliant language depicts the landscape as gloomy, torpor and vacant amidst darkness. Elizabeth's aesthetic soul feels pain, awe and pity for Walter who has been smothered to death in cave-in. From the pain of her ignorance, Elizabeth has come into the pain of understanding. The author has emphasized her loneliness and pain by creating the tension between her and the absent husband. To be a mother is necessary and good, but to be a wife is a terrible thing to Elizabeth. Using Mrs. Bates' pregnancy, the author creates a tension between the static blight of their psychic lives and their parental fecundity. Like the pain that must accompany Elizabeth's understanding of their isolation, the pain of her knowledge of this horrible paradox of human life is ineluctable. Past and future collapse upon the protagonist—the inferior caring and indifferent attitude of the past and the tension of economy afflict her. Lawrence extends the incompatibility of male and female existence as Elizabeth envisions her life with husband in the next world. She heaves a sigh of exhaustion. At last, Elizabeth's quick realization elevates her contemplation from mere earthly to spiritual or philosophical world. "It was hard work to clothe him"—according to mythology soulless body is nothing but naked. "At last, it was finished"—it is but a reminiscence of Christ's last speech. The rigid mind of protagonist melts and her unconditional submission to her "master" in both life and death makes her a unique character who has achieved the life's intellectual perception.

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