

Marriage Reflection in “Odour of Chrysanthemums” by D. H. Lawrence

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the gradually changeable relationship between the husband and wife, and the influence of this relationship on their marriage, their children and even the whole family. It also discusses the essence of marriage and the maintenance of a perfect marriage. Lawrence’s social consciousness and blood consciousness are embodied in the short story and if the two can’t be balanced, it will result in an unhealthy and sick relationship. Even though her husband died, life has to go on for she has her responsibility as wife and mother.

Key words: Odour of chrysanthemums; D. H. Lawrence; Marriage reflection; Dead relationship

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Odour of Chrysanthemums” is written by D. H. Lawrence, one of the most important writers in the 20th century. This short story is based on material which Lawrence was to use for his play *The Windowing of Mrs. Holroyd* and again for one of his fine dialect poems. It was originally published in the *English Review* in July 1911 and the final version as reprinted in the three-volume *Complete Short Stories*.

The background of the story is a realistic and familiar topic based on a mining community. By depicting what

happened in a miner’s family within a short period of several hours, Lawrence expresses his understanding of marriage under the influence of Industrial Revolution and also based on his parent’s marriage and his own love affairs.

The story begins with romance when the well-educated daughter fell in love with a handsome and charming son from the mining community at the first sight at a Christmas party. The cruel reality has crushed their romance when she has to face the difficulty of making a meagre living on her husband’s limited salary. All these have formed a sharp contrast with her imagination of life after marriage and her previous good life, as well. Constant quarrels have driven both of them crazy and Walter can only have time to take a breath of fresh air in the pub where he always goes after a day’s hard work. In the end, an accident has grabbed Walter’s life and the whole families are lost in great grief.

For a whole family, the relationship between husband and wife matters the most in marriage since it sets the tone for the atmosphere and environment for children’s growth. While the husband and wife in “Odour of Chrysanthemums” are not close and happy, their dead relationship makes the family full of solidarity and dullness. The family is no longer whole and falls into segments.

2. HUSBAND AND WIFE RELATIONSHIP: FROM BEAUTIFUL ROMANCE TO DEAD RELATION

This relation can be divided into three parts.

2.1 The First Part: Beautiful Romance Short after Marriage

At the beginning of their marriage, Elizabeth once loved her husband and we can conclude from the symbolic meaning of chrysanthemums. Chrysanthemums symbolize

love and the changes of the flower also show their relationship during different periods.

"No," she said, "not to me. It was chrysanthemums when I married him, and chrysanthemums when you were born, and the first time they ever brought him home drunk, he'd got brown chrysanthemums in his button-hole." (Lawrence, 1911, p.187)

When her daughter notices a chrysanthemum at her mother's apron and wants to smell at it, which reminds her mother of her own associations with the bloom of the chrysanthemum. Before her answer to her daughter's question "Don't they smell beautiful?", she "gave a short laugh". This means that she remembers her beautiful romance with her husband and her happiness in her memory.

But this happiness doesn't last long and things changes very fast, even faster than her imagination — the drinking habit and not returning of her husband.

2.2 The Second Part: Drinking Habit and the Indifference of the Husband

After marriage and when Walter began to drink and came back home late, Elizabeth was dissatisfied with such kind of life and constantly talked about her husband's "indifference".

"Bitterly" has appeared in the story for four times each time Elizabeth mentions her husband. For example, in a conversation between Elizabeth and her father, she "said bitterly" twice as her father told her that her husband got drunk and wasted money in bars.

Elizabeth has some complaints and regrets for her husband, as shown in her monologue, "What a fool I've been, what a fool! And this is what I came here for, to this dirty hole, rats and all, for him to slink past his very door." (Lawrence, 1911, p.188-189)

This monologue has clearly shown the inner pain torturing her constantly when she reflects upon their relations. Her hard work from morning till night for households, gains nothing in return and her husband has always been absent, not only physically, but also emotionally.

She also feels the gap between her and her husband after marriage. Elizabeth Bates might be better educated than her husband and other miners. It can be obviously delivered through the speaking manners of characters in the story. Elizabeth speaks in a fine way yet the others use a lot of dialects and vulgar forms. There is an educational gap between husband and wife.

She is fed up with such kind of life for she has to wait for her husband to be back every day. She waits from afternoon till late at night and is anxious about every movement outside for she wants her husband to be back early. From 4:30 to after 7:00, she was waiting with the children. Then she was waiting alone at home, for sometime before 8:00 p.m. From 8:00 to after 9:00 p.m., she was out for the husband. She was at home alone till 9:45 p.m. and from 9:45 to 10:30 p.m. with her mother-in-law.

As mentioned earlier, chrysanthemum is a symbol of their relationship as the flower turns from fresh into brown. It can be inferred that "brown chrysanthemum" withered for lack of oxygen. It results from the suffocating atmosphere in the house—the husband was always out and left Elizabeth at home. She is isolated from communication and the outside world.

2.3 The Third Part: Climax Brought by the Death of the Husband and a New Start

With the arrival of miners bringing in the husband's body, she knew that her guess was true. Once again, the chrysanthemum appears through the wife's eyes and for the first time they are associated with death: "There was a cold, deathly smell of chrysanthemums in the room. (Lawrence, 1911, p.194)"

After Walter's death, she began to ponder over her husband and pitifully found that she even did not know more about this man. He seemed so isolated from her. It is only at this moment did she have the patience and time to reflect what has happened between them and to examine her husband's body closely. She even began to doubt whether she has loved her husband and how could it be possible for them to be two totally complete strangers even though they are husband and wife.

"She saw him, how utterly inviolable he lay in himself ... She seemed to be listening inquiring, trying to get some connection. But she could not. She was driven away. He was impregnable." (Lawrence, 1911, p.196-199)

"She was grateful to death, which restored the truth... But from death, her ultimate master, she winced with fear and shame". (Lawrence, 1911, p.198-199)

From this stage, we can judge that Elizabeth has grown into a rather mature and independent woman with her three children to care about. Quite a lot of affairs have been left for her to deal with and she has to shoulder these responsibilities all by herself.

It is at this moment did she realize that she has been angry and disappointed for such a long time that she even ignored and neglected their true relationship. "The story concerns his (Walter's) transformation from an irresponsible, hurtful, and selfish man into a symbol of masculine beauty and life itself." (Lovesey, 1998) She knows that it was her mistake that she had "denied him" his true self. Only now, with Walter dead body in front of her, does she understand the truth, and her realization that she herself is not dead suggests that she will now change her outlook on life.

With an unborn baby and her two children, she realizes that she has to hold herself up to move on. Life is beautiful and she has her family to support. With responsibilities at hand, she should make resolutions to start a new life. Maybe she will be a teacher in a school to earn money after her baby is born. She must have planned a good future not only for her dignified self but also her

children when she thinks about the current situation: There were the children—but the children belonged to life (Lawrence, 1911, p.198).

In the end, things are settled for their dead relation—the death of her husband and a new beginning of her life.

3. THEIR MARRIAGE'S INFLUENCE ON THE WHOLE FAMILY

Obviously, the worst victims of their dead relationship are their children, a boy and a girl. If mother doesn't have a good mood, children will also not enjoy a perfect motherhood since mother will impose her bad mood on her children, thus having a bad influence on their children's behaviors and ways of conducting things.

In the short story, several parts of the description of the son and the daughter can be found to show more about the personality and characteristics of her children. When the boy complains about the darkness in the room because of the night that falls, Elizabeth compares his son to his husband, since his husband always complains that when he came back, the house is dark and cold, totally different from the atmosphere in the pub which is always warm and bright. Obviously, her husband's complaint annoys Elizabeth, so she makes a judgement that her son is as bad as his father. She even didn't have the patience to comfort the child that when the light is lit, things will be better.

"I canna see," grumbled the invisible John.

When she came again like a shadow on the hearth, the lad repeated, complaining sulkily:

"I canna see."

"Good gracious!" cried the mother irritably, "you're as bad as your father if it is a bit dusk." (Lawrence, 1911, p.186-187)

We can judge that to some extent the mother has imposed her anger onto her children and her children are afraid of her. This can be found in the description that "The children hid their faces in her skirts for comfort. (Lawrence, 1911, p.188)"

When the mother says "It is time for bed", and the girl answers that "my father hasn't come", the mother scolds the girl that there would no sense for them to wait for their father, as shown in her answer: "Never mind. They'll bring him when he does come— like a log. And he may sleep on the floor till he wakes himself. I know he'll not go to work tomorrow after this." (Lawrence, 1911, p.188)

It is quite sorry for the children to bear the distress brought by their father. Children are innocent in any way in the development of their mentality and heart that they should be protected under no harm and distress from the outside.

For most cases, the children are naïve, innocent and adorable, possessing all the good traits children are naturally endorsed with, especially when the girl found the chrysanthemums on her mother's apron and wanted to smell it.

Another question lying for the children is to face their father's death. Even though Elizabeth tries to hide the truth, their children will discover this and endure the sorrow and the loss of a father in their growth. In one word, it is no longer a whole and integrated family. We can imagine the future life for the children without parental love. They must have lost something precious in life for a human and no matter how hard her mother tries to compensate for the lack of parental love; there must be a scar in the children's heart.

The man's mother is also experiencing distress and she fainted when she saw her son's dead body. As the whole support and hope of the old woman, her son's leaving made it hard for her to accept.

The broken love between the two people has such a huge impact on the whole family that we should not ignore the effect of the relationship between the couple.

4. ESSENCE OF MARRIAGE IN "ODOUR OF CHRYSANTHEMUMS"

D. H. Lawrence embodies his view of marriage in his works through different stages of relationship between husband and wife or lovers. It can be inferred that D. H. Lawrence's abiding interest in the complex nature of marriage derives from his experience both as the child of a troubled marriage and a partner in an even more volatile one (Lowe-Evans, 2017, p. 408).

Just as Balbert (2016) claimed that the subject of marriage is "both elusive goal and persistent torment" in D. H. Lawrence's another novella, *The Captain's Doll* written in 1921, marriage in "Odour of Chrysanthemums" has also been a torture for Elizabeth who has been waiting for her husband's return every day, but only with his late return at night from the pub. The gap between Elizabeth and her husband who works as a miner has been enlarged in this daily route and can never be mended, regardless of the happy romance between them at the very beginning.

Love is a kind of fair between two people, husband and wife, while marriage and family are not only things between the couple but also the whole family. From this point of view, Elizabeth and Walter's marriage is a failure since the family is not happy and children are not well developed in their family.

A perfect marriage contains responsibility, mutual understanding, forgiveness and trust between two people. If any of this fails, the marriage will not be strong any longer. In reality, many marriages are failed or destroyed because of distrust or gap between two people. Since the relationship between two people can't be hold any longer, many couples get divorced or departed. While in this short story, their relationship ends with the husband's death, but fortunately she still tries to hold the family and raise her children.

Imagine that if Elizabeth had had a deep talk with her husband when she found that there was a huge educational gap between them and she wanted him to improve himself, things would have been different. No matter what her husband's reaction may be, at least, they should have more talks to know more about each other.

To maintain a harmonious marriage, every one of the family should shoulder his or her corresponding responsibility and then think on the stance of the other one. It is quite meaningful for a harmonious family to respond to the advocate of the harmonious society and even the harmonious world.

5. SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND BLOOD CONSCIOUSNESS IN "ODOUR OF CHRYSANTHEMUMS"

As shown in his letter to Bertrand Russell in 1915, Lawrence regards blood consciousness as the consciousness "exists in us independently of the ordinary mental-consciousness, which depends on the eye as its source or connector" (Lawrence, 1981, p. 470) and he further demonstrates that blood consciousness is "one half of life, belonging to the darkness" (ibid: 470). And only death can release the liberation of blood-consciousness, as usually it is mental and nerve consciousness that win over the blood-consciousness. In this short story, it is the social consciousness that takes control over blood consciousness as reflected in the depiction of Elizabeth's inner pain and denial of her husband. This can be explained under the influence of social consciousness, her own consciousness as a well-educated woman. The constant pressure from life and physical and psychological distance between her and her husband have forced Elizabeth to reflect the disparity in education between them. Her consciousness has even increased her despair in life and driven both of them far apart from each other. Due to her strong social consciousness, she has subdued the blood consciousness within herself and lost her true self.

As Lawrence has expressed in his novel *Sons and Lovers* that the ability to live blood-consciously and achieve a harmonious state of being is dependent upon this positive relationship with the mother (Salter, 2013, p. 35), mother has played the most important role in the growth of a child and helped to shape the child's personality in the future. To certain degree, Elizabeth has failed to keep a positive relationship with her children when she complains about his husband's late return and finds similar bad traits in her son with her husband. But when the accident happens, we can find that Elizabeth has grown to be strong enough to control her emotion and help to deal with her husband's corpse and gather the energy to face the future with her unborn child and two children.

6. CONCLUSION

As for the blood consciousness and social consciousness, one has to find a balance between them. In the short story Elizabeth thinks too much of social consciousness and to some degree departs herself from happiness, nature and her true self. She should have had deep talks with her husband but not just holding her dignity and swallow the bitterness silently. More contacts between them will lead to a rather different result.

It is their "dead" relationship that has resulted in such a tragedy which not only influenced the happiness between the couple but also the whole family. Their story is under the influence of industrial evolution which has also some influence over people living in it. The objective reason for their failure of marriage is the dehumanization of industrialization which brought too much stress on miners' lives and too heavy for them to shoulder the responsibility of raising a family with two children. However, the underlying reason for their corruptive relationship is their isolation, misunderstanding and lack of communication.

Family life is too much embodied of trivial things and mixed with social factors, environmental factors and even individuals. How to deal with such complex and complicated forces is a big problem laying there for new or old couples and families to think and cope with. Family and marriage is an everlasting topic and under different social contexts, and it has different connotations.

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