

# Husband and Wife Relation in "Odour of Chrysanthemums"

## RELATION ENTRE MARI ET FEMME DANS *ODEUR DU CHRYSANTHÈME*

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**Abstract:** This essay focuses on the husband and wife relations; the wife is in dominance in the relation. The story is a rediscovery of the wife in her marriage, her husband, and herself. When man cannot balance his natural and social consciousness, the gap and utter isolation appear. The essay finds evidence from the description of the wife, the children, the husband, and of their talks. It's proved that both the wife and husband are the victims of this isolation.

**Key words:** relation, isolation, social consciousness, natural consciousness, gap

**Résumé:** Le présent article se concentre sur la relation conjugale, dans laquelle la femme est dominante. L'histoire est une redécouverte de la femme dans son mariage, son mari et elle-même. Quand l'homme ne peut pas balancer ses conscience naturelle et conscience sociale, le fossé et l'isolation absolue apparaissent. L'article trouve la preuve dans la description de la femme, des enfants, du mari et de leurs conversations. Il est prouvé que la femme et le mari sont tous les deux victimes de cette isolation.

**Mots-Clés:** relation, isolation, conscience sociale, conscience naturelle, fossé

### 1. INTRODUCTION

"Odour of Chrysanthemums" is a short story by D. H. Lawrence. It was written in the autumn of 1909 and, after revision, was published in the *English Review* in July 1911. Lawrence later included this tale in his collection of short stories entitled *The Prussian Officer and Other Stories*, which Duckworth, his London publisher, brought out on 26th November 1914.<sup>2</sup>

Based on his parents' marriage and his own love affairs, Lawrence advocated in his works the principle of saving the decaying civilization through a rearrangement of personal relationship, especially a rearrangement of relationship between men and women. Most of his works investigate what happened to its hero's relationship with women or men. He and his works pursued the balance of body and soul in marriage.

Compared with his other novels, "Odour of Chrysanthemums" is only a fragment of life that happened within several hours. And the change of the heroin's consciousness and psychology constitutes the

main development of the short story.<sup>3</sup> In the early novels of Lawrence, his heroines can be divided in to these four types, Elizabeth is the kind of dominance,<sup>4</sup> as Gertrude Coppard in "sons and lovers", The refined daughter of a "good old burgher family," meets a rough-hewn miner at a Christmas dance and falls into a romance. But soon after her marriage to Walter Morel, she realizes the difficulties of living off his meager salary in a rented house. The couple fights and drifts apart and Walter retreats to the pub after work each day.<sup>5</sup>

### 2. HUSBAND AND WIFE RELATION

In "Odour of Chrysanthemums", the wife is more in the focus of attention. She also comes from a higher social class than her coal miner husband. From the text we know that from natural consciousness, the wife have loved her husband, and still treasure it in her memory.

<sup>3</sup>董俊峰, 趙春華. 國內勞倫斯研究述評[J]. *外國文學研究*, 1999 (2)

<sup>4</sup>高萬隆. 勞倫斯的回應: 婦女問題與婦女解放—論勞倫斯早期小說中的女性形象[J]. *外國文學*, 1999 (2)

<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odour\\_of\\_Chrysanthemums](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odour_of_Chrysanthemums)

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odour\\_of\\_Chrysanthemums](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odour_of_Chrysanthemums)

*"Don't do that—it does look nasty," said his mother. He refrained, and she, suddenly pitiful, broke off a twig with three or four wan flowers and held them against her face. When mother and son reached the yard her hand hesitated, and instead of laying the flower aside, she pushed it in her apron-band. (27)*

*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."(32)*

Chrysanthemums symbolize love and the natural world. These pieces of softness shows her real character and emotion which is too much hid by a man-centered society, a industrial force, class consciousness, most importantly her own social consciousness. More evidence can be found from the fact she mended his clothes while waiting. However from most of the descriptions in the text, Elizabeth is a woman of strong personality, imperious, with definite black eyebrows, calm, set, strict, of high dignity, because she didn't went to the bar herself to look for her husband. She is a responsible mother and wife, but love diminished. From the story we know her husband indulge himself in bar and drinks and the warm environment there, and he always complains of the cold and not having a warm fireplace when he came back.

*Another point is that although her husband Walter didn't show up until the end of the story, their son, John, is in some way a shadow of his father. "She saw herself in his [her son's] silence and pertinacity; she saw the father in her child's indifference to all but himself". (29)*

From her critical and strict attitude towards her son, we may infer her relations with her husband. She starts to see traits in her son that she had not noticed before; moreover, the fact that she sees herself as quiet and determined in her son's personality makes her look like a warm nurturing mother. In contrast, she sees a selfish image in the child inherited from the father, characterizing the father as a bad influence to the son. Her thoughts foreshadow to the reader and to her that the marriage is having problems because she cannot even find a moral trait in her husband let alone her son. Her thoughts also demonstrate her feelings of anger towards her husband because she thinks about the negative characteristics that her son possesses from the father rather than the positive.

Walter didn't show up until he was moved in dead in a stretcher, but from other characters, we can know about him. From his son, as mentioned before, we get to know that he is a careless, not so sentimental man, who doesn't care much about his wife's emotion. *They have sex without love* (43). Moreover, the miners are described by the use of a simile, as, *"...single, trailing, and in groups, like shadows diverging home."* Man

cannot escape his shadow, and in being described as shadows, these "men" are described in essence by the narrator as being part of nature, invisible in terms of their human identity, and significant only in terms of their labor as miners.<sup>6</sup>

Coal miners, husbands are like shadows coming between home and coal mine, far from nature, emotion, which women cherish. By the force of industrialization and reality, Elizabeth has to face the fact the deep gap in the marriage. *"There had been nothing between them"*. (43) An opposition between nature and society creates the theme of D.H. Lawrence's, "The Odour of Chrysanthemums". This theme is evident in Elizabeth's recognition of the absolute differences between her world and the world of her now dead husband. Elizabeth is confronted with the shocking reality that she only knew the body of her now dead husband, but never gained knowledge of his true existence-his soul. *"The wife felt the utter isolation of the human soul"*(42)

*"One of the men had knocked off a vase of chrysanthemums. He stared awkwardly, and then they set down the stretcher. Elizabeth did not look at her husband."*

In this passage Elizabeth's complete lack of emotion with her husband, and intense sense of guilt at this lack of feeling is highlighted. After Walter's death, Elizabeth appears extremely calm. When she was washing Walter's body, hiding the truth from her children, she just looked the naked body of her husband and suddenly found that she even didn't give herself a chance to know about him.<sup>7</sup>

While waiting for her husband to return home from work or the bar rather, she regrets ever moving in with him, *"...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"*. She feels threatened and upset that her husband is so selfish as to not even come home to his family when she has given up so much for him. Growing suspicion proves that Elizabeth no longer trusts her husband, and she faces with the reality of her diminishing marriage.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said *"Is not marriage an open question, when it is alleged, from the beginning of the world, that such as are in the institution wish to get out, and such as are out wish to get in?"*<sup>8</sup>

Emerson's expressions are all too true for many married people as well as those in serious relationships. It seems that engaging in marriage is a step that many take only to find out it was a mistake. Nothing is ever

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.masterpapers.com/samples/Book\\_Reports.doc](http://www.masterpapers.com/samples/Book_Reports.doc)

<sup>7</sup> "Brainy Quote." 2005. XploreInc. March 6, 2005

[http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics\\_love.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics_love.html).

<sup>8</sup> "Brainy Quote." 2005. XploreInc. March 6, 2005

[http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics\\_love.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics_love.html).

perfect in relationships as well as in life and in death.<sup>9</sup> D.H. Lawrence similarly illustrates the theme of relationships and their unsuccessfulness in life in his short story "Odour of Chrysanthemums".

*He realistically demonstrates these themes with "the pitiless self-discovery sometimes brought about only through the death of another".*<sup>10</sup>

When Elizabeth discovers the death of her husband, she deals with the fact that she never knew about him; the main theme in the story is that truth and the relationships in life are often difficult and are sometimes not figured out until the ultimate tragedy, death.

Elizabeth Bates discovers that inside, she is a person with unique thoughts, passions and fears; her husband was just as much of an individual as she, but one whom she never really sought to know beneath the surface. Their marriage had been dead long before her husband lost his life that night in the mine. In the end, even the vase of chrysanthemums intended for aesthetic beauty within Elizabeth's home is clumsily knocked onto the floor, leaving nothing tangible behind, but an "odour".

*"The chrysanthemums symbolize a spot of beauty unrecognized by Elizabeth, just as she never appreciated what she could have had with Walter until it was too late." "She knew she had never seen him, he had never seen her. They had met in the dark..."*

The reality had set in that she never had a connection with this man whom she loved for so long. He was a stranger to her even when it seemed they were so close. Having kids together was the only thing they shared, yet "the utter isolation of the human soul, the child within her was a weight apart from her...in her womb was ice of fear..." She now has the hinder of his child in her. Finding no love from her husband's dead malicious body, how could Elizabeth find the strength to love her unborn child? The fear inside of her reaches far beyond her child, "She was grateful to death, which restored the truth...But from death, her ultimate master, she winced with fear and shame". It was as she was reborn. Now she has to move on by living rather than dwelling on what had been or rather what had not been in life. Realizing that she had kids to provide for and a home to maintain, Elizabeth found the strength to move on. Through experience and struggle, truth is found, whether it is painful or not, truth is found. Lawrence successfully embodied symbolism along with imagery and other literary elements to portray the theme of death, life, and relationships. Elizabeth discovered the truth in her own personal relationship through the death of her

husband. No matter how they are represented in life, as chrysanthemums or as fire, difficulties are evident in everyone's lives.

### 3. CONCLUSION

As Elizabeth alienated herself from her husband, which we may find evidence all through the story, she at the same time lost her real self. In the last several paragraphs, when Walter was moved in,

*"At last it was finished. He was a man of handsome body, and his face showed no traces of drink. He was blonde, full-fleshed, with fine limbs. But he was dead."*

When the story comes to this part, it gives the reader a new impression of the husband, a completely natural, human-being, quite, clean, full of life. But, critically, he was dead. It is just at this moment the wife found that she even hasn't given herself a chance to know about and to love her husband as a real man, a natural self.

*He was so heavy and inert. A terrible dread gripped her all the while: that he could be so heavy and utterly inert, unresponsive, apart. The horror of the distance between them was almost too much for her—it was so infinite a gap she must look across. (44)*

Firstly, it's the husband's personality, happy, jolly lad, attracts the wife, however, after marriage, she begins to realize that this distance between two classes, and the social consciousness takes the upper hand, the wife was not only isolated from other people, but also from her true self. Both the husband and wife are the victims of this unbalanced relationship. In the end of the story, we know that Elizabeth was on her way to have a baby, "the child within her was a weight apart from her", how life will be? Is the baby bears the meaning of a new beginning of life for Elizabeth, or a rediscovery of her relations with Walter means a complete end of the old one through death? Whatsoever, the death of her husband, the influence will be everlasting.

*At last it was finished. They covered him with a sheet and left him lying, with his face bound. And she fastened the door of the little parlour, lest the children should see what was lying there. Then, with peace sunk heavy on her heart, she went about making tidy the kitchen. She knew she submitted to life, which was her immediate master. But from death, her ultimate master, she winced with fear and shame. (45)*

In the relationship, we may infer that whether her husband is dead or not, Elizabeth is a loser in the relationship, she is a loser when facing life. When a human-being is too much obsessed with social consciousness, she is far away from happiness, from herself, from human nature. Moreover, from the

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[http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics\\_love.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics_love.html).

<sup>10</sup> "Brainy Quote." 2005. XploreInc. March 6, 2005

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description of her son and daughter, we vaguely feel the same characters they inherited from their parents. This tragedy will continue.

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