

**An Exploration of D.H. Lawrence's,
"The Odour of Chrysanthemums" brings to light the
true fragrance of chrysanthemums set in contrast to
Katherine Mansfield's, "The Garden Party",
which makes for an interesting discovery into the reality of
human class construction and distinction through the depiction
of interpersonal human relations and the effect on them of
class.**

"From the mechanical monster terrifying the cantering colt at the beginning, (a brilliant bit of Lawrence this - demonstrating the way that the iron horse may be able to carry more than the animal but that it can't beat it's pace) to the un-weeping widow at the end, we may think that this is just a 'tale'. But hours after the story is finished, the images are still with the reader."

- Helen Croom

An opposition between nature and society creates the central, juxtaposing theme of D.H. Lawrence's, "The Odour of Chrysanthemums". A verification of this theme is evident in Elizabeth's recognition of the absolute differences between her world and the world of her now dead husband, based on her perceptions. 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 Odour of Chrysanthemums" functions as a depiction of human relations and the effect on them of class, as portrayed by the third person, limited omniscient narrator. The narrator knows what the characters are thinking most of the time, usually focusing on the thoughts of one character. In "The Odour of Chrysanthemums," Elizabeth functions as the protagonist and most of what is told, is through her perspective. The presence of a subjective plot, in which the inner subjective life comes into conflict with the objective life or reality as others see it, is evident both in "The Odour of Chrysanthemums", and as compared to, Katherine Mansfield's, "The Garden Party". Several correlations may be drawn between these two magnificent short stories, linking them on several levels, especially that of the impacts that class has on human relations: the differences, as well as the similarities, regardless of class difference. However, a focus on D.H. Lawrence's, "The Odour of Chrysanthemums" shall be maintained for the purposes of this exploration and shall be discussed in terms of theme, narrative voice and the development of the plot through Lawrence's structured manipulation of tone, symbolism and irony in reference to Katherine Mansfield's, "The Garden Party", in certain instances.

The theme of “The Odour of Chrysanthemums” contrasts ... "industrial blight against the beauty of nature, but also the separation of death from life, especially the retrospective sense of distinct separateness.” (Amoia 1) “The horror of the distance between them was almost too much for her – it was so infinite a gap she must look across.”

Chrysanthemums, as well the use of light and darkness, are used throughout the story as symbols representing life and death, thus lending support to the theme. Similarly, lilies are used symbolically in “The Garden Party” as creating the divide between the vitality and radiance of life verses death, by the use of ironic foreshadowing techniques, coupled with the use of light and dark not only representing life and death, but also the divide between classes. The Sheridan’s are introduced to us in the setting of ideal weather, “windless, warm, the sky without a cloud”, in contrast to the trip that Laura takes along the road which “...gleamed white, and down below in the hollow the little cottages were in deep shade.” Ironically, the prejudice and differences felt in class are expressed in the narrative voice by means of tone and diction, evident in the passage, “The very smoke coming out of their chimneys was poverty-stricken. Little rags and shreds of smoke, so unlike the great silvery plumes that uncurled from the Sheridan’s chimneys.” Prejudice and class distinction are portrayed thus by means of descriptive imagery and biased views of nature by the narrative voice. Laura is torn between the reality of the prejudice she feels due to her “upbringing which made her wonder for a moment whether it was quite respectful of a workman to talk to her of bangs slap in the eye”, and her ironic feeling of “absurd class distinctions”. Laura seems unable to distinguish between her feeling of restricted separation from the prejudice of those of the same class around her, and her psychological desire to connect, communicate and understand a “world” foreign to her

due to the way in which society, and her family has constructed this “world’s” associations and connotations for her through social psychology and modelling.

Lawrence constructs separation, especially within human relationships by the use of chrysanthemums, as well as descriptive, symbolic imagery, especially nature and the surroundings encompassing the characters. The initial mention of the “...dishevelled pink chrysanthemums” is coupled with a dreary introductory diction of a “small”, “stumbling” locomotive engine, “...thump[ing] heavily past...with slow inevitable movement, as [Elizabeth] stood insignificantly trapped between the jolting black wagons and the hedge.” as well as the mention of “the fields [being] dreary and forsaken”. Elizabeth’s being “insignificantly trapped” between a slow moving object, (the jolting black wagons), signifying a changing factor, and a stationary hedge, signifying a more constant, independent variable is of great significance when taken into account in terms of Elizabeth’s current and future situation. The drab diction further reinforces Lawrence’s desired tone by the use of imagery such as “stagnant light”, and progression by “...the winding engine [which] rapped out its little spasms.” In both these images paradox is introduced by the use of oxymorons. Although light would stereotypically be seen as positive, when coupled with stagnancy, we are left questioning whether it is not in fact negative? Similarly, a “winding engine” would be seen as fulfilling some duty to man, however, when expressed in terms of “...rapp[ing] out its little spasms”, we are introduced to the idea that although this movement is repetitive and its purpose is to serve man, that in fact little progression is achieved, and that in a sense it rather serves man with a state of “stagnancy” and monotony, the word “little” before the action of

“spasms”, signifying its “insignificance”. “The initial paragraph has several references to the physical and emotional bleakness of English mining life.”(Amoia 1), as well as perhaps serving the purpose of being an allegory to Elizabeth’s life and perceptions, or a foreshadowing of events to follow. “The diction, like the title of the story, imbues a fragrance upon the reader.” (Amoia 1) and sets the stage for continued symbolism.

We are introduced to the differing perceptions of the characters through the demonstration of their connotations and perceptions that the “odour” of the chrysanthemums imbues upon them. John, Elizabeth’s son, “...tore at the ragged wisps of chrysanthemums and dropped the petals in handfuls along the path.” signifying his carefree attitude and lack of connection or association he felt towards the flowers, contrasted by his mother who scolded him for his actions by saying, “Don’t do that – it does look nasty.” Although superficially Elizabeth dealt this scolding as a result of her reason substantiating it, her actions following, being “...suddenly pitiful, [breaking] off a twig with three or four wan flowers and [holding] them against her face.” symbolizes something quite different from her reaction towards her son. When Annie notices the flower which her mother hesitated “laying aside” and instead ironically, “pushed into her apron-band”, a gender difference between Annie and John’s reactions to chrysanthemums, when Annie excitedly exclaims “Oh, mother!”, “You’ve got a flower in your apron!”, is established. Annie proceeds to ask whether she can smell it, murmuring, “Don’t they smell beautiful!”, in which a contrast between the children’s innocent reactions which we may refer to as being positive due to a “lack of life experience” and their mother’s cynical remark, “No, 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 buttonhole." is evident. Ironically, Elizabeth seems unable to distance herself from the negative "odour" of the chrysanthemums, as is suggested by the fact that she stuck the flower into her apron regardless of her connotations associated with these flowers. Elizabeth's response demonstrates the cycle of life as she has experienced and perceived it, as well as a symbolic foreshadowing in the form of the progression of this cycle - death being the final stage, she has not yet experienced, and is thus unable to associate with at this stage. "This story mirrors its title, although the odour is not of flowers, but of the "utter separateness" of life. The use of chrysanthemums in strategic points in the plot further enhances the contrast between life and death, along with the natural beauty and industrial blight." (Amoia 2-3). Walter is smothered by a fall of coal, as his wife has been smothered by him and the odour of chrysanthemums. (Croom 3) Walter's vitality and the complete separation between him and his wife, now in death, is exemplified by the passage, "One of the men had knocked off a vase of chrysanthemums. He stared awkwardly, then they set down the stretcher. Elizabeth did not look at her husband. As soon as she could get into the room, she went and picked up the broken vase and the flowers." In this passage Elizabeth's complete lack of affiliation with her husband, and intense sense of guilt at this lack of feeling is highlighted. The reality of Walter's death, and the guilt she feels is enhanced by the preceding strategic uses of ironic symbolism, by means of foreshadowing, especially in the words Elizabeth speaks to her children, "They'll bring him home when he does come – like a log. And he may sleep on the floor till he wakes himself." Another ironic, more innocent statement enhancing this reality, is that spoken by Annie upon returning home from school when she states that, "The lamp's

not lighted, and my father's not home", introducing the symbolism imbued by the strategic and frequent altercation of light verses dark for effect. In the "menace" of the room as they wait - the children playing but ever on the alert, the mother determinedly sewing, even the flannel makes a "wounded sound".

We realize that there is more than anger in Elizabeth's mind. She is afraid. Lawrence portrays the weariness that worrying brings with precision. The way the mind jumps from one thing to another - how will she manage on the pension if he is dead? - will they get on better if only wounded and kept away from the drink? (Croom 2)

Several references are made to class through the narrative voice's ability to conjure imagery and stereotypical associations the reader would easily associate with. "Lawrence portrays the social factors he knew so well. The butty's wife rushing to gossip with her neighbour, the man's deference to the other man's wife." (Croom 2) The miners are described by the use of a simile, as, "...single, trailing, and in groups, [passing] like shadows diverging home." Much symbolism is present in this simile. 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 labour as miners. Ironically, Elizabeth's statement, "...it's getting dark.", is followed by, "There's your grandfather's engine coming down the line!", directed at her son, John. Symbolically, with this statement, it becomes clear that John's fate has already been determined not only as a person born into this mining class, but also due to his gender role as a male. John was "...dressed in trousers and waistcoat cloth that was too thick and hard for the size of the garments. They were

evidently cut down from a man's clothes", indicating a suggestion that identity is perhaps not lost, but rather due to class never individually achieved. This idea of a lack of male identity, directed at John as a form of gender stereotype, is enhanced by figurative use of the extended metaphor of darkness versus light. John is described as, "...almost hidden in the shadow", as well as Elizabeth's observation that "...she saw herself in his silence and pertinacity; she saw the father in her child's indifference to all but himself." Nature is used to enhance the metaphor, "The garden and fields beyond the brook were closed in uncertain darkness." The second reference to John's fate being similar to that of his father's is realised when he is described as being seated, "...at the end of the table near the door, almost lost in the darkness, his face a dusky mark on the shadow..." John is not only described as a shadow, in similar fashion to the miners in the introduction of the story, but his lack of personal identity and uniqueness is delineated by the way in which his face is described as a "dusky mark". A paragraph later, this idea is progressed when he is described as, "...the invisible John", grumbling, "I canna see.", to which Elizabeth replies "You know the way to your mouth", contrasting not only the gender differences in problem solution, but especially Elizabeth's practical and sarcastic elements as a female and as a mother, as well as an implied, expected instinctual act on the part of her son. In "The Garden Party", when Laura's mother sends her with a basket of "scraps" and insists that she "...take the arum lilies too", because, "People of that class are so impressed by arum lilies.", as well as the preceding prejudiced comment of her daughter, "You won't bring a drunken workman back to life by being sentimental", we begin to realise just how far the ingrained prejudiced associations of class distinctions have separated the Sheridan family from reality. It seems highly ironic that although Mrs Sheridan portrays immense

arrogance, superiority, and separation demonstrated by the narrative voice reading her thoughts such as, "...the little cottages were in a lane to themselves at the very bottom of the steep rise that led up to the house. A broad road ran between. True, they were far too near. They were the greatest possible eyesore, and they had no right to be in that neighbourhood at all.", and the fact that she personally ordered lilies from the florist, that she now refers too in terms of, "People of that class [being] so impressed by arum lilies.". Thus, the reader is left questioning how she, or people of "her class" justify their own prejudices, associations or judgements passed?

Chrysanthemums, which bloom in the fall and then die, are symbolic in this story of the fragility of our inner lives (our subjective lives). 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 the myopic Elizabeth, just as she never appreciated what she could have had with Walter until it was too late." (Croom 4) "She knew she had never seen him, he had never seen her. They had met in the dark..."

The chrysanthemums which had opened Elizabeth's married life had now also closed it. Elizabeth finally smells the true fragrance of chrysanthemums, and it is the odour of resolve, determination and final closure to the season in which chrysanthemums will

bloom with bitterness in her life. (Amoia) Contrasting the experience of death in “The Odour of Chrysanthemums” and “The Garden Party”, we come to realize that human emotion and experience is universal and similar, regardless of class distinction or barriers manifested by mankind. We, as human beings cannot escape death due to our mortality, thus we must accept that life is our immediate master and that it should be our goal to smell the true fragrance of the chrysanthemums around us, instead of being hindered by our human constructions of class, gender or race barriers.