

Industrial Corruption:

The main culprit for the relationship between Husband and wife in “*Odour of Chrysanthemums*”

CORRUPTION INDUSTRIELLE:

LE COUPABLE PRINCIPAL DE LA MAUVAISE RELATION CONJUGALE DANS *ODOUR OF CHRYSANTHEMUMS*

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Abstract: The relationship between man and woman is one of the main foci of D.H. Lawrence, a famous English writer. On the basis of a careful analysis of his short story--“*Odor of Chrysanthemums*”, the present writer tries to prove that the industrial corruption is the main culprit for the dead relationship between husband and wife, a major one of the relations between man and woman in human society.

Key words: relationship between husband and wife, industrial corruption, main culprit

Résumé: La relation entre l’homme et la femme est l’un des thèmes de D.H. Lawrence. A travers l’analyse minutieuse de son roman *Odour of Chrysanthemums*, l’auteur tente de prouver que la corruption industrielle est le coupable principal de l’aggravation de la relation entre la mari et la femme dans le roman, alors que le relation conjugale est l’une des relations importantes de la société humaine.

Mots-Clés: relation conjugale, corruption industrielle, coupable

Lawrence, in his novel writing, is chiefly concerned with human relationships, and with the relation of the self to other selves. He probes into various aspects of relationship—the relationship between man and his environment, the relationship of man to God and to nature, the relationship between parent and child, the relationship between man and woman, the relationship between instinct and intellect, and the proper basis for the marriage relationship. In his opinion, the most important relationship is the one between man and woman (張伯香：407).

“*Odor of Chrysanthemums*” is one of his short stories. The story takes place in a mining country, and its central character, Elizabeth Bates, starts the story as a collier's wife and ends it as a collier's widow. The story builds slowly and powerfully as Elizabeth waits anxiously for her husband, Walter, to come home after working all day in the mines. He is very late, and when he is not among the weary miners trooping past “in grey somber groups,” Elizabeth assumes that he is out getting drunk with his mates. “Never mind,” she tells her daughter, “they'll bring him when he does come--like a log.” But Elizabeth's anger is “tinged with fear,” for of

course coal mines are dangerous, and accidents are common. Elizabeth's fear is confirmed, for that day her husband is killed in the mines: “He was smothered,” as one man explains.

The burdened and resentful pregnant wife ends up ritually preparing the corpse of her husband. Her epiphany--“death restored the truth”--is that theirs had been an erotic failure and she had been “fighting a husband who did not exist.” The righteously rigid wife had defeated the passive individuality of the man. The balancing forces of death and terror fuse in the haunting odor of failure.

The story, focusing on a dramatic moment in the life of Mrs. Elizabeth Bates, the accidental death of her husband, Walter Bates, centers on husband and wife relation, a major one of the relations between man and woman in human society. In this story, Lawrence probes into the relationship between Elizabeth-the wife and Walter-the husband. After reading this story, we know that there is no true love between Elizabeth and Walter. Elizabeth had said Walter was her idea of him, but now she sees this was “something he was not.” She had

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thought she knew him inside and out: she had "felt familiar with him." "But her epiphany--"death restored the truth"--is that theirs had been an erotic failure and she had been "fighting a husband who did not exist." (T.H.McCabe) But what should be responsible for their failure in love and marriage? The present writer intends to argue that among all the reasons the industrial corruption is the main culprit for the death of true love between the husband and wife.

At the very beginning of the story, the author tells the readers that the story happens at Brinsley Colliery, the industrial base of an English coal-mining town and presents the readers a dreary picture which shows the terrible effects of industrialization at the cost of the natural environment. All this sets a tone of bleakness and despair for the story. Through the narrator's descriptions, a mechanistic corruption seems to pervade the setting, tainting all that it comes in contact with—especially people. Obviously, all these descriptions are used to show that people cannot survive the mechanical impositions on their lives, because those impositions corrupt not only the natural environment but also human nature, which leads to the corruption of relationship between man and woman, specifically the husband and wife relation in "*Odor of Chrysanthemums*". Under the background of mechanical civilization, people fall slaves to machines. Labor leads to indifference and alienation among people. Human nature is suppressed and distorted. Lawrence reveals and criticizes the dark side of modern British society.

Lawrence implies worried consciousness in his novels, which comes from the worry about the human living condition caused by the nature that was destroyed by modern mechanical civilization and the alienation of human nature. Although Lawrence does not directly deal with social problem in this novel, he was aware of the evil of modernization. Industrialization improved the living standard and accelerated the material civilization; it, however, also changed people's living style and their way of thinking. The cut-throat competition forced man to disguise himself since he must obey the mainstream civilization: money, power, moral, social status, etc; mechanical progress diminished individual creativity. As a result, man became hollow, insensitive and indifferent; the society lost feelings and tenderness as a whole. In his eyes, Lawrence saw modern society as being sick and false.

To show the corruption mentioned above, the author, in the first sentence, links a small locomotive with a colt who, "startled from among the gorse, which still flickered indistinctly in the raw afternoon." manages to outrun the "clanking, stumbling" train, even though running "at a canter". While the colt symbolizes a young and natural life-force, the train suggests the slow, but mechanical machine that is the more powerful and more dominant force in the landscape. And a woman, who stands between a hedge and a row of coal-carrying wagons, is also described as standing "insignificantly

trapped" between the two. Thus the reader may assume that whatever is natural, even though superior to the mechanical, has been relegated to a background of indistinctness, for the colt is faster than the engine and the woman represents the humanity that is pushed aside by machines. Moreover, all of the sentences in this opening paragraph depict mechanical things as overwhelming and corrupting the beauties of nature. Fields are "dreary and forsaken," while "withered oaks" stand among polluted, smoky grass. None of the adjectives in this paragraph are positive e.g. dreary, rough, forsaken, etc. ; rather, the scene describes a raw, bleak, and ugly landscape. As a matter of fact, the sentence, "The engine whistled as it came into the wide bay of railway lines beside the colliery, where rows of trucks stood in harbor." is a summary of the fierce opposition between nature and the mechanical world. The image of trucks "in harbor" seems ironic since we normally associate a harbor with the sea and the power of nature, and the word "harbor" also suggests rest, peace, and protection against the power of nature. But given the opening descriptions of the setting for the story, we cannot assume that the Brinsley Colliery and its effects on the surrounding countryside represent anything peaceful and safe but noisy and dangerous. It seems that everything is at the mercy of the mechanical machine, which is representative of the industry.

In addition, Lawrence handles this story with its setting of a mining community in a basically realistic way. But he saw a miner's life always in rhythmic terms: the descent into darkness away from the light of day, the dark comradeship in the mine complementing the marital relationship above, the rhythm of departure and return. "*Odor of Chrysanthemums*" moves wholly in darkness, the unconscious world of miners. This assumption is apparently confirmed by the third paragraph, which begins with a description of the miners, who, "single, trailing, and in groups, passed like shadows diverging home." They too appear insignificant, like the gorge from which the colt emerged, or the woman who was pinned between the trucks and hedge. Humanity and what is natural are at the mercy of the industrial environment and come off a poor second in the struggle, like the description of a "large bony vine" that "clutched at the house"; nature is death-like, grasping for life in its final moments, for living things are depleted and malnourished. Although the depictions of the dreary landscape caused by the industry at the beginning of the story at first seem to just serve as a background or setting for a more particular story to follow, it soon becomes clear to the reader that those descriptions metaphorically detail the life of Elizabeth Bates, who is losing her own nature amid the same destructive forces that killed her husband. Like the "twiggy trees" that dotted the landscape, the insignificance of the miners who "passed like shadows" on their way home, and the "disheveled pink chrysanthemums" that grew before her house, nature—and her nature—is swallowed up by an industrialism that people create, which takes away their

humanity. Again, we can see the crime committed by the industrial corruption.

Undoubtedly, readers anticipate that Lawrence's story is about more than the realistic description of a coal-mining community, which is confirmed when the narrator focuses on a particular person, a woman who is described in positive terms: "She was a tall woman of imperious mien, handsome, with definite black eyebrows. Her smooth black hair was parted exactly". We later learn that this is Elizabeth Bates, a mother of two small children with another on the way, who stands in contrast to her surroundings, as well as the simple folk who are her neighbors, people who treat her with gentleness and respect. All descriptions that have preceded her arrival in the story, therefore, metaphorically suggest her own struggle against the mechanical, unnatural, and ugly surroundings. The tone of the story suggests, however, that she too, like the landscape in which she lives, will not survive this struggle. When her husband Walter, a worker in the mines, does not come home at the usual time, she automatically assumes that he has gone off to one of the local pubs to spend his pay in drink. Elizabeth has seen his "mechanical" behavior before, for whenever he is paid he sneaks past his home, going off to spend more money in an evening of drinking than he gives her to feed their family. As readers, we know that Elizabeth's expectations about Walter are true, even though he never speaks in his own defense. Because of the descriptions in the story's opening, we readily believe that he too has been corrupted by the ugliness of the Brinsley Colliery town. Even when we learn that Walter has been killed in a mining accident, our trusts in Elizabeth's first assumptions are not shaken. The events confirm that Walter's death was "unnatural," in that he was not crushed to death—indeed, was not even bruised—but rather died of asphyxiation when buried alive. He too has been smothered by industry. Here the author seems to tell us readers that all in the mining town are quietly suffocating, dying alone, cut-off, and isolated from other human beings. By focusing on Elizabeth, however, the narrator points up her isolation in the midst of a living death; she has lost her husband to the very industrialization that is destroying the countryside. And rather than weep as she stares at his lifeless body, she is suddenly shocked at how little the husband and wife knew one another. Even when making love, creating the child with whom she is pregnant, "they had been two isolated beings, far apart as now". While this isolation may have been particular to them, the tone of the opening few paragraphs suggests that all life, not just Elizabeth's and Walter's, is being destroyed by the "unnaturalness" forced upon them by machinery, industrialism and the destruction of nature. At this point, we cannot deny that it is the industrial corruption that directs this tragedy.

Lawrence created many female characters. Their disharmony with the social situation both put a great strain on their feelings and tore their personalities apart.

Their life was filled with pains, perplexity and helplessness. In this novel, Elizabeth Bates has a strong personality, stifled, long-suffering, distant but caring with her family. Walter Bates is insensitive, absent. They probably did not know each other well before their marriage, as they were ill-suited for each other. They are married but strangers. Walter Bates frequents the public house, maybe he was an abusive alcoholic. At her husband's death the wife came to be aware of the fact that they are two worlds apart although they are tied each other by marriage. Because of his death, the husband is left for the first time purely himself. This helps to illuminate Elizabeth's reaction to Walter's death and to clarify her sense of isolation. This man can never be utterly known to her. And now that she sees the reality of his perfect form, she cannot get into connection with it. She realizes at last the falseness of her marriage:

In fear and shame she looked at his naked body, that she had known falsely. ... After all, it was itself. ... She had refused him as himself. And this had been her life and his life. She was grateful to death, which restored the truth.

They come to represent the fragile beauty of the world while also evoking, for Elizabeth, hard memories and lost hopes. In this story Lawrence depicts, not for the last time, the real danger and the rough dignity of life in the mines, and in his way he pays tribute to men whose lives demand comradeship and courage—even while he strongly implies that their work kills not only the body but the soul. Walter, after all, is still a youth when he begins his life of work underground; he is in several respects trapped well before his normal lifespan is complete. Certainly Lawrence's reference to the mental gulf that separates Elizabeth and Walter shows the writer's interest in exploring the tension, conflict, and lack of connection that he would long associate with relations between the sexes. With its closing references to Elizabeth's "shame" and its rather direct use of biblical imagery—for Bates, the "Lamb," is a Christ-figure of sorts.

As a great writer growing up from a working-class boy, Lawrence bears a strong reaction against the mechanical civilization. "In his opinion, the bourgeois industrial revolution, which made its realization at the cost of ravishing the land, had started the catastrophic uprooting of man from nature.....It is this agonized concern about the dehumanizing effect of mechanical on the sensual tenderness of human nature that haunts Lawrence's writings."(张伯香 : 405) In a word, Lawrence believes that industrialization corrupts civilization and cruelly destroys humanity. This theme is fully unfolded in "*Odor of Chrysanthemums*". From the mechanical monster terrifying the cantering colt at the beginning to the un-weeping widow at the end, this story impresses the reader with its desperate grey in both the descriptions of the external world and the depictions of the internal world of the husband and wife. It is not difficult for the reader to believe that the

industrial corruption plays a decisive role in the dissolution of the husband and wife relation—no true love but sex. In other words, it is the industrial

corruption that is the main culprit for the failure of the Bates' love and marriage.

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