

## The Significance of Epiphany in D.H. Lawrence's Short Story "The Odor of Chrysanthemums"

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to point out to the significance of epiphany experienced by the character Elizabeth in "Odour of Chrysanthemums" with an eye on the social realities of the time in which the story was written. With the analysis of the story, this study challenges the claims that D. H. Lawrence is a sexist by feminist critics such as Kate Millet. In the line with these, after a brief information on D. H. Lawrence and his stories that are similar to "Odour of Chrysanthemums" and social, cultural and financial realities of British Industrial society, the story has been handled. In the end, it has been observed that by portraying the main character Elizabeth as a woman who seems to have a sadistic pleasure of her husband's death in the story, Lawrence criticizes not femininity but 20th century British society which imposes unbearable responsibilities on women. In addition to these, the study also criticises industrial society and helps the reader to have an idea concerning its social facts especially on the role of a woman in the working-class family.

### INTRODUCTION

This study intends to dispute this accusation of an American feminist Kate Millet who claims that D. H. Lawrence is a sexist by showing that Lawrence was not a supporter of patriarchy; and contrary he became the voice of women by criticizing industrial British society which imposes unbearable responsibilities on women with the analysis of the story "Odour of Chrysanthemums". In her book *Sexual Politics* (1970) Kate Millet wrote a chapter to criticize D.H. Lawrence and blames him for being a sexist:

Lawrence is a passionate believer in myth of nature which has ordained that female personality is congenital, even her shame not the product of conditioning, but innate (1970: 241).

The above accusation of Millet is the main problem of this paper. With a scrutinized analysis of the story, this paper aims to dispute Millet's argument and show that D. H. Lawrence is actually on the side of the women, not on the side of the patriarchy as Millet claims. Another goal of the paper is to analyse Lawrence's reflection of the inner world of the women of the working-class family as well as the burden on their shoulders from the eye of Lawrence.

D.H. Lawrence is celebrated for having written many short stories that study the conditions and psychological states of people in the early 20th century. Lawrence came to known in London literary circles and met popular English authors of his time such as H.G. Wells and Ezra Pound after 1909. At that time, his poems were sent to the editor of the English Review (Moore 22). He was dissatisfied with the condition of his country during the war and reflected his sadness for the disfigurement of his country. Thus, the traces of the war and the relation between sexes in his period were the major themes of most of the short stories, especially in his collection of short stories *England my England* such as "Tickets Please", "Wintry Peacock" and "Samson and Delilah" all of which reflect the social realities of the period in which they were written. In addition to social realism, most of his short stories focus on psychology, especially epiphany of women characters. For instance, "New Eve and Old Adam" is concerned with the conflict between husband and wife and the story makes the couple realize that neither the man nor the woman is "there" for the other, which comes life through the wife Paula's complaint that "You- you don't love. I pour myself out to you." Similarly, in "The Shadow in the Rose Garden", the woman in the rose garden realizes that she is

unrecognized by the other to whom she is erotically bound (qtd. in Scharpio 55 -56). This study focuses on "Odour of Chrysanthemums" which is a short story that combines both social realism and psychological study of Lawrence, which makes it one of the most famous short stories of D. H. Lawrence.

The masterpiece of short fiction "Odour of Chrysanthemums" has received appreciation by many critics since its first publication. For instance, Madox Ford, the editor of the distinguished English Review who accepted the first publication of the story "Odour of Chrysanthemums", comments on the genius of Lawrence: "as was witnessed by his use of rhythm in the opening scene to capture readers' attention, his ability to forge a flawless paragraph, and his knowledge of the life about which he wrote, set in a region effectively revealed by means of an arresting word here and there" (Kearney 3-4). The critic F.R. Leavis observed that the story is "both a portrayal of life as Lawrence knew it from his earliest memories in Eastwood, and typically unbiased glimpse of working-class life, wherein humanity is presented universally" (Kearney 26). Another critic, Julian Monahan, notes that the death of Walter Bates in the story may be regarded as "a complete waste of life" and "reveals the truth of unnatural and isolating facets of the industrial system had hidden" (Kearney 26). Studying the psychology of Elizabeth, Maria Kalnins argues that the story is a "profound and complex examination" of a woman "as a mother, wife, woman and finally, as human being" via the character Elizabeth (Kearney 28). As seen, most of the critics agree on the fact that the story holds a mirror to the working-class life in the industrial society.

The story is about an evening during which Bates' family learns that the father of the house Walter Bates is dead in a mining accident. The family is a middle-class mining family and the central character is Elizabeth, the wife of Walter. At the beginning of the story, when her husband does not come home from the mine, Elizabeth assumes that he has gone to a public house and will be brought home "like a log". When she finds out that her husband is dead in the mining accident, she does not show any reaction. She only does necessary preparations for receiving the dead body and washing him. She washes her husband's body while the mother of her husband cries. At this point, for the first time she realizes that she has never known him. The story ends with her recognition that the dead man had never had anything in common with her.

### **SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND FINANCIAL REALITIES OF 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY BRITISH INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY**

Like most of Lawrence's literary works, "The Odour of Chrysanthemums" reflects the social, cultural and financial realities of the period in which it was written. The story that was written in early 20<sup>th</sup> century was published in three different versions. The first version was published in 1910; the second one in 1911; and the final version was published in 1914 (Kalnins 472). In all these versions, Lawrence presents his readers with a vivid picture of early 20<sup>th</sup> century working-class life in the Midlands area where his family comes from (Moore, 5). He gives a vivid portrayal of many features of miners' and their

family lives. He makes the reader visualize many details of the setting, the mining town environment dominated by the colliery with its small houses, pubs, the kitchen and the parlour of the Bates' house and the kitchen of another miner's house. He also points out to the hard, monotonous and dangerous work of the miners. As Schulz points out in his essay, their exhaustion is revealed by their "trailing homeward" whereas the monotony of their work is reflected by their habit of drinking. (Schulz, 364) On the other hand, in addition to Mr Ridgley's "blue scar caused by a wound got in the pit", Mr Bates' fatal accident is an indication of the danger of their work. Poverty which is implied through some details such as a large number of children, primitive housing, badly fitting old clothes and the men's drinking habit, is another issue the story unfolds. For instance, Mrs Bates realizes twelve shoes in the Rigley's house, which is an indication of misery for a family with a little income. Secondly, there are no drains in Bates' "law cottage". The fact that Mrs Bates has to "strain" the potatoes in the yard which is "overrun" with rats is another indication of poverty. There is also just one carpet in "one bit of carpet in the whole house whereas the son's clothes "were evidently cut down from a man's clothes" (Lawrence 89).

Another social detail that deserves attention is the fact that as he often does in his literary works, Lawrence reflects his disappointment with industrial life in this story by pointing out the industrial disturbance of natural life. He draws the landscape around the mining town as spoiled and violated as a result of the act of mining. He draws a negative portrayal of the mining town with noise, soot, fire and smoke. He implies that not only human life but also animal life is overpowered by the mechanical force industry. The animals are upset and the fields are "dreary and forsaken" (88). The atmosphere he creates in the story with "the clanking, jolting spasmodic sounds of machinery" (89) and repetitive movements of locomotive wheels or lift machinery is not peaceful.

It is not likely for both men and women living in such an unpleasant mechanic environment to be happy. The residents of this town appear to be entrapped in this environment similar to the figure of solitary woman in the opening scene:

A woman, walking up the railway line to Underwood, drew back into the hedge; held her basket aside, and watched the footplate of the engine advancing. The trucks thumped heavily past, one by one, with slow inevitable movement, as she stood insignificantly trapped between the jolting black wagons and the hedge: The fields were dreary and forsaken... (88)

The woman mentioned above tends to symbolize that like her, all the colliers and their families are trapped in this disturbing town. Thus, people of the town seem to be victims of the industrial system in general. With this negative portrayal of industry, Lawrence attacks on modern industrial civilization and its negative effects on people.

### **CRITICISM OF INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY FROM THE INNER WORLD AND EPIPHANY OF ELIZABETH**

Although Lawrence gives a general portrayal of the life of the miners, he mainly focuses on the inner world of Eliza-

beth. In a way, he directs his criticism at the industrial life and its effects from a general point of view to a specific one, focusing on the inner world of the wife of a miner in order to accentuate the negative effects of mechanical way of living caused by industry on the family life.

In line with this, Lawrence criticizes industrial society which has imposed excessive responsibilities on women. He draws a realistic portrayal of a wife of a miner who has to struggle with two kids in poverty as she states: "Eh, 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" (93). This complaint of Elizabeth shows that she is not content with her life and her waiting for her husband to come back may also indicate the long working hours. Lawrence seems to imply that the long working hours of the miners imposed by industrial life has left women alone in family matters and obliged them to bear the responsibilities of the home and children on their own because Elizabeth who has to keep control over her family alone since her husband is often being working or drinking or hanging around late and does not take the responsibility of the family. For instance, when her husband is late home, the first thing that comes to Elizabeth's mind is that "he had probably gone past his home, slunk past his own door, to drink before he came in, while his dinner spoiled and wasted in waiting" (91). Then, after some time, when her daughter Annie asks for her father she replies: "Eh, he'll not come home now till they bring him" (93). These details imply that Elizabeth is frustrated by the irresponsibility of her husband and used to take all responsibility of her family on her own. Thus, as the critic Pinion argues like the woman trapped between "the jolting railway and wagons and hedge" Elizabeth's "life" is trapped between her overwhelming responsibilities (219).

As Thornton points out, "Elizabeth is not simply a generic 'miner's wife'; she is the person who very much values control ... When she first learns Walter's death, Elizabeth is mainly concerned to stay in control emotionally and mentally" (32). She never loses control and bursts into crying when she is informed about the accident and possibility of the death of her husband. The first thing that comes to her mind is her responsibilities as a wife and mother:

If he was killed-would she be able to manage on the little pension and what she could earn? she counted up rapidly -If he was hurt, they would not take him to the hospital- how tiresome he would be to nurse!... The tears offered to come to her eyes at the picture. But what sentimental luxury was this she was beginning? She turned to consider the children. At any rate she was absolutely necessary for them. They were her business. (98)

These ideas of Elizabeth give clues about the personality and inner world of Elizabeth. First of all, this quotation shows that Elizabeth has a high sense of responsibility and has no time to lose control because she was "absolutely necessary" for her children. Secondly, the quotation indicates that "the tears offered to come to her eyes" not because she feels sorry for the possibility of her husband's death, but because she considers the picture of her family in poverty. This shows that it is the poverty she has to deal with that has

put her in a difficult situation because she thinks that due to poverty she will not be able to make ends meet with the "little pension". It is clear that with these ideas of Elizabeth, Lawrence points out to the overwhelming responsibilities of women rather than portraying her as a heartless being. Thus, Lawrence implies that the society does not even allow a woman to lament for her husband since she has to consider her responsibilities as a wife and a mother even after her husband's death.

These ideas of Elizabeth also appear to be a clear indication that Lawrence really "intended to be a spokesman for women" as he explained his intention as a writer in a letter he wrote to an Eastwood neighbour, Sallie Hopkin, saying "to do [his] work for women, better than the suffrage" (Feinstein 9). As he expressed himself, Lawrence intended to be on the side of women and these words of his are in direct opposition with Kate Millet's citation of Lawrence as "the most talented and fervid of sexual politicians" (Millet 239). For Millet, Lawrence "hated" and "feared" "the autonomy of women" (241) and "identified the female (at least his target, the New Woman) as a rather sophisticated enemy" (285). If it were the case, Lawrence would not be portraying Elizabeth as a woman of robust personality with a high sense of responsibility. Even after being informed about her husband's death, she continues to keep control of her emotions and tries to prevent others from losing control. For instance, she consoles her mother-in-law and tries to stop her cry by saying "be still mother, don't waken the children: I wouldn't have them down for anything!" (Lawrence 99). She protects her children from the scene because when they come to see what is happening she tells them: "What are you shouting about? Go to sleep at once-there's nothing" (101). She also devotes herself to the necessary preparations for receiving his body thinking that "she must be ready" (100) before they bring him home, and starts to do preparations for it. She calculates "whether there would be room to lay him on the floor" (100), spreads some cloth down "to save her bit of carpet" (100). When they bring him home, "she [does]not look at her husband" and she "pick[s]up the vase" (101) broken by one of the men who brought him, "put[s]on the kettle", "unfasten[s]the knotted leather laces", "strip the men" (102) "pour[s]warm water into a bowl" and "wash[es]" the corpse (103). She "carefully wash[es] his face", "brush[es] his blonde moustache" (103). As seen, in all these actions, without "sentimental luxury", she performs what she is supposed to do.

It is the sigh of her husband's half-naked body, her confrontation with "naïve dignity of death" (103) and the awareness of impossibility of making a "connection" with her husband that initiates Elizabeth's epiphany:

Elizabeth [feels] countermanded.... She had nothing to do with him. She could not accept it.... Elizabeth embraced the body of her husband, with cheek and lips. She seems to be listening, inquiring, trying to get some connection. But she could not. She was driven away. He was impregnable (103).

As seen, feeling nothing in common with her husband, Elizabeth tries to "get some connection" with her husband,

but she cannot. Even embracing the body of her husband, does not provide her this. Thus, at this point, she feels herself isolated from her husband. As Schulz emphasizes, Elizabeth's recognition that her husband is out of her reach, "leads to the shocking additional recognition that this had *always* been the case" (366). She realizes that neither their life together nor their sexual intercourse prevents their being two isolated beings as the quotation indicates:

Life with its smoky burning gone from him, had left him apart and utterly alien to her. And she knew what a stranger he was to her. In her womb was ice of fear, because of this separate stranger with whom she had been living as one flesh. Was this what it all meant—utter, intact separateness, obscured by heat of living? In dread she turned her face away. The fact was too deadly. There had been nothing between them, and yet they had come together, exchanging their nakedness repeatedly. Each time he had taken her, they had been two isolated beings, far apart as now (104).

This quotation reveals that Elizabeth regards the deceased body of her husband as a "stranger" and feels alienated from him. She realizes that her alienation from her husband has started long before he dies. She realizes that their living together "as one flesh" and their sexual intercourse are nothing but a superficial "heat of living" "obscuring" their "intact separateness", which lies at the core of their marriage.

Later, Elizabeth realizes neither herself nor her husband "never impinged on one another in any meaningful way" (Thornton 33). She expresses her frustration as follows:

... she knew she had never seen him, and he had never seen her, they had met in the dark, not knowing whom they met nor whom they fought. And now she saw, and turned silent in the seeing. For she had been wrong. She had he was something he was not; she had felt familiar with him. Whereas he was apart all the while, living as she never lived, feeling as she never felt" (Lawrence 104).

Here, "in fear and shame" (104), Elizabeth openly recognizes that she has always "been wrong" in "feeling familiar with" her husband with whom she had been living for years. Here, she realizes similarly, her husband also had never felt familiar with Elizabeth because "he had never seen her" and does not know "whom [he] met". He had lived the life her wife "never lived" and felt "as she never felt." Thus, for her, "he was no more responsible than she" (104). In the following paragraph, Elizabeth understands that the reason behind their isolation is not understanding each other: "She had denied him what he was she saw it now. She had refused him as himself (104). She realizes her own part in their mistake, but she is also aware that "he was no more responsible than she" (104) as well. Thus, the story reveals that both marital partners felt alienated from each other throughout their married life. It is likely that with this realization of mutual isolation, as the critic Julian Monahan observes the story emphasizes "the unnatural and isolating facets of the industrial system had hidden" (Kearney 26) because the story reveals that the both husband and wife has been isolated from one another throughout their married life; moreover,

they could not realize it when Walter is alive. It is implied that neither Elizabeth nor Walter had time to understand each other because they could not spend enough time together because of long working hours of Walter.

As her awareness of complete failure of their married life grows, Elizabeth blames herself for having denied Walter thinking that "how cruelly she had injured this man and now how clearly she sees her fault" (Thornton 34): "And all the while her heart was bursting with grief and pity for him. What had he suffered? What stretch of horror for this helpless man! She was rigid with agony. She had not been able to help him" (Lawrence, 105). As Thornton argues, "such a moral/emotional swing on her part seems wonderfully faithful to how a woman of her temperament would respond to such an experience" (34). Thus, with this "moral" and "emotional" reaction of Elizabeth, Lawrence once more reveals that he does not "identify the female" as "enemy" or "monster" as Millet argues in *Sexual Politics*. It is because after revealing the reasons behind Elizabeth's unusual emotionless to her husband's death as her sense of responsibility as a wife and mother as well as her isolation from her husband in her married life, Lawrence points out the "moral" and "emotional" attitude of Elizabeth which is expected from a woman who "would respond to such experience." In other words, reflecting Elizabeth's "grief and pity" for her dead husband towards the end of the story, Lawrence reveals that Elizabeth is not a heartless being.

After her emotional and moral judgement, Elizabeth "becomes aware of the different paths for which she and her husband have been destined" (Schulz 367):

He had been cruelly injured; this naked man, this other being and she could make no reparation. There were the children but the children belonged to life. This dead man had nothing to do with them.... Now he was dead, she knew how eternally he was apart from her, how eternally he had nothing more to do with her. She saw this episode of her life closed (Lawrence 105).

With these ideas, Elizabeth implies that there has nothing left for her to do now. She can "make no reparation" for him. The only connection left between her husband and herself appears to be children, but "the children belonged to life". Thus, the dead man has "eternally" left her family behind him. She also realizes that with her husband's death, her own life has not finished: only an "episode of her life closed". Thus, "an episode, which was hopeless between husband and wife 'long before he had died' is closed" (Pinion 220).

After she closes her episode with her husband, Elizabeth focuses on her children, another episode of her life. Elizabeth turns toward life with the idea that "there were the children" after her frustration to the failure of her marriage. She seems to hope to find a new meaning in life in her role as a mother. Thus, her sense of responsibility makes her turn away from failure of her married life toward a hope of finding fulfilment as a mother (Schulz 367-368).

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the study shows that D.H. Lawrence is not a sexist as Kate Millett argues; contrary, he is on the side

of woman and criticizes industrial society which imposes unbearable responsibilities on woman.

The epiphany Elizabeth experiences at the end of the story reveals that there is one more reason behind her performance without any sense of emotion after the news of her husband's death in addition to her sense of responsibility, which is her alienation from her husband which started "long before he died" (105). It is at this moment of realization that Elizabeth understands that their marriage "had been hopeless between them long before he died" (105). Until her husband's death, Elizabeth does not realize the alienation and isolation between herself and her husband. She realizes her emotions towards her husband and their married life only after her husband's death. It is only after her husband's death that she realizes "he had been her husband. But how little!" (105). After his death, she realizes that their marriage was a failure because both sides could not manage to understand and accept the other side as she is. She also realizes that the children "did not unite them" (105). The fact that all these things Elizabeth recognizes after her husband's death shows that even recognizing her emotion and the problems of their married life is a luxury for the wife of a working-class man. The story reveals that when her husband was alive, Elizabeth was so busy with her responsibilities as a wife and mother being most of the time left alone at home with children because of the long working hours of her husband that she could not find time to contemplate her emotion and feelings towards her married life. She had always been struggling with poverty and had been used to do everything for her children and husband and did not feel the non-existence of her husband until dinner time.

Consequently, Elizabeth's epiphany points out to Lawrence's criticism on early 20th century British society. He shows that the society imposes such unbearable responsibilities on women that they cannot find the time to contemplate on the wrongs of their lives. They are so busy with carrying out their responsibilities and struggling with poverty that they do not have any "sentimental luxury". That is why Elizabeth contemplates on how she "would be able to manage on the little pension" (98) at the moment when she is informed about the possibility of her husband's death.

In conclusion in "Odour of Chrysanthemums", Lawrence draws a vivid portrayal of the life of mining family in the early 20th century. He presents social realism by pointing out the poverty and the conditions of working-class families. He puts a mirror to the alienating face of industrial life. He reveals that the industrial life does not allow the members of a working class to spend enough time with their families, which leads to the isolation of the couples and leaves the responsibility of the whole family on the wives. Thus, women turn out to be somebody who just performs what they

are supposed to do as a wives and mothers without emotions, as seen in Elizabeth's case. Her sense of responsibility is so strong that she sees crying as a "sentimental luxury". That is why Elizabeth does not give way to emotional reactions at her husband's death. During her husband Walter's lifetime, she could not recognize the isolation between herself and her husband because she was too busy with her responsibilities to realize it. It is the epiphany she experiences after her husband's death that makes her realize the facts of her married life. For this reason, Elizabeth cannot be blamed for not acting emotionlessly for her husband's death. It is the society that makes her feel and act in this way. Therefore, the story is not Lawrence's criticism of femininity just like Kate Millet argues but rather criticism of 20th century British society which imposes unbearable responsibilities on women from the working class. Thus, the story reveals that contrary to Millet's argument that Lawrence sees women as his enemy, Lawrence dignifies women with this story. Revealing the burden on the wife of a working-class member and its consequences on married life, especially isolation, he invites his readers to sympathize with women's plight.

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