

Multiple Themes on Odour of Chrysanthemums

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Abstract: *Odour of Chrysanthemums* is one of the representative short stories of D. H. Lawrence. It has multiple themes. The sufferings caused by mechanical civilization, the relationship between the sexes, and seeking hope in solitude are the themes of this story. It tries to enlighten the readers that it is of great necessity to erase the harm caused by the mechanical civilization, that it is of great importance to establish a harmonious relationship between the sexes, and that one should never lose hope no matter how much he suffers and how lonely he is.

1. Introduction

Lawrence wrote not only novels, novelettes and poems but also many short stories in his whole life. And *Odour of Chrysanthemums* is one of his representative short stories. This short story was written in 1909, just one year before his early masterpiece *Sons and Lovers*. And it is like a rehearsal of *Sons and Lovers*.

From the perspective of closing reading, this paper intends to make a deep research on the themes in this short story.

2. Multiple Themes of *Odour of Chrysanthemums*

2.1 The Sufferings Caused by Mechanical Civilization

The mechanical civilization has not only destroyed the ecological environment but also twisted the human nature. In the beginning of this short story, Lawrence describes the destruction caused by mechanical civilization toward the natural environment. The mechanical civilization has not only invaded the habitats of the birds but also nibbled away the living space of the human beings:

The fields were dreary and forsaken, and in the marshy strip that led to the whimsey, a reedy pit-pond, the fowls had already abandoned their run among the alders, to roost in the tarred fowl-house. The pit-bank loomed up beyond the pond, flames like red sores licking its ashy sides, in the afternoon's stagnant light. "Just beyond rose the tapering chimneys and the clumsy black head-stocks of Brinsley Colliery".^[1]

And Lawrence describes the devastation caused by mechanical civilization toward the human beings:

Miners, single, trailing and in groups, passed like shadows diverging home.^[1]

The hero Walter in this short story is one of the miners. He often needs to go deep down into the pits to earn his living and has a duty to support his family. His wife Elizabeth, the heroine, has

received good education, which can be detected from her standard London accent and her temperament. And the following descriptions of Elizabeth remind the reader of Mrs Morel in *Sons and Lovers*:

She was a tall woman of imperious mien, handsome, with definite black eyebrows. Her smooth black hair was parted exactly. ^[1]

Though Elizabeth harbors hope for the future, yet the mechanical civilization severely affects her normal life. The railway is just near her home. And around her shelter is the chuffing sound of the winding-engine. Her life is being increasingly besieged by the mechanical civilization.

The mechanical work gradually deprives Walter of his vigor and twists his nature. He often gets intoxicated. And the relationship between him and his wife also gets inharmonious.

Walter gets back late for another time, which makes Elizabeth unable to calm down:

The woman again looked across the metals. Darkness was settling over the spaces of the railway and trucks: the miners, in grey sombre groups, were still passing home. The winding-engine pulsed hurriedly, with brief pauses. Elizabeth Bates looked at the dreary flow of men, then she went indoors. Her husband did not come. ^[1]

Under the heavy burden of the mechanical civilization, Elizabeth has a strong sense of insecurity:

Elizabeth's thoughts were busy elsewhere. 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 wouldn't take him to the hospital-how tiresome he would be to nurse!-but perhaps she'd be able to get him away from the drink and his hateful ways. She would-while he was ill. 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. ^[1]

The mechanical civilization not just destroys the natural disposition of her husband Walter, finally it deprives him of his life:

Life with its smoky burning gone from him, had left him apart and utterly alien to her. ^[1]

Walter's death makes Elizabeth plunge into deep sorrow. Her husband's life has been deprived of by mechanical civilization, yet she can do nothing. This makes her feel extremely painful:

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. He had been cruelly injured, this naked man, this other being, and she could make no reparation. ^[1]

After being washed clean by his mother and his wife, which makes the reader think of religious baptism, the marks left on Walter by the mechanical civilization are erased. The true state of his life has been restored:

"White as milk he is, clear as a twelve-month baby, bless him, the darling!" the old mother murmured to herself. "Not a mark on him, clear and clean and white, beautiful as ever a child was made," she murmured with pride. Elizabeth kept her face hidden. ^[1]

From the following monologue of Walter's mother, the reader can clearly detect that under the suppression of the mechanical civilization, Walter's natural nature and vigor has shrunk and that it is mechanical civilization that turns Walter from an energetic and happy lad into a troublesome stranger in her eyes:

"...He was a happy lad at home, only full of spirits. But there's no mistake he's been a handful of trouble, he has! I hope the Lord'll spare him to mend his ways. I hope so, I hope so. You've had a sight o'trouble with him, Elizabeth, you have indeed. But he was a jolly enough lad wi' me, he was, I can assure you. I don't know how it is ..."^[1]

The consequences of the mechanical civilization are ubiquitous. It can also be clearly seen from the offsprings of the miners. The poverty of their family makes it hard for them to receive good education. The harsh environment caused by the mechanical civilization is also polluting and poisoning their soul. This can be clearly seen from John, Walter's son:

At the back, where the lowest stairs protruded into the room, the boy sat struggling with a knife and a piece of whitewood. He was almost hidden in the shadow...As the mother watched her son's

sullen little struggle with the wood, she saw herself in his silence and pertinacity; she saw the father in her child's indifference to all but himself. ^[1]

From the foregoing descriptions of the boy, it is clear that the future of the boy is worrying. And this point can also be supplemented by the descriptions of the boy on two other occasions. When being called back home by his mother, the lad advanced slowly, with resentful, taciturn movement. He was dressed in trousers and waistcoat of cloth that was too thick and hard for the size of the garments. They were evidently cut down from a man's clothes. As they went slowly towards the house he tore at the ragged wisps of chrysanthemums and dropped the petals in handfuls along the path. ^[1]

Back at home, when John and his elder sister Annie gave up playing their games, John crept out like a frog from under the sofa. His mother glanced up.

"Yes, she said, "just look at those shirt-sleeves!"

The boy held them out to survey them, saying nothing. ^[1]

"John's creeping out like a frog from under the sofa" has a symbolic meaning. It reminds the reader of the miners working in pits. The foregoing descriptions of the boy seem to present such an omen: The boy might suffer the same fate as his father when he grows up and relive the tragedy that happens to his father.

In a letter to Charles Wilson on December 28, 1928, Lawrence expresses his worries about the living conditions of miners and his dissatisfaction and even hatred toward the whole scheme of things of England:

I read with shame of the miners' 'Hampers' and the 'Fund'. It's a nice thing to make them live on charity and crumbs of cake, when what they want is manly independence. The whole scheme of things is unjust and rotten, and money is just a disease upon humanity. It's time there was an *enormous* revolution—not to instal soviets, but to give life itself a chance. What's the good of an industrial system piling up rubbish, while nobody lives. We want a revolution not in the name of money or work or any of that, but of life—and let money and work be as casual in human life as they are in a bird's life, damn it all. Oh, it's time the whole thing was changed, absolutely. And the men will have to do it—you've got to smash money and this beastly possessive spirit. I get more revolutionary every minute, but for life's sake. The dead materialism of Marx socialism and soviets seems to me no better than what we've got. What we want is life and trust; men trusting men, and making living a free thing, not a thing to be earned. But if men trusted men, we could soon have a new world, and send this one to the devil. ^[2]

And the critique of mechanical civilization goes through the later main novels of D. H. Lawrence. For instance, in *Women in Love*, through his mouthpiece Birkin, Lawrence expresses his abomination of mechanicalness: "there is no production in us now only sordid and foul mechanicalness." ^[3] It seems to Birkin "there remains only this perfect union with a woman—sort of ultimate marriage—and there isn't anything else." ^[3] Through his mouthpiece, Mellors, in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Lawrence also expresses his worries for the future of mankind and hatred for the western mechanical civilization:

If we go on in this way, with everybody, intellectuals, artists, government, industrialists and workers all frantically killing off the last human feeling, the last bit of their intuition, the last healthy instinct; if it goes on in algebraical progression, as it is going on: then ta-tah! To the human species! ^[4]

2.2 The Theme of the Relationship between the Sexes

This short story presents a preliminary exploration of the harmonious relationship between the sexes. It is still obscure as to how to achieve a harmonious relationship between the sexes, yet the reader can see that Lawrence makes some deep thoughts.

The heroine has received better education. This can be detected from the conversations between her and others living in Underwood. She speaks standard English, while others speak only local dialect. After her husband's death, she feels sheer loneliness, which comes from the lack of the truly harmonious relationship between her and her husband:

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? ^[1]

The lack of common ground in the spiritual realm makes them isolated from each other. Even their "living as one flesh" can not change this. Despite their marriage, they are two separate lonely beings. And the true sense of happiness is far from them:

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. He was no more responsible than she. The child was like ice in her womb. ^[1]

Without the mutual understanding in spiritual aspect, their passion that arises from physical attraction can not last long and their life can not be invigorated, which surely brings about their deep sense of loneliness. Facing her husband's death, Elizabeth begins to reflect on the nothingness of their marital relationship:

"Who am I? What have I been doing? I have been fighting a husband who did not exist. He existed all the time. What wrong have I done? What was that I have been living with? There lies the reality, this man." ^[1]

Though they are husband and wife, they are totally strangers to each other:

she knew she had never seen him, he had never seen her, they had met in the dark and had fought in the dark, not knowing whom they met nor whom they fought. ^[1]

From the foregoing close reading of the text, the reader can not help feeling sorry for the hero and heroine's tragedy. Their tragedy both originates from the suppression of the mechanical civilization and stems from the lack of understanding in spiritual aspect.

One year after *Odour of Chrysanthemums* was written, D. H. Lawrence wrote his early masterpiece *Sons and Lovers*, which is based on his early experience. In *Sons and Lovers*, D. H. Lawrence conducts a further exploration of the relationship between the sexes. And this exploration goes through his later novels such as *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, *The Lost Girl* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. In many short stories written by D. H. Lawrence later, such as in *Love among the Haystacks*, *England, My England*, *The Princess* and *Sun*, the exploration of the harmonious relationship between the sexes can also be seen.

2.3 Seeking Hope in Solitude

In this short story, the imagery of chrysanthemum is very striking, impressive and thought-provoking. In the wintry atmosphere, chrysanthemum symbolizes solitude and hope. In harsh winter, many other kinds of flowers wither, yet chrysanthemums are still blooming. After going through havoc and devastation, chrysanthemums are still standing upright beside the path in Underwood:

Beside the path hung dishevelled pink chrysanthemums, like pink clothes hung on bushes. ^[1]

The existence of chrysanthemum is closely related to the heroine's life. In a conversation with her daughter, Elizabeth speaks of the close links between her and chrysanthemums:

The child put the pale chrysanthemums to her lips, murmuring:

"Don't they smell beautiful!" Her mother gave a short laugh.

"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." ^[1]

It is the spirit of chrysanthemum that matters, not its scent. In the harsh mechanical environment, it is chrysanthemum that heralds unyielding will and latent hope. In actual fact, chrysanthemum can

be said to be the externalization of the heroine's inner world. And it symbolizes her own life. Despite the misery that befalls on her, she is still seeking hope. Though she is very lonely, she never gives in.

She forbades her son to tear at the ragged wisps of chrysanthemums. And she cannot help feeling pitiful for them:

“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.^[1]

After her husband's death, great solitude befalls on her. At this moment she is at a low ebb. Accordingly, in her eyes, the chrysanthemums have also changed:

She set down the candle and looked round. The candle-light glittered on the lustre-glasses, on the two vases that held some of the pink chrysanthemums, and on the dark mahogany. There was a cold, deathly smell of chrysanthemums in the room.^[1]

Yet, despite the miseries, she needs to continue with the life. She needs to go on taking care of the children. Although the chrysanthemums often encounter wind and frost, they are as tenacious as pine and cypress, forecasting the latent hope.

In *The Rainbow*, Lawrence expresses his hope for the future by means of the perspective of Ursula:

She knew that the sordid people who crept hard-scaled and separate on the face of the world's corruption were living still, that the rainbow was arched in their blood and would quiver to life in their spirit, that they would cast off their horny covering of disintegration, that new, clean, naked bodies would issue to a new germination, to a new growth, rising to the light and the wind and the clean rain of heaven. She saw in the rainbow the earth's new architecture, the old, brittle corruption of houses and factories swept away, the world built up in a living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching heaven.^[5]

3. Conclusion

Odour of Chrysanthemums not only criticizes the mechanical civilization through the sufferings suffered by the lower-class people, it also conducts a preliminary exploration of the harmonious relationship between the sexes. Besides, it also tries to inspire people to harbor hope despite loneliness and sufferings.

Therefore, from the foregoing close reading of the text, the reader can draw such a conclusion: This story has multiple themes. It tries to enlighten the readers that it is of great necessity to erase the harm caused by the mechanical civilization, that it is of great importance to establish a harmonious relationship between the sexes, and that one should never lose hope no matter how much he suffers and how lonely he is.

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