

D.H. Lawrence's **Odour of Chrysantemums** and **The Rocking-Horse Winner**:

Art, ideology and history

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D.H. Lawrence's art is now unanimously considered a turning-point for the fiction of the twentieth century. As a critic of society he opposed the literary production which characterized the Victorian age by providing a new structure of feeling, a new form to express the problematic development of the industrial civilization and its devastating consequences for human beings. His production certainly presents a complex variation in terms of the topics he touched upon. Much has been said about the way he depicted passion and its dissolution, a recurrent issue in many of his books, for example. The realistic depiction of sexual intimacy, his antagonistic view of the capitalist system and the conflicting relationship between the working-class and aristocracy also constitute other topics Lawrence insistently wrote about and should not be ignored for those who explore the author's fictional universe.

. In this paper, I will concentrate on some of the issues represented in two of his short-stories – **Odour of Chrysanthemums** and **The Rocking-Horse Winner** – analysing some similarities and some distinguishing traits that can be found between the stories. In **Odour of Chrysanthemums**, Lawrence focuses the hardships of a small community of working-class people, portraying through the Bates family, the bleak life of exploration led by the mining workers who are obliged to toil many hours per day deep down the pit-hole. In an indirect way, one realises that the promoters of industry or the ‘moneyed’ class are blamed for the ugliness of the people’s life. Through Elizabeth Bates, the main protagonist, the idea of the family as a protective and loving entity is dismantled as there is no love between wife and husband, but a mechanic relationship which gradually makes the couple two strangers sharing the same roof and bed.

Incommunicability ends up transforming the wife and husband into persons whose lives have no connection whatsoever. The narrator’s voice describes Elizabeth as a “tall woman, handsome, with definite black eyebrows. Her face was calm and set, her mouth closed with disillusionment” (p.20). Elizabeth is portrayed in a moment of crisis which is triggered by the husband’s delay in arriving home. Her changing mood from anger and irritability to fear help to create an atmosphere of tension and suspense in the domestic realm which affects the children as well. Those contradictory feelings make her reflect about her marriage and the children she had given birth to.

Both events are recalled with resentment. The husband had started drinking and, in her eyes, he had become a failure as the house's breadwinner. As the protagonist reflects about her children, she realises that although they had come out of both of them they had never united them. By presenting a mother who believes her children were thrust upon her, Lawrence subverts the traditional concept of motherhood, displaying a view of a woman in conflict with herself, unable to cherish her husband and children.

On a certain moment of the narrative, when her girl sees some chrysanthemums in the mother's apron and happily wants to smell the flowers, Elizabeth's reaction comes fast – she immediately takes the flowers out of her apron, revealing her aversion to them. Surprised, the child asks if she doesn't think they look pretty. The mother's reply is again immediate: "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 drunk, he'd got chrysanthemums in his button-hole (p.26)".

Chrysanthemums are, therefore, connected with the episodes in Elizabeth's life which she resents. By showing the main protagonist's vicissitudes, her incapacity to be a fulfilled human being and the lack of love toward her children and husband, Lawrence portrays the ambivalent feelings that marriage and motherhood can take on when long-suffering and alienation predominate over joy and pleasure.

As Elizabeth continues waiting her husband, the narrator describes her frustration with the life she has:

‘Twenty minutes to six’. In a tone of carelessness she continued: he’ll not come now till they bring him. There he’ll stick! But he needn’t come rolling in here in his pit-dirt, for I won’t wash him. He can lie on the floor – Eh, What a fool I have been, What a fool! And this is What I came here for, to this dirt hole, rats and all (p.26).

Some of the protagonist’s thoughts displayed in the fragment above and throughout the narrative, point to the ugliness of the coal miner’s work who never see daylight and whose wage is never sufficient to construct a decent life nor to alter it.

In **The Rocking-Horse Winner** family relationship is also one of the major subject-matters explored in the narrative plot, but unlike **Odour of Chrysanthemums**, here it is a middle-class problematic bonds that come into light. As Stevenson (1996) suggests, Lawrence was chilled by the sterility of modern industrial civilization and its threat to the freedom and spontaneity of the individual. The short-story dramatises such a somber view since the lack of affection among the members of the family is related to the sheer compulsion for money which ends up with the premature death of one of the children.

The mother’s insistence that they were unlucky because there was always a grinding sense of the shortage of money creates a cold and uneasy atmosphere. Unable to understand what was really going on in the adult world, the children believe to hear an unspoken phrase everywhere in the house, even in the nursery room where they play.

A whisper – ‘there must be more money, there must be more money’ would make them stop playing and look at each other’s eyes to see if they had all heard it. In portraying the mother’s obsession for money and her incapacity to love her children whom she believes had been thrust upon her, the narrator suggests both the somber face that the modern, materialist world may display and its dreadful consequences for humanity.

A tragic view of society which is the basis of several works by the author can be sensed in **Odour of Chrysanthemums and the Rocking – Horse Winner** and it is conveyed through the employment of a realist technique. Holderness (1982) argues that Laurence’s realism, at its purest, is tragic in form and feeling. Both short-stories show the individual to be rooted in a specific society, but a society which cannot fulfill him. To the theorist such a view is a characteristic pattern of D. H. Laurence’s fiction:

[...] an individualist ideology that affirms the unlimited potentialities of the liberated self, but simultaneously a realist technique (expressing a contrary ideology) presses that affirmation to confess its true hopelessness, complicates the attempted resolution, and insists on the inevitably social nature of all human experience (p.19).

The analysis of **Odour of Chrysanthemums and the Rocking-Horse Winner** well illustrates that sense of unavoidable hopelessness and human void Holderness points at. In **Odour of Chrysanthemums**, Elizabeth’s long and resentful wait for her husband’s homecoming has a dramatic outcome.

As she hears some male voices outside her front yard, late at night, she knows something is wrong. In fact, Walter had not been drinking as she first predicted. A deadly incident in the coal mine had killed him and he was being carried home by his fellow companions, still dirt and in pit-clothes. An avalanche in the pit-hole had crushed and suffocated Walter. A most relevant part of the narrative is presented when the two women – Walter’s mother and wife – sit by his motionless body. A great dread and mixed emotions possess them both. Walter’s death functions, in this story, as a revelation. Elizabeth, for the first time of her married life, grasps the true nature of their relationship – utter, intact separateness.. She understands that she had never seen him and he had never seen her:

In fear and shame she looked at his naked body that she had known falsely. She had denied him what he was – she saw it now. She had refused him as himself. And this had been her life, and his life and all the while her heart was bursting with grief and pity for him. They had denied each other in life. Now he had withdrawn. An anguish came over her (p.41).

The mother, who had lost her son, could not resign. She “felt the lie was given to her womb. She was denied” (p.36). **The Rocking-Horse Winner** also provides a tragic end. All through the narrative, the protagonists’ action and thoughts are revealed by the narrator’s voice and accounts which pinpoint a family that is torn apart and whose members are unable to connect.

Unlike **Odour of Chrysanthemums**, the central figure in the story is the boy Paul, who desperately wants to earn money to make his mother happy. The mother's insistence that her husband and herself are unlucky and that the family's income was always scarce, gradually make Paul obsessed with the idea of getting money to reverse the family's condition. Paul sees in the horse races an opportunity to do so. He becomes familiar with horses and races by hearing his uncle's conversation with the family's gardener. Both men use to bet in the horse races. Paul starts to ride his toy rocking-horse, day by day in a feverish way, almost in agony. He believes that by so doing, the name of the winner horse will come to his mind. Eventually, the boy manages to guess the winner's name and helped by his uncle and the gardener, he enters the adult world of betting and money making.

The state of anxiety that takes hold of Paul is described by the narrator and by piecing together all the information the text unfolds, it is possible to anticipate that the boy's furious rides are likely to make harm to his mind and body. Paul ends up getting a lot of money and anonymously gives it to his mother. The mother who "knew that at the center of her heart was a hard little place that could not feel love, not for anybody"(p.1) receives the money, but to Paul's utter disappointment, she never shows a happy smile nor changes her behavior in relation to her children.

The criticism, indirectly conveyed through the narrator's voice is addressed both to the rupture of family ties and to the blind materialist drive which ultimately provokes Paul's loss of innocence and premature death.

Lawrence was quite aware of the conflicts and contradictions of his society. He, himself, experienced that both within the domestic sphere and outside it, in the world of external social relations. To Lawrence, nothing should be judged as if it existed in the absolute. Every piece of work needs the penumbra of its own time, place and circumstance to make it full. He believed that one should like to ask the reader to fill in the background with the place, the time, the circumstance. Such a concept reinforces the interrelationship among text, history and ideology. The novelist, short-story writer and poet was born in a culture which still lingered on in the Midlands mining and farming communities – a sort of organic and healthy community where a bond among the individual, nature and traditional culture was still possible and shared by people at large.

As Lawrence became an adult, he also experienced profound social changes, the maladies originated by industrial society which he saw as the lifeless negation of humanity. According to some critics, in Lawrence's work there can be seen at times, the artist's effort to bridge the antagonism existing in those two opposing contexts. Holderness (1982) observes that Lawrence's art is directly related "to the core of a historical past which was life-giving, creative and human" (p.47). To him, "the turbulent and cultureless chaos of modern industrialization affected the man and the artist, being equally transported into the writer's aesthetic plane" (p.48).

Thus, in his studies of D.H. Lawrence's biography and fiction, Holderness affirms that it is possible to demonstrate that Lawrence's "formation, and his art, were products of conflicting traditions and ideologies which can only be explained by reference to a complex and contradictory society" (p.48).



## CONCLUSION

Through this analysis, though a brief one, it is possible to assert that the aesthetic dimension of Lawrence's **Odour of Chrysanthemums** and **The Rocking-Horse Winner** are intertwined with the writer's own historical and ideological views of his time, place and circumstance. The realistic and vivid way which characterizes the portrayal of the women and men who inhabit the stories' fictional universe, make Lawrence stand as a hallmark for the early twentieth century literature. It is also true that his achievement was obscured by its controversial and unorthodox nature, which are well illustrated in **Women in Love**, **Sons and Lovers** and **Lady Chatterly's Lover**, for example. Lawrence's wide recognition started to spread after 1950. Spilka's (1984) studies demonstrate that serious and in-depth investigation on Lawrence's works began to emerge by that time claiming that the author's position could be compared to Eliot's. Charles Olson (apud Spilka, 1984) the poet, made the next statement:

The man who more and more stands up as one man of this century to be put with Melville, Dostoyevsky and Rimbaud – men who engaged themselves with modern reality in such fierceness and pity as to be of real use to any of us who want to take on the post-modern – is D. H. Lawrence (p. 336).

In **Odour of Chrysanthemums**, Lawrence focuses a small village of hard and rude working-class people. Everything pivots around the coal mine whose pit-hole bank “loomed up beyond the pond” and whose flames are “red sores licking its ashy sides in the afternoon, stagnant light” (p.19). Nature is depicted as lifeless and dry and the main protagonist is described as being “trapped between the hedge and the locomotive engine which passes by” (p.9). All through the narrative, Lawrence’s vision that the rise of industrialization – represented by the coal mines which fed the industries and the exploration of those who work there - are, metaphorically speaking, a scar, a wound which negates a spontaneous and creative life to human beings.

In **The Rocking-Horse Winner**, though there is no clear references, it is possible to imply that the characters live in a urban context which has already been spoiled by the ripeness of the capitalist system for destruction. Lawrence’s individual artistic eyes saw society as a decadent place filled with tension and antagonism. Both the protagonits in **Odour of Chrysanthemums** and in **The Rocking-Horse Winner** convey the writer’s ideology as they seem impotent to cope with their individual and social conflicts which are clearly affected by historical and ideological determinants. Theirs is a tragic struggle and Lawrence , as the spokesman of his time, strove to write and to communicate his belief that society had long given its back to human beings. I conclude by quoting the opening lines in *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*, which I believe is a fine example of the author’s overall worldview:

Ours is an essentially tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among ruins, we start to build up new habitats to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is no smooth road into the future, but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen (p.1).

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