

Restoring the “Horror of Distance” in Lawrence’s

“Odour of Chrysanthemums” and “Sun”:

The Association between Family Concept and Natural Images

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Although D.H. Lawrence’s “Odour of Chrysanthemums” and “Sun” seem like two unrelated stories, both stories concern the idea of distance and separation within family relationships.¹ As both these stories engage with the sensory and natural images of flowers and sun, this essay attempts to examine Lawrence’s insight into the family through those images. The distance within families is central to both stories; whereas “Odour” reflects an unbridgeable distance between the married couple that they were not aware of before, “Sun” reconsiders the distance and attempts to repair it.

“Odour” realistically describes the miner’s world by recognizing the essential detachment and strangeness in the relationship between Elizabeth and Walter Bates. The story, as Keith Cushman points out, is “bound together by the pervasive imagery of the flowers in its title” from the opening scene of their son John carelessly dropping the petals in the yard, to the vase of chrysanthemums left behind with the corpse of Walter at the end of the story (Cushman 48). As Cushman and Dominic Head have observed, Lawrence uses the flowers to evoke the life cycle of birth, marriage, and death as well as the unfortunate marriage of Walter and Elizabeth. Also, as “Odour” is juxtaposed with “Chrysanthemums” in the title, Lawrence associates the sense of smell with the relationship between husband and

¹ From now on, I will abbreviate the title as “Odour.” First published in 1911, there are a series of revisions of “Odour.” The significant changes are mostly at the ending of the story. In the earlier version, Elizabeth and Walter’s mother feels an excessive love towards the dead husband; the later version captures more of Elizabeth’s reconsideration of herself and their married life. In order to focus on the awareness of the distance between the marital partners, this essay covers the later revision of 1914.

wife, suggesting a slight hope of preventing complete separation in the family. By presenting two distinct scents of flowers, Lawrence captures both the vast isolation and possible attachments simultaneously within the family.²

Even though less attention has been paid to the odour of the flower, it is noteworthy that the narrative features both sweet or pleasing and unpleasant smells. When Walter's body is brought home on the stretcher, one of the men carrying it accidentally dropped one of "two vases that held some of the pink chrysanthemums" containing "a cold, deathly smell" ("Odour" 88). The description of the flowers as having a "cold, deathly smell" can symbolize the relationship between Walter and Elizabeth. Notably, this deathly smell remained during the entire time that Walter's body remained in the room, reflecting the couple's lack of a healthy understanding in their marital relationship:

Elizabeth felt countermanded. She saw him, how utterly inviolable he lay in himself. She had nothing to do with him. She could not accept it. Stooping, she laid her hand on him, in claim. He was still warm, for the mine was hot where he had died . . . Elizabeth embraced the body of her husband, with cheek and lips. She seemed to be listening, inquiring, trying to get some connection. But she could not. She was driven away. He was impregnable.
(91-2)

When Elizabeth encounters "the naïve dignity of [the husband's] death", Elizabeth, for the first time, experiences the horrible distance that she had not known before ("Odour" 91). Her touch is useless here. As she puts her hand out to "embrace the body of her husband" and feel him, Elizabeth shockingly realizes how alienated she is from her husband and how

² According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, odor, or odour is defined as "senses relating to the sense of smell". An early use refers to "a sweet or pleasing scent", but now, it frequently implies "an unpleasant smell".

indifferent they are to each other (“Odour” 92). The husband is “inviolable,” and “impregnable,” meaning that he is beyond her reach. More importantly, with “her tragic recognition, accepting the dead man as unreachably other, as unknown” (Black 205), Elizabeth discovers that she had not known him at all and there had been nothing between them.³ For years, Walter and Elizabeth had been “two isolated beings” denying 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” (“Odour” 93). Thus, along with Elizabeth’s touching and seeing the corpse, the presence of the deathly smell enables Elizabeth to accept her husband’s death with the realization of otherness and separation from him, and reminds her of the impossibility of relating to him.

Whereas Elizabeth dislikes the smell of chrysanthemums, her daughter Annie delights in seeing the flowers in her mother’s apron and makes an entirely different remark on the scent: “Don’t they smell beautiful!” (“Odour” 80). Unlike the unpleasant smell next to the dead father, the sweet aroma, perhaps, hints that there might be a chance to weave the family together by their shared memories. Since “the chrysanthemums serve as a way for Elizabeth to communicate the ritual and emotional calendar of her marriage to Walter,” whether the memories are good or not, the memories associated with the flowers would support the hole in the family (Harris 28). The flowers would lead their family to remember the deceased and be together with future events. However, since the odour does not last long, the beautiful smell cannot hold the family together for long. Even though Lawrence uses the floral scents as a more approachable way to the Bates’, the odour does not unite them, but only reminds them of the father’s absence without resolving the distance between the couple.

³ It is right to say that they have children at the core of their two lives. But what Elizabeth finds as the result of their “exchanging their nakedness” is noting that the children are not shared equally. As John Worthen points out, in terms of fostering the children, Elizabeth “makes her children like herself: different, opposed, alien” (Worthen 71). Therefore, her possession of the children indicates that it is another way for her to estrange and deny Walter in the household.

While the floral scent pervades the dark, the sunlight illuminates by the day. “Sun” opens with a wife and husband, somewhat similar to the Bates’, who maintain physical distance from one another. Juliet leaves for Sicily due to her doctor’s prescription of taking in sun. Regarding “the sun’s regenerative and healing mission” (Reeve 216), some critics argue that “Sun” is a tale about sun worship. Yet her “secret ritual” (“Sun” 23) with the sun does not mean that Juliet literally idolizes the sun as a god; Lawrence instead finds the sun to be a therapeutic force to shrink the family distance and balance her connections to family and herself.

Juliet’s engagement with the sun enables her to regain her family links. As the sun “faced down to her . . . and enveloped her breasts and her face, her throat, her tired belly, her knees, her tights and her feet” (“Sun” 21), every body part is connected to the sun, so that Juliet, apart from all human relations, recovers herself “in the cosmic carnal sense of the world” (“Sun” 23). As Juliet’s withered breasts become like ripe fruits in the hot sun, she reconnects with her child. In contrast to Elizabeth’s finding her children as her purpose and reason for her life after her husband’s decease, Juliet feels “so horridly, ghastly responsible for him” by her demanding role as mother (“Sun” 20).⁴ However, with the sun’s influence, her naked son, who always clinging to her, now undergoes a kind of transformation, so that he becomes more independent and comfortable “like an absorbed young animal playing” (“Sun” 27). There is no more “anxious love-tension” between them, but rather a mutual understanding of keeping one’s distance from each other (“Sun” 22). Through sunbathing, Lawrence suggests that the healthy relationship of family comes from the distance of respecting one’s solitude and independence.

⁴ After the confrontation with her dead husband, Elizabeth realizes that she still submits to life, not death like her husband, and there are children belong to life as well (“Odour” 94-5). As her own life and the children’s are not finished, we may assume that the top priority of her renewed life is focused solely upon the children since she sharply defines herself as mother throughout the work.

While the husband's absence makes it difficult to restore the marital relationship itself in "Odour", Lawrence slowly and partially navigates it in an attempt to close the couple's distance in "Sun". Despite the husband's expected sunbathing together with his wife and son, Lawrence does not conclude that the sunbathing is a solution or cure, but rather a catalyst for the relationship. Like an x-ray, which passes through the body, the sunlight penetrates one's body, emotions, and thoughts, leading the person to become transparent and to finally face one's own self as well as the other. Although it is questionable whether the couples finally restore their relationship by the "flower of her womb" soon to be open to her husband Maurice over a young Italian peasant, it is important that Juliet and Maurice try to narrow their distance by facing and getting to know each other ("Sun" 33).⁵ Unlike Elizabeth and Walter who had refused each other without reaching out across the unbridgeable gulf between them, Juliet and Maurice see each other as they are. The sunned wife now sees a civilized timid man, and the sunless husband "glances at her again and again, with growing desire and lessening fear" ("Sun" 34) and finally acknowledges that his once-estranged wife has transformed into an autonomous and vital individual. Thus, the story indicates that what is important about the relationship is mutual awareness and understanding.

In "Odour of Chrysanthemums" and "Sun," Lawrence explores the complexity of family relationships by illustrating the powerful sensory images of the odour of the flowers and the sun. As the odour significantly plays an important role to reveal an unbridgeable gulf within the families that keeps them apart from complete understanding, the sun highlights the respectful distance and gives a sort of resolution to restore this distance from each other.

⁵ While sunbathing, Juliet meets a young and healthy Italian man and feels her womb beginning to open towards him with excitement. However, neither the man nor the woman takes a step, and she dares not to involve sexual contact with him. She chooses instead to submit to her husband. Her choice of her husband over the Italian man indicates that she is consciously or unconsciously aware of her role as wife and mother.

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