

Odour of Chrysanthemums



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF D. H. LAWRENCE

D.H. Lawrence grew up in a mining town as a frail child who was extremely close to his mother, a failed schoolteacher. He sympathized with her struggles as the wife of a coarse miner with a drinking problem, and many of his female protagonists—including Elizabeth in *Odour of Chrysanthemums*—similarly bear the challenges of difficult marriage. After Lawrence graduated from university, he became a schoolteacher, publishing poems and short stories at the same time. As his writing career grew, he left teaching and began to build a reputation as a controversial writer with works like *The Rainbow*, his second novel, which was seized by authorities for being obscene. Lawrence and his wife, Frieda, were also viewed suspiciously in wartime England because of Frieda's German father, and the government asked them to leave in 1917. The couple traveled extensively afterwards, and Lawrence passed away in France in 1930.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the late 19th century and early 20th century when *Odour of Chrysanthemums* was written, the coal mining industry was booming in England. Miners often lived in isolated villages where a majority of workers in the village were miners, and some communities had begun to form trade unions. Mining became a political issue due to the dangerous working conditions and low wages colliers faced. Lawrence's father was a miner himself, and likely served as inspiration for Walter's character in *Odour of Chrysanthemums*.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Lawrence won acclaim for many of his short stories, including *The Rocking-Horse Winner* and *The Horse Dealer's Daughter*. *Odour of Chrysanthemums* is one of his most highly regarded stories and was a major factor in launching his career, drawing the attention of Heinemann, a London publisher. A longer version of the story can be found in his collection, *The Prussian Officer and Other Stories* (1914).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Odour of Chrysanthemums*
- **When Written:** 1909
- **Where Written:** 1909
- **When Published:** 1911
- **Literary Period:** Modernism

- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Mining town of Underwood, Nottinghamshire; early 20th century
- **Climax:** Elizabeth and Walter's mother learn that Walter has died in a mining accident
- **Antagonist:** Death
- **Point of View:** Third person, primarily from Elizabeth's perspective

EXTRA CREDIT

Banned books. When Lawrence died, many of his contemporaries believed he had wasted his talents writing pornography. Due to the controversial and explicit nature of his work, his writing was responsible for some of the most famous censorship cases of the 20th century.

Sons and Lovers. Lawrence's mother hugely influenced his work. She was often overbearing and jealous—like Walter's mother in *Odour of Chrysanthemums*—and the female protagonist in his earliest masterpiece, *Sons and Lovers*, was based around the missed opportunities he perceived in her life.



PLOT SUMMARY

A train passes by a mining town, where a woman calls to her young son, John, as the **light** fades to dusk. He joins her sullenly, pulling at the **chrysanthemum** bushes as they walk towards the house. The mother tells her son to stop, before plucking a branch of flowers to smell and tucking them into her waistband.

The mother and son wait at the foot of the steps, watching miners heading home after a day of work. The train comes to a stop before their gate, and the engine driver, the woman's father, calls out to ask whether she has a cup of tea. The woman prepares some tea, bread, and butter, and she exchanges words with her father, expressing disapproval of his hasty remarriage. Her father defends himself and mentions that he heard news of Walter, the woman's husband, spending his money in pubs. The woman bitterly acknowledges that this news is very likely true.

The woman's father pulls away in the train, and the woman, Elizabeth, enters the house and begins preparing the family's tea. Meanwhile, the day darkens, and there are fewer and fewer miners passing by on their way home. A young girl enters the house, and Elizabeth chides her for coming home late. Annie, the girl, responds that it's hardly dark out yet. Elizabeth asks Annie whether she's seen her father, and Annie responds that she hasn't. Elizabeth bitterly replies that he probably snuck

by Annie on his way to the pub.

Annie sits before the fire, admiring the flames. Her mother tells her that the fire needs to be tended to, or else her father will complain that the house isn't warm enough when he returns. As Annie tends the fire, John complains that she isn't working quickly enough.

The children eat as Elizabeth drinks her tea, growing angrier as she waits for her husband. She puts coals on the fire, and John complains that it's too dark. Elizabeth lights a lantern in the middle of the room, revealing her stomach, rounded with pregnancy. Annie, upon seeing the chrysanthemums, gasps at their beauty and goes to smell them. Elizabeth says that chrysanthemums no longer smell beautiful to her because they were present when she married Walter, when she gave birth to Annie, and when others first brought Walter home drunk.

Elizabeth sews as the children play, and eventually, she sends them to bed, promising that there won't be a scene when their father returns home. She continues to sew, growing worried as she waits.

When the clock strikes eight, Elizabeth goes outside and walks to town, consulting another miner's wife, Mrs. Rigley. Mrs. Rigley goes to ask her husband whether Walter is in the pub, "Prince of Wales," while Elizabeth waits in the Ringleys' untidy home. When the Ringleys return, Jack Rigley admits that he left Walter finishing up a stint at the mine. He walks Elizabeth to her home before he leaves to search for Walter. Elizabeth waits, growing more and more anxious, when she hears a pair of footsteps at the door.

Walter's mother enters the house, moaning. Jack Rigley told her that Walter had an accident, though she doesn't know how serious it is. When the men come to the door, Elizabeth is informed that Walter is dead. Walter's mother reacts hysterically, but Elizabeth warns her not to wake the children.

The men bring Walter's body into the parlor, knocking down the vase of chrysanthemums, which Elizabeth cleans up. The noise wakes Annie, and Elizabeth goes to comfort her, while the men tiptoe out of the house. When Elizabeth returns to the parlor, she and Walter's mother strip and wash the body, as Walter's mother reminisces about Walter's childhood. Elizabeth realizes suddenly how far removed she and Walter were, even in life. She acknowledges that she also played a part in the dissolution of their marriage because she never recognized Walter for who he truly was.

After the women finish dressing Walter, Elizabeth locks the parlor door and goes to tidy the kitchen. She's aware that she must tend to her current master, life, but she fears death, which is the ultimate master.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Elizabeth – Although the story is told in third person, the narration focuses itself around Elizabeth's perspective. Elizabeth is stern and practical in her behavior and appearance, with exactly parted black hair and dark eyebrows. She resents her husband, Walter, for his drinking and blames him for their failed marriage, though she is pregnant with their third child. Despite the resentment she feels towards her marriage, however, she remains a devoted mother, taking care not to upset her two children, John and Annie. After Walter's death, she comes to realize how her tendency towards criticism and judgment also contributed to the dissolution of their marriage.

Walter – Walter is Elizabeth's husband. He labors as a miner and has a drinking habit that often keeps him at the pub after work. Walter never appears in the story while he's alive, but his mining accident and subsequent death focus the story's plot, and Lawrence hints that the couple's dissatisfaction lies on both sides of the marriage.

Walter's mother – Walter's mother is hysterical when her son's death is announced. She jealously guards her affection for Walter, taking part in washing and dressing the body. Her attachment to Walter as a son is juxtaposed with Elizabeth's detachment to Walter as a spouse, but connected to Elizabeth's own behavior toward her young son, John.

John – John is Walter and Elizabeth's younger child. He wears grownup clothes that have been cut down to fit a five-year-old. John's behavior throughout the story is surly and stubborn, though Elizabeth is kind to him despite this, and he is said to resemble his father in his desire for more **light** in the house.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Annie – Annie is Walter and Elizabeth's young daughter. Annie has large blue eyes and curly blond hair. She is drawn to the **chrysanthemums** in her mother's waistband.

Mrs. Rigley – Mrs. Rigley is also a miner's wife. She has twelve children and an untidy house, which Elizabeth observes with silent criticism.

Jack Rigley – Rigley, another miner, is a big man with large bones. He admits that he left Walter alone to finish up some work and helps Elizabeth look for Walter.

Elizabeth's father – Elizabeth's father, a train conductor, appears briefly at the beginning of the story. He's another practical character, remarrying quickly after the death of his wife because he does not want to be alone, though Elizabeth views this second marriage with mild disapproval.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



ISOLATION OF INDIVIDUAL LIVES

When Elizabeth looks over Walter's dead body, she feels "the utter isolation of the human soul." She realizes that she and Walter have always been two separate entities who didn't understand one another, and even when they were physically intimate, there was a lack of understanding and emotional connection between them. She reacts flinchingly towards the baby growing inside her, as it's a reminder of the distance that couldn't be overcome between her and Walter, even by children. She understands that although the distance is emphasized now by death, they were removed from each other long before Walter passed away.

Even before Walter dies, Elizabeth is a picture of isolation. At the very beginning of the story, she watches the miners pass, but her husband doesn't come. She commands the household on her own, and the references to Walter show that she's emotionally removed from him even before he dies. In the description of her son, John, for example, she sees "the father in her child's indifference to all but himself." Finally, the way the story's told—from Elizabeth's perspective, in her head—also emphasizes her solitude by further removing the reader from the perspectives of the other characters in the story.



MOTHER/CHILDREN RELATIONSHIPS

At the beginning of the story, Elizabeth is seen interacting solely with her children, and although she grows impatient with them at times, she still worries about their safety and acts affectionately towards them. Her differing attitudes towards her children and her husband can be seen when John grumbles that the room is too **dark**—although his complaints remind Elizabeth of her husband's irritating habits, she laughs affectionately at the appearance of these habits in John. In general, Elizabeth is quickly conciliatory when dealing with John, even though he's surly and resentful.

The contrast between mother/son and wife/husband becomes even more obvious when Walter's mother and Elizabeth react to Walter's death. As Walter's mother says, "But he wasn't your son, Lizzie, an' it makes a difference..." When faced with Walter's body, Walter's mother is able to remember all the endearing aspects of Walter from when he was a little boy she was raising, whereas Elizabeth feels suddenly that she was always married to someone she didn't know.



WIFE/HUSBAND RELATIONSHIPS

Once Elizabeth's attention turns towards her husband, her feelings become resentful and angry. She blames him for upsetting the household and drinking too much. For example, Elizabeth regards **chrysanthemum** flowers bitterly because they were present when she married Walter and when the other men carried Walter back after he started drinking. She connects them with the resentment and regret she feels towards her marriage, holding onto those feelings without the same willingness to forgive that she shows towards her children. Even after she begins to worry about Walter and goes to search for him, she stubbornly believes that he likely went to the pub. Her anger towards him is almost a habit that she's unable to let go of. She realizes this later when looking at Walter's dead body, as his death finally shocks her out of her habitual resentment long enough to realize that the disappointment lay on both sides—she didn't make him happy either, since she never recognized who he was, busy as she was with resenting his influence on her life.

Elizabeth's relationship with her unborn child actually reflects her feelings towards her husband more than her feelings towards her children. As the baby is still unborn and unformed, she feels that its presence is more a reminder of the distance between her and Walter, rather than a child she has maternal feelings for.



LIFE VS. DEATH

The story is one of contrasts, the main one being the contrast between the living and the dead. This juxtaposition is shown through the story's symbols, such as the **chrysanthemums**, which at the beginning of the story, appear alive and growing outside the house, and towards the end of the story, are plucked dead—in one of Elizabeth's memories of Walter, they appear brown and wilting. Their odor, once Walter has passed away, also reminds Elizabeth of death ("there was a cold, deathly smell of chrysanthemums in the room").

When Walter's body is brought back to the house, both his mother and Elizabeth are in awe of it. In death, he has a dignity he may not have possessed in life, and Elizabeth realizes that she never knew who he was; death reveals this truth to her. She turns her thoughts to practical questions as well—such as how she might raise her children on a small pension alone—as she realizes that although death is the ultimate master, life is her current ruler, and she has to answer to its demands immediately. Walter's peaceful appearance in death stands in contrast to Elizabeth's striving attitude in life, and yet she knows that she too will one day die.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



LIGHT AND DARK

Lawrence uses contrast in the play of light and dark throughout the story, which begins as the sun sets in the afternoon. The characters constantly draw attention to the quality of light, with Elizabeth reprimanding Annie when she comes in after dark, and with John complaining repeatedly that he can't see his food, craving more light and warmth from his home—just like his father, who goes to seek it at the brightly lit pubs in town. All the characters are constantly trying to escape the darkness—which represents death and solitude—even though it inevitably takes over as the story progresses from late afternoon to late evening, just as Walter's death takes over the course of the story, and, as Elizabeth realizes, death always takes over life.



CHRYSANTHEMUMS

Chrysanthemums remind Elizabeth of her relationship with Walter, appearing at several crossroads of their shared lives: during their marriage, the birth of their first child, the first time Walter was brought home drunk, and finally, at Walter's death. Chrysanthemums also appear differently to Annie and to Elizabeth, who are in different stages of life. Annie, still a child in her prime, wonders at their beauty, while Elizabeth associates their scent with the cool odor of death. The chrysanthemums themselves also undergo change and upheaval, still alive and growing in the beginning of the story, wilting as the story progresses, and getting knocked over as the story reaches its climax with the arrival of Walter's dead body.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Selected Stories* published in 2008.

Part 1 Quotes

☞☞ 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. She seemed to be occupied by her husband. 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.

Related Characters: Elizabeth, John, Walter

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Elizabeth is watching her son John play, and his attitude is reminding her of both herself and her husband Walter. This makes her think of where Walter might possibly be, since he hasn't yet come home. Elizabeth is resentful and angry towards Walter. So many times before he has "slunk" past his house, with a warm dinner lying in wait for him, to spend time at the pub before coming home drunk. Elizabeth's dutiful fulfillment of family duties stands, in her mind, in stark contrast with Walter's dissolute behavior.

And yet at the same time, even as John's gestures remind Elizabeth of her husband, and make her resentment towards Walter rise up again, this resentment doesn't extend to her feelings about her son. John may be "indifferent" to everyone but himself, but this self-centeredness is more natural and forgivable in a child. Elizabeth doesn't seem to fear that John will grow up to be like his father: instead, she concentrates on the fact that Walter doesn't seem to have moved beyond a childhood immaturity and self-absorption.

☞☞ "I canna see."

"Good gracious!" cried the mother irritably, "you're as bad as your father if it's a bit dusk!"

Nevertheless she took a paper spill from a sheaf on the mantelpiece and proceeded to light the lamp that hung from the ceiling in the middle of the room.

Related Characters: John, Elizabeth (speaker), Walter

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

Once again, Elizabeth draws a connection - explicitly and out loud, this time - between her son John and her husband Walter. She responds irritably to his complaint about not being able to see, but it's not obvious that she really is upset by John. Instead, it seems that her son has tugged her out of her reverie and forced her back into the real world. He's

also reminded her again of her husband, whom she fails to think of with any warmth or sympathy. For John, though, Elizabeth does all she can to make him comfortable. She understands his fear of the dark as the fear of a child, and she is quick to assuage that fear as well as she can.

“...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.”

Related Characters: Elizabeth (speaker), Walter

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

Annie has marveled at the beauty of the chrysanthemums outside and inside the house. In an outburst, in which Elizabeth seems to forget to hold her tongue as a mother, and instead expresses her frustration and resentment aloud, she dismisses Annie's idealistic notion of chrysanthemums. For Elizabeth, these flowers say little about beauty: instead, they're related in her mind to all the major events of her life, events that create a sorrowful trajectory rather than being treasured memories.

Indeed, it is perhaps the contrast between the natural beauty of the chrysanthemums and the negative memories that Elizabeth associates with them that really makes her despair. In this sense, chrysanthemums might stand for lost illusions, the failure of youthful ideals to be fulfilled in reality and over time. (Particularly because the chrysanthemums at Elizabeth's wedding and childbirth were presumably alive, while those associated with Walter's drunkenness are wilted and dead.) The difference between Annie and Elizabeth does suggest that one's view of beauty and natural charm does change over time, becoming subject to the pessimism-inducing realities of the relationship between a husband and wife.

Part 2 Quotes

“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.”

Related Characters: Elizabeth, Walter

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 86-87

Explanation and Analysis

Here, as Elizabeth worries about what may have happened to Walter, she faces for the first time the possibility of his death or injury, and imagines a future that, in either case, might be radically different than their past together. First, when she thinks about her husband's death, her thoughts immediately turn to the practicalities of life: after all, Walter may be painfully troublesome, but he does serve the role of the family breadwinner, so without him Elizabeth will have to find a way to support herself and her children on her own.

When her thoughts turn to nursing Walter back to health, Elizabeth seems to allow herself a bit of romantic reflection, which she's denied herself up until now. She permits herself to wonder if she might be able to change Walter after all - if the husband-wife relationship that has become a static reality between them might be open to shifting, even if this comes as a result of pain and injury. Still, Elizabeth soon dismisses these thoughts. She recognizes that her greatest responsibility is towards her children - and unlike Walter, she's never shirked that responsibility. Any thoughts of his death or injury, then, need to concern her only insofar as they would affect the children and *their* well-being.

“But he wasn't your son, Lizzie, an' it makes a difference. Whatever he was, I remember him when he was little, an' I learned to understand him and to make allowances. You've got to make allowances for them—”

Related Characters: Walter's mother (speaker), Elizabeth, Walter

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

Elizabeth and her mother-in-law, Walter's mother, are waiting for news of Walter, and the grandmother is reflecting on the son that she knew - a man that is to be distinguished from Elizabeth's own experience of him. In this passage, Walter's mother seems to be almost defensive. She recognizes that Elizabeth has had a difficult time dealing with Walter's drinking, but she also wants Elizabeth to understand the "real" Walter behind these problems, and to forgive or try to understand - to "make allowances" for - his actions.

Walter's mother does seem to think that there is a real, good Walter behind and beyond the problems he's caused their family. Having raised him, she treasures him as a child, in much the same way that Elizabeth treasures her own children. Elizabeth, however, cannot bring herself to see Walter in such a way: Walter's mother's entreaties only reveal the gap between the way the two women perceive and understand the man.

☛ When they arose, saw him lying in the naïve dignity of death, the women stood arrested in fear and respect. For a few moments they remained still, looking down, the old mother whimpering. Elizabeth felt countermanded. She saw him, how utterly inviolable he lay in himself. She had nothing to do with him.

Related Characters: Elizabeth, Walter, Walter's mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Elizabeth and Walter's mother are looking down at the body of their respective husband or son. Walter's mother seems to be experiencing a more straightforward, if still profound and painful, grief at the sight of her dead son. But Elizabeth's reaction is different. When she looks down at Walter, she doesn't see a husband with whom she shared some of the greatest intimacy of her life. Instead, she sees a stranger. To "countermand" can mean to revoke or repeal, but it can also suggest, and does here, that Elizabeth feels like she herself is rendered unnecessary and invalid. In

death, Walter is revealed as his own person, entirely apart from and unknowable to her.

In some ways, Elizabeth sees Walter as she's always seen him before: she only now *explicitly* recognizes that she's always felt apart from him, that she's never had any sense of connection or closeness to her husband. But in another way, she does see Walter differently, as a whole, "inviolable" being with his own desires and realities, which she's denied to him before. He is no longer just a burden to her or a source of unhappiness and resentment, but revealed as his own person, complex in all his goodness, badness, and individuality.

☛ They never forgot it was death, and the touch of the man's dead body gave them strange emotions, different in each of the women; a great dread possessed them both, the mother felt the lie was given to her womb, she was denied; the wife felt the utter isolation of the human soul, the child within her was a weight apart from her.

Related Characters: Elizabeth, Walter, Walter's mother

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

As Elizabeth and Walter's mother clean Walter's body, the action affects them both in different ways, although both women struggle to manage their emotions. This passage draws one major connection between the women in focusing on their relationships to their children, through the womb that carried them. Walter's mother continues to think back on the years she spent raising her son: the promise of life that seemed to come from the time she was pregnant with Walter now seems to be denied to her with his death.

Although Elizabeth's thoughts are also centered around the womb, her feelings are quite different. Here we learn that she is carrying another of Walter's children. But just as she saw Walter and felt that he was entirely separate from her - and thus that she too was alone and isolated - now she feels that her unborn child, although growing inside her, has nothing to do with her either. The distinction Elizabeth has made in the past between her negative relationship to her husband and her more tender relationship to her children now begins to collapse, as the existential isolation she senses seems to spread out from Walter's body to her own.

Elizabeth sank down again to the floor, and put her face against his neck, and trembled and shuddered. But she had to draw away again. He was dead, and her living flesh had no place against his.

Related Characters: Elizabeth, Walter

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

Elizabeth continues to struggle to come to terms with Walter's death, distraught not quite because she loved him and is grieving, but because his death has prompted a great deal of contemplation on her part concerning what it means to live and die at all. After having felt that Walter's body underlines the isolation and separateness of human beings, Elizabeth momentarily tries to reduce this distance by embracing her husband's body. But she is only further convinced by doing so that his cold, dead body has nothing to do with her warm, living one. She now finds herself more alone than ever, required to turn towards the life that remains for her, even if it is a life that seems to hold little joy.

There were the children—but the children belonged to life. This dead man had nothing to do with them. He and she were only channels through which life had flowed to issue in the children. She was a mother—but how awful she knew it now to have been a wife. And he, dead now, how awful he must have felt it to be a husband.

Related Characters: Annie, John, Walter, Elizabeth

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

Elizabeth begins to distinguish her complex relationship to Walter from the lives of the children that they have produced together. It is beginning to dawn on Elizabeth that she failed to fully know or even try to understand her husband. She has no illusions that her marriage could have been a good one, but for the first time she recognizes that

Walter, too, must have suffered from being her husband just as she suffered from being his wife. While Walter remains indelibly distinct from her, then, Elizabeth does try to imaginatively inhabit his mind.

And yet, nonetheless, since Walter is now dead he is definitively apart from the life that she must carry on. Here Elizabeth shows a colder understanding of her relationship to her children (even while thinking less harshly about her relationship to her husband): life belongs to them, but this life has little to do with Walter or even with her - she is only a conduit through which life reached them, she says. Even in a family, then, the isolation of the individual is so strong as to render bonds of family or relationships ultimately insignificant.

Then, with peace sunk heavy on her heart, she went about making tidy the kitchen. She knew she submitted to life, which was her immediate master. But from death, her ultimate master, she winced with fear and shame.

Related Characters: Elizabeth

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

Elizabeth has finished washing Walter's body, and after the desperate, profound anxiety of the last few moments, she recognizes that despite all of that there are still chores that need to be done, children that need to be fed. Elizabeth knows that she can't shirk these duties, even while grieving, because soon enough she'll have to occupy life and all its requirements once again. This embrace of life, however, is not a joyful one - it's one that Elizabeth must "submit" to, because it is the only alternative to death. Elizabeth has, however, glimpsed death, and knows that it is lying in wait for her and for everyone else, even her children - although theirs is a greater time of life, presumably. Elizabeth has grasped that the dead are fully apart, no longer relevant to life: but she also must continue to live while fully recognizing death's inevitability and omniscience, and the way in which it forces her to consider things she'd perhaps rather not face.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

In the afternoon's dimming **light**, a small train passes through town, slowly enough for a horse to outrun it at a canter. A woman waits for it to pass, trapped between the moving train and the hedge. Just beyond the train is the Brinsley Colliery, where miners are leaving after a day of work, like "**shadows** diverging home." Nearby, there's a small cottage with a disheveled garden of apple trees, cabbages, and a path of chrysanthemums. A woman appears from the fowl-house, standing tall.

The woman is attractive, with exactly parted black hair and dark eyebrows. She calls for John, but there's no answer; finally, a child's sulky voice sounds from among the bushes. The five-year-old boy appears, standing stubbornly still. The mother gently urges him to come indoors as it's getting **dark**, and his grandfather's engine is coming down the line.

The boy is surly, advancing slowly in clothes that are evidently cut down from a grown man's clothing. He pulls at the **chrysanthemums** on the path, scattering the petals, and his mother tells him to stop because it looks nasty. Suddenly, feeling sorry, she breaks off a sprig of the fading flowers, holds them against her face, and tucks them into her apron-band. As they stand at the foot of the steps, the mother and son watch the miners pass on their way home, and the small train moves past the house and stops opposite the gate.

The engine driver, the woman's father, leans out of the cab over the woman and asks cheerily if she has a cup of tea. She goes inside to prepare the tea and returns, and a brief exchange between her and her father ensues. He begins to explain why he didn't visit last Sunday, but she interrupts to suggest that she already knows that he remarried and didn't expect him. She expresses some disapproval at how quickly he remarried, but her father defends himself by saying that it's no life for a man of his age to sit alone by the hearth.

The story opens with the dying of the day. As the light dims, the people within the world of the story are presented as solitary beings, unconnected to one another. They either stand alone or move as "shadows diverging," constantly drifting apart. The coal miners also look like shadows because of the coal dust covering them—and in a story that, at least in part, connects darkness with death, that darkness attached to their skin suggests the danger inherent in their work.



The woman's affection for her child is immediately apparent in the gentle tone she uses with the boy even when he's being stubborn and sullen. Her exactly parted hair indicates her desire for control and precision.



The boy's adult clothes cut to fit a boy size suggests the family's lack of money. The woman's reprimands of the boy for making a mess again shows her desire to keep things neat and in control. That she feels guilty immediately afterwards shows that she cares about his actions—teaching him what's proper—but also about her affect on him. Breaking off the sprig of chrysanthemum suggests that her guilt may also have something to do with the flowers themselves, or what they mean to her, though that meaning isn't so clear yet.



The father's pragmatic approach to marriage hints at one of Lawrence's big themes—that marriage is not necessarily a romantic joining of souls. Her father remarries quickly after the death of his first wife not for love but for the practical desire for basic companionship. The woman's disapproval suggests she still holds a more idealistic view of what marriage should be: that it should be about love.



The woman brings out the tea and some bread and butter. Her father sips the tea appreciatively and mentions that he heard news of Walter spending his money at the 'Lord Nelson,' to which the woman responds bitterly, saying that the news is very likely true.

The woman's father leaves, and she continues to watch the miners returning home. After a while, the woman—Elizabeth Bates—turns to go inside. Her husband doesn't come. Inside, the table is set for tea, but it can't begin until her husband returns. She watches John, seeing herself in his silence and determination and seeing her husband in the boy's self-absorption. Elizabeth imagines that her husband has probably slunk past the house to drink at a pub while his dinner spoils on the table. As she strains the potatoes in the garden, she once again watches the miners passing by, their numbers growing fewer.

As the **fire** dies down, Elizabeth places a batter pudding by the hearth and waits. A young girl with blonde curls enters the door, taking off her winter coat. Elizabeth chides her for coming home late, but the girl responds that the lantern is not yet lit and her father isn't home yet. Elizabeth asks the girl whether she's seen her father, and the girl responds that she hasn't. She adds that he can't have passed the house because she didn't see him. Elizabeth responds bitterly that he would have taken care not to let the girl see him and that he must be at the "Prince o' Wales" or else he wouldn't be so late. The girl suggests that they have their teas.

Elizabeth glances outside once more. Everything is deserted. The girl sits before the **fire**, commenting on how beautiful it is. Her mother replies that the fire needs mending and that her husband will complain the house isn't warm enough when he comes. She bitterly adds that a pub is always warm enough. The boy complains to the girl, Annie, that she isn't making the fire quickly enough, and their mother scolds him.

As the children eat, Elizabeth drinks her tea with determination, growing angrier. In an outburst, she says that she doesn't know why she should wait for him with his dinner when he walks past their home to go to a pub. She drops coals on the fire until the room is almost entirely **dark**, and John complains that he can't see. Elizabeth laughs at him, but lights the lamp that hangs in the middle of the room.

The woman's bitter response reveals the resentment she feels towards her husband, Walter. The implication is that despite the family's poverty her husband regularly drinks money away.



The other miners returning home only highlights that Walter has not, and feeds Elizabeth's belief (and anger) that Walter is out drinking. Her tender thoughts about her son reveal her love for him, but her anger at her husband is also evident in the fact that she sees the boy's good traits as coming from her and his bad traits as coming from Walter. Yet it's interesting that she doesn't say anything to John about his self-absorption: traits she hates in her husband she tolerates in her son.



The dying fire corresponds with the failed tea—a family social event thwarted by Walter's failure to appear. The warmth of the fire dies along with the warmth of the family. Similarly the lighting of the lantern is connected with Walter's return; when he doesn't return the lantern lighting the outside of the house remains cold. Meanwhile, Elizabeth continues to speak bitterly about her husband. While she also exhibits an outward sternness with her children, her actions are more lenient, as she easily lets the girl off for coming home a bit late.



Elizabeth's bitter comments about Walter saying the house isn't warm enough (and the fact that the pub is) can be taken in two ways. First, it shows how she resents how Walter is always asking more of her when he gives so little. But Walter's desire for warmth can also be seen as a desire for a little warmth from her (a warmth he gets from the camaraderie at a bar), as opposed to her cold bitterness. It's worth noting also that the young boy John is following in her father's footsteps in his demand for the women of the house to provide warmth.



Elizabeth's anger with her husband is directly contrasted with her amusement with John. Although John and her husband share the same traits, she finds it amusing in her son and willingly fulfills her son's demands.



As Elizabeth **lights** the lamp, revealing her pregnant stomach, Annie catches sight of the **chrysanthemums** in her mother's waistband, exclaiming on their beauty. She goes to smell the flowers, commenting on how beautiful they smell. Her mother gives a short laugh and disagrees, saying that chrysanthemums were present when she married their father, when Annie was born, and when others first brought home their drunk father. Elizabeth bitterly rails against their father before going to clear the table. The children play silently, fearing their mother's wrath at their father's homecoming.

The significance of the flowers is here revealed, as they have been present from the happy initial moments of their marriage but also as that happiness died away. That Elizabeth collected the flowers at all, though, suggests she still has some nostalgia for those early happy times. And yet all of that again ends in a rant against her husband; the bitterness of the marriage now is overwhelming. Note how the light illuminates Elizabeth's pregnancy, and usually a coming baby would be associated with love. But Elizabeth's bitterness suggests no such thing is happening here.



Elizabeth sews as the children play, and her anger eventually wears out. The children tire of playing as well, and their mother announces that it's time for bed. Annie complains that her father isn't home yet, but her mother says that they'll bring him when they bring him, and there won't be a scene.

Elizabeth does not so much get control of her anger as she gets exhausted by it. She reassures her children that there won't be a scene so that she can put them to bed. Even though she's angry, she doesn't let her emotions get the best of her parenting.



The children quietly prepare for bed, and Elizabeth feels anger towards her husband for causing her and the children such distress. After the children are in bed, Elizabeth continues to sew, and her anger becomes tinged with fear.

Again, there's a huge contrast between Elizabeth's feelings as a mother and her feelings as a wife. She automatically places blame on her husband. Yet the tinge of fear now suggests that Walter's absence this time is longer than usual, and that Elizabeth worries it may not be the result of Walter's normal drinking.



PART 2

When the clock strikes eight, Elizabeth abandons her sewing and goes out the door. The night is **dark**, concealing the scuttling of rats. She walks until she reaches the road, where she can see the "Prince of Wales" ahead and loses her fear. She regains her conviction that her husband is drinking, but she refuses to go fetch him in the pub. Instead, she enters a passage between dwellings and speaks to Mrs. Rigley, another miner's wife. Mrs. Rigley says that her own husband has already come in for dinner and went out again for half an hour before bed. However, he hadn't said anything about Elizabeth's husband, Walter.

Elizabeth hurries in the dark, which seems to press in around her, emphasizing her solitude. And further, the scuttling rats hidden in the night seem to mirror Elizabeth's "scuttling" fears. Even the light from the pub "Prince of Wales" only serves to highlight the darkness outside, and the fact that she stands separate from the lively carousing of the pub. That she refuses to enter the bar again shows her pride—she refuses to be embarrassed by having to go inside to pull him out.



As Elizabeth turns to go, Mrs. Rigley stops her and says she'll go ask her husband, Jack, whether he knows anything. Mrs. Rigley asks Elizabeth to stop inside and apologizes for the state of the kitchen. Elizabeth reassures Mrs. Rigley that their kitchen is just as bad, but she silently disapproves of the untidiness of the room. She counts the shoes and realizes that they have twelve children, explaining the mess in the house.

The Ripleys return, and Jack Rigley reports that Elizabeth's husband isn't at "Prince of Wales." He admits that when he left work Walter stayed behind to finish up, and Elizabeth now feels certain of disaster. She reassures Rigley, however, and says that he probably went up to 'Yew Tree.' Rigley offers to look for Walter at Dick's, and he walks Elizabeth back to her house before he goes to search.

Back in her house, Elizabeth waits in the quiet. She's startled when she hears the sound of the winding-engine at the pit, but she calms herself again and waits longer. She takes up her sewing as more time passes, and then at a quarter to ten, she hears a pair of footsteps at the door. The door opens to reveal an elderly woman dressed in black—Walter's mother.

Walter's mother is upset and keeps telling Elizabeth that she doesn't know what they'll do. Alarmed, Elizabeth asks whether Walter is dead, and his mother responds that they must hope it's not as bad as that. Jack Rigley only told her that Walter had had an accident. Walter's mother tells Elizabeth not to get too upset, or it might affect her pregnancy.

Elizabeth thinks of how she might support her children if Walter is hurt or killed, while Walter's mother continues to ramble about her son. Walter's mother says that it's different for Elizabeth because Walter wasn't her son. Meanwhile, footsteps sound outside the house, and Elizabeth goes to the door. A man in pit-clothes informs Elizabeth that they're bringing Walter now.

Elizabeth asks whether it's bad, and the man responds that the doctor says that Walter's been dead for hours. Walter's mother collapses in a chair upon hearing the news and starts wailing, but Elizabeth shushes her, worried she'll wake the children. She asks the man what happened, and he responds that Walter was shut in and smothered. Walter's mother continues to wail, and Elizabeth once again shushes her.

Elizabeth's interaction with Mrs. Rigley is important, because her thoughts about Mrs. Rigley's kitchen show that Elizabeth is not just critical of her husband. She's critical of everyone. She's judged her father, Walter, and now the Ripleys. The constant criticism of others causes her to stand apart from community, and also makes Walter's criticism of the "coldness" in their house more understandable, and starts to suggest that Walter is not the only person at fault in the failure of their marriage.



The presence of death—in Elizabeth's sense of disaster—enters the story at this point and doesn't leave. The story continues on with a sense of dread. Elizabeth continues to put up a brave face, but Rigley's offer suggests that he too is worried about Walter.



The appearance of Walter's mother gives the reader a chance to directly compare and contrast the feelings of Elizabeth (wife) and Walter's mother towards Walter.



Walter's mother is hysterical and irrational at the news that her son's been injured, whereas Elizabeth asks the practical questions, seeking more information. The mother's love seems more powerful, more overwhelming, than the wife's.



When considering the possible consequences of Walter's accident, Elizabeth thinks of the practicalities of the loss—financial ramifications of the death—and how she can protect her own children more than she thinks of Walter. Similarly, Walter's mother focuses on her own child—Walter—and she explicitly tells Elizabeth that their feelings differ because Walter wasn't Elizabeth's son.



Walter's death is finally confirmed, and the confirmation sets Walter's mother to wailing again, while Elizabeth remains stern and practical. Note that the description of the way Walter was killed by asphyxiation—that he was "shut in and smothered"—bears a resemblance to what he seems to have felt his life was like with the critical Elizabeth.



Elizabeth prepares the parlor for Walter's body, **lighting** a candle and taking note of the "cold, deathly smell of **chrysanthemums** in the room." She shivers and lays down tablecloths to save her carpet. Walter's mother continues moaning and rocking in the chair, and Elizabeth informs her that she'll have to move because they're bringing the body. Walter's mother moves without taking much notice.

The men begin to move Walter's body into the room, and as they do so, the coat used to cover his body slips off, revealing his torso and causing his mother to wail again. One of the men knocks down the vase of **chrysanthemums**, and Elizabeth replaces them and mops up the water without looking at her husband. As the men comment on the accident, Annie calls for her mother from upstairs.

Elizabeth goes immediately to hush the girl, telling her to go back to bed and that nothing is amiss. Annie asks whether they've brought her father, and Elizabeth replies that they have. Elizabeth says that he's sleeping downstairs. Annie, hearing Walter's mother wailing, becomes frightened and asks about the sound, but Elizabeth tells her it's nothing, while one of the men attempts to shush the old woman. The children finally go back to sleep, and the men tiptoe out of the house.

When Elizabeth returns to the parlor, only Walter's mother remains with Walter's body. The two women begin to strip and wash his body. Seeing Walter's body, Elizabeth feels very removed from him, and both women are in awe of his composure and dignity in death. Elizabeth senses "the utter isolation of the human soul" and feels that the weight of her unborn child is apart from her.

After the women finish washing Walter's body, Walter's mother begins to reminisce about Walter as a child, while Elizabeth considers how removed she and Walter were from each other, even when he was alive. Even when they were physically intimate with each other, Elizabeth realized that there was no true connection there, and she feels that her unborn child is like ice in her womb.

Although Elizabeth lights a candle, it does little to warm the room as she still shivers. The chrysanthemums, meanwhile, which for Elizabeth had come to symbolize the death of their marriage, now are connected to death itself. In the face of Walter's death Elizabeth is able to function rationally while Walter's mother is not.



The arrival of her husband's dead body results in knocking over the chrysanthemums, which while a sad connection to their marriage was also the only remaining vestige of it.



Elizabeth controls her feelings in order to protect her children, while Walter's mother is unable to control her feelings at all in the face of her own child's death.



To the women, the dignity of Walter's dead body is so far removed from them as living beings that they are in awe of him. Elizabeth senses that all humans are essentially isolated from one another as she and Walter were as husband and wife—a revelation that doesn't seem to be shared by Walter's mother, who still regards Walter as her youthful son.



Elizabeth carries her feeling of isolation on to her unborn child—it's not yet a being she has to take care of, but a symbol and reminder of how far removed she was from Walter. For Walter's mother, however, Walter's death is an opportunity to remember her attachment to Walter as her child.



Elizabeth begins to acknowledge her role in the dissolution of their marriage, realizing that she never recognized her husband for who he was in life. She pities him as a human now that he's dead. Walter's mother and Elizabeth dress him in a new shirt, and Elizabeth feels a terrible weight at the distance between her and Walter, feeling almost ashamed to touch him.

Elizabeth feels that it's hopeless to try to understand another person in life—only when they're dead is it possible to see them objectively, as another (pitiable) human. At the same time, with this new objectivity she can now see that her judgmental nature played a role in their failed marriage. The German poet Rilke, a contemporary of D.H. Lawrence, discussed lovers as having the responsibility of protecting each other's solitude. Elizabeth and Walter did no such thing.



After the women finish dressing Walter, they cover him with a sheet, and Elizabeth fastens the parlor door so that the children will not stumble upon their father in the morning. Elizabeth goes about tidying the kitchen, aware that her current master is life. However, she fears her ultimate master, which is death.

Even after Elizabeth's revelation about the nature of life, death, and understanding human souls, she remembers to take care of her children. For her, they represent the life she's responsible for at the moment, even as she's aware that, ultimately, death will be as inescapable for her as it was for Walter.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Cao, Diana. "Odour of Chrysanthemums." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 5 Jan 2014. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Cao, Diana. "Odour of Chrysanthemums." LitCharts LLC, January 5, 2014. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/odour-of-chrysanthemums>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Odour of Chrysanthemums* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Lawrence, D. H.. *Odour of Chrysanthemums*. Penguin Classics. 2008.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lawrence, D. H.. *Odour of Chrysanthemums*. New York: Penguin Classics. 2008.