For B.A English Hons. Part-2; Paper-4

**Odour of Chrysanthemums**

D.H Lawrence is one the most disputed literary geniuses of the twentieth century. He was a prolific writer, who during the twenty years of his literary career tried his hand at different genres of literature. During this creative period, not a year passed without the publication of something important from his pen. He was a versatile genius who could excel in many fields. His novels and short stories are his most important and interesting work. He was a good poet and a gifted writer of descriptive and expository essays. Lawrence was one of the greatest English letter writers and his letters rank with those of John Keats and Gerald Manly Hopkins. Many of his contemporaries like Bennett, Wells, Galsworthy, Kipling were as celebrated as Lawrence, yet none of them had the impact on their age and ours that Lawrence had and yet continues to wield.

He was also blessed with a prophetic vision which he incorporated in all his writings. He did not hesitate to express his own ideas on a variety of topics such as politics, psychology, education, religion and many other spheres. His thinking was original and uninhibited as only of the greatest prophets, and he defied all current practices of fiction writing. His writings are highly original and thought-provoking.
Like Bernard Shaw, he was an iconoclast, who throughout his 2 literary career waged a war against the conventional values and ideas.

In comparison with France and Russia where the realistic story had already been introduced by Flaubert and Maupassant, Gogol and Tolstoy, Turgenev, Dostoevsky and Chekov respectively, the modern short story in England blossomed late. Upto the last decade of the nineteenth century English readers were still spending time with fables, legends, anecdotes and tall tales. Joyce, Mansfield, Woolf and Lawrence who would follow the discoveries of Turgenev, Chekov and Verga were still school children and they began writing short stories only in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Among these writers, Lawrence is clearly the best writer in the range and quantity of masterpieces.

During his own period, Lawrence speedily altered several of the premises of the nineteenth century short story, to serve his own talent. His first tales written in 1907 and 1908 are relatively traditional and consist of legends and anecdotes. In the last part of 1908, he however discovered the new school of realism. In his short fiction, Lawrence adopted the ideas of this new school at once. But he had to struggle with a variety of nineteenth century romantic notions about the novel for about three years, before he could adopt these ideas in his long fiction.

In his first visionary tales "The Prussian Officer" and "Vin Ordinaire". He wrote "The Fox", "You Touched Me" and "The Border Line" during this period. This vision of masculine dominance soon ended and "The Overtone" and "St Mawr" mark that end. In Lawrence's last visionary tales both masculine and feminine voices are honoured. In the later stories, Lawrence moves towards fables and satires. He was thus inspired to write "The Rocking-Horse Winner", "The Man who Loved Islands" and "The Man who Died."
"Odour of Chrysanthemums" is the first of a cluster of tales to focus on the familiar than the fantastic. The early realistic tales written between 1909 and 1912 are important because they taught Lawrence the craft of writing a short story. These tales are also important because they lead to Sons and Lovers. Lawrence's visionary tales saw him through great changes of thinking between 1913 and 1925, and this shows clearly the flexibility of the adaptation of realistic short stories to visionary perspectives.

"Odour of Chrysanthemums" was written in the autumn of 1909. It is supposedly subdivided in three parts: Part I: Waiting; Part II: The Search; and Part III: Death. And after revision, it was published in The English Review in July 1911. Lawrence later included this tale in his collection entitled The Prussian Officer and Other Stories, which Duckworth, his London publisher, bought out on 26 November 1914.

Elizabeth Bates is the main character of the story. She has two young children and is pregnant with a third. She is waiting for her husband Walter, a coal miner, to come home. She thinks that he has gone straight to the pub after work and she feels angry. It turns out to be something completely different. In the end, she's come to realize that they really never did know each other. "Odour of Chrysanthemums" focuses on a dramatic moment in the life of Mrs. Elizabeth Bates, the accidental death of her husband, Walter Bates. The story develops in three major stages.

The story begins with a description of the sights and sounds of a bleak mining village at the end of the mine’s afternoon shift. Mrs. Bates calls her son, John, in for the evening meal and provides a light snack for her father, a train driver, while chiding her daughter, Annie, about being late from school. She is also
upset because her husband is not home from work yet, and she has a feeling he is drunk at the pub again. Mrs. Bates’s daughter directs her to begin the evening meal without their father and appreciates the flowers her mother wears in her apron. Mrs. Bates can only criticize her husband before her children and lament the misery and neglect in her life. She is a fretful, nagging mother, but clearly one who wants a better life for her children, and she doesn’t hide her outrage at her husband’s recklessness.

In the second part of the story, Mrs. Bates, now worried and no longer angry, goes out to search for her husband. Tension builds as she asks her neighbors for news about Walter’s whereabouts, and Mr. Riley goes in search of his missing partner. Everyone knows that while Mr. Bates may simply be drunk in one of the village’s many pubs, he may also be seriously injured, though their fears are unspoken. When Walter’s mother arrives to comfort Elizabeth, at Mr. Rigby’s suggestion, we know something is amiss and rapidly the disaster is revealed, but not until the two women display their very different views of Walter. The elder Mrs. Bates recalls a lively boy and suggests his wife should be more forgiving and generous to him. Elizabeth muses to herself that if her husband is merely wounded, she may be able to nurse him to better physical and moral health. She quickly realizes how sentimental these thoughts are, indicating, along with her memory of Walter’s gifts of flowers, and Mrs. Bates’s memories of his youthful liveliness, the mixture of fond delusion and unspoken sexual desire which first made Walter attractive to her.

The story’s pace accelerates with the speed of disaster. The men from the mine arrive with Walter’s body, and now Elizabeth knows for certain that he has died. She shows almost more concern for her carpet and a smashed vase than she does for the body of her husband, but she goes and kindly comforts her daughter
woken by the sounds in the house. After the men leave, depositing the body in the parlor, but safely away from the carpet, Elizabeth Bates and her mother-in-law begin to wash the body. Rinsing the dirt from the unmarked body, Elizabeth comes to reevaluate her husband’s worth and their life together, realizing that they never really knew each other and that she might have been to blame for the failure their marriage had become.

The story of Odour of Chrysanthemums is the most unusual story. There is no plot in it. It is remarkable that nothing happens in the story. There is only a sense of brooding expectations that something is going to happen. It is on this sense of uneasy expectation that Lawrence builds up the tension in the story. The aura in the story is suffused with a permanent tension.

The story is highly symbolic and contains patterns of imagery associated with darkness and fire, but its most obvious pattern relates to the flowers of its title. Chrysanthemums, the flowers of the title are intended to be the primary symbol of the story. Their presence hangs over the entire narrative and their thematic frame of reference is directly addressed within the story. Elizabeth’s wry recollection that chrysanthemums accompanied so many of the major turning points her life from marriage to births to the first time her husband got so drunk he had to be helped home indicate that the flowers are, above all else, symbols of transition and change.

The flowers also represent Elizabeth’s struggle to maintain a sense of grace and beauty amid the dreariness of her world. Just as the flowers fighting the mine dust outside the home are “dishevelled.” Soon, while awaiting the arrival of her husband’s body, she notices that the odor of the flowers she has picked is “cold”
and “deathly.” The men arriving with the corpse knock over a vase holding the chrysanthemums, signifying her smashed illusions concerning her marriage.

Unlike many Victorian novels, such as George Eliot’s Felix Holt, in which the train represents progress, here it symbolizes merely destructions. In this environment, a vine clutches at a cottage as if it wants to pull the structure down, and even the chrysanthemums are “dishevelled.” The war between the organic world and the hard, machine world of the mine reflects the conflict between the characters in the story. Walter is associated until the end with the murderous, mechanical domain of the mine, and Elizabeth with the chrysanthemums.

The story makes reference to a range of traditional symbols. Like much of Lawrence’s work, it draws extensively on nature imagery. In this way, Lawrence belongs to a line of prose writers in the pastoral narrative tradition of Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, who celebrated rural life, discovering in nature something of profound spiritual significance. Their sympathy with nature also indicates a nostalgia for a mythic English past, which probably never existed in the idealized form they presented. Certainly, however, the rural environment was being transformed from the mid-eighteenth century up to the time of Lawrence by industrialization, which blights the environment of the Bates’s family home at the beginning of “Odour of Chrysanthemums.”

This short story has many themes including the isolation of the human soul and the nature of love. Early on, Elizabeth is isolated in her home as she waits helplessly for Walter, and she is further isolated when she seeks help in finding him and thus becomes the subject of gossip among the other wives. We can assume that Walter felt isolated in his marriage as well, unknown and unseen by Elizabeth. In death, he has achieved the ultimate isolation, and widowed, Elizabeth is now
even further isolated than she was before. The nature of love between Elizabeth and Walter is much darker than the love between Elizabeth and her two existing children.

From the technical point of view, the story can be slammed because it does not follow the well established rules which govern the short story. Catherine Mansfield and Anton Chekov attempted the kind of narrative which does not move on like a river taking one from point to point but stays in one place like a lake. We have got no right to say that only a river is beautiful; a lake has also its own kind of enchantment.

With perfect objectivity and compassion Lawrence depicts a waste of life in order to affirm life and discriminate the point from which civilization must begin to reconstruct itself if we wish to recover a true unanmalous vision of ourselves, one another, and the world.

According to critics, “…………this short story is about transformation and change ……by the end of the story, when the grime and dirt from the mine are washed off Walter Bates’s handsome body, his natural beauty emerges and he is again the innocent “lamb” his mother remembers from his boyhood. The story concerns his transformation from an irresponsible, hurtful, and selfish man into a symbol of masculine beauty and life itself. More importantly, it concerns the metamorphosis of Elizabeth Bates. By the end of the story, she has recognized the true, abstract worth of her husband, and the “otherness” of another world, which he represents. She is humbled by this revelation and will be a chastened and more reverential woman in future. The story accomplishes the transformation of the two characters through the manipulation of a variety of symbols, and through the
representation of Elizabeth Bates as an intrusive reader and interpreter of grand symbolic occurrences in her own life…….”.

….THANK YOU