

Meeting in the dark:  
solitude and union in  
d. h. lawrence's  
"odour of  
chysanthemu...



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A seemingly impenetrable solitude permeates human life in D. H. Lawrence's two short stories, "Odour of Chrysanthemums" and "The Horse Dealer's Daughter". Inside Lawrence's fictional worlds, the thematic isolation of individuals from one another (often compounded by a profound remoteness from one's own self) situates itself as a paradoxically separating yet potentially unifying force between people - but firstly, as a thoroughly cumbersome facet of the human condition. Each of Lawrence's stories conveys the essential tragedy of the human condition through the ever-present reality of inevitable death. In the lives of the central characters, a precarious divorce from any true comprehension of mortality works to further complicate their confused isolation; each individual struggles mechanically in an obscure world, steeped in the burden of his "daily self" ("Horse" 2665), or appearing as Mabel does to Jack - as a "small black figure moving in the hollow of the failing day" (2666). In "Chrysanthemums," the immense gap that lies between people on earth becomes a reality to Elizabeth Bates as the tragically overdue realization brought about by a death, while in "Horse," Lawrence ambiguously portrays the possibility of making amends - of traversing that gap and connecting with another - before time runs out. Lawrence opens each story by introducing his characters as notably still subjects in a surrounding world of motion. In "Chrysanthemums", Elizabeth and her son stand waiting amidst "clanking, stumbling" (2647) locomotives and trucks that "[thump] heavily past" (2648). The reader finds the story's subjects in a fast-paced, industrial coal mining village - an environment whose busy, active atmosphere highlights the quiet solitude of the people it contains, isolated from the moving world and from each other. The activity that continues in their presence is

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described as “ inevitable movement” (2648), a constant progression of civilization that underscores the apparent ineffectuality of humans like Elizabeth, a wife and mother who stands “ insignificantly trapped between jolting black wagons” (2648). Similarly, “ a confused tramping of horses’ feet” serves as the backdrop to the Pervin family’s despairing silences, emitting a “ strange air of ineffectuality” (“ Horse” 2660). Not only does Joe’s opening question to Mabel, “ what are you going to do with yourself?” (2660) signify the metaphysical stillness of Lawrence’s central characters, but this stillness forms a gap between the family members themselves. The narrator conveys this in lines such as, “[Mabel] did not share the same life as her brothers” (2660). The cavalcade of horses outside furthers the “ sense of disaster” (2661) brought about the death of Mr. Pervin. While it is principally the trains’ perpetual motion in “ Chrysanthemums” that encircles the stark existence of Elizabeth, the horses that both surround and define the Pervin family take on a more complex symbolism as Joe, in a “ stupor of downfall” (“ Horse” 2661), compares the militant yet unaware passage of the horses to his own human circumstance: Every movement showed a massive, slumbrous strength, and a stupidity which held them in subjection. The groom at the head looked back, jerking the leading rope. And the cavalcade moved out of sight up the lane, the tail of the last horse, bobbed up tight and stiff, held out taut from the swinging great haunches as they rocked behind the hedges in a motion-like sleep. ( 2661)The “ massive” presence of these mammals pointedly reflects the apparent power of life itself, whether animal or human; however, the harnessed state of the horses reminds the reader that a related, though less definable, burden weighs on the Pervin family and, implicitly, on all living beings whose dramatic movements are pitted

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with inherent subjection. Lawrence peculiarly inverts his description of the horse's movement (or lack thereof): while a more typical allusion to sleepwalking would perhaps have been satisfactory to convey a horse's propensity to move without autonomy, the author invokes the rather unsightly notion of " motion-like sleep," thereby suggesting that the beings he describes live in perpetual half-consciousness; not fully engaged in actions, nor receptive to the guidance of others; one's life may appear to be in motion but in actuality involves no trace of free will or self-determination. With this pervasive, metaphorical slumber, the frustrating dimness of the surrounding world stresses the characters' inability to see the reality of their existence (assuming, that is, that human life may be clarified at all).

Significantly, Lawrence reveals that the source of his characters' vague sight comes both from within, and from without. Elizabeth, for example, struggles to conquer the oppressive atmosphere when she periodically " look[s] piercingly through the dusk" (" Chrysanthemums" 2648), just as Jack Fergusson demonstrates the rare success of detecting a person " in the midst of such obscurity" (" Horse" 2666); however, a number of Lawrence's characters, both alive and deceased, are plagued with compromised vision. The eyes of Mr. Bates' corpse are not only " half shut" but " glazed in the obscurity" (" Chrysanthemums" 2659), and the reader of " Horse" cannot help but relate Mabel's brother's " glazed hopeless eyes" (2661) to the look of the dead body in " Chrysanthemums". Both stories are fraught with references to the enigmatic world in which humans live and breathe; each landscape continually marked by " uncertain darkness" (" Chrysanthemums" 2650) or " dim, dark grey" (" Horse" 2667) serves to accentuate Lawrence's motif of solitude in the face of inscrutable surroundings. Before either <https://assignbuster.com/meeting-in-the-dark-solitude-and-union-in-d-h-lawrences-odour-of-chysanthemums-and-the-horse-dealers-daughter/>

narrative develops into a discussion of connections between individuals, Lawrence paints his characters in such a self-contained light that human life appears to be a relentlessly singular experience. Throughout the family's period of waiting for Mr. Bates' return in "Chrysanthemums", "their faces [are] hidden from each other" (2650), or appear transfigured by the flickering light of the fire. As it remains rare for the characters in "Horse" to actually look each other in the eye, Mabel sits fixed and unnoticed amongst her brothers who "had talked at her and round her for so many years, that she hardly heard them at all" (2662). Each central character's isolated struggle to see clearly in their own story thereby evolves into concern over seeing others clearly - another human being inevitably grappling with the same earthly uncertainty. For Elizabeth, the death of her husband provides the dose of lucidity that allows her to reflect on the complexity of human relationships; faced with the oppressive presence of her husband's heavy, naked corpse in front of her, Elizabeth is overwhelmed by the separateness of his being from hers: "There lies the reality, this man." And her soul died in her for fear: 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. And now she saw, and turned silent in seeing. For she had been wrong. She had said he was something he was not; she had felt familiar with him. Whereas he was apart all the while, living as she never lived, feeling as she never felt. ("Chrysanthemums" 2659) Lawrence's passage highlights the symbolic "darkness" that circulates in the world of his characters; in each story, this darkness obscures clear vision, signifies human boundaries, and comprises a concrete representation of the line that must be crossed before individuals can truly "see" one another and connect.

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However, Elizabeth's reflections at the close of "Chrysanthemums" are less amenable to the plausibility of conquering solitude at all. She and Mr. Bates have had the luxury of finding each other "in the dark," but continued to lack genuine knowledge of each other's essence. Elizabeth is struck by the realization that a consciously formed "marriage" could in fact be sheer artifice - that the bond one seeks to form in the world can be ultimately hindered by insuperable individuality, leaving one "familiar" with another yet always a stranger to his or her interior experience of life. Suggestive of the "massive, slumbrous strength" that characterizes animal life in "Horse", the burdensome weight of Mr. Bates' corpse expresses to Elizabeth the sharp boundaries of the physical body - and, in turn, the true horror of human solitude: "A terrible dread gripped her all the while: that he could be so heavy and utterly inert, unresponsive, apart. The horror of the distance between them was almost too much for her - it was so infinite a gap she must look across" ("Chrysanthemums" 2660). "Chrysanthemums" is thus ambiguous about whether Mr. and Mrs. Bates' lack of oneness is specific to their circumstances, or a sign of a dark consequence of the human condition: the mortal impossibility of solidarity, empathy, or love. In "Horse", Jack Fergusson peers into "the thick, ugly falling dusk" and sees Mabel "positively enough" (2666). Their mutual gaze invokes in each of them the feeling of being "found out by the other" (2665), insinuating the possibility that, in this case, two characters may understand each other's plight, despite their explicitly different natures. While Lawrence portrays Jack's intrigue with "the innermost body" (2666) of people's lives, Mabel is, until her brush with death, "immune from the world" (2665). Nevertheless, Mabel's portentous look penetrates Jack's "fretted, daily self" (2665) from <https://assignbuster.com/meeting-in-the-dark-solitude-and-union-in-d-h-lawrences-odour-of-chysanthemums-and-the-horse-dealers-daughter/>

across the gulf of dusk light that separates them. Lawrence thus begins to restore the hope (absent in "Chrysanthemums") that some universal thread ties humans together after all; the prospect of some greater, unspecifiable significance becomes especially imminent through the union of two people struggling in the same dim light. To a certain extent, Jack and Mabel's new love places the two of them in the thick of the old problems; only now, their most deeply felt experiences are shared. Even during the passionate realization of Jack's love for Mabel, death and inertia continue to characterize their imperturbable natures. Jack "remain[s] motionless, suspended through one of man's eternities" as he fears the "look of death" (2669) in Mabel's eyes. Although the somber message of "Odour of Chrysanthemums" emerges through Elizabeth's grievous thoughts about death and solitude, the reader of "The Horse Dealer's Daughter" finds that what develops between Jack and Mabel offers redemption for the human nature evidenced in Lawrence's earlier story. While for Elizabeth Bates a meeting in the dark can promise no more than companionship between two innately self-contained people, Jack and Mabel's discovery of each other is a triumph. At the close of "Chrysanthemums," Elizabeth becomes aware that life is merely a momentary guide, and death her "ultimate master" from which she cowers "with fear and shame" (2660). It is only under these terms that Jack and Mabel communicate with each other, each conscious of their fear of death, shameful of their human limitations, and aware of the horror of solitude. United by a confused reality, even the first moments that Lawrence's new lovers spend together convey the emotional weight that accompanies authentic participation in another's life. Jack consciously chooses the difficult path of love, for "he want[s] to remain like that for ever, with his heart

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hurting him in a pain that [is] also life to him" ("Horse" 2669). Lawrence's narrative suggests that such connections may provide a source of lifeblood both painful and desirable. Heartbroken in love, Jack and Mabel will continue to sustain themselves, as though the risk of loving and possibly of losing is a manifestation of the pain of living, and of dying.