

Story as Life

Similarities and Differences between *The Odour of Chrysanthemums* and *Daxuesheng*

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Forward

At one time in history literary criticism placed the reader at the center, developed a reader oriented theory, and went as far as to claim that “the Author is Dead”. In actuality, we cannot entirely eradicate the influence of an author in a creative work. To a certain degree, an author’s world vision and values are manifested in their writings. This essay has selected the works of a foreigner author, David Herbert Lawrence, and a domestic author, Wang Anyi, to compare to one another and attempt to analyze the similarities and differences of two of their short stories. In speaking about these works, the backgrounds in which the stories take place, the character’s social status, etc, are all very similar. In another aspect, both authors have both enmeshed their own personal life experiences into that of their short stories. Due to the two author’s different feelings towards society during their respective times, the final outcomes of their works are filled with different tones. It can be said that these stories are the manifestations of each author’s profound thoughts towards society.

1. Lawrence and *The Odour of Chrysanthemums*

D.H. Lawrence is one of the most important 20th century British writers. His works are basically considered to fall into the realm of realism, with the backgrounds of his short stories mostly being set in his hometown of Nottingham Shire, which adds a strong sense of reality to many of his writings. *The Odour of Chrysanthemums* is no exception to the characteristics Lawrence’s writings.

Lawrence’s *The Odour of Chrysanthemums*, displays in front of us the blood, sweat, and tears of a mining family. The story’s character of Walter is a common miner. Everyday he indulges in alcohol, and alienates himself from his wife. On this day, as in the past, Walter does not return home, but his wife, Elisabeth, persistently waits for him. Not knowing that there was an accident in the mine, what returns is her husband’s corpse.

The story begins by revealing to us the lowly life of mine work. “In the open, the smoke from the engine sank and cleaved to the rough grass. The fields were dreary and forsaken, and in the marshy strip that led to the whimsy, a reedy pit-pond, the fowls had already abandoned their run among the alders, to roost in the tarred fowl-house. The pit-bank loomed up beyond the pond... Just beyond rose the tapering chimneys and the clumsy black head-stocks of Brinsley Colliery”. “At the edge of the ribbed level of sidings squat a low cottage, three steps down from the cinder track.” (1) This is the place where Elizabeth and Walter live, their lives being surrounded by the industry. “For a male author, a village represents tradition, it is a paradise; honesty represents T.S.

Elliot's spiritual wasteland, and is degradation and dirt.” (2) “对于男性作家来说，乡村代表着传统，是一方净土；诚实代表着 T.S 艾略特所说的精神荒原，是堕落、污浊。” (2) What Lawrence unfolds before us, however, is another side of things. The village is not the embodiment of beauty, but having been seriously affected by industrialization, the environment has caused a transformation in the people's hearts and minds, especially of those in the lowest level of society. It is very difficult for them to adapt to such a drastic change and thus resort to other methods to vent their inner feelings. Walter is an example of this in the story, and his method is to turn to alcohol. From the beginning we learn from Elizabeth's conversations with her relatives that Walter often sneaks out to the bar. In her chatter while anxiously awaiting the return of her husband, Elizabeth says various times that he probably passed by the house on his way to the pub. The pub has become a place where he can escape from reality, as the fatigue from work and burdens of life have pushed him to turn to alcohol to pass the time. Due to the way in which industry destroys human nature and causes the distancing of relationships between people, Elizabeth is not able to understand his excessive drinking and the anguish in his heart. Every time he goes to the pub, she does not have the will to go and bring him back home. On the surface their marriage seems quiet but underneath there lays many problems. After Elizabeth waits for a long time, Walter dies in the mine. With his passing, the only hope of the family goes as well. Elizabeth's mother says “This for you is ... a disaster, a real disaster!” (3) In actuality, the family's only economic pillar has collapsed, and with no hope for Elizabeth or the family's livelihoods, they too will fallow suit and collapse. Facing her husband's corpse, Elizabeth begins a process of self examination, “she said he was reliable, in fact he was not; she thought she knew him, however he was always distant. She never experienced his life, and never felt his affection.” (4) She realizes that her marriage was a failure “in fact, hopelessness doomed between them well before his sudden death.” (5) Walter's death actually made the barefaced alienation that existed between them more evident. “There was a cold, deathly smell of chrysanthemums in the room” that seems to spread their despair.

Those who are familiar with D.H. Lawrence can see that the character of Walter, in reality, is the embodiment of Lawrence's father. Moreover, the short story seems to epitomize the author's family situation during his childhood.

Lawrence was born into a mining family. In *Laolunsi Chuan* (A Biography of D.H. Lawrence), the author Xing Jianchang says the following about Lawrence's hometown; “at the end of the 19th century, this place has clearly stamped itself as a place of the industrial revolution; tawny avenues, low dirty homes, slate tiled roofs, mine frames that tower high, and smoke stacks who's soot covers the surrounding people's gardens”. (6) Using different words, this type of environment is similar to the one in *The Odour of Chrysanthemums*, and the place where the story takes place is the same as the one where Lawrence spent his childhood. Loathing this type of environment, Lawrence describes this village as a spiritual wasteland, not beautiful, but simply filthy. Lawrence's father, Arthur Lawrence, was a miner, completely illiterate, and was the family's only worker. His mother was very a knowledgeable and reasonable, gentle and mild woman. It was destined that inescapable confrontations would exist in such a union. His mother hated the fact that his father liked to drink, and because of this the two often quarreled, with Lawrence detesting his father. In what can be called Lawrence's autobiographical novel, *Sons and Lovers* also describes the hate he and his mother both had for his father's drinking. The relationship of Walter and Elizabeth in *The Odour of*

Chrysanthemums was not better than that of Lawrence's parents. In the story their marriage was full of problems, and the coldness and distance that existed between the husband and wife caused the family to lack the warmth a family deserves. Walter, just like Arthur, chose the same method of drinking to pass the time. The obvious reality is that Lawrence's parents are the prototypes of Walter and Elizabeth in the *Odour of Chrysanthemums*. Drinking is not the patent of just these two men, the life of a miner seems to be linked to that of alcohol. *Laolunsi Chuan* describes the following; "miners sometimes can be found poaching around the half deserted village, or sometimes assembled in groups of three to five at a bar, exchanging their money for beer. When these fellows drunkenly find their way home, what is waiting for them is often a quarrel. This is because these few schillings that went for alcohol were accounted for by their wives to cover living expenses, and thus, what was already a tight living becomes even more constrained". (7) This is the life of a miner, using alcohol to numb themselves and escape reality, yet reality is not easy to escape. Perhaps just as in this industrialized community, the difficulties of life and the quarreling sounds from Lawrence's youth, have implanted the seeds of despair inside him. As a result, this type of disappointment towards society, towards life, are naturally revealed in his stories.

2. Wangan Yi and Daxuesheng

Wang Anyi is a contemporary female Chinese writer. Her short story *Daxuesheng* (The University Student) is based on the large amount of migrant workers that live in cities and the hardships they face in their living situations. If we examine closely, it is not difficult to discover that this short story and Lawrence's *The Odour of Chrysanthemums* have many similarities as well as differences. In this story we can also see the personal reflection of Wang Anyi.

In *Daxuesheng* the protagonist is a so-called "university student" from the northwest countryside. He has received some education and is a bit cultured. He has graduated from high school but has not gone to university, so calling him a "university student" of course refers more to his manner. He not only has no trade but also does not work in the fields. He spends all day running around outside and spends very little time at home. This time he has come to Liangcheng New Village to visit his younger cousin Li Wenge. Li Wenge is a migrant worker and works repairing the homes of others to earn a bit of money. Nowadays, it should be said that migrant workers are a disadvantaged group of people from the lower levels of society. Many of them have not received much education and can only rely on a bit of technical skills to support their families. When they leave their homes for the outside world and come to cities with forests of skyscrapers to earn money, what they make is very little. Add to this their status in society, that many migrants receive little to no recognition, are discriminated upon, and have lost out on everything, they still do not dare say anything. Li Wenge is one of these people. He is making painstaking efforts so that his family conditions will improve. Even as the Chinese Spring festival approaches, he is still out working, "I want to return home and reunite with family, but I also want to find a job over the holiday and make a little more money to then bring my wife and child over from the countryside. In this large city I will have a special New Year". (8) However this city gives him an affectionless blow as during this time an unfortunate event happens. While he is working he becomes upset and feels wronged by the boss and piping specialist, Old Gu,

who likes to make things difficult for people. In fear of losing his job, he does not want to talk back, because it would have been difficult for him at that time to find a new job. From this we can see at once the difficult situation that migrant workers encounter. When facing the setbacks of life they have no choice but to follow along. But the “university student” encourages Wenge to fight back and go and talk with the boss. It is here where we discover the differences between the university student and Li Wenge. The university student has received some education, understands a bit of reason, and is always trying to converse with the boss, trying to integrate into the city and become one of them. In facing the rural and urban transformation of society, he adapts a method whereby he transforms himself into an urbanite. However, no matter how hard he tries, the city does not accept him. Every time he encounters the boss, he always “tries to go up and shake the boss’s hand, give him a cigarette, talk a bit about the weather or other situational topics, as if they were friends. When the boss goes to inspect work and put forth suggestions and demands, the ‘university student’ turns into the spokesman for the workers, immediately putting forth a frame for negotiations and tries to reason with the boss”. Encountering a powerful boss, the “university student” will be directly brushed aside and the boss will say, I will not talk with you, and will then go and look for the person responsible for the issue. (9) Even though he encounters these types of obstacles he still tries to find opportunities to interact with people from the city. The difference between rural and urban, the exclusion of the rural from the urban, and the plight of the people from the countryside living in the city are all vividly portrayed to us. Under the mobilization of the “university student”, the weak Wenge has the chance to indirectly engage in a discussion with the boss, where the outsider has a chance to directly confront the city dweller. Although the discussion is a failure, and in the end recognition is not received, yet what it does do is give Li Wenge an injection of courage. After the failure of the discussion the boss tells them to leave, in response the “university student” asks, “is it ok if we leave tomorrow?” (10) At this time, after the “university student”, who provoked him to fight back, goes soft, Li Wenge, however, “puts down his bowl, gets up, and begins packing up” (11), “he picks up the bag, stands up straight, and says in good spirits: lets go home for the holiday!” (12) This one sentence seems to cast aside everything and shows his ambivalence towards being resistant and courageous. From this incident, he appears to be stronger than before and not so obsequious. Perhaps such an experience has made him more courageous in confronting set backs.

Wang Anyi is a contemporary female Chinese literary writer. Her works are often based on the trivial matters of daily life, among which however includes the author’s deep thoughts on life and reality. *Daxuesheng* is the author’s expression of solidarity for the living conditions of those people who come from outside to live in the cities.

“In 1955, Wang Anyi as the generation after the “comrades”, moved with her parents from Nanjing to Shanghai, and became a Shanghainese immigrant after the founding of the nation. As a political immigrant after the revolutionists victory, Wang Anyi’s heart was filled deeply with feelings of loneliness, always searching to find recognition from the city.” (13) Wang Anyi also harbored feelings about finding her own place in the city, and perhaps it is because of these feelings that she shows concern to the urban migrant workers stumbles and falls. From her own personal experience, she puts forth an investigation on the problems of the relationship between the people who immigrate to the city with that of the local city culture. As an immigrant living in Shanghai herself, Wang Anyi possess deep understanding of the living experience of

immigrants. She has taken notice of the defensive and exclusive nature of Shanghai's local culture towards outside cultures. Therefore, in *Daxuesheng*, we have the incident where Li Wenge is being prompted by the university student to confront the boss. Yet the result is still failure and in the end all they can do is go home, expelled by the city. Wang Anyi must also possess a sense of disappointment towards the city. Although material things in the city are abundant, and the people's living conditions are good, the city's forest of skyscrapers lacks a feeling of warmth that the countryside has. She feels that although the people from the rural areas are poor they have a fervent love of life. She sees the beauty in the person from the countryside, which is what the person from the city lacks. So in the end, what we see in the short story is Li Wenge wearily returning home to spend the holiday, but he does not let this incident take hope out of his life.

3. Conclusion

Through this comparison, we discover that these two stories do not lack similarities.

Simply speaking, Walter and Li Wenge are apart of the lowest working level of society and are both the economic pillars of their families. They both are taking on enormous amounts of pressures, pressures that come from the changing surrounding environment, one being industrialization, and another being urbanization. What is ultimately different is their attitudes towards life. In the end, Walter and Elizabeth's family, because of Walter's death, goes down a path of more hardship where Elizabeth's disappointment towards life becomes more apparent. Li Wenge, however, through the support of the "university student" and trying to reason with his boss, seems to have been injected with courage. He is not disappointed but goes on working hard.

Moreover, the reflections of both authors' are apparent in these two stories. What's more is that these authors want to communicate their views on society's common phenomena in these stories.

Having been raised in a miner's family, Lawrence lived in a generation that belonged to a period of changing times, where the influences of industrialization were serious. He abhorred the industrialization of capitalism and believes that industrialization oppresses and distorts a person's human nature. This perspective resulted in him making human relations between the sexes the main theme of his writing. Using the pen, he accuses society that is under the oppression industrialization, for the alienation of people from each other and for life's hardships. Perhaps it is because of the author's disappointment towards society at that time that led him to write such a story, where Walter dies and leaves Elizabeth behind to face the cruelty of life, with nothing but endless despair. Just as Lawrence writes in his book *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: "all living things will be eliminated under the ravages of the iron".

Having experienced the Cultural Revolution, Wang Anyi too has experienced the changing of times, and has witnessed a series of changes in China's development. Therefore, urbanization is something she is familiar with and also has the authority to speak about. She has seen society change and people from the lowest levels

strive to adapt and pursue the progress of the times, yet concurrently encountering various types of issues. The problems of the migrant workers are without a doubt one of these issues. By writing this story she is informing people about a common phenomenon in contemporary society. Although Wang Anyi has experienced societal changes, and retains feeling of disappointment towards the affectionless city, nonetheless she continually makes efforts to uncover the problems of the city, explore its spirit, and therefore hopes to confront and rescue it. She believes that China's development will improve and puts this belief on display to us in the character of Li Wenge. Although Li Wenge experiences all types of barriers, yet his belief in life is not lost and he continues to fight and struggle for his little family.

It can be said that the works of excellence that these author's produce is because of their keen insights of society, allowing them to bring the characters in their works to life. These two stories have similarities yet their endings unfold differently. Just as Freud points out his book *The Creative Writer and Daydreaming*, the creative work of an author is a type of fantasy in which is hidden a desire that the author is unable to satisfy or put into reality. These two author's, without a doubt, have put their spirits into these works, expressing through them the unique monologue of their inner heart.

Annotations

1. D.H. Lawrence, translated by Zhuwan and Zhu Jiongqiang, *Selected Stories of D.H. Lawrence*, D.H Lawrence Author [M], People's Literature Publishing House, 2006, pg. 233.
2. Song Wen, *The Circumstances of Modern and Post-Modern Urban Women – A Critique on Michael Cunnigham's <The Hours>*, *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, 2006, pg. 148.
3. D.H. Lawrence, translated by Zhuwan and Zhu Jiongqiang, *People's Literature Publishing House*, pg. 243.
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5. D.H. Lawrence, translated by Zhuwan and Zhu Jiongqiang, *People's Literature Publishing House*, pg. 250.

6. Xing Jianchang, *Laolunsi Chuan (A Biography of D.H. Lawrence)* [M], Beijing, China Radio and Television Publishing House, 2003, pg. 1.

7. Ibid

8. Wan Anyi, *Yinju de Shidai – Wang Anyi Zhongduanbian Xiaoshuo* (An Age of Seclusion – A Collection of Wang Anyi's Middle and Short Stories) [M], Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing Group, 1999, pg. 103.

9. Wang Anyi, *Yinju de Shidai – Wang Anyi Zhongduanbian Xiaoshuo* (An Age of Seclusion – A Collection of Wang Anyi's Middle and Short Stories) [M], Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing Group, 1999, pg. 106.

10. Wang Anyi, Beijing, *Yinju de Shidai – Wang Anyi Zhongduanbian Xiaoshuo* (An Age of Seclusion – A Collection of Wang Anyi's Middle and Short Stories) [M], Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing Group, 1999, pg. 120.

11. Ibid

12. Ibid

13. Zhang Yongchun: *Cong Xianshi Rensheng dao Xinling Shijie – Lun Wang Anyi de Xiaoshuo Chuangzuo* (From the Reality of Life to the Spirit World – Discussions on Wang Anyi's Short stories), Shaanxi Normal University, 2005, pg. 19.

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