

**Unhappily Ever After:**

**Representations of Women in *Odour of Chrysanthemums* and *The Return of the Soldier***

The female characters in D.H. Lawrence's *Odour of Chrysanthemums* and Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* are clearly shaped by societal forces. These societal forces do are not positive. These forces cause the characters to be trapped and live out their lives as prisoners.

Elizabeth Bates is the main character in *Odour of Chrysanthemums*. She is married with two children with a third on the way. In the story, she is waiting with her mother-in-law for her husband to come home from work. She married very young and it seems that at first their marriage was a happy one. But now they have clearly drifted apart, as she says to her daughter "[i]t 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 buttonhole." (Lawrence 2321) It is clear that the image of the chrysanthemum that represents her life and it slowly changes from a romantic symbol to a symbol of despair. Eventually she learns that her husband has died. The symbolism of chrysanthemums continues when her husband returns home as a corpse. The men who carry his corpse into her house knock over a vase of chrysanthemums, causing the symbol of chrysanthemums to shift from symbolizing a bad marriage to symbolizing death, both for her husband and perhaps for her. The broken vase further compounds this symbol by representing a shattered and broken life. After the men leave she admits that she had "[known] him falsely" (2329) and that her

differences were not with him, but with a husband "who did not exist". (2329)  
Elizabeth's life is most definitely an unhappy one.

The real tragedy about Elizabeth's life is that there was no way it could have been better. Elizabeth is trapped by the society she lives in. She knows that her marriage is unhappy, but she cannot get a divorce. Even if she were allowed to divorce, she has no skills and as a woman, she would not be allowed to work. Elizabeth and the children's survival is wholly dependant on her husband. Her fear of not being able to survive is clear when the narrator describes her thoughts when she ponders what she will do "if he was killed—would she be able to manage on the little pension and what she could earn?" (2325) If he dies, Elizabeth and the children will be without a wage earner and they will starve. Society further traps Elizabeth because of the child she is carrying. At this time, an abortion would be unheard of, so she will be forced to carry the child to term, which will cause further harm to her survival possibilities. A single woman alone with three children and no income will have a very hard time surviving.

If Elizabeth was a man in this society, you would think that she would have more options. You would think that she could divorce her husband and find work for herself. In addition, she would not have the burden of childbirth. Although it would seem that these options would be available to her, in the story her husband has all of these options and seeks none of them. He simply tries to drink his troubles away at the public house. (2320) Eventually he gives up and commits suicide. (2327) Despite the fact he has these options he is unable to make any changes to his life. In this society, both the males and females are trapped by society and are unable to break free.

The power of society is also prevalent in West's *The Return of the Soldier*. In *Return*, there are three major female characters. They can all be described by their relationship with the male head of the household, Chris. Chris is currently married to Kitty. Jenny, the narrator of the story is Chris's cousin and confidant. Margaret Grey is Chris's long lost love. Despite their different approaches to life, all three female characters and Chris are trapped by the society they live in.

Kitty is clearly a product of her society. She is a rich woman and her personal worth is completely defined by her husband and her social position. The transparency of her character is so obvious that Jenny (the narrator) says that "she looked so like a girl on a magazine cover that one expected to find a large '7d'" (West 4). When Chris cannot remember her in the hospital, his friend's description of her echoes the superficiality of Jenny's description; he describes her as "a beautiful little woman... [with] a charming and cultivated soprano voice." (16) Society has shaped Kitty into this empty woman and this is the main reason that Kitty cannot understand Chris's memory loss. She does not comprehend that Chris is sick; she just believes he is an unfaithful husband. (24) She also seems aware of her emptiness and attempts to put up a facade. When Chris comes home, she is unable to express herself so she puts on all the jewels that he had ever given her. She is excessive in her jeweled ploy. Jenny describes her as raising "her ringed hand to her necklaces", and when Chris refuses her she "put up her hands as if to defend her jewels" (21). Since she is a hollow and empty person, he cannot refuse her; he can only refuse her jewels. She does not actually exist as a person. Kitty is only a creation of the society she lives in. She is described not as a person, but more like an automaton, "sweet and obedient and alert." (23) The final act of her superficiality is when she is

willing to have Chris awakened from his amnesia, even though it means that he will have to go back to the front and will most likely be killed. This act shows she would rather see him dead and faithful rather than alive and unfaithful. She cares for him only as a "husband" and not as a person.

Jenny is Chris's cousin and confidant. She is also the narrator of the story. She lives with Kitty and Chris and is an "old maid". Jenny's character is interesting because unlike Kitty, who is completely controlled by society, Jenny attempts to defy society's control over her. In the beginning of the story, she is clearly in love with her cousin Chris. This is clearly forbidden by society. Although we see her take no action toward him, her love is expressed in her writing, "he kissed us both; as he bent over me I noticed once again how his hair was of two colors, brown and gold". Her attention to detail is usually focused on aspects of Chris. This shows how much she has built him up in her mind. To her he is a Herculean God and surely can do no wrong. Despite her leanings towards incest, Jenny's anti-societal behavior is stifled because she is deluded like Kitty and honestly believes that "[Chris] was so happy here." (2) When Margaret first arrives, she threatens to shatter Jenny's image of their home being a "fine place for Chris." (2) Jenny believes that Margaret and her story of Chris losing his memory is a swindle and that Margaret is a foul con artist attempting to take advantage of Kitty. However, when Chris returns she noticed that he has changed, "his hair was of three colours now—brown and gold and sliver" (18). This change shows the duality of Chris. He is now a man torn between a world of joy and love with Margaret, and a world of sadness and death on the front lines. He is a new man and if they choose to send him back to the front, this new man will be most certainly be destroyed. Jenny continues to show her love for Chris

when she learns of his youthful romance with Margaret. She fantasizes about their rendezvous on Monkey Island, introducing her fantasy by saying, "I have lived so long with the story which he told me that I cannot now remember his shy phrases. But this is how I have visualized his meeting with love on his secret island. I think it is the truth."

(25) She goes on to describe an idyllic romance. Her description is obviously enhanced by her forbidden longing for her cousin. Her most fervent attempt to defy society comes when her affection switches from Chris to Margaret. Jenny even has a lesbian experience with Margaret, "[w]e kissed, not as women, but as lovers do." (66) She tries to mask her lesbian experience by saying that "[we] embraced that part of Chris the other had absorbed by her love." (66) But her affections are truly for Margaret and due to the conventions of society; she is unable to express this affection, except for that brief moment when they kissed. Despite all of Jenny's attempts to defy society, she is trapped in the end. Her decision to betray Kitty and take Margaret's side will most likely deny her of a place to live. Chris, her first love, will be sent back to the front lines, to certain death and she will never see his hair of two colors again. Jenny will never be able to come to terms with her new love Margaret, because of the bounds of the society she lives in. Jenny will most likely die an "old maid". Her dreams will never be realized because of the strict rules of her society.

Like Jenny, Margaret also tries to break the rules of society. Margaret is Chris's long lost love. They were together for a brief moment of time and then they were torn apart by a misunderstanding. Theirs is truly a tragic romance. It has been years since they have seen each other. Margaret has lost faith in true love and has married someone she does not love. However, in her heart, Margaret is still a romantic and while her life

has not turned out how she had hoped, she sees a second chance for happiness in Chris's memory loss. The fact that Chris is sick, and should not be allowed to live out his life in a dream state does not occur to Margaret. Through the rediscovery of love, Margaret is transformed, "[s]he was different now; she had a little smile in her eyes as though she were listening to a familiar air played far away." (47) Margaret is willing to let Chris stay sick, until the very end when she learns that Chris, like herself, had a son who died young. When she learns this Margaret realizes that it is wrong to allow Chris to forget his son, and to remain in the past. She goes to Chris and by reminding him of his son, she ends his amnesia and he returns to normal. Now that he is cured, Chris will be sent back to the war. Kitty asks Jenny "how does he look" and she responds "[e]very inch a soldier." (67-8) Waking Chris from his dream was the right thing to do, but Margaret will be punished by society for doing the right thing. She and Chris will never be together. By following the rules of society and waking Chris, she has doomed both herself and Chris.

Chris, the principal male character in *The Return of the Soldier*, is also trapped by the society he lives in. Chris, like Margaret and Jenny takes actions to attempt to escape his fate. His subconscious manufactures his memory loss and gives him one more chance at happiness with Margaret. Unfortunately, for Chris, he is not allowed to continue forever in a dream state. Margaret is forced by society to awake him and this causes him to lose his freedom and dooms him to death in the war. For Chris, the truth will not set him free, the truth, forced upon him by an uncaring society will cause his life to be both a brief and miserable.

Both the female and male characters of D.H. Lawrence's *Odour of Chrysanthemums* and West's *The Return of the Soldier* are controlled by societal forces. Most characters try to escape these forces but like Oedipus, those who attempt to fight fate will usually end up worse off. This is very true when applied to these characters. Fight as they might, they cannot defeat society and in the end, they will truly live unhappily ever after.

**Works Cited**

Lawrence, D.H. *Odour of Chrysanthemums*

West, Rebecca. *The Return of the Soldier*