

Sex and Knowing in the Modern World

D.H. Lawrence's *Odour of Chrysanthemums*¹ and Kafka's *The Trial* depict very different worlds. The former is a portrayal of Elizabeth Bates, a woman confronted with the death of her coal miner husband. It is largely a realistic story in that its physical and social dynamics closely mirror those of our own world. Indeed, many of the details are drawn from Lawrence's own life. In contrast, *The Trial's* protagonist, K., attempts to navigate the surreally draconian workings of a modern bureaucracy. The texts' tones similarly differ: *Chrysanthemums's* vivid descriptions of characters' thoughts and feelings connect us to full-fledged human beings whereas *The Trial's* elliptical factualness causes its characters to seem distant; the surreal nature of the events *The Trial* only increases their otherness. However, despite such differences, each work seeks to describe the barriers between the self and others, and, indeed, the barriers within the self. Sex strengthens these barriers, primarily by giving the illusion of intimacy. Elizabeth and K., however, meet with different fates. The death of Elizabeth's husband gives her a renewed, albeit dark, understanding of the world, while K. is unable to transcend his ignorance and is executed. Ultimately, *Chysanthemums* and *The Trial* depict a common struggle to understand human nature in a world confused by sex and delimited by mechanistic and bureaucratic structure, but their distinct tones lead their protagonists to different ends.

Chrysthanthemums depicts a woman coming to understand how little she knew of her husband. The first part of the story is an indirect description of Elizabeth's perception of the relationship. She says to her daughter, "if your father comes he'll carry on and say there never is a fire when a man comes home sweating from the pit.—A public-house is always warm enough" (8). These bitter lines show that Elizabeth expects an argument when her husband returns; to her, he seems ungrateful, preferring drink

¹ For the page numbers, I am using the online text from: <http://odour.nottingham.ac.uk/view.asp?version=D&page=1> . This matches the version of the text linked to on the syllabus, though it seems as though there are some other versions.

to his family. From the outset, though, small pieces of evidence accumulate against her explanation for his late return. When asking her daughter about her husband, her daughter replies “Has he come up an’ gone past, to Old Brinsely? He hasn’t, mother, ‘cos I never saw him” (7). Elizabeth dismisses this fact, saying “he’d take care as you didn’t see him, child” (7). However, for a man who was “heered... in the ‘Lord Nelson’ braggin’ as he was going to spend that b---- afore he went” (5), such caution seems strange. Later, when she goes to visit the Ripleys, Mrs. Rigley says, “Oh, Jack’s been ‘ome an’ ad ‘is dinner long since” (13), making her husband’s disappearance even more disturbing. Elizabeth is not oblivious to such clues, and her “anger” starts to become “tinged with fear” (12). However, she nonetheless perseveres with her explanation for her husband’s lateness. As a consequence, she makes a number of predictions which ominously foreshadow his death. For instance, she says “Eh, he’ll not come now till they bring him... He needn’t come rolling in here in his pit-dirt, for / won’t wash him. He can lie on the floor” (10). Indeed, her husband is brought in and laid on the floor. Further, while Elizabeth intends “pit-dirt” to refer to the mine, it also suggests the dirt of the pit where his body will eventually be laid to rest. Elizabeth’s predictions reflect her imperfect understanding of her husband: they are true on a superficial level, but entirely wrong in their judgment of his character. Just as she does not predict why her husband will be “brought in,” so too is she ignorant of the troubles which impel him to quarrel and drink.

The second half of the story describes Elizabeth’s realization of the vast distance between herself and her husband. When she sees his body, she knows that “Life with its smoky burning gone from him, had left him apart and utterly alien to her” (27). Devoid of life, his body takes on an aura of otherness to her. Yet, this otherness had always been present in their relationship; it had only been masked by the “smoke” of life: he was a “separate stranger with whom she had been living as one flesh. Was this what it all meant—utter, intact separateness, obscured by the heat of living? ... Each time he had taken her, they had been two isolated beings, far apart as now” (27). Elizabeth thus comes to

understand how little her knowledge of his body connected her with his mind. Indeed, her carnal knowledge of him actually “obscured” their separateness, tricking her into trusting a false knowledge of him. Elizabeth’s feeling of removal extends beyond her husband: she “felt the utter isolation of the human soul, the child within her was a weight apart from her” (26). *Chrystanthemums* is thus a story about our inability to penetrate beyond the outermost shell of others, even those we should be closest to. We project onto their bodies images of drinking husbands or innocent children, but such images are inevitably simplistic, a reflection primarily of the gulf of separation between people.

Such separation is not limited to Elizabeth’s relationship with her husband. The mother, for instance, seems not to recognize either the man’s faults or the horror of his last moments: “He went peaceful, Lizzie,—peaceful as sleep” (27) she says of them. In contrast, the doctor says that he was “‘Sphyxiated... It is the most terrible job I’ve ever known... Clean over him, an’ shut ‘im in, like a mouse-trap’” (23). Just as Elizabeth’s former understanding of her husband centered on his body, so too is the mother’s perception tied to his physical appearance. “White as milk his, clear as a twelve-month baby, bless him, the darling!” she says, “Not a mark on him, clear and clean and white, beautiful as ever a child was made... Isn’t he beautiful, the lamb?” (27). Yet, we know from Elizabeth’s memories that her husband was quite capable of viciousness and drunkenness, traits that hardly suggest a “lamb.” The mother is instead seeing the man as the child he once was or she imagines he once was. She is aided in this illusion by the deceptions of his body. His pale skin is caused by his death,² yet the mother views it as a sign of innocence and purity. As was once true with Elizabeth, the mother uses the man’s body to confirm a superficial conception of his mind.

The gulf between perception and reality is also apparent with *The Trial’s* K. and the numerous characters he meets. For instance, when K. is called for an initial inquiry, he entirely misunderstands the

² The skin or eyes of people who die from asphyxia are sometimes damaged from burst blood vessels, so it’s possible the mother is deceiving herself on a more literal level. The narrator, though, describes the man as “of handsome body, and his face showed no traces of drink” (26). Since no other disfigurement is noted, it seems that the mother is probably not mistaken about his appearance.

nature of the proceedings. K. immediately focuses on the difference between the left and right halves of the crowd. The right half generally seems to be supportive, applauding K. when he speaks (43) while the left half remains silent. From this, K. somehow concludes that “The people in the party on the left, who were in fact less numerous, may have been no more important than those in the party on the right, but their calm demeanor made them appear more so. As K. now started to speak, he was convinced that he was expressing their thoughts” (44-45). Even early on, then, K.’s conclusions about the actors in this situation seem strange. It is unclear, for instance, why K. should think that he was expressing the thoughts of the silent party. As is often the case in *The Trial*, the description of the scene is mysteriously elliptical in that we are presented with very few of the nuances which we would normally use to analyze tone; all the information is presented in a matter-of-fact and analytical style. Notably, the narration never addresses the oddity of such a stark division in a public courtroom. As another example, when the magistrate asks K. whether he is a house painter, K.’s reply—that he is “the chief financial officer of a large bank” (44)—provokes laughter from the right half of the hall. Yet, it is unclear what precisely is funny. K., who joins in, clearly believes that they are laughing at the magistrate’s error. However, it might just as well be that they are laughing at K.’s indignation or at the humiliating position of one so socially powerful. Such questions cannot be answered in *The Trial*: the narration tells us nothing of K.’s tone and only says of the laughter that it is “hearty” (44). Just as K. seems unable to understand others’ actions, often viewing them only as they relate to him, the experience of reading *The Trial* similarly distances us from the characters through its factual tone. The inquiry scene concludes by overturning K.’s assessment of the proceedings. After the washerwoman screams, K. realizes that “They all had badges, as far as he could see. They were all one group, the apparent parties on the left and right” (52). K. thus badly misreads the situation at his inquiry, evincing little understanding of any of the actors or their purpose.

Flirtation and sex similarly distort K.'s assessment of people. When K. returns to the scene of the inquiry, he once again meets the washerwoman who begins to flirt with him and offers to help him. K. responds well to her grabbing his hand (56), but is repulsed by her complimenting his eyes, thinking "So that's all it is... she's offering herself to me; she's depraved, like everyone else around here... so she accosts any stranger who comes along with a compliment about his eyes" (57-58). He dismisses her, saying "I don't think you can help me" (58). However, after she seductively "[stretches] out her legs, [and pulls] her dress up to her knee" (61), K.'s attitude changes. Suddenly, "The woman did tempt him, and no matter how hard he thought about it, he could see no good reason not to give in to that temptation. ... And her offer of help sounded sincere, and was perhaps not without value" (62). Though little about the nature of her offer has changed, K.'s view changes dramatically and he "easily brushed away" "the fleeting objection that the woman was ensnaring him on the court's behalf" (61). As with Elizabeth, sex gives K. a false sense of knowing.

A counterargument to viewing K.'s interpretative ineptness as a personal failure would be to argue that this failure stems from the complicated and paradoxical world in which K. resides. In this view, the court system is an elaborate sham: K. never hears his charges, the magistrate mistakes him for a house painter, and his lawyer never produces any tangible results in his defense. K.'s inability to understand this system that ensnares him is not his own failing, then, but rather the result of the maliciousness and opacity of the society he lives in.

While it is true that *The Trial* reflects many of the concerns with modern society, the counterargument overlooks the personal nature of K.'s "trial." Indeed, events relating to the trial surreally pervade the most private spaces in K.'s life: his trial begins in his bedroom (3) and eventually violates the safety and comfort of his workplace (80). Additionally, K. exhibits an internal "bureaucratization" which is often the cause of his problems rather than the bureaucracy of the court system. The first suggestion that K.'s issues are internal comes from the conversation with the inspector.

Of K.'s situation, the inspector says "you've misunderstood me; you're under arrest, certainly, but that's not meant to keep you from carrying on your profession. Nor are you to be hindered in the course of your ordinary life" (17). Rather than being locked up by a repressive government, K. is simply informed that he is "under arrest"—that is, restricted or in stasis in some way. Yet, until the executioners come at the end of the novel, no physical restrictions are ever placed on him. K.'s "arrest," then, is of a mental sort. Indeed, K. exhibits "arrested" thinking in a number of ways. First, his life is described as ordered and static. In his desk, "everything lay in perfect order" (7) and his days are dominated by routine: "That spring, K. generally spent his evenings as follows: after work, if there was still time... he would take a short walk.... Then go to a tavern... In addition, K. paid a weekly visit to a woman named Elsa" (20). Similarly, his thought processes reveal a bureaucratic thoroughness. When speaking to the magistrate, for instance, he unnecessarily addresses technical objections to his statements, leaving them as confusing and indirect as the proceedings against which he is protesting:

Your question, Your Honor, about my being a house painter—and you weren't really asking at all, you were telling me outright—is characteristic of the way these proceedings against me are being conducted. You may object that these aren't proceedings at all, and you're certainly right there, they are only proceedings if I recognize them as such. But I do recognize them, for the moment, out of compassion, so to speak. One can only view them compassionately, if one chooses to pay any attention to them at all. I'm not saying these proceedings are sloppy, but I would like to propose that that description for your personal consideration. (45)

K.'s arrest is not manifested in the prison bars of a totalitarian state, but rather seems to be a comment about K.'s state of mind. Like Kafka, K. is a bureaucrat, and *The Trial* is about his thinking rather than a broken judicial system.

K.'s "bureaucratic" thinking leads to much of his aimlessness and failure to defend himself in his trial. He is resistant to change, and throughout the novel searches for an easy way to acquit himself. This desire is apparent in K.'s conversation with Titorelli. The painter describes how "there are three possibilities: actual acquittal, apparent acquittal, and protraction" (152). The latter two involve constant effort over time, and consequently K. prefers the first option, speaking of it "as if speaking to himself

and to his hopes" (154). Instead of seriously pursuing his defense, K. either does nothing or uselessly pursues gimmicks he hopes will provide an easy resolution to his trial. When K.'s uncle comes to visit, the uncle perceives that K. does not take his situation seriously: "And you sit there calmly with a criminal trial hanging over your head?" the uncle exclaims (91). Even later on, K. still exercises little agency in his defense. Though he believes "these efforts must be continuous, with everything organized and supervised" (126), he finds "the difficulty of composing the petition was overwhelming. At one point, about a week ago, it was only with a sense of shame that he could even contemplate having to prepare such a petition some day; that it might be difficult had not even occurred to him" (126). K. understands intellectually that vast efforts need to be put into his defense, yet he is pathetically ineffective at motivating himself. When he is advised to consult the painter Titorelli, however, K. immediately goes to see him, despite understanding that the hope for any real help is "vague... and slender" (139). K. thus finds himself unequal to the task of his defense. Though he believes that "all he had to do now was turn the abilities that had made [his rise in the bank] possible partially toward his trial" (125), he seems unable to adapt those skills to a new task. Instead, he is paralyzed by its difficulty, able only to dither about a relatively unimportant petition. K.'s trial is thus as much of an internal struggle as an external one, and the strange bureaucracy which characterizes the trial is similarly a reflection of the bureaucratic nature of K.'s own mind. As such, K.'s inability to understand the people he encounters should be understood as a personal failing rather than the result of a sinister and manipulative society. K.'s bureaucratic nature is undoubtedly influenced by modern society, but *The Trial* is a story about an individual.

The ominous foreshadowing of *Odour of Chystanthemums* and the frequently atonal exposition of *The Trial* both depict characters grappling with an inability to know others. Elizabeth Bates recognizes that she "[had] been fighting a husband who did not exist" while "*He* existed all the time" (28). In other words, her arguments had been with a projection of her husband, rather than the man himself whom

she did not see. She thus defined him primarily in relation to herself: a husband who left her for taverns and came home ready to fight her. In a similar fashion, K. mostly sees people in terms of his trial. Most of his sexual relationships, for instance, involve women who he believes can use their influence to free him: "He, or the women, or some other messengers, would have to besiege the officials day after day and force them to sit down at their desks" (126). When thinking of them here, K. does not even view them as individuals, but simply as "the women." Sex appeal plays into this trait, often distorting his perceptions of these same women. Likewise, Elizabeth's relations with her husband obscured the distance between them: "If they met there, in the beyond, they would only be ashamed of what had been before" (29). Despite significant differences in characters and tone, both texts thus seek to illustrate the distance between people.

Though they face similar problems, Elizabeth and K.'s stories ultimately diverge. The death of Elizabeth's husband, indeed, provokes a new understanding of herself and him. This understanding can be seen in the contrast between Elizabeth and her mother-in-law. At first, the narration connects the two women in their common plight. As they wash him, "They worked... in silence for a long time. 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 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" (26). Though they each experience "different" emotions, this passage emphasizes their commonalities. Both share the "great dread," and just as Elizabeth "was driven away" (25) so too is the mother "denied." The two also share in feeling the falsity of motherhood and in being disconnected from their children. Moreover, by using plural pronouns, the passage portrays them as acting in unison rather than separately. For a while, at least, the two women seem connected in their common grief.

However, Elizabeth, unlike her mother-in-law, possesses the courage and self-awareness to face her situation lucidly. The mother "[speaks] out of sheer terror... a faint, sibilant ecstasy of fear and

mother love" (26). The "ecstasy" of her speech implies a rapidity uninhibited by reflection. This lack of reflection is significant, for, as noted earlier, the mother's assessment of her son's character and manner of death is hardly discerning. Rather, she projects her conception of him as an innocent child onto his adult self. Elizabeth, in contrast, reflects heavily on her husband and seems to come to a truer understanding both of his character and of his end. The interspersed passages relating her thoughts with the mother's rambling has the effect of distancing the two women while depicting Elizabeth's contemplativeness. For the next few pages (26-29), the mother's questions only briefly interrupt her thoughts, illustrating her focus on the dead man. We are unable to hear what, if any, response Elizabeth gives, which puts further distance between herself and the mother. The tone of these pages shows Elizabeth to be subsumed in thought, removed from the more naïve comments made in the distance above her consciousness.

Elizabeth, correspondingly, reaches starkly different conclusions about her husband than the mother does. Whereas the mother holds on to her conception of the man as a child, Elizabeth realizes that "she [Elizabeth] 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" (28). While the mother reacts to the horror of the occasion by holding closer to her earlier views, Elizabeth reacts by realizing their shallowness. By doing so, she comes to a fuller understanding of her husband as a person not merely as a projection. Making such a realization is difficult, however. When she picks up her husband's body, "The horror of the distance between them was almost too much for her—it was so infinite a gap she must look across" (30). Yet, she is able to look, and ends the story "with peace sunk heavy on her heart... making tidy the kitchen" (30). After the spiritual agony of the night, she finds the strength to return to the mundanity of daily life. The story's final note is not one of empowerment—"from death, her ultimate master, she wince[s] with fear and shame" (30)—but she is at last able to breach the barriers between her husband and herself as well as those within herself.

K., in contrast, is unable to achieve a realization about himself or others, and is consequently unable to defend himself in his trial, an inability that ultimately leads to his execution. K. exhibits his lack of personal growth when discussing the parable with the chaplain. As soon as the chaplain finishes, the two men have the following exchange:

‘So the doorkeeper deceived the man,’ said K. at once, strongly attracted to the story. ‘Don’t be too hasty,’ said the priest, ‘don’t accept another person’s opinion unthinkingly. I told you the story word for word according to the text. It says nothing about deception... He wasn’t asked earlier... and remember he was only a doorkeeper and as such fulfilled his duty’ (217).

Even at the end of the novel, K. is unable to attribute blame to the man in the parable, and, by analogy, to himself. He much prefers the explanation of a simple deception to a nuanced interpretation. The chaplain, in vain, attempts to remind him that the parable, and by analogy life, does not offer straightforward answers to the questions it raises. As noted earlier, K. generally looks for easy solutions to his problems, and arguing for an easy moral acquittal of the parable’s protagonist shows he has learned little from the experience of his trial. Consequently, when the men come to execute him, he at first resists, but ultimately leads them: “Now all three of them, in total accord, crossed a bridge in the moonlight, the men yielding willingly to K.’s slightest move” (228). Though his executioners seem to be an instrument of outside repression, K. becomes complicit and even seems to take control over their direction. This scene is thus, in a sense, a microcosm for the whole story’s trajectory. K.’s trial likewise seems to be an unjust imposition from outside, but K.’s apathy toward his defense is ultimately responsible for his execution. Indeed, it is natural for us to face “trials” which are unjust and unaccommodating of individual circumstances. It is expected of us to handle such trials with decisive maturity, onerous though they may be. As with his response to the parable, this fact seems to be lost on K. Indeed, he much prefers to think of the “legal system” as invalid, publicly calling the room of the magistrate’s hearing a “so-called court” (49). While this opinion is legitimate, it shows that K. does not have the courage to take seriously the unfair proceedings against him. Unlike Elizabeth, he lacks the

strength to look across that “infinite gap” and appreciate the world as a complex and often irrational place.

Odour of Chrystantheums and *The Trial* begin with the same struggle to understand others, but end in different places. On the one hand, Elizabeth is able to escape her limitations and achieve a true moment of empathy with her husband. K., on the other, dies too weak to even give himself an honorable death. As his executioners pass the knife back and forth,

K. knew clearly now that it was his duty to seize the knife as it floated from hand to hand above him and plunge it into himself. But he didn't do so... He could not rise entirely to the occasion, he could not relieve the authorities of all their work; the responsibility for this final failure lay with whoever had denied him the remnant of strength necessary to do so (230).

To the end, then, K. lacks the strength to handle his situation as he knows he should. Though this “failure” is a personal one, K. persists in blaming outside forces for it. While it is possible his initial struggle with the guards wore him out, his attribution of blame is decidedly vague, implying that he has no plausible culprit in mind. As such, K.'s accusation is merely a final refusal to accept responsibility for his actions. The flaws of K.'s character throughout the novel are also present at his execution. Just before he is killed, he sees a blurry figure reaching out and wonders “Who was it? A friend? A good person? Someone who cared? Someone who wanted to help? Was it just one person? Was it everyone? Was there still help? Were there objections that had been forgotten? Of course there were. Logic is no doubt unshakable, but it can't withstand a person who wants to live” (230-31). As before, K. hopes for an easy solution in the form of a rescuer, yet that hope is hardly realistic. He is further focused on the unfairness of the situation, believing that there are still “objections” to be made. K. then dies, and “the verdict” is given as “‘Like a dog’ ... it seemed as though the shame was to outlive him” (231). He dies shamefully—“like a dog”—reinforcing the notion of his failure. K. never learns to understand the people or society around him, unjust as it may be, and his story is thus a tragedy of a static character.

The stories' divergence corresponds to the texts' differing tones and styles. The often impersonal and atonal nature of *The Trial* limits the potential for character development. While

characters need not be developed explicitly, *The Trial* is generally not concerned with an exposition of K.'s character. For instance, when K. attempts to bribe the flogger, it is unclear why he does so. On the one hand, he seems motivated by vaguely moral reasons as "It tormented him that he had been unable to prevent the flogging" (85). Yet, these reasons are immediately qualified by "but it wasn't his fault; if Franz hadn't screamed—of course it must have hurt terribly, but at critical moments you have to control yourself" (85). K. is thus hardly an empathetic person, adding more questions as to the nature of his character. This small, elliptical passage is the only indication *The Trial* gives as to K.'s motivations for the attempted bribe and no similar incident occurs later in the text. We are thus left with only this isolated incident to speculate about a large aspect of K.'s character. The flogging thus shows K. to be something of a moral man, but we have little idea to what extent; does K. excuse himself so easily because his morals are not strong? Or is he a man of average moral fiber, but one who has trouble accepting blame? These are questions *The Trial* does not allow us to answer fully. Of course, such ellipticism is justified in many cases and can often be more evocative than a fully fleshed out description. However, this passage is typical rather than exceptional for *The Trial*, leaving many aspects of K.'s character as sketches instead of those of a full human being.

The Trial, while being the story about an individual, is not the story of an individual. Some aspects of K.'s personality, such as his propensity to procrastinate, are developed throughout the story. Yet, the omission of other aspects renders K. something of an abstraction. Indeed, we are never even given a physical description of K. Such abstraction is not inconsistent with *The Trial's* imagery and themes. For instance, as a novel about modern people, K.'s abstraction allows *The Trial* to have general implications; instead of focusing on K. as a person, the focus is on K.'s traits that are relevant to modern people. However, abstraction does impose some limits on *The Trial's* focus. Namely, it limits the prospects for character change as such transformations are complemented by fully developed characters. *The Trial's* specific themes also discourage transformations. *The Trial* is about modern

bureaucracy and a “bureaucratic” man, but bureaucracies are characteristically static. As such, it would be difficult to imagine *The Trial* as the story of a man who, at the outset, is constrained in his understanding of others, but ultimately overcomes this difficulty. Not only would this story require the new K. to radically change his fundamentally bureaucratic nature, but it would require a new focus on K.’s individuality. That focus, however, would run counter to the elliptical and impersonal tone set by *The Trial*, a tone at the very heart of its statement about the modern world.

In contrast, *Chrysanthemums* is the story of an individual with the modern world as a backdrop. As represented by the image of the locomotive and the colt from the outset (1), the technology of modern society seems to ominously encroach upon nature and human lives. Indeed Elizabeth’s life, like K.’s, is a product of the modern world. The “locomotive engine, Number 4, came clanking, stumbling down from Selston... The trucks thumped heavily past, one by one, with slow inevitable movement, as she [Elizabeth] stood insignificantly trapped between the jolting black wagons and the hedge” (1). The imagery of the story’s beginning, then, portrays modern technology as an enclosing and stultifying force, and perhaps an isolating one as well. Elizabeth’s temporary entrapment foreshadows her husband’s in the coal mine, the mine itself being another product of modern technology. Indeed, part of what separates Elizabeth from her husband is his coal miner’s lifestyle: he toils away underground and, for relief, turns to drink before turning to her. From the outset, technology is marked by dark colors, and many of the hues of *Chrysanthemums* also mark it was a dark story. The locomotive and its smoke are black; the coal mine is in the darkness of the earth’s depths and the coal itself is black or dark blue; Elizabeth has “definite black eyebrows” (2), “smooth black hair” (2), and wears a “big black bonnet” (26). The forces of the modern world are thus quite present in *Chrysanthemums* and unnaturally trap or separate characters. However, *Chrysanthemums* is first and last a story about a woman who, in losing her husband, begins to understand him. Unlike *The Trial*, *Chrysanthemums* gives us an in-depth look into the mind of an individual. The narration vividly depicts Elizabeth’s emotions with phrases such as “in her

womb was an ice of fear” (27) or “She drank her tea determinedly, and sat thinking. When she rose her anger was evident in the stern unbending of her head” (8). The forces of the modern world are thus merely the setting rather than the focus of the story. The relationship between Elizabeth and her husband, for instance, is developed and full of idiosyncratic detail. Moreover, unlike K., Elizabeth possesses many traits which do not stem from being a product of the modern world. For instance, a substantial section of the story depicts her growing dread when her husband does not return home, a dread which grows despite the estrangement of their marriage. In this light, it is unsurprising that Elizabeth undergoes such a stark transformation in *Chrysanthemums*. Not only do the details of her character give the text a greater latitude to depict her changing, but the transformation is consistent with *Chrysanthemum’s* focus on Elizabeth as an individual.

The fates of the texts’ protagonists ultimately stem from the tone each text establishes at the outset. *The Trial* opens with the line “Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was arrested” (3). From the outset, then, the narration blames external forces, yet the word “truly” implies that the statement is more protest than fact. Further, we can already see the ellipticism and ambiguity of the narration: we will never find out what exactly K. did or did not do that was “wrong.” What is important for *The Trial’s* purposes are not the details of its protagonist’s life or past, but the abstract notions of the “arrest” and “wrongness.” *The Trial* thus explores these themes in the context of the modern world’s bureaucracy and devotes less attention to K. as an individual. As a consequence, he is left on an unalterable trajectory to his death. In *Chrysanthemums*, so too do the opening lines set the tone for the rest of the story. Just as the colt in can temporarily “outdistance” (1) the train, so too is Elizabeth’s outdistancing of death’s coldness temporary, as the text’s last line suggests. Elizabeth’s revelation is meaningful, but it is ultimately private; she communicates nothing of her understanding to the mother, and, indeed, “strove to weep and behave as her mother-in-law expected” (29). In this sense, her revelations are temporary as they

will end with her, and little will change outwardly because of them. Yet, the colt's athletic vibrancy suggests that there is still room for nature and individuality in spite of the "inevitability" of the train.

This freedom philosophically grants her the ability to delay the "shame" of death, instead allowing her to renew her focus on life. The two texts, then, represent different approaches to the same fundamental difficulty of human relations; complexity and nuance are at the heart of our natures, yet those very features make truly knowing another an ever elusive end.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21L.709 Studies in Literary History: Modernism: From Nietzsche to Fellini
Fall 2010

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.