

A woman bound by society

Literature, American Literature



A Woman Bound by Society John Steinbeck, in his short story "The Chrysanthemums" depicts the trials of a woman attempting to gain power in a man's world. Elisa Allen tries to define the boundaries of her role as a woman in a closed society. While her environment is portrayed as a tool for social repression, it is through her love of nature and her garden where Elisa gains and shows off her power. As the story progresses, Elisa has trouble extending this power outside of the fence that surrounds her garden. In the end, Elisa learns but does not readily accept, that she possesses a feminine power, that is weak, not the masculine one she had tried so hard to achieve through its imitation. The short story begins with a look at the setting. "The Chrysanthemums" was written in 1938, and the story takes place roughly around the same time. It is winter in Salinas Valley, California. The most prominent feature is the "gray-flannel fog" which hid the valley "from the rest of the world" (221). The grey fog that covers the valley is like that of the man's world covering Elisa and pushing her down. The mountains, valleys, sky, and fog sum everything up inside as a "closed pot" (221). This reference to a closed pot can be related to Elisa's feelings of being secluded from the man's world. Inside this shut-off habitat the environment is trying to change. Just as the farmers are waiting for an unlikely rain, Elisa is waiting for a change in their enclosed lives. Gregory Palmerino sums up the overarching meaning implied by the setting, "the natural elements of the foothills ranch seem as unable to confront each other as each of the characters that inhabit it's environment" (1). Palmerino's quote shows how Elisa feels unable to confront her situation of repression. "There is a tension created and maintained from the opening scene that is unique in Steinbeck's

work" (Wyatt 1). The action of the story opens with Elisa Allen working in her garden. She is surrounded by a wire fence, which physically is there to protect her flowers from the farm animals. This barrier symbolizes her life; she is fenced in from the real world, from a man's world. It is a smaller, physical version of the environment in which she lives. This man's world is dominated by commerce. As Elisa works on her garden, she looks through the fence out to where her husband, Henry, is talking with two men in business suits. It seems as if the men surround the women, just as the fences surround the animals and plants. With this repression, Elisa feels a sense of hopelessness and almost that of fear for the unknown in the man's world. As she looks out to these men, we get to see Elisa. Although she is doing the "feminine" work of gardening, she is dressed like a man. She wore a black hat low on her forehead to cover her hair; thick leather gloves covered her hands, and huge shoes which covered her small woman's feet. A big apron covered the feminine dress making "her figure look blocked and heavy" (222). Unconsciously, as she looks through her fence at the men talking business, she is trying to cover up her feminine qualities. Elisa is covering up her feminine qualities, because she wants to be seen as a "businessman". She longs to be in their position and possess their characteristics and power due to her wishing to be appreciated and loved. Through all of Elisa's inner struggles and desires, she is seemingly unsure about which side of herself to show to her husband and the world. While she wants to seem strong, it seems to violate her role of being the pretty wife. When her husband suddenly comes up behind her, she immediately pulls on her gloves again. This could be to cover her dirty hands, but it also covers

them, hiding her femininity. This event plays in with the traditional role of a woman during the times of the Great Depression. Women were suppose to stand silently behind their husbands (Hinton 2). Nevertheless, she is proud of her gardening for " in her tone and on her face there was a little smugness" with her husband's compliment (222). When Henry even suggests she could use her talents in the apple orchard " her eyes sharpened" (222). Elisa shows off her power saying, "'I've a gift with things, all right'" (222). According to Gregory Palmerino, Henry only tells Elisa the comment because his business sensibilities cause him to wish out loud that Elisa would raise a cash crop of apples equally impressive. This encounter shows her longing for the outside world, but it also shows how she truly wishes to be appreciated and loved for what she can and has done (2). We soon meet the man who will change Elisa's feelings on female power and relationships with men. The stranger pulls up in his spring-wagon to sell his services, which is fixing household, metallic items. As he talks with her, the man tells of his hard-working travels up and down the West Coast and asks for directions back to the main road. Elisa notices the " calloused hands he rested on the wire fence were cracked, and every crack was a black line" (224). Elisa sees that this man also worked with his hands in nature; it seems that now she is attempting to show her feminine side, " she stood up and shoved the thick scissors in her apron pocket" (224). Yet, also with this action Elisa also may have recognized she was about to enter into a normal male business conversation involving bargaining and denying services. The traveler gets right down to business. Elisa seems to understand and then she takes on the role of a hardened businessman. With the man's first inquiry, she refuses and " her eyes

hardened with resistance" (224). Even after a third time she refuses him saying, "I tell you I have nothing like that for you to do" (224). In this role as businessman, Elisa has succeeded, but only for the moment. Elisa's source of power is also her point of weakness. After failing for a fourth time, to gain Elisa's attention he asks about her flowers. This attracts Elisa's interest; suddenly her face undergoes a noticeable change: "the irritation and resistance melted from Elisa's face" (222). She is able to talk to a man about something, inform him of something she knows more about than he does. Elisa's innocence in the business world does not allow her to understand the tricks men play to get what they want. To the reader it seems fairly obvious that the stranger has only asked about these flowers to get on Elisa's good side, but she is unaware to the fact. It becomes apparent that the peddler is using the method of trying to connect with Elisa on a personal level so she will have emotions for him, ultimately buying his service. This first encounter with the peddler shows Elisa's feminine weakness of not understanding men and their tricks. When the peddler asked Elisa about her flowers she felt appreciated, and she began to show him her beautiful flowers. The narrator tells us, "She was kneeling on the ground looking up at him" (226). She bears her soul and in effect shows all of her power to this man. While she physically is beneath him, she believes them on an equal level in their natural power. She questions him: "Do you see that? Can you understand that?" (226). But this show of feminine power is puzzling to the man who turns the conversation back to business. Elisa realizes her mistake and gives into the man, finding him a few old pots to fix. Now both head into the man's world through the gate where Elisa watches the man work with his anvil and

hammer, men's tools. As she watches the man work on the saucepans she ponders aloud doing the same type of work and travel he does saying " I wish women could do such things" (226). The peddler protested with a typical male response, " It ain't the right kind of life for a woman" (226). Elisa tells the stranger, " You might be surprised to have a rival sometime...I could show you what a woman might do" (227). This reveals how Elisa feels about her life and the lives of woman of the time period. Although they want to break free of the fences around them, it would be socially unacceptable to do so. After the encounter with the peddler, Elisa goes to get ready for her night out on the town. Elisa seems to have a new sense of femininity about her and she wants to show it off. When Henry finally sees Elisa he is surprised at her appearance. He says, " Why; why Elisa. You look so nice! ...I mean you look different, strong and happy" (228). She questions: "'What do you mean 'strong'?" His answer comes in a confused tone, since his wife probably never talked to him like this before: " You look strong enough to break a calf over your knee, happy enough to eat it like a watermelon" (228). But this is not the answer Elisa was looking for any longer. Although this may have satisfied the Elisa whose power search focused on her being like a man, she now longs to have a kind of feminine charm and to be desired as a woman.. The narrator says, " For a second she lost her rigidity" (228). Then Elisa says, "'Henry! Don't talk like that. You don't know what you said'" (228). But quickly she recovered boasting, "'I'm strong'...'I never knew how strong'" (228). She then feels powerful enough as a woman to keep her husband intentionally waiting in the car for her. The imagery that is used throughout this scene is normal to Steinbeck's style, it helps convey how one might feel

about things that happen (Wyatt 2). Elisa's sense of power suffers during the drive into Salinas. Elisa sees the chrysanthemum sprouts thrown into the road. This event forces her to open her eyes to the larger world around her and get away from the traditional "Rose of Sharon" view of life (Hinton 2). (The Rose of Sharon is in reference to Steinbeck's book "Grapes of Wrath") Apparently, she expected this after her final encounter with the man, and notices he kept the pot she had given him, since it had some monetary worth unlike her flowers and thus unlike herself. As they pass the peddler's wagon, she turned away so as not to see it. Henry noticed a change in her saying, "'Now you're changed again'" (228). Her strength weakens. She questions her husband if the men in the prizefights ever hurt one another. Henry responds in the affirmative. Finally she asks, "'Do women ever go to the fights?'" (228). Elisa is wondering if as a woman she could enter a man's world of business and other "masculine" responsibilities. Her husband now asks if she wants to go and she responds, "Oh, no. No. I don't want to go. I'm sure I don't" (229). Elisa now fully understands that she does not want to gain power from a man's world. The "wine" she wants at dinner is a way to show her acceptance of this fact, of the typical married life of a woman. She condemns herself to attempting to gain power through normal female attempts in society. Elisa cries at the end, making her look "like an old woman" (229) with the realization of this fact, that indeed, she will continue to age into the role of an old woman still enclosed by society. Elisa's encounter with the peddler made her realize that she was not fit for a man's world, but this did not mean she couldn't still be strong. The peddler's business of selling his service of fixing pots closes women out of his world

just as natural fog closes of the valley. Although we hope her tears can be compared to the pruning she does to her precious chrysanthemums, clipping them back for future and stronger growth, Steinbeck leaves the reader questioning the future for women (Palmerino 2). Elisa's tears will not rid the valley of the fog, for as Steinbeck tells us in the beginning, " fog and rain do not go together" (221). While Elisa will continue to dominate her immediate surroundings inside the fence, she will not gain power outside of it, in a man's world. Works Cited Hinton, Rebecca. " Steinbeck's ' The Grapes of Wrath.'" The Explicator Winter 1998. Expanded Academic ASAP. Pellissippi State Tech. Comm. College Lib. 21 April 2006 Palmerino, Gregory J. " Steinbeck's ' The Chrysanthemums.'" The