

# My interpretation of the chrysanthemums

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My Interpretation of “ The Chrysanthemums” “ The Chrysanthemums” is one of John Steinbeck’s popular short stories. “ The Chrysanthemums” represents inequality of gender, limitations, and feminism. The story is about a married woman living in the early 1900s who longs for a more exciting, meaningful existence. Elisa Allen is intelligent, accomplished, attractive, and ambitious. Yet she feels confined in her life and marriage. Steinbeck uses the world around Elisa to give the reader a comparison to her life. The story takes place in the Salinas Valley at her husband, Henry Allen’s, ranch in the foothills.

Steinbeck opens the story up by describing to us how the fog closes off the Salinas Valley from the sky and from the rest of the world. “ The high grey-flannel fog of winter closed off the Salinas Valley from the sky and from all the rest of the world” (438). This comparison shows how Elisa feels inside. Even her house compares to a prison. “ Behind her stood the neat white farmhouse with red geraniums close-banked around it as high as the windows” (439). Elisa spends most of her days alone, behind her wire fence. She feels cut off from society.

Elisa’s husband works as a successful rancher but doesn’t involve the smart and interested Elisa with the business of the ranch. In his eyes she belongs in the house or the garden. They don’t have an intimate relationship and it lacks any kind of romance. In the beginning of the story, she watches from a distance behind the wire fence as her husband talks with the men in suits but Henry does not invite her over. Elisa wants to travel and be free to do as she pleases but is suppressed by society because of her gender. She becomes intrigued when she meets a traveling repairman by his way of life.

When Elisa expresses interest to him about his life, “ It must be very nice. I wish women could do such things. ” The wanderer tells her, “ It ain’t the right kind of life for a woman” (445). Elisa feels a little off-put by his response and tries to argue with him. Elisa asks “ How do you know? How can you tell? ” He protests “ I don’t know ma’am, of course I don’t know” (445). We are given the impression of strength and capability in Elisa. We can tell Elisa’s a good nurturer because of the way she tends her garden and keeps a clean organized home.

Her chrysanthemums are the biggest healthiest chrysanthemums around. Despite all that she has no children. Elisa puts all of her motherly energy into her flowers to fill the void of childlessness. Henry makes the statement to Elisa how she could make anything grow. “ You’ve got a gift with things, some of those yellow chrysanthemums you had this year were ten inches across. I wish you’d work out in the orchard and raise some apples that big” (439). I believe this represents Elisa’s fertility and Henry’s lack thereof. Steinbeck describes Elisa’s clothing in the beginning of the story as masculine. A man’s black hat pulled low down over her eyes, clod-hopper shoes, a figured print dress almost completely covered by a big corduroy apron with four big pockets to hold the snips, the trowel and scratcher, the seeds and the knife she worked with. She wore heavy leather gloves to protect her hands while she worked” (438-439). This description reflects her lack of sexuality. Shortly after she meets the traveler she begins to shed some of these items, like the gloves and hat. At first she feels irritated by the insistency of the man because she had no need for someone to repair her pots or sharpen her scissors.

Her attitude changes toward him when he expresses interest in her flowers. The thought of her chrysanthemums shared with another part of the world makes Elisa feel like a little part of her might escape. Her demeanor suddenly changes. He makes her feel intellectually and physically stimulated. Her feminine sexuality awakens. She turns the conversation of the chrysanthemums into something sexual. “ When the night is dark-why, the stars are sharp-pointed, and there’s quiet. Why, you rise up and up! Every pointed star gets driven into your body.

It’s like that. Hot and sharp and lovely” (444). She completely surrenders herself to him as manifested by her kneeling before him “ like a fawning dog” as she hands him the chrysanthemum shoots. But despite all that, the traveler holds no interest in her or her flowers. This symbolizes society’s rejection of women in the workforce no matter their talents. Elisa has hope of a more interesting life. She takes special care in dressing for dinner. She stares at herself naked in the mirror. She pokes her chest out and tightens her stomach.

She puts on sexy lingerie and a dress that brings out her beauty. She puts make-up on. By Elisa looking more like a beautiful sexy woman, she is stepping into her femininity. When Henry gets home and starts dressing for dinner Elisa nervously waits on the porch for a reaction on her appearance from her passionless husband. “ She looked toward the river road where the willow-line was still yellow with frosted leaves so that under the high grey fog they seemed a thin band of sunshine” (447). Sunshine symbolizes happiness, she’s slightly hopeful for some happiness in her life.

When Henry walks out onto the porch he feels off-put by her appearance. She fishes for a complement. Henry tells her she looks strong and she comments back to him “ I am strong. I never knew before how strong” (447). Before they leave Elisa goes into the house and takes extra care in putting on her hat and her coat, which I think is interesting because she doesn’t put on gloves so there is still a feeling of feminine sexuality there. She isn’t hiding herself like in the beginning of the story. As Elisa and Henry drive to town she sees a black speck in the road.

She immediately knows what it is, her chrysanthemum shoots she had given the traveler. He tossed them out on the road. She feels betrayed by this man. He didn’t care about her flowers, he only wanted her money. Her hope dwindles. Elisa starts to step back into herself. This act symbolizes how society deems woman as unimportant just as how the traveler sees her flowers as unimportant. She then asks her husband if they could have wine with their dinner. She tries to satisfy some of her needs through this small act of abnormality. She then asks her husband about going to watch the men fight.

Henry says he will take her but doesn’t think that she will like it and was unaware that she was interested in such things. Elisa asks if any women go to the fights, Henry tells her there are some that go. Elisa changes her mind because she understands that it is not acceptable for a lady in those times to watch such things. Now she could have gone to the fights, of course, but fear holds her back. I believe in that moment she loses hope for a brighter, more exciting existence. “ She turned up her coat collar so he could not see that she was crying—weakly like an old woman” (448).

Notice how she covers her body again. I think the assumption can be made by the last sentence in the story that Elisa's life doesn't become what she subconsciously hoped. She realizes her closed off, uneventful, lonesome way of living will continue. She grows old with this same unsatisfactory life, no children, passion, or exploration. "The Chrysanthemums" is an interesting story because it was published in 1937 when a married woman's only place in society was at home, yet it is unashamedly written in the point of view of the woman.

This story was carefully written by Steinbeck so we as readers don't condemn her for her actions. We could have felt that she was betraying her husband in a way by flirting with the wanderer. Instead we sympathize with her and understand her feelings, and why she does the things she does and feels the way she feels. It is almost like John Steinbeck could see into the future and what was to come. Did he see society's unequal treatment of women and men? Did he feel that it was wrong to treat women as if they had no other use in society?

I believe he did. He uses this story to show the society of that time the inequality of men and women, and the way it makes a woman feel. The reader reads this story and doesn't even realize that what they are feeling is compassion for Elisa Allen because of limitations that are set on her and every other woman at that time. This story could have been a very strong political tool in its time for feminism. Bibliography Steinbeck, John "The Chrysanthemums" *The Seagull Reader Stories*. Ed. Joseph Kelly. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton, 2008. 437-448. Print