

# Themes in john steinbeck's "chrysanthemums"



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During the 1930s genders were viewed differently than they are today. It was a time when there were specific expectations of what a male was supposed to be and how they were to act, they were raised playing with toy guns, soldiers and cars and taught that they were the breadwinners. Females were taught to play with dolls, how to sew, cook and clean because they were to be homemakers and caretakers of children. "Chrysanthemums" a short story, bursting with symbolism throughout was written by John Steinbeck during this time frame and released in 1938 (Price 1). There are several themes present in the story which include both the sexual oppression of females and the inequality that was apparent between males and females at the time. "The fable examines the attitudes, limitations, and frustrations of gender during this era" (Haggstrom 1).

Next there are only three main characters in "Chrysanthemums", Henry who is a farmer and the husband of Elise, Elise homemaker and dreamer, the lonely wife of Henry and an unidentified, manipulative man known only as a "Tinker" (Steinbeck 1, 3). Elise who is the focus character is unhappy with her life. She tends to her garden with the love and care she would provide to the children she does not have but longs for. Furthermore, Elise suffers from feelings of being trapped, confused, isolation, possible depression, and along with being sexually frustrated by being in a passionless marriage.

Throughout this her husband Henry seems to not comprehend what is happening with her nor know what to do to help correct it (Price 1).

Furthermore, the story is set in a time in history when the world viewed gender as a way of distinguishing man and female roles in society (Price 1).

Males were the "heads of households", leaders of the family, strong,

performed manual labor outside of the home, along with being the primary breadwinners. Women's roles were traditionally seen as teachers, nurses and most often "stay at home" housewives or homemakers who cooked, cleaned and raised the children because they were viewed as the weaker sex.

Because of this viewpoint, Elise Allen does not believe she can live a satisfying life as the men do, and because the expectation of her gender restricts her, she is unequal and set to live an unfulfilling life.

Elise Allen does not believe she can live a satisfying life as the men do, because of the way that the world expects females to behave. Elise feels isolated and trapped in her life with no way out. During the opening sentence in "Chrysanthemums", the feeling is set with the first two sentences in the story. "The high grey-flannel fog of winter closed off the Salinas Valley from the sky and from all the rest of the world. On every side, it sat like a lid on the mountains and made of the great valley a closed pot" (Steinbeck 1).

Yellow is several times throughout the story, seemingly symbolizing the loss of hope, the feeling of being forlorn. Steinbeck wrote "The yellow stubble fields seemed to be bathed in pale cold sunshine", but there was no sunshine in the valley now in December. The thick willow scrub along the river flamed with sharp and positive yellow leaves" (Steinbeck 1). This leaves the feeling of bleakness, hopelessness, despair, and death. Next, the Chrysanthemums embody parts of Elise herself and her love of them reflects her longing for children (Evans 242). At the age of 35, Elise is without human children, but her flowers are treated as such, with love and care. Furthermore, Chrysanthemums are a symbol of the woman that Elise is with the blooms. They represent her sexual being along with her femininity. As Henry gives

her compliments on her flowers, he does not appear to be sincere in it. There is a lack of affection in the dialog between husband and wife, only one-sided directions from Henry to Elise. He leaves her doing woman's work in her flower garden as he goes to round up his herd, which was considered man work. The fog in the story appears to clarify that it is hard to see a way out of her current life, as things are not clear.

The fence that surrounds Elise's garden protects it from being disturbed by animals, while also keeping her within it protecting her as well, allowing her to see the world around her without stepping out into it (Evans 241). "Elisa seems to be enclosed inside the fence that keeps animals from her garden. " She feels emotionally enclosed as well" (Price 1). Her husband does not step inside the fence which shows distance when he speaks to Elise of his plans. Later a tinker arrives which Elise has no work or time. Then the tinker sees a way to manipulate Elise by pretending interest in her garden causing "The irritation and resistance melted from Elisa's face" (Steinbeck 5).

Furthermore, this excites her and brings forth feelings of desire within her as she craves the attention. At a point, while talking with the tinker, Elise almost touches his pants leg as she is telling him how to care for the flowers. Her words seem to be almost sexual innuendo, as she really appears to be giving the impression of telling him how a woman needs care and attention. Afterward, she finds work for the tinker while speaking to him about his travels and the feeling of freedom while expressing her dream of it. She tells him "It must be nice," "It must be very nice. I wish women could do such things." (Steinbeck 7). He finishes his work, taking the forgotten flowers almost as an afterthought, leaving Elise standing alone in her garden.

Elise believes that she is a strong capable woman who could do many of the same jobs a man can, but because the expectation of her gender restricts her, she does not. While Elise feels that she is strong and capable of doing things other than housework and gardening but is not allowed because she is female. This causes her to have feelings of frustration and feeling empty. Working in her garden was a way to release her exasperation as noted in the sentence “ even her work with the scissors was over-eager, over-powerful. The chrysanthemum stems seemed too small and easy for her energy” (Steinbeck 1).

After concluding his business with the two men her husband then comes to talk to her as she is gardening, he admires her work. He then goes on to tell her jokingly that “ I wish you’d work out in the orchard and raise some apples that big” (Steinbeck 2), she knows that this will never be allowed. Elise then changes the subject asking Henry what was happening with the men he was speaking with. He tells her that he has sold some of their livestock to the men and that they could go into town to celebrate by having dinner and seeing a movie (Steinbeck 3). During this conversation, her husband is telling her what he thinks, what they will do without really giving her choices or asking her ideas. Elise does not seem thrilled; just merely agrees to do what he tells her. She even seems to ask his permission to have some wine while they are out. There is no passion between these two people, he does not understand what she needs or wants. Henry appears to realize that there is something different about her but does not know what, nor does he ask her how she is feeling or if anything is wrong. Elise only wants to be seen as someone who is desirable, strong and smart, but he does

not see this. Elise does not tell her husband that she feels unappreciated, or what she wants. Neither Henry or Elise wants to sit down and talk about how things are.

As Henry is collecting the livestock for the men to pick up, Elise continues to work in her garden. During this time a traveling tinker comes to the ranch pretending to ask for directions. The tinker who never gives his name inquires if there is anything that he can repair so that he will have money for his supper. Elise tells him that she has nothing for him to do, but when he realizes that he is getting nowhere with her he feigns interest in her flowers as “the calculating tinker exploits her romanticism” (Evans 244). And “although she resists his sales pitch, she is excited by his admiration for her flowers” (Evans 242). She then listens to the tinker's lies believing them all the while being drawn to him, envying his freedom, even allowing him to enter her world via the fence, showing passion towards him with her actions and words. Elise then finds work for the tinker afterward paying him for his services. As the tinker prepares to leave, she gives him a pot of flowers for the imaginary woman to grow, she goes on to tell him “You might be surprised to have a rival some time. I can sharpen scissors, too. And I can beat the dents out of little pots. I could show you what a woman might do.” (Steinbeck 7). This shows that Elise shows that while she has faith in her ability to do the same work as a man, inside she knows that she will not be allowed to because of her gender.

Elise believes that she is unequal and set to live an unfulfilling life, because of the way that the world was during this time. Females were viewed as being a weaker sex, with less intelligence that needed to be taken care of,

almost existing without rights or thoughts of their own. Males were the breadwinners, working outside the home to earn income, also in charge of paying the bills, along with doing hard labor. Elise felt that she had to hide within herself, not allowing Henry to see her for who she really was. After the tinker visited the farm and she later saw the pot of flowers that she had given him for one of his customers laying by the road, she felt that she had been thrown away and lost all hope.

Elisa worked steadily in her garden while her husband left her out of his business discussion with the two men who had come to the farm. He later told her "I sold those thirty head of three-year-old steers, Got nearly my own price, too." (Steinbeck 1). Elisa replied to him by saying "Good," she said. "Good for you" (Steinbeck 1), as if it had nothing to do with her because as head of the household it was up to him. Next, he told her that they should go out and celebrate, even telling her where and how, without asking for a suggestion from her. She agreed with him, not overstepping her bounds and saying what she really wanted to do. Elisa exhibits wanting to be as a man, with a man freedom while remaining a woman, as when she works in her garden. She is described as "Her figure looked blocked and heavy in her gardening costume, a man's black hat pulled low down over her eyes, clod-hopper shoes (Steinbeck 1). According to Peter Lisca, this was part of "Elisa's silent rebellion against the passive role required of her as a woman" (Renner 1). There are also other references in Steinbeck's story relating to how Elisa kept the house "hard swept" and polished. She dreamed being free to travel like the tinker who visited the farm, but the tinker dashed her dream when he advised her that "It ain't the right kind of a life for a

woman." (Steinbeck 7). These are several ways that Elisa attempted to leave her place, to step out of bounds of what was expected of her, into a man's domain. But each time she went back to her normal life of being a homemaker, unfulfilled and oppressed.

When the tinker stopped by the farm looking for work, he awoke something in Elisa. Hope for passion and to be respected and admired, not just for her beauty but for her mind and the things that she could do. When the tinker left Elisa went into the house and scrubbed herself clean and took her time dressing in her best clothing, doing her makeup and making herself look nice in the hopes of attracting romantic attention from her husband. She wants to be treated differently by her husband, she hopes to be treated like a grown woman with a desire of her own and desired by her husband. Henry complements her how nice she looks but she takes some type of offense to what he has said as if he has insulted her. They then get into the car for the drive into town for dinner and the movie when they came upon the tinker in his wagon ahead of them, but her attention was caught by an object lying beside the road. Her dreams were dashed when she saw the discarded Chrysanthemums laying by the road, feeling that she had been rejected by not only her husband but the tinker as well. " She despairs when she sees that the tinker has thrown away the flowers that symbolize her femininity" (Evans 243). Because of this act by the tinker, she realizes that she was tricked and may even feel the urge to seek revenge as she asks her husband about what happens at the fights. When Henry tells her of the brutality of what happens during the fights, she retreats into her feminine self, vanquished and rejected. Elisa decides that maybe the wine that they are



going to have with the dinner with help to calm her down. She is even broken to the point of crying as she gives up hope of her life or anything about it changing, feeling old and that she has wasted her life.

In conclusion, Elise Allen does not believe she can live a satisfying life as the men do, and because the expectation of her gender restricts her, she is unequal and set to live an unfulfilling life. Elise never saw her dreams fulfilled due to being afraid to voice them to her husband Henry. There was no type of real communication between the husband and wife, nor affection. She kept her own feelings, needs, and dreams inside herself throughout the story, denying herself the chance to do or be anything else. At the end of the story, we see her broken and defeated after seeing the small bunch of flowers laying by the roadway thrown out by the conniving tinker. She cries like an old woman because she feels like a fool thinking that the tinker had any type of interest in her. At the same time, she realizes that her husband will probably never see her any different than he does currently, leaving her feeling old and alone and lost. Elisa is left with the conclusion that there is nothing to look forward to because nothing will ever change as she will be trapped in this life forever.

Elisa and Henry wasted their marriage by not talking over things with one another. This could have been a productive and happy relationship if there was communication between the husband and wife. There was no passion or affection between the pair. Both went about the marriage as if they were related somehow or maybe business partners. At 35, Elisa was questioning her life without the children that she wanted and how to change things. Neither one of them cared enough to ask the other what they needed or even if

they were happy. While Elisa was completely unhappy with the state of their relationship and wanted more, she did not discuss it with him. Henry apparently realized that something was bothering Elisa and that her demeanor was altered after the tinker had left but he never bothered to explore it by asking her what she was thinking or feeling.

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