

# The door of opportunity



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John Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums" dives into the world of wife Elisa Allen. As a 35 year old woman she is childless and extremely dissatisfied in her passionless marriage to her well-meaning but utterly clueless husband, Henry. Her low level of self-confidence also contributes to this feeling.

Despite having her chrysanthemums to make her somewhat happier in her life, in the end she fails to confront her dissatisfaction in every other aspect of her life, ultimately leading to a lifetime of unfulfillment.

Elisa is deeply unsatisfied with her marriage. Elisa and her husband Henry are more like roommates than husband and wife in the sense that their marriage is passionless and they go about their daily activities more or less completely separate from one another. Elisa feels disconnected from Henry because of this lack of togetherness and is illustrated when Henry tells her that he "sold thirty head of three-year-old steers" getting "nearly my own price, too" (Steinbeck). Elisa reacts by saying "Good,...Good for you" (Steinbeck). Her reaction shows how she does not celebrate this as an accomplishment for the both of them, but only sees it as something good for Henry, even though this accomplishment is bound to benefit the both of them.

Elisa's and Henry's lack of communication also contributes to her dissatisfaction with her marriage. The couple never has any disagreements because they do know how to have one. When the story opens and the scenery of the Salinas Valley is being described, there is mention of there being fog and the farmers being hopeful of rain, "but fog and rain do not go together." These elements are unwilling to confront each other much like Elisa and Henry. Elisa-like the fog- is much too indistinct while Henry-like the

rain- is altogether absent . In their first discussion of the story, Henry describes a fight that is happening and jokingly asks Elisa if she wants to go and she responds “ Oh, no... No, I wouldn't like fights” eluding to the absence of friction between them that prevents their relationship from growing stronger.

Elisa's low self-confidence acts as a profound barrier to her finding satisfaction in her life. Her appearance and the clothing that she wears 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, a figured print dress almost completely covered by a big corduroy apron...She wore heavy leather gloves to protect her hands while she worked” and it purposefully allows her to blend in and not call attention to herself. Her low self-confidence can also be attributed to the small confines of her world. The scenery of the story is described as “ 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). In this closed pot, her attention is always focused on her chrysanthemums, leading her to feel like that is all she can be good at. This also explains why Elisa avoids answering Henry's offer when he wishes aloud that Elisa could raise a cash crop of apples in addition to her chrysanthemums (Steinbeck). Despite Elisa having “ planter's hands” that destroyed pests such as aphids, sowbugs, and snails “ before they could get started”, and having an abundance of energy that “ The chrysanthemum stems seemed to small and easy for...” she is hesitant to take up his offer (Steinbeck). Although Elisa would most likely succeed at this

new venture, her low confidence and fear of failure stops her from moving forward.

In her world of dissatisfaction, the chrysanthemums arguably offer Elisa the most joy and are a high source of pride for her. When she is working in the garden one day, a tinker shows up and unbeknownst to her, cons her into giving him a brand new pot. When he first comes into the scene, the tinker asks Elisa if she has any work for him to do stating “ I mend pots and sharpen knives and scissors. You got any of them things to do?” (Steinbeck). At first, Elisa is visibly irritated that the man is bothering her but when the tinker searches for something to connect with her with and find the chrysanthemums, “ the irritation and resistance melted from Elisa’s face” (Steinbeck). As she started to explain her chrysanthemums to the man, her eyes began to “ grow alert and eager” and they shone (Steinbeck). Elisa suddenly gains some kind of strength from the sexually charged moment that they share bonding over their mutual appreciation of the chrysanthemums as “ Her breast swelled passionately” and her “ voice grew husky.” This strength is something that she has not been able to get from her husband. While Henry appreciates her chrysanthemums for their function and size, stating “ Some of those yellow chrysanthemums you had this year were 10 inches across”, the tinker “ appreciates” them for their beauty, describing the flower as “ Kind of a long-stemmed flower? Looks like a quick puff of smoke?” (Steinbeck). This elicits a response in Elisa that her husband has been unable to evoke. When the man asks for some chrysanthemums to bring to a woman down the road, Elisa was ecstatic to help him as she “ ran excitedly along the geranium-bordered path to the back of the house” to get

a pot to put the flowers in and tears off her “battered hat and shook out her dark pretty hair” in addition to removing the heavy leather gloves (Steinbeck). This is a sign of her softening and opening up completely to the man, in a way that she does not do for her husband. Her connection with the tinker momentarily takes her out of her confined self and gives her hope for the future.

In addition to her talk with the tinker about the chrysanthemums, they also discussed the tinker’s life on the road. Elisa began to think about what life travelling around would be like, even challenging the tinker, saying “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). The man countered that “It would be a lonely life for a woman, ma’am, and a scary life, too, with animals creeping under the wagon all night” (Steinbeck). As he leaves down the road, Elisa remarks “That’s a bright direction. There’s a glowing there” suggesting that Elisa believes that maybe she can try something new that does not deal with her chrysanthemums and still succeed at it.

After her encounter with the tinker, she returns to her house and gets ready for dinner with her husband by dressing up in her nicest clothes “the symbol of her prettiness” hoping to elicit a response from her husband about her beauty much like the tinker did with her chrysanthemums (Steinbeck). When Henry sees her, he simply responds “You look so nice,” utterly clueless to the fact that she wanted him to call her beautiful (Steinbeck). Henry means well but is unable to connect with his wife on an emotional level. He has

been blinded by his own work and role as provider of the household that he cannot see that Elisa needs more fulfillment in her life.

As the couple begins to drive to dinner, Elisa notices the flowers that she gave to the tinker are tossed onto the road. For Elisa, this is a huge betrayal because she opened herself up to the tinker on such a deep and emotional level about the chrysanthemums that she cared so much about. Just like her husband Henry, the tinker only wanted the pot that the chrysanthemums were in solely for its practical use and simply leaves the flowers to die on the road. The strength that she once felt vanishes and again she feels limited.

Elisa realizes that her precious flowers that she gave over to a complete stranger with the expectations that they would be taken care of, were thrown into the wind like a piece of garbage. This realization hits her hard and she hides her face from her husband as she begins to cry “ weakly-like an old woman” (Steinbeck). Again, her husband is unable to emotionally connect with her to figure out what is wrong. In the end, Elisa fails to escape her perceived limitations in life. Rather than risking failing at her dreams that could give her the opportunity to live more freely and fulfilled, she chooses to settle for the life she has always known, even if it means a lifetime of suffering.