

The crysanthemums

by j steinbeck



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

John Steinbeck captures the sense of the constrained woman and her sense of isolation in his short story *The Chrysanthemums*. The definition of constrained is: To compel by physical, moral, or circumstantial force. The feminist perspective focuses on unjust social practices that limit any group of people. Elisa Allen, the main protagonist, is a very lonely and depressed woman. She is isolated from the world, she feels frustrated with her marriage and she wants nothing more than a sense of connection to the world outside her garden gate, illustrating the general sentiment of women everywhere who were frustrated in their attempts to connect with the greater world. Every element of the story highlights this deeper meaning, only ending as Elisa is ??? crying weakly ??“ like an old woman.

??? (Steinbeck, 2011, para. 120). The rules of gender in Elisa??™s era limited her to many activities. Filled with pure intentions but a need to play a part in life, Elisa??™s actions as she tends her chrysanthemums, talks with the tinker and in her relationship with Henry all emphasize her overpowering sense of isolation and desperate need for a larger world. In every way, Elisa is constrained throughout the story. This is seen physically as she works in her garden space which is symbolically place away from everyone else around. Although dedicated to her garden, Elisa constantly wonders what the men with her husband are talking about not far away. The affection she gives to her flowers demonstrates how much she has to give to others while the tension in her hands as she snaps off flower heads shows her frustration at being excluded and set apart.

Steinbeck says, ??? The chrysanthemum stems seemed too small and easy for her energy,??? (Steinbeck, 2011, para. 5), but her flowers are the nicest

flowers around. Even the weather confines her: ??? The high grey-flannel fog of winter closed off 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, 2011, para. 1).

Like other women of her time, women were expected to make themselves happy only within the home space, but Elisa continues to show that the home is not enough. Elisas unimportance to the world is seen with the arrival of the tinker and the inclusion of her husband. Through her relationships with these men, Steinbeck reveals that the social expectations for the woman gave her no room for human passion. The tinker makes it clear that he has only stopped at the Allen ranch because he lost his way, but Elisa clings to him. She gives the tinker some of her precious chrysanthemum shoots dreaming about how they will go out and brighten up the world the same way she dreams she would one day send out children. When her husband, Henry, shows up, she hurries to put on ??? the dress which was the symbol of her prettiness. She worked carefully on her hair, penciled her eyebrows and rouged her lips,??? (Steinbeck, 2011, para. 95) betraying her willingness.

But the relationship she has with her husband is also politely distant. As they drive to town, Henry praises her for her skill in the garden, but keeps her confined there by rejecting her offer to help in the orchard. This further confines Elisa, this time within strict boundaries of gender work division. Realizing the limitations of her marital relationship reinforced by social expectations and their remote ranch, Elisa finally breaks down into the tears of a woman old before her time when she sees that not even her flowers have been able to make a difference in the world. Steinbeck??™s story

<https://assignbuster.com/the-chrysanthemums-by-j-steinbeck/>

paints a very moving image of how the positions women find themselves in are sometimes due to the lack of choice available to them or the dictates of a conservative society that feels the woman's place is in the home.

Steinbeck's characterization of Elisa expresses the loneliness and frustration of women living in confinement. She is confined within the strict bounds of a masculine perception of her gender roles. Even the weather conspires to keep her thoughts on the ground.

References
Constrain. (n. d.) The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. (2003). Retrieved May 25 2011 from <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/constrain>

Steinbeck, J. (2011). The Chrysanthemums in D. L. Pike and A.

M. Acostas (Eds.) Literature: A world of writing stories, poems, plays, and essays [Vital Source digital version] (p. 375). Boston, MA: Pearson Learning Solutions.