

An analysis of two women and their stories



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Lourdes Martin An analysis of two women 15 July 2006 AN ANALYSIS OF TWO WOMEN AND THEIR STORIES John Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums" and Ernest Hemingway's "Cat in the Rain" tells the story of two women trapped within the narrow confines of a chauvinistic society and the conflict raging within their souls. Both writers in their respective creations, Elisa Allen and the "American wife" bring out the stark reality of the times and an intimate glimpse of a woman's secret needs and hidden desires. The predominant theme in both stories is suppression, and the subsequent wilting of the female protagonists under the strictures of a rigid society. Towards the end we also realize their inner pain and their need for adventure and an identity independent of their husbands.

The two women lived in a time when society was male-dominant. A woman's place was relegated to home and hearth and her entire existence revolved around the needs of her husband. Consequently Elisa Allen and the American wife are filled with a craving for some meaning in their lives and needs so powerful that it threatens to overwhelm them. They yearn for personal happiness that has been denied to them by marriage and society.

Steinbeck's opening lines, "The high gray-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 of a closed pot" capture Elisa's plight beautifully. She is shut off from the rest of the world and it seems to her like the fog will never lift. Elisa's husband means well but he is insensitive to her secret yearning and therefore he fails her. Her boundless energy is poured in concentrated amounts to numerous household chores and her beloved chrysanthemums but there is always a part of her which longs to rise above the low expectations society has for

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women. Thus she is a veritable cauldron, bubbling over with hope for something better than her life has to offer.

Similarly Hemingway's protagonist is trapped in a loveless marriage with a controlling and neglectful husband. She attempts to save a cat from the relentless rain almost as if she hopes to rescue herself in the process. In a passionate outburst which is entirely lost on her husband she pours out her need for seemingly trivial things which in reality goes much deeper. It is a desperate appeal to her husband but he being very much a man of the age pays her no heed and returns to his book.

The climax in both stories is significant and is relevant to this day. Elisa has her hopes quashed in a single cruel stroke by a tinker to whom she had barred her soul momentarily in a moment of exquisite vulnerability. The chrysanthemums she had so lovingly nurtured callously dumped by the tinker represent the remnants of her battered hopes and lost dreams. The "American wife" meanwhile has her hopes centered on finding a rain-drenched cat. The hotel-keeper's thoughtful gesture of recovering it for her, results in hope burgeoning deep within once more.

Both climaxes provide food for thought. While society is more hospitable to women today, the modern woman is still not free from the terrors of a society that favors the male and from inner conflict. Some women like Elisa have their hopes and dreams destroyed by a still cruel society while others find a glimmer of hope in their lives for a better future and whether this hope is justified or not is anybody's guess.

Works Cited

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