

John Steinbeck's The Chrysantheums



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John Steinbeck's critically acclaimed short story, "The Chrysanthemums", reports an incident in the life of a farmer's wife, Elisa Allen. But in doing so, this short story makes a subtle commentary on gender roles and repressed sexuality through the brief but intricate network of symbols and themes it builds up. One such indirect device of introducing gender into the story is the description of the attire of the characters. Elisa Allen is introduced to the reader as working in her garden, dressed in an unflattering, unfeminine gardening costume that made her look "blocked and heavy" and a "man's black hat", to boot - in a manner of speaking. This gender ambivalent description of her appearance sets the theme of uncomfortable sexuality in the story. Elisa does not fit into a neat feminine pigeonhole. Her clothes are described in explicitly masculine terms, she is "handsome" and "lean and strong"; and yet her occupation is tending to flowers, a symbol of womanhood. That there is something amiss in the situation Elisa is found in can be surmised from the very beginning of this story. Speaking of the chrysanthemums as a symbolizing womanhood, one notices that symbols in this story are used with keen gender awareness. Elisa sees her husband talking to unknown men, engrossed - in a way, we suspect, that she is not used to being spoken to by her husband. The men are merely "business suits" who smoke while they talk. Because of the amazing brevity of this story, these men are never commented upon at length, and their "business suits" become symbolic of a professional life that Elisa has no access to. The business suits from, again symbolically enough, the "Western Meat Company" becomes a reminder of Elisa's own trapped and restricted situation. To contrast this, the bearded vagabond and his wagon become symbolic of the unrestricted life on the road that Elisa so envies. Elisa's

situation of silent repression is expressed through these subtle symbols. Certain lines address this concern directly also. Elisa says, "It's good to eat away from home", for instance or later, "It must be nice," she said. "It must be very nice. I wish women could do such things." Male responses to this expression of female desires are summarized succinctly in the tramp's response, "It ain't the right kind of a life for a woman". When Elisa confesses that she could have done the tramp's job herself, "I could show you what a woman might do", she is again dismissed. Elisa Allen's gender is portrayed with sensitivity. She is not a cardboard cutout in any respect. It cannot be said dismissively that she wants a man's life because although Elisa desires the freedom of being a man, both in her own words and through the author's subtle commentary, Elisa repeatedly turns to symbols of femininity to attempt to fulfill this desire. First, she turns to the chrysanthemums as a symbolic connection with this man that she is so fascinated by. Later, she uses "the symbol of her prettiness" i. e. her dress, stockings and underclothes to reach out to her husband and reconnect with him. Although she desires the liberation of a male field, she uses the tools available to her as a woman and does not attempt to subvert patriarchy in unorthodox ways. The cruel discarding of the chrysanthemums that symbolized to Elisa the closest she had got to achieving freedom, and also a moment of tenderness that she shared with someone who appeared to understand her, summarizes again the general attitude of the patriarch towards the woman. It remains the woman's role to cry weakly and the man's to continue along his own open road. Steinbeck, with his beautiful and sensitive prose, his intricate web of symbols, does not attempt to present a particularly revolutionary picture or even to suggest a solution to the situation of the oppressed woman.

Instead, he uses this story to reflect the condition of a woman denied a life of her choice. And in the subject he is depicting, it is my opinion, that this choice of writing with delicacy and resignation is very apt. References:

Steinbeck, John. *The Chrysanthemums* (1938). Retrieved from <http://www.nbu.bg/webs/amb/american/4/steinbeck/chrysanthemums.htm>