

# A woman's job



“The Chrysanthemums” written by John Steinbeck, illustrates the feelings of a woman in a misogynistic relationship living in a patriarchal society. Women are placed into gender roles of being housewives to their working husbands. They are portrayed as fragile, quiet, and submissive, and Steinbeck renders Elisa Allen as such, but her actions throughout the story show otherwise. Steinbeck elucidates Elisa's realization of who she is as a woman, but how she hides her true feelings from her husband.

In the beginning of the story, Elisa is described as lean and strong, but “her figure looked blocked and heavy in her gardening costume” (Steinbeck). This is the first illustration that while Elisa is strong, she isn't strong enough for what she is wearing. She is also wearing mostly men's clothing for gardening, which defeminizes Elisa's character. He even uses the masculine adjective, “handsome”, to describe her appearance as she gardens. The way Steinbeck describes Elisa in the garden is that the tools are using her and not the other way around; they are strong and powerful. Her energy while working with the chrysanthemums is “over-eager, over-powerful” and from the use of the masculine adjectives, this is too much for a woman. Steinbeck is subtly describing Elisa in comparison to a man. Henry Allen, Elisa's husband, is introduced into the story. His tone starts off friendly, but slowly begins to sound condescending, like he is speaking to a child. He observes that she is doing a good job with her flower crops, and states that he wishes Elisa “work out in the orchard and raise some apples that big” (Steinbeck). She reminds him that she could easily do it, but from his tone he knows that he wouldn't allow her to work on the orchards because that is a man's job. Elisa retorts that she has a gift working with plants and he

reminds her “ it sure works with flowers” (Steinbeck). A flower is a common object of femininity and Henry is insisting that of course Elisa would be good at raising the chrysanthemums because she is a woman. Henry believes that women have a place in the world and should only tend to certain jobs. This hints towards the subtle underlying connection of their misogynistic relationship. Elisa's husband isn't the only man in the story that dismisses her intelligence and eagerness to do the jobs that men do. A tinkler is passing by and asks Elisa if she has any work for him; he is a fixer that fixes cookware and sharpens knives. She is resistant to his proposition, but becomes animated when he expresses interest in her chrysanthemums. The conversation is one-sided and the tinkler seems bored of Elisa as she talks about her flowers. Elisa notices and “ she stood up then, very straight, and her face was ashamed” (Steinbeck). Elisa remembers that this man is her superior, even if he isn't her husband, but her superior because he is a man. She offers to find something for the tinkler to fix and “ his manner changed, he became professional” (Steinbeck). Steinbeck uses Henry and the tinkler as a parallel to society. The men express no interest in a woman and her abilities, similar to the way society dismisses women.

“ The Chrysanthemums” is a manifestation of a society that dismisses woman who are incisive. Elisa's curiosity is consistently dismissed by her husband and the tinkler. Henry jokingly suggests that they see a fight in town and Elisa declines, but only does this because she doesn't think it is a place for a women. The tinkler also rejects her eagerness about his job stating, “ it would be a lonely life for a woman...and a scary life too...” (Steinbeck). Both men are stating that Elisa should just watch their jobs from

afar. The men in the story are described as boring and less vividly than Elisa. Elisa is intelligent, curious, and adventurous. She is constantly seeking answers to the questions she has of the world. She escapes her misogynistic relationship with her husband while she talks to the tinkler, only to realize he is the same as her husband. Elisa is trapped in a patriarchal society and the scenery encompasses the entrapment she feels as a woman in this story. She is able to escape reality temporarily as she bids the tinkler goodbye “ her shoulders were straight, her head thrown back, her eyes half-closed so that the scene came vaguely into them...then she whispered, ‘ That’s a bright direction. There’s glowing there’” (Steinbeck). The setting of the story takes place on a piece of land, isolated from the main town, similar to Elisa’s isolated life with her husband.

Steinbeck introduces Elisa in the beginning, describing her with masculine adjectives and stating that she was wearing men’s clothing to garden. The chrysanthemums are a representation of Elisa in life, and the setting is the enclosure of herself and the flowers; by being able to plant these flowers Elisa is able to escape from her reality. Elisa is stripped of her femininity throughout the story and is shown disconnected from her feminine side. There is significance when Elisa begins to feel more comfortable when the tinkler comes and she begins to talk about the flowers; “ she tore off the battered hat and shook out her dark pretty hair”, and “ the gloves were forgotten” (Steinbeck). Slowly, Elisa is remembering her adventurous side as a woman. After the tinkler has gone, she feels at peace when she starts to get ready for dinner with her husband. She put on her newest underclothing and her nicest stockings and the dress which was the symbol of her

prettiness. She worked carefully on her hair, penciled her eyebrows, and rouged her lips (Steinbeck). Elisa has been re-categorized into a more feminine category as she dresses for dinner with her husband. It follows that her husband is shocked because she looks “different, strong and happy” (Steinbeck). These feminine actions in comparison with the masculine adjectives used to describe Elisa at first, symbolize her remembering that she is a woman. Elisa is still joyful of her brief liberation of being in a relationship with a misogynistic man, she forgets and asks Henry again if women attend the fights; Henry insists that she won't like it and she shouldn't go. Elisa is abruptly brought back into reality and reminded of her place in society and in her relationship with her husband.

John Steinbeck provides an insight to the reality of a trapped women in a patriarchal society. The emotions conveyed in the story represent the feelings of Elisa in her relationship with a misogynistic man who dismisses her intelligence consistently. Not only does her husband dismiss her, but a tinkler disregards her because she is a women. There is a symbolic significance of the chrysanthemums throughout the story. The flowers are consistently described as strong, just like Elisa. She becomes one with the flowers because this is the only thing she can be good at. When the tinkler comes along, at first he rejects the flowers. This is parallel to society rejecting woman; the chrysanthemums are a representation of women in society. In this society, women are taught to cater to men; women are not allowed to deviate from societal standards set by men.