

# People's limitations in john steinbeck's "the chrysanthemums"



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In his short story "The Chrysanthemums," John Steinbeck portrays not just the restrictions placed upon the protagonist, Elisa Allen, in the male dominated society of her day, but the intellectual and emotional shortcomings of the men to understand and acknowledge such a fact. Through his text, Steinbeck examines people's limitations. The first lines of "The Chrysanthemums" not only set the scene of the story, winter in Salinas Valley, California, but also capture the idea of limitation. Steinbeck writes, "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 389). The "grey" color and the thick, warm, "flannel" texture of the fog limit visibility, effectively separating the valley and its residents from the rest of the world. The idea of enclosure continues when the author compares the fog attached to the mountains and the valley to a lid on a pot. Not only does the fog curtail visibility, but also, as the simile implies, the energy and spirit within it cannot express itself. As if looking through a telescope the wrong way, Steinbeck moves from a panoramic view of the valley, across the river to Henry Allen's foothill ranch, and finally to the protagonist herself, Henry's wife, Elisa. Through the narrowing perspective, Steinbeck renders her small and insignificant, almost lost in a larger world. The initial image of Elisa confined within "the wire fence that protected her flower garden from cattle and dogs and chickens" (390), supports the idea of limitation, her world within a larger one. The unyielding, harsh quality of "the wire fence," together with the listing of potential dangers that seem more extensive through the repetition of "and," infer that she, like her chrysanthemums, needs substantial protection from the outside world. Behind the enclosed

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garden stands the Allen's house, " a white farm house with red geraniums close-banked around it as high as the windows" (390). Elisa's home, similar to her garden, appears prison like, the geraniums resembling security walls " high" and " close-banked." The quantity of the flowers, together with their height, as " high as the windows," limits both vision and movement. Such physical images of restraint: the fog, the enclosed garden, and home symbolize limitations, captivity and restricted vision. The author expands on the theme of limitations as he considers Elisa Allen herself. Unlike the " figured print dress" (390), the shapeless, functional gardening clothes that she wears obscure her femininity. Described as a " costume" (390), her clothes alter or disguise her real appearance. The weight and size of the garments: " clodhopper shoes," " big corduroy apron" with " big pockets" and the " heavy leather gloves" that cover her hands, conceal the real Elisa (390). The very length of the third sentence illustrates the weight and shapelessness of the garb that disguises her. Together with the " man's black hat," the clothing emasculates her, Elisa's sexuality almost completely " blocked" or restrained (390). The chrysanthemum seeds and the gardening tools: " trowel," " scratchers," and " knife," which indicate fertility and possibly sexuality, remain buried in the depths of Elisa's apron pockets (390). Though her youth has past, at thirty-five Elisa has plenty of time to live. In contrast to the fog that blinds the area, her eyes " as clear as water" (390) show not only impressive vision and probable wisdom, but also the ability and desire to see beyond the immediate. Clearly, she has much to offer. Not only attractive, she has maturity and spirit. Yet, Steinbeck infers that Elisa's energy can barely be contained within her limited lifestyle. As she cuts down the old chrysanthemum stalks she appears " over-eager,"

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over-powerful" as if the thick stems seemed "too small and easy for her energy" (390). Likewise, her "little house" looked "hard-swept," the windows "hard-polished" (390). Her enthusiasm and her capabilities make her efforts too extreme for the tasks at hand; hence, the stalks and the house appear more diminutive than likely. Like the chrysanthemums she tends, Elisa has the potential to bloom broadly if only the limitations placed upon her disappeared. The two male characters in the text represent the society that places the limitations, constraints, upon Elisa and other women. Henry Allen and the visiting tinker, at separate times each converse with her from the other side of the wire fence. The fact that she remains within the enclosure of her garden implies that Elisa cannot be part of the men's world. Similarly, the men, unable to appreciate her needs and talents, remain without. At the beginning of the story, Elisa simply looks on from afar, as her husband conducts business with two other men. Steinbeck writes, she "looked down across the yard and saw Henry, her husband, talking to two men in business suits" (389). The distance between herself and the men, emphasized by the words "down across," confirms that as a woman she must be excluded from meaningful discussions even though she seems more intelligent than her husband or the tinker for that matter. The misspelled words "scissors" (391) and lawn "mores" (391), plus the dripping paint on the tinker's wagon, seems sloppy in comparison to Elisa's efficient industry in the home and garden. Despite the tinker's own limitations, his lack of intelligence and perception, he has the freedom to be and do as he pleases. He "[goes] from Seattle to San Diego and back every year. Takes all [his] time. About six months each way. [He] [aims] to follow nice weather" (392).

The short sentences give the impression of time to spare. Traveling toward <https://assignbuster.com/peoples-limitations-in-john-steinbecks-the-chrysanthemums/>

San Diego, he tracks the sun, warm weather, and possible prospects.

However, Elisa Allen remains in the winter fog. Steinbeck implies the man has opportunities, the woman none. When the tinker assumes, "It ain't the right kind of life for a woman," Steinbeck writes, "Her upper lip raised a little, showing her teeth. 'How do you know? How can you tell?'" (394). The baring of her teeth hints at both aggression and defense. Later, as she watches the tinker leave, Elisa whispered, "That's a bright direction. There's a glowing there" (395) because she senses possibilities of a more fulfilling life. Her whispering suggests awe but also guilt when "she looked around to see whether anyone had been listening" (395). Through Elisa, Steinbeck questions the necessity of the limitations society imposes on women. Within the limitations of a male dominated society, come the further boundaries of marriage. Aware of her responsibilities, Elisa keeps a clean home and tends to her husband's needs. When Henry came in from work, "Elisa [had] laid his dark suit on the bed, and shirt and socks and tie behind it" (395). The use of the comma, together with the repetition of "and" lengthens the sentence. In her efficiency, she sees to Henry's every need, but the task seems wearisome. In his turn, Henry cares about his wife: he compliments her gardening skills and offers to take her out to celebrate his business deal. Yet while their conversation seems pleasant, it lacks spontaneity and familiarity. Elisa comments "good" (390) to Henry's business transaction and again to the suggestion of an evening out. The repetition of her bland response, "Good... Oh, yes. That will be good" (390), suggests a lack of real interest. Similarly, Henry has to "put on his joking tone" (391). The fact that he has to "put on" a relaxed tone indicates an unnatural force and stiffness

between them. In contrast, Elisa and the tinker converse easily and with  
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humor. Steinbeck writes, "The man caught up her laughter and echoed it heartily" (391). The word "echoed" captures the naturalness of their chatter. Perceiving the easy familiarity they share, Elisa's repressed sexuality starts to emerge. Though Elisa does not seem to notice her husband's appearance, her quick appraisal of the tinker's reveals interest. His interest intensifies when he observes her chrysanthemums, and by extension her. In Elisa's haste and excitement to gather little sprouts for the tinker to take, she temporarily forgets the narrowness of her life and "[tears] off [her] battered hat and [shakes] out her pretty dark hair" (393). The verb "tears" indicates not only passion but also eagerness simply to be herself. As she removes the man's hat, she allows her femininity to emerge. When the tinker allows Elisa's gardening expertise to instruct and guide him, the newfound freedom acts like an aphrodisiac. Steinbeck writes how "her breasts swelled passionately" (394) and her "voice grew husky" (394), releasing her previously confined sexuality. When the tinker has left, Elisa goes into the house to bathe. The description of her scrubbing her "legs and thighs, loins and chest and arms, until her skin was scratched and red" (395) reveals her thoroughness and determination to simply be herself. When she looks at her naked body, Elisa finally experiences complete freedom, restraints and limitations gone. Society demands Elisa's freedom from limitation be short lived. The change in Elisa's appearance creates tension between the husband and wife. As Henry emerges from his bath, Elisa "stiffened and her face grew tight" (396). She feels a combination of apprehension and hope, wishing to elicit a romantic or sexual response from her husband. While he sees a positive change in his wife commenting, "You look different, strong and happy" (396), he seems confused and uneasy by her transformation.

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Steinbeck describes how Henry “blundered on” and looked “bewildered” (396). His own limitations make it difficult for him to accept her as anything other than a dutiful wife or perhaps understand her need for more. Recognizing defeat, Elisa replaces her hat before leaving the home to join her husband. The firm action of “[pulling] it here and [pressing] it there” captures her resignation as once again her true self disappears. When Elisa sees the discarded chrysanthemum shoots at the side of the road, her rejection seems complete. The final scene between the couple creates pathos. Henry's eagerness to please his wife with offerings of more frequent outings and wine with dinner, simply falls short. In her turn, Elisa rejects her instinctive desire to witness a fight with all its implied passion and excitement, the fighting gloves “heavy and soggy with blood” (396). Elisa convinces herself, “Oh no. No. I don't want to go. I'm sure I don't” (397). Clearly, she does. Her regression complete, she turns up her coat collar to hide her emotion. Her strength gives way to weakness and, as the limitations return, her sense of identity fades. In “The Chrysanthemums,” John Steinbeck examines people's limitations. He not only examines the restrictions placed upon women in the male-oriented society of its day, but also the intellectual and emotional limitations of the men to understand and acknowledge such a fact. The protagonist, Elisa Allen, has much to offer. Attractive and spirited, strong and capable, she must nevertheless subdue her desires, talents, and dreams. Independence denied, Elisa must be content to surrender her identity to be a dutiful wife to Henry, a working man lacking her intellect and passion. Despite their shortcomings, Henry and the tinker have the freedom to be who they will. Clearly, Steinbeck feels sympathy for his main character and all women limited to an unsatisfactory

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life through no fault of their own. Unfortunately, society will always present limitations, if not for gender, then race or disability. With the loss of one barrier, comes the birth of another. With or without, can one ever be free?