

John Steinbeck's The Chrysanthemums

Literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The protagonist in John Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums" is Elisa. She is 35 years old and lives with her husband in a ranch. They don't have children or pets, or nearby neighbors. Elisa's husband is working in the ranch and she is mainly occupied with the house chores and her garden. At first glance we can think that Elisa is satisfied with the life she is leading. However, deep down in her soul Elisa is restless, because she feels unloved and unappreciated. She longs for attention as a sexual being and not as a working object, the way her husband perceives her. Elisa is lonely and insecure. She finds consolation in growing chrysanthemums. She sees them as a replacement for her aching soul, for her lost motherhood and womanhood. Steinbeck depicts her struggle with symbolism through the chrysanthemums. The garden is part of Elisa's soul and it aids her to accomplish and dominate her strengths. Through her garden she attempts to silently force others to appreciate her and see her female side. From a different perspective, Elisa tries to escape from the real, social world and the lack of understanding dedicating herself to the nature. Nature is "holy" land. When she is among the nature she doesn't have to struggle and persuade it in anything what her true self is. Nature sees Elisa the way she is. What shatters Elisa the most is her husband's lack of sensitivity to her inner world. The Chrysanthemums symbolize her feminine being and every time when Henry suppresses her female side, she escapes into the garden where she cares for her flowers, because they can see her true nature. At moments Henry's remarks are even reprimanding. He is a practical man and remarks to Elisa that she can grow apple trees instead of the garden with Chrysanthemums. But the flowers mirror Elisa's inner self and her woman

tenderness. If she lets them die, she will die with them, too. Her hope for a change will disappear and she will fight no more. Henry must be feeling insecure himself, because when Elisa dresses herself beautifully in the evenings, he sees this gesture as an insult and an attempt to diminish his masculinity. Elisa's appearance disturbs Henry so much and he is so shocked by her transformation that he tells her that she looks "different, strong and happy". The metaphor which he uses "you look strong enough to break a calf over your knee, happy enough to eat it like a watermelon". The metaphor that he uses ultimately devastates her. He shows his wife that he doesn't see any sexuality or female sensuality. She is denied her feminine nature. And the only consolation and salvation Elisa finds is in her garden. A travelling tinker arrives at Elisa and Henry's home. He starts to talk about his travelling experiences and Elisa begins to understand how limited her life is and how she desires to head for an adventure. She thrives at the idea that her chrysanthemums will be shared and that the world outside will love them. Elisa dreams about the world, but she lives in a nightmare and there is no hope she would ever escape the life of emptiness, spiritual torture and solitude. The only source of love are her flowers. Given the historical time of the story Elisa is considered a strong character. Had she attempted to rebel, she would have been casted away from society. In Faulkner's "Barn Burning" the author depicts the life of an itinerant farmer, whose son Sarty is torn between his filial obligation to protect his family and the clear conscience. The story begins with Sarty who is introduced to the court where he has to testify whether his father burnt a barn or not. Even though, he knows that he has to lie before the court, he is positive that he has to protect

his family. Exposing the truth is not an option. Slowly, Sarty understands that there is something awry about his father's behavior. Every time he gets angry with his employer he burns his barn. The plot revolves mainly around the relationship between father and son and how the son chooses to abandon his family in the name of righteousness. Fire plays an incredible symbolism in the story. It begins and finishes by a burning a barn. It also shows the transition which Sarty undergoes. The boy is very attached to his family and believes that his father has a good side. When Sarty sees the magnificent mansion of Major De Spain he is convinced that his father would not attempt to harm the people. No one would dare to destroy this beautiful plantation and mansion. As the storyline progresses, we witness Sarty's struggle between morality and family duty. The planter fines Sarty's family for damaging a rug and we quickly see a shift in both Sarty and his father's behavior. At this very instant their relationship is put to test and we see how Sarty faces the grand decision to escape and warn Major De Spain that his barn will be in fire. Sarty makes his choice. Torn between the desire to defend his father and be just and defend the truth, he seeks salvation in honesty and frankness. Although, he is still a child, Sarty's conscience is unspoiled and he feels the natural moral dilemmas inside of him. He walks alone through his rites of passage, to realize that his father's crimes are social evil and he is not able to live hiding the truth. With his growing consciousness Sarty leaves behind his family to pursue a different world where he can live by his morality without being afraid that he will be punished. Sarty's inner pain must be excruciating - to know that his father might be dead, and his family needs support and to walk in the wood, and

not turn back. Sarty's character possesses a moral dignity and strength. He knows that he would not follow into his father's steps and should start a new life - a life full of honesty and virtue. References: Steinbeck, John, *The Chrysanthemums*, n.d. Web, 28 January 2011. Faulkner, William, *Barn Burning*, archive.org, n.d. Web, 30 January 2011.