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## Gender Inequality in “The Chrysanthemums” by John Steinbeck

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**Abstract.** This paper deals with Steinbeck’s classic short story “The Chrysanthemums,” discussing about the conflict Elisa Allen, the female protagonist faces to enhance her role as a woman in a modern society and about her attempt to gain social approval for her feminine traits. The purpose of this paper is to analyze Elisa’s feminine identity as portrayed in “The Chrysanthemums.” The method used was descriptive method. In order to reveal Elisa’s identity, the study will focus not only on Elisa but also her husband as well, analyzing the relationship between the couple. The result shows that Elisa is a sympathetic woman, where the source of her frustration as related to sex and gender, and to limitations in her marriage life. She is portrayed in the marital relationship which renders her to be dependent on her husband. She seemingly depicted as a stereotype feminine feature. On the other hand, it is found to be unusual, finding her unsympathetic as her feminine traits are the elements which degrade her. Elisa is a less woman imprisoned by men, than one who secures herself with a sterile, ambiguous sexual identity. She is not frustrated by her husband but continually frustrates him by rejecting social reality and pursuing for her romantic fantasy.

**Keywords:** sympathetic, unsympathetic, female protagonist, chrysanthemums, ambiguous

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## INTRODUCTION

Elisa Allen is one of Steinbeck's most unforgettable female characters who spiritually bounds to her garden and produces the biggest chrysanthemums in the region. She is noticeably portrayed as dependent woman however she is spiritually independent to her own vision of her life. "The Chrysanthemums" apparently is a narrative about a woman who is well-talented in gardening. Indeed, doing a deeper explication, it can be discovered that the narrative contains strong point of sexual identity. Elisa's struggle represents her attempt as a woman who is striving and stopping to emasculate her identity in a "masculine-dominant" society.

Elisa is portrayed in the marital relationship which renders her to be dependent on her spouse. She seemingly portrayed as stereotype feminine figure. In fact, reading the story closely, we can identify her identity from other point of view. Renner argues "The Chrysanthemums" is a story about a strong, capable woman kept from personal, social, and sexual fulfillment by the prevailing conception of a woman's role in a world dominated by men.<sup>1</sup> "The Chrysanthemums" has been well discussed among many critics. Critics have been debated over considering whether Elisa, the female protagonist of the story is sympathetic or unsympathetic, powerful or powerless. The story concerns a married couple, their psychology and their desires in their "unhappy" everyday life.

The purpose of this paper is to examine Elisa's identity portrayed and focused in "The Chrysanthemums." The paper is subsided in three parts where each conveys the aspects of Elisa's life and her circumstance in short story respectively. In the aims of revealing Elisa's identity, the study focus on the male characters as well, dissecting relationship among the characters. At last, how Elisa is portrayed in the short story whether she is sympathetic or unsympathetic is explicated.

### 1. The Limitation of Elisa's Femininity

Jackson J. Benson has suggested that the character of Elisa Allen was based on Steinbeck's first wife, a bright and energetic woman who gave up her career to follow her husband.<sup>2</sup> However, this paper aims to get details on Elisa's identity as it is told in the story. We read closely about the story's focus which is upon Elisa, the conflict she faces to enhance her role as a woman in a modern society, "men's world," and her attempt to gain

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Renner, "The Real Woman Inside the Fence in 'The Chrysanthemums,'" *Modern Fiction Studies* (Summer 1985), Vol. 31, pp. 305-316.

<sup>2</sup> Jackson J. Benson, *John Steinbeck, Writer: A Biography* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 276.

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social approval for her feminine traits.

Elisa is a woman with “artistic gift” with gardening. She says about herself: “I’ve a gift with things, all right. My mother had it. She could stick anything in the ground and make it grow. She said it was having planters’ hands that knew how to do it.” (*LV*, 3) While she is working with her garden, being “enclosed”, Henry is doing his own business in the ranch. In the beginning of the story, we see Elisa at work cutting away old chrysanthemum stems. Her husband, whom she can see from the garden, is talking with two other men near the tractor shed. Already we see that Elisa is isolated from what would seem to be a man’s world. The isolation or the separateness soon becomes clearer. When Henry comes to see Elisa in her garden, he leans over the garden fence. The fence has become a physical border between him and Elisa, a separation between his farm world and her garden world.

Elisa is described dressed in a mannish figure, “a man’s hat pulled low down over her eyes, clodhopper shoes, a figured print dress almost completely covered by a big corduroy apron with four big pockets... She wore heavy leather gloves....” (*LV*, 1) Elisa’s heavy-block clothes conceal her beauty, her femininity. The heavy-block clothes place her in a life which seems not so attractive to a “female”, symbolizes a trapped state of her being. Thus, Elisa’s feminine traits are trapped in those clothing, in her appearance in the garden. The heavy-block clothes place her in a life which seems not so attractive to a “female”, symbolizes a trapped state of her being. Thus, Elisa’s feminine traits are trapped in those clothing, in her appearance in the garden. The aspects of Elisa’s life can be retained for profound analysis on the reason why is she limited and frustrated which renders her yearning for a new hope in her life. For deeper analysis, we can look at how her relationship with her husband, Henry Allen is.

## **2. Elisa and Henry**

Henry is a practical man rather than a romantic. So, he is unable to appreciate aesthetically and fully Elisa’s gift and at least recognize it and support her with her garden. As a matter of fact, Henry places Elisa in his expected cultural role as a housewife woman gardening and keeping their house clean and comfortable. He gives her enough space to elaborate her genius or ability at gardening for he knows that she is very passionate about it. But he excludes her from his ranch business, inviting her to engage but half-hearted.

There is an unfathomed difference in valuing things between Elisa and Henry. For Elisa raising flower is an icon for her aesthetic identity, for she does it never for money.

Flowers are a kind of her offspring, her pride as well as her symbol of femininity. We can say she is with the value of nature and natural reproduction. On the contrary, Henry values flowers by its size, as he says, “ten inches across,” (*LV*, 2) and he is always seeking for money, by selling cattle. He values things in terms of producing profit. He wonders how it would be if Elisa’s planters hands do with things in his orchard, raising some apples, and he knows those would be more profitable. His viewpoint is a money one. As we already know, he raises steers and sells them to the meat companies who expect the steers to be the food. The dichotomy in their relationship renders Elisa to be excluded by her husband. Renner argues “The Chrysanthemums” is a story about a strong, capable woman kept from personal, social, and sexual fulfillment by the prevailing conception of a woman’s role in a world dominated by men.<sup>3</sup>

There is evidence that this couple has something wrong with their marriage. Indeed, they have separate rooms as Renner describes, “she has her own room and presumably sleeps apart from her husband. This woman repulses the amorous advances of her husband. Elisa, as we shall see, characteristically stiffen and turns cold as the approach of Henry, even as they prepare for a romantic evening in town.”<sup>4</sup>

Another evidence of the rift in their marriage can be found in Elisa’s encounter with the tinker. The tinker approaches her garden, asks about direction, and tries to grasp her attention, “He drew a big finger down the chicken wire and made it sing.” (*LV*, 5) A stranger has already stood on the entrance of her private world. Soon the tinker leans farther over the garden fence and finally Elisa invites him into the garden after his praise for her treasure flower as he says, “A kind of a long stemmed flower? Looks like a quick puff of colored smoke.” (*LV*, 6) The words clearly and certainly reach her truest self which Henry is unable to reach, when he says “strong new crop coming.” Only in this way Henry describes and flatters her treasure flowers. As Mitchell adds to this, “In the tinker, though, Elisa finds a man whose strength seems to match hers, although she later discovers his emotional poverty. Their brief encounter reveals an aspect of Elisa which is not seen in her dealings with Henry – her erotic potential.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the tinker can go through the border which exists between Elisa and Henry.

The nature of the border or conflict is something which Steinbeck hints at but

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Renner, “The Real Woman Inside the Fence in ‘The Chrysanthemums,’” *Modern Fiction Studies* (Summer 1985), Vol. 31, pp. 305-316.

<sup>4</sup> Renner, *op.cit.*, p. 307.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, *op.cit.*, p. 99.

never makes obvious. The rift between Elisa and Henry could be caused by their childless condition, sexual frustration that Elisa suffers, Elisa's oppression or by practical minded society, or Elisa's repression for aesthetic companionship which Henry does not aware. Osborne puts it best as he rejects sex as the focus in the story, "the root of Elisa's frustration is her uncertainty of who she is and what her relationship to her society should be."<sup>6</sup>

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The nature of the border or conflict is something which Steinbeck hints at but never makes obvious. The rift between Elisa and Henry could be caused by their childless condition, sexual frustration that Elisa suffers, Elisa's oppression or by practical minded society, or Elisa's repression for aesthetic companionship which Henry does not aware.

### 3. Why Elisa Cries Weakly like an Old Woman

"She was kneeling on the ground looking up at him. Her breast swelled passionately." (*LV*, 8) These sentences are considered to be the details of Elisa's revelation of her femininity and sexuality. Her brief encounter with the tinker arouses Elisa's passion for he can reach her aesthetic feeling. The tinker describes chrysanthemums by their beauty, not by its size. His aesthetic appreciation brings out a response in Elisa that her husband is unable to evoke. Her eyes shine; she shakes out her hair; runs excitedly and talks rapidly. Her breast swells passionately, her voice grows husky, and she talks about passion in language that Henry would never understand: "When the night is dark—why, the stars are sharp-pointed, and there's quite. Why, you rise up and up! Every pointed star gets driven into your body. It's like that. Hot and sharp and—lovely." (*LV*, 8)

Then, she finally invites the tinker, a stranger into her yard, takes off her protective gloves, and with bare hands prepares the sprout and the damp sand for him, "The gloves were forgotten now. She kneeled on the ground by the starting bed and dug up the sandy soil with her fingers and scooped it into the bright new flower pot." (*LV*, 7) This

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<sup>6</sup> William Osborne, "The Education of Elisa Allen: Another Reading of John Steinbeck's 'The Chrysanthemums'," *Interpretation*, (1976, Vol. 8), p.11.

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, op.cit., p. 99.

scene puts Elisa in an ambiguous role as a wife as she responds gratefully to the tinker, perhaps even suggesting some slight unfaithfulness to her husband. She finds herself treated just as she longs for and this recognition renders her to turn to be sympathetic for him.

It is important to keep in mind that she has generously offered something she cares tenderly to a stranger, but at the end she has to see that something is discarded cruelly. The sprouts are Elisa, her femininity, her offspring, for she takes care of them very attentively and very passionately. The tinker's discarding seemingly ends her hope for understanding, for recognition, and for gender/sexuality fulfillment. Like an old woman she cries, for she knows that her new feminine spirit, her hope, and her offspring have been discarded by the tinker. She once finds herself filled with a new spirit of her femininity, and emanates herself from his praise for her chrysanthemums which means praising her truest self since the flower represents her inner self.

We should also notice that Elisa is facing another side of her sexual revelation. Steinbeck portrays her in a masculine term while working with her flowers in her garden, in the world of her own, in a place with her truest identity. She is in mannish clothing with an over-eager energy which seems too much for her flowers. Indeed, in the evening, before dressing, she reveals another side of her identity. Before getting on her newest underclothing, stocking, and dress for an evening with Henry she looks at her body very carefully after drying it up; "She tightened her stomach and threw out her chest. She turned and looked over her shoulder at her back." (*LV, 10*) She is studying her own body as a female and perhaps enjoying in her looking at it. Elisa's way of looking at her own body can be considered as a "masculine" way of looking.

Related to this fact, it can be said that she is frustrated in a sense of her ambiguous sexuality which mainly feminine but partly masculine. Inside her feminine identity seemingly the masculine trait has been already embedded. She is frustrated by her own way of defining her sexual identity which critics see as her sexual ambivalence. Some critics feel unsympathetic to Elisa seeing that her feminine traits are the elements which degrade her. Thus, we would like to say that Elisa defines her sexual identity in a sterile, ambiguous way. Scholars have debated for her masculine outfit and the circumstances behind. The aspects of Elisa's life can be retained for profound analysis on the reason why is she limited and frustrated which renders her yearning for a new hope in her life. For deeper analysis, we can look at how her relationship with her husband, Henry Allen is.

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In fact, Henry places Elisa in his expected cultural role as a housewife woman gardening and keeping their house clean and comfortable. He gives her enough space to elaborate her genius or ability at gardening for he knows that she is very passionate about it. But he excludes her from his ranch business, inviting her to engage but half-hearted. Osborne puts it best as he rejects sex as the focus in the story, “the root of Elisa’s frustration is her uncertainty of who she is and what her relationship to her society should be.” (Osborne, 1976)

Some critics attribute unsympathetic to Elisa seeing that Elisa’s feminine traits are the elements which degrade her. When Henry flatters her before going to evening town, he says bewilderingly, “You’re playing some kind of game,” he said helplessly. ‘It’s a kind of a play. You look strong enough to break a calf over your knee, happy enough to eat it like a watermelon’” (LV, 11). This expression is the revelation of Henry’s feeling on his wife. As been mentioned before, Elisa stiffens and turns cold toward her husband approach. It might be said that he is frustrated by Elisa’s withdrawal for his romantic attempts. Stanley Renner is unusual in finding Elisa unsympathetic. He believes that Elisa is “less-woman imprisoned by men than one who secures herself within a fortress of sexual reticence and self-withholding defensiveness,”<sup>8</sup> as he explains in *Modern Fiction Studies*. Thus Elisa is not frustrated by her husband, but continually frustrates him by rejecting reality for romantic fantasy.

As beauty is important for Elisa the tossed flowers tell her that her feminine value is never important at all for the tinker. Eventually, she learns about it and admits her “weak” feminine traits. The feeling of being defeated fills her with tears and renders her to cry weakly like an old woman; “She turned up her coat collar so he could not see that she was crying weakly like an old woman.” (LV, 13) Elisa miserably has no other way than admitting her feminine weakness for she fails gaining society’s recognition for her artistic gift. As the failure is symbolized by the tossed chrysanthemums, the discarded flower emanates her truest feeling to admit what society imposed on her.

Concerning Elisa’s appearance, she is once portrayed in beautiful, appealing woman, she is very lovely and Henry is amazed. She urges to be adored for that beauty in which Henry failed to explain at last. Her looking is really beautiful that night due to the routines have rendered her to be contrary; unattractive, strong, and part of masculine.

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<sup>8</sup> Renner, op. cit., p. 306.

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## CONCLUSION

Some critics attribute unsympathetic to Elisa seeing that Elisa's feminine traits are the elements which degrade her. When Henry flatters her before going to evening town, he says bewilderingly, "You're playing some kind of game," he said helplessly. 'It's a kind of a play. You look strong enough to break a calf over your knee, happy enough to eat it like a watermelon'" This expression is the revelation of Henry's feeling on his wife. As been mentioned before, Elisa stiffens and turns cold toward her husband approach. It might be said that he is frustrated by Elisa's withdrawal for his romantic attempts. It is unusually found that Elisa is unsympathetic. It is believed that Elisa is less-woman imprisoned by men than one who secures herself within a fortress of sexual reticence and self-withholding defensiveness. Thus Elisa is not frustrated by her husband, but continually frustrates him by rejecting reality for romantic fantasy.

Eventually, she learns about it and admits her "weak" feminine traits. The feeling of being defeated fills her with tears and renders her to cry weakly like an old woman; "She turned up her coat collar so he could not see that she was crying weakly like an old woman." (LV, 13) Elisa miserably has no other way than admitting her feminine weakness for she fails gaining society's recognition for her artistic gift. As the failure is symbolized by the tossed chrysanthemums, the discarded flower emanates her truest feeling to admit the role, society imposed on her.

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