

# The Chrysanthemums



by John Steinbeck

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## eNotes: Table of Contents

1. [The Chrysanthemums: Introduction](#)
2. [The Chrysanthemums: John Steinbeck Biography](#)
3. [The Chrysanthemums: Summary](#)
4. [The Chrysanthemums: Characters](#)
5. [The Chrysanthemums: Themes](#)
6. [The Chrysanthemums: Style](#)
7. [The Chrysanthemums: Historical Context](#)
8. [The Chrysanthemums: Critical Overview](#)
9. [The Chrysanthemums: Essays and Criticism](#)
  - ◆ [Overview of "The Chrysanthemums"](#)
  - ◆ [A Kind of Play: Dramatic Elements in Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums"](#)
  - ◆ [The Cur in "The Chrysanthemums"](#)
  - ◆ ["The Chrysanthemums": Study of A Woman's Sexuality](#)
10. [The Chrysanthemums: Compare and Contrast](#)
11. [The Chrysanthemums: Topics for Further Study](#)
12. [The Chrysanthemums: Media Adaptations](#)
13. [The Chrysanthemums: What Do I Read Next?](#)
14. [The Chrysanthemums: Bibliography and Further Reading](#)

## The Chrysanthemums: Introduction

First published in the October, 1937 issue of *Harper's*, "The Chrysanthemums" was included in John Steinbeck's 1938 short story collection, *The Long Valley*. In several significant ways, this story of an unhappy marriage is typical of Steinbeck's fiction. It takes place in the Salinas Valley of California, the "Long Valley" named in the title of his first short story collection. It concerns a married couple and examines the psychology of the unhappiness their marriage causes. Finally, it contains many vivid images of the seasons, weather, plants, and animals, all of which fascinated the writer his entire life.

One of Steinbeck's biographers, Jackson J. Bennett, has suggested that the character of the protagonist, Elisa Allen, was based on Steinbeck's first wife, a bright and energetic woman who gave up her career to follow her husband. Whatever her origins, Elisa is a woman who loves her husband, but whose life is narrow and unexciting, limited in what she can become by geography and opportunity. When a strange man passes

through, a wanderer who travels up and down the coast sharpening scissors and repairing pots, her conversation with him leaves her feeling frustrated and dissatisfied.

From the beginning, this story has been regarded as one of Steinbeck's finest pieces of fiction—indeed, some have called it one of the best short stories ever written. More than sixty years later, it is still the author's most widely anthologized story, and one of his most debated. Critics are divided, for example, over whether Elisa is sympathetic or unsympathetic, powerful or powerless. Few modern short stories have built up such a body of criticism as "The Chrysanthemums," as readers have tried to establish Elisa's reasons for her dissatisfaction with married life.

## The Chrysanthemums: John Steinbeck Biography

John Ernst Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California, the setting for many of his early stories, including "The Chrysanthemums." The Salinas Valley was then, as it is now, largely rural and agricultural, a place of small towns and small farms. As a boy Steinbeck was a devoted reader. He wrote for his high school newspaper and attended college as an English major. Summers, he worked along the Salinas River harvesting beets. In 1925 he left home for New York City and took a job with a newspaper.

Though Steinbeck found reporting unsatisfying, he was determined to become a writer. He returned to California and published a novel about the Caribbean, *Cup of Gold*, just before the 1929 stock market crash. As the Great Depression unfolded, Steinbeck married the first of his three wives, met his closest friend, found his lifelong literary agents, and began writing about the California locations that he would feature in much of his work.

Within a few years he created some of his best work, including *The Red Pony*, (1933) *Tortilla Flats*, (1935), and *Of Mice and Men* (1937). He won awards, he was earning money, and in 1937 he was named one of Ten Outstanding Young Men of the Year. Finding celebrity distracting, Steinbeck took a tour of Europe and returned to work in seclusion. In 1930, he published a collection of short stories, *The Long Valley*, which was comprised of several previously published stories, including "The Chrysanthemums."

For years, Steinbeck visited migrant farm workers' camps, originally on assignment for the *San Francisco News*. The conditions the workers faced as they struggled to provide for their families angered and saddened him, prompting him to write his greatest novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). This novel cemented Steinbeck's reputation as a social critic. The success of *The Grapes of Wrath* and the 1940 film version ultimately separated him from the rural landscape and the rural people that had informed his writing. He returned to New York City and continued to produce well-regarded and best-selling work for nearly thirty more years. He died of heart failure on December 20, 1968, at the age of sixty-four.

Steinbeck was one of the most famous and successful writers of his day. He won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962, and the United States Medal of Freedom in 1964. Three decades after his death, he continues to be one of a handful of writers whom nearly every American high school graduate has read.

## The Chrysanthemums: Summary

The story opens with a panoramic view of the Salinas Valley in winter, shrouded in fog. The focus narrows and finally settles on Elisa Allen, cutting down the spent stalks of chrysanthemums in the garden on her husband's ranch. Elisa is thirty-five, lean and strong, and she approaches her gardening with great energy. Her husband Henry comes from across the yard, where he has been arranging the sale of thirty steer, and offers to take Elisa to town for dinner and movie to celebrate the sale. He praises her skill with flowers, and she

congratulates him on doing well in the negotiations for the steer. They seem a well-matched couple, though their way of talking together is formal and serious. Henry heads off to finish some chores, and Elisa decides to finish her transplanting before they get ready to leave for town.

Soon Elisa hears “a squeak of wheels and a plod of hoofs,” and a man drives up in an old wagon. (He is never named; the narrator calls him simply “the man.”) The man is large and dirty, and clearly used to being alone. He earns a meager living fixing pots and sharpening scissors and knives, traveling from San Diego, California, to Seattle, Washington, and back every year. The man chats and jokes with Elisa, who answers his bantering tone but has no work for him to do. When he presses for a small job, she becomes annoyed and tries to send him away.

Suddenly the man's attention is caught by the chrysanthemum stalks and seedlings. When he asks about them, Elisa's annoyance vanishes, and she becomes friendly again. The man remembers seeing chrysanthemums before, and describes them: "Kind of a long-stemmed flower? Looks like a quick puff of colored smoke?" Elisa is delighted with his description. The man tells her about one of his regular customers who also gardens, and who always has work for him when he comes by. She has asked him to keep his eyes open in his travels, and to bring her some chrysanthemum seeds if he ever finds some. Now Elisa is captivated. She invites the man into the yard, prepares a pot of chrysanthemum cuttings for the woman's garden, and gives him full instructions for tending them. Clearly, Elisa envies the man's life on the road and is attracted to him because he understands her love of flowers. In a moment of extreme emotion she nearly reaches for him, but snatches her hand back before she touches him. Instead, she finds him two pots to mend, and he drives away with fifty cents and the cuttings, promising to take care of the plants until he can deliver them to the other woman.

Elisa goes into the house to get dressed for dinner. She scrubs herself vigorously and examines her naked body in the mirror before putting on her dress and makeup. When Henry finds her, he compliments her, telling her she looks "different, strong and happy." "I'm strong," she boasts. "I never knew before how strong." As Henry and Elisa drive into town, she sees a dark speck ahead on the road. It turns out to be the cuttings the man has tossed out of his wagon. She does not mention them to Henry, who has not seen them, and she turns her head so he cannot see her crying.

## **The Chrysanthemums: Characters**

### **Elisa Allen**

Elisa Allen is the story's protagonist, a thirty-five-year-old woman who lives on a ranch in the Salinas Valley with her husband Henry. She is lean and strong, and wears shapeless, functional clothes. The couple have no children, no near neighbors, and Henry is busy doing chores on the ranch throughout the day. Elisa fills her hours by vigorously cleaning the "hard-swept looking little house, with hard-polished windows," and by tending her flower garden. She has "a gift" for growing things, and she is proud of it. For the most part, Elisa seems satisfied with her life. When the traveling tinker comes along and talks about his wandering habits, she begins to think about how limited her life is, and she longs for adventure. The idea that her chrysanthemums will be shared with a stranger who will appreciate them gratifies her, makes her think that in a small way she is part of a larger world. When the man betrays her by throwing away the chrysanthemums, he makes it clear that her world extends only as far as the boundaries of the ranch.

### **Henry Allen**

Henry Allen is Elisa's husband, a hard-working and successful small-scale rancher. As the story opens, he has completed the sale of thirty steer, and he wants to celebrate with Elisa. He suggests an evening in town, with dinner and a movie, and compliments her on her gardening skills. But there is no intimacy in his talk; the two are serious and formal with each other, and when Henry attempts a bit of humor Elisa does not understand it. As the couple prepare to leave for town, Henry can see that something is bothering his wife, but he cannot

guess what it is and everything he says is wrong. In the face of her strange mood he "blunders," he is "bewildered" and speaks "helplessly." He is a good man, and he wants to make her happy, but he does not know what she needs.

### **The man**

The man is a tinker who travels up and down the coast every year with a horse-drawn wagon bearing the legend 'Pots, pans, knives, sissors, lawn mores, Fixed.' He is large, with careworn face and hands and a dirty suit. Because he depends on his salesmanship to earn his living, he is skillful at bantering small talk, but his friendly laughter is only superficial. Elisa has no work for him and is about to send him away when he notices the chrysanthemums and gets her to talk about them. Instantly her tone changes. She becomes enthusiastic, and she finds some work for him to do. When she finds her discarded chrysanthemums on the road that evening, Elisa realizes that his interest in the flowers was insincere, simply a way to win her over.

## **The Chrysanthemums: Themes**

### **Limitations and Opportunities**

The most discussed theme in "The Chrysanthemums" is limitations—the limitations under which a married woman lives. The idea of limitation or confinement is presented as the story opens: "The high gray-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." Within this closed pot, Elisa operates within even narrower confines. The house she shares with Henry is enclosed "with red geraniums close-banked around it as high as the windows," and the garden where she grows her flowers is surrounded by a wire fence. From these enclosures Elisa watches men come and go, the cattle buyers in their Ford coupe, Henry and the hired man Scotty on their horses, and the tinker in his wagon drawn by a horse and a burro.

Elisa does not express any regret at staying put while the men move about. She clearly is not always confined to the ranch, since she has enough knowledge of the roads to give the man advice. She knows that the dirt road to the ranch "winds around and then fords the river" in sand, and suggests, "I think you'll save time if you go back to the Salinas road and pick up the highway there." Does she know how to drive the family roadster? Perhaps she stays at home because she chooses to, or because she has nowhere to go. However, when the tinker describes his journey ("from Seattle to San Diego and back every year. Takes all my time. About six months each way. I aim to follow nice weather") she replies, "That sounds like a nice way to live."

After she talks with the man and gives him some chrysanthemum cuttings, she asks him more about his life. "You sleep right in the wagon?" she asks, and he answers affirmatively. "It must be nice," she replies. "It must be very nice. I wish women could do such things." Of course, as the man points out, women cannot do such things, but just the thought of it gives her courage and strength. One day, she says, she might give the man some competition. "I could show you what a woman might do." Again, he tells her that it would be an unsuitable job for a woman, too lonely and frightening. But she does not believe him. When Henry sees her a bit later she glows and boasts, "I'm strong. I never knew before how strong."

Her sense of strength comes from her encounter with the man, from the sexually charged moment they shared over their appreciation of the chrysanthemums and the wandering life. This connection enlarges her, takes her out of her confined self. When she sees she has been betrayed, by the man and by her romantic ideas, she feels limited again. Eagerly, desperately, she looks for some small way to break out of her confines. Henry senses her feelings, and observes, "I ought to take you in to dinner oftener. It would be good for both of us. We get so heavy out on the ranch." He means well, but after Elisa's disappointment she needs more. Still, she does not have the strength or the power to take what she needs, just as she would never leave the ranch and pursue a different life. She asks permission: "Henry, could we have wine at dinner?" A bit later she asks, "Do any

women ever go to the fights?" But the feeling passes. Although the narrator, Henry, and Elisa have all praised her for her strength, she is not strong enough to overcome her limitations, and she breaks down in weak tears "like an old woman."

### **Beauty and Aesthetics**

Although there are other ways to describe it, the tension between Elisa and Henry, the reason they cannot communicate with each other or satisfy each other, is that they do not share an aesthetic sense. Elisa needs to experience beautiful things, but Henry values things because they are functional. He appreciates Elisa's "gift with things," her "planter's hands," and he praises her for this gift. But the quality he admires in the chrysanthemums is their size: "Some of those yellow chrysanthemums you had this year were ten inches across." He would place more value on Elisa's gift if she could use it for production, to "work out in the orchard and raise some apples that big."

By contrast, the tinker appears to share Elisa's aesthetic sense. Although Elisa mentions the flowers' size, the man describes their beauty: "Kind of a long-stemmed flower? Looks like a quick puff of smoke?" His aesthetic appreciation brings out a response in Elisa that her husband is unable to evoke. Her eyes shine, she shakes out her hair, she runs excitedly and talks rapidly. Her breast swells passionately, her voice grows husky, and she talks about passion in language Henry would never understand: "When the night is dark—why, the stars are sharp-pointed, and there's quiet. Why, you rise up and up! Every pointed star gets driven into your body. It's like that. Hot and sharp and—lovely."

After the man leaves, Elisa dresses for her evening out with Henry, and tries to get an aesthetic response from him. She puts on her nicest clothes, "the symbol of her prettiness," and waits for him to see her. But Henry fails the test. He notices at once that Elisa looks "so nice," but he is unable to explain what he means. He knows he is being tested, and comments, "You're playing some kind of a game." But he tries again to say the right thing. "You look strong enough to break a calf over your knee, happy enough to eat it like a watermelon." There is no unkindness in Henry's evaluations. He is a good man who admires and respects his wife. But he does not appreciate beauty as she does.

Neither, as it turns out, does the tinker. Apparently, all of his words of appreciation were false, calculated to gain Elisa's confidence. Like Henry, he values what is practical. He has saved the flowerpot, but tossed the flowers into the road. As important as beauty is to her, Elisa has no one in her life who shares her feelings.

## **The Chrysanthemums: Style**

### **Imagery**

As is typical of Steinbeck's fiction, "The Chrysanthemums" uses clusters of images to subtly reinforce important themes and ideas. For example, imagery of seasons and weather reinforces the contrast between Elisa's life and the tinker's. Elisa's life is confined, closed in, as described in the story's opening line: "The high gray-flannel fog of winter closed off the Salinas Valley from the sky and from all the rest of the world." The atmosphere in Elisa's world is grim; there is "no sunshine in the valley now" and the air is "cold and tender." The tinker, however, moves about freely, and he is free "to follow nice weather." He is not confined to this closed off place, and when he drives away Elisa notices, "That's a bright direction. There's a glowing there." Later, as she again looks off in the direction he has taken, she notices that "under the high gray fog" the willows look like "a thin band of sunshine." For Elisa there is "no sunshine in the valley," but for a man who can travel, the horizon holds promise.

The story contains other image clusters that function in much the same way. As Ernest W. Sullivan, II, observes in *Studies in Short Fiction*, "The correspondences between people and dogs elucidate the social and sexual relationships of the three humans, as well as foreshadow and explain Elisa's failure at the end of

the story to escape from her sterile and unproductive lifestyle.” R. S. Hughes examines the color yellow, in the “yellow stubble fields” and the willows’ “positive yellow leaves,” and finds “These bright sunny yellows (including Elisa’s chrysanthemums) in the midst of winter suggest Elisa’s hope, rekindled by the tinker, for a more fulfilling life.” Images of hands, animals, enclosures and, of course, the chrysanthemums themselves, may be profitably lifted from the text and examined side-by-side for clues to Steinbeck’s and the characters’ intentions.

### **Point of View**

“The Chrysanthemums” is told by a third-person narrator who reports clearly about the actions of the characters, but who cannot read their thoughts or their motivations. This limited third-person narrator helps establish the mood of the story by recreating for the reader the experience of Elisa and Henry hearing each others’ words but having to guess at their meanings. When the tinker praises the beauty of the chrysanthemums, the narrator does not step forward to explain that he is being insincere; the reader must discover his deceit as Elisa discovers it. And when Henry tries to find the words to please Elisa and explain himself, the reader shares Elisa’s frustration at not being able to read his thoughts.

But the third-person narrator does not reveal Elisa’s heart, either, and this contributes greatly to the air of mystery surrounding the story. Although Elisa is the protagonist and the reader feels closest to her, she too is revealed only through her actions and words. Why does Elisa “start” at the sound of her husband’s voice? Why does she attack the weeds with such fury? What does she think about during those long hours in the garden? The reader never learns. After the tinker has gone away, Elisa gets dressed for her evening out. The narrator describes her preparations in fascinating detail: “she scrubbed herself with a little block of pumice, legs and thighs, loins and chest and arms, until her skin was scratched and red. When she had dried herself she stood in front of a mirror in her bedroom and looked at her body. She tightened her stomach and threw out her chest. She turned and looked over her shoulder at her back.” Clearly these strange actions signal moments of contemplation for Elisa, continued when she sits on the porch and looks toward the river, “unmoving for a long time.” Steinbeck calls attention to these strong emotional responses, but refuses to fill in the blanks. The result has been a large body of criticism of “The Chrysanthemums,” each essay revealing perhaps as much about the critic as about Elisa Allen.

## **The Chrysanthemums: Historical Context**

### **The Great Depression**

Steinbeck wrote “The Chrysanthemums” in 1934, as the United States was just beginning to recover from the Great Depression. The Depression began with the collapse of the New York Stock Market in October 1929, and eventually affected employment and productivity around the world. Banks collapsed and businesses folded. Millions of people lost their jobs, and with less money to spend they bought fewer goods, leading to factory closings and more unemployment. There was no federal “safety net” at that time, so poor and hungry people had to rely on individual states for assistance beyond what their families could provide. In many states, there was no help available. In 1932 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt initiated a series of programs, called the New Deal, to get the country back on its feet. He reformed the banking and stock market systems to make them more stable, created the Public Works Administration to create jobs, and gave new protection to labor unions to help workers get fair wages and decent working conditions.

The Depression did not affect all Americans equally, and many people even grew wealthier during the 1930s. With prices lowered by the Depression, it was possible to live well on less money. Necessities like food and housing, and luxuries like restaurant meals and fashionable clothing, were actually cheaper, because so few people worldwide could buy them at all. Some areas not directly affected by coal-mining, cotton-growing, and other devastated industries—California among them—continued to thrive. Elisa and Henry Allen seem to be among those who were not much affected by the Depression. They have a tractor and a car, and do not seem

to be in desperate need of the money Henry brings in by selling his steers.

Steinbeck, too, lived relatively comfortably if simply through the early 1930s, even before he started to earn large sums for his writing. His wife Carol earned a small salary as a typist, while he devoted all his time to writing. They were able to supplement their diet with fish they caught in the ocean and with cheap local produce. But Steinbeck was not oblivious to those who were less well off. His novel *In Dubious Battle* (1936) is about migrant workers who go on strike in the California apple fields. Investigative newspaper stories that he wrote about migrant worker camps in 1936 led to his greatest work, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

### **Forgetting Their Troubles**

Even in stable and productive pockets of the country, the mood was grim during the depression. To escape their troubles for a short time, Americans turned their attention to the movies and to sports as never before. For its part, the movie industry tried to provide a refuge by erecting lavishly ornamented movie theatres where worried people could watch elaborate musical comedies, fantasy horror films, and sentimental family films like those starring Shirley Temple. Movie tickets were inexpensive, and about forty percent of the population of the United States went to the movie theatre every week. One in four people went at least twice each week. With the new technology for making talking pictures, Hollywood, California, became world's most important center for filmmaking. The year 1931 saw the first television broadcast, but the days of commercial networks and televisions in most people's homes were still years away.

Sports provided other diversions for a gloomy population. The 1932 Summer Olympic Games were held in Los Angeles, and the Winter Games in Lake Placid, New York, the first time the Winter Games were held in the United States. Football and baseball drew large crowds. Boxing was a popular spectator sport, as Americans Jack Sharkey, Max Baer and Joe Louis held world heavyweight titles.

## **The Chrysanthemums: Critical Overview**

Steinbeck knew as soon as he finished writing "The Chrysanthemums" that he had created something special. In a letter to his friend George Albee he wrote, "I shall be interested to know what you think of the story, 'The Chrysanthemums.' It is entirely different and is designed to strike without the reader's knowledge. I mean he reads it casually and after it is finished feels that something profound has happened to him although he does not know what or how. It has had that effect on several people here." Over the next six decades, enough critics have attempted to pin down that "something profound" to create what has been called a "small critical industry" devoted to this one story.

Immediate response to the story, and to *The Long Valley*, the collection in which it appeared, was positive. Elmer Davis, in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, called the collection "certainly some of the best writing of the past decade." The great French author André Gide, like Steinbeck a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, commented that the stories were as fine as those of the nineteenth-century Russian writer Anton Chekhov. In 1941, Joseph Warren Beach included Steinbeck among the eight American writers "most worth our thoughtful consideration" in *American Fiction, 1920-1940*, and singled out "The Chrysanthemums" for praise because "the author does not waste words and insult his reader with ... explanation." In the same study Beach penned what has become a frequently repeated line, calling Elisa Allen "one of the most delicious characters ever transferred from life to the pages of a book." For Beach and others of his generation, the marriage between Elisa and Henry appeared to be "one of confidence and mutual respect," and Elisa's grief at the tinker's betrayal was "no tragic grief," but simply a reluctance we all feel if we "let someone get the best of us."

With the rekindling of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s, more critical attention was given to the roles of women in literature. New works by and about women appeared, and older works were examined for

clues as to the relative status of women in society. Mordecai Marcus, in 1965, began a debate carried out in *Modern Fiction Studies* over the meaning of Elisa's dissatisfaction. Marcus, who considered "The Chrysanthemums" to be "one of the world's great short stories," believed that Elisa's greatest desire is to become a mother, and "her devotion to her chrysanthemum bed is at least partly an attempt to make flowers take the place of a child ... Denied a child, a wider world of experience, and that projection of oneself into the world of fresh and broad experiences which possessing a child fosters, she finds a substitute in her flowers." Elizabeth E. McMahan, writing four years later, disagreed: "Elisa's need is definitely sexual, but it does not necessarily have anything to do with a longing for children." In 1974 Charles A. Sweet found in Elisa "an embryonic feminist," and read the story as "Steinbeck's response to feminism." Elisa, he claimed, was "the representative of the feminist ideal of equality and its inevitable defeat." All three writers express sympathy for Elisa, and see the source of her frustration as related to sex and gender, and to the limitations marriage imposes on a woman.

Robert Benton, in a chapter of *A Study Guide to Steinbeck*, also sympathizes with Elisa, but does not find sex to be the cause of her frustration. Rather, "Henry does not fulfill her need for aesthetic companionship." William Osborne also rejects sex as the focus in an article in *Interpretations*, and recalls a common Steinbeck theme, "the effect of a utilitarian society on the sensitive and romantic individual. At the root of Elisa's frustration is her uncertainty of who she is and what her relationship to her society should be." John H. Timmerman agrees, explicating a "story about artistic sensibility" in *John Steinbeck's Fiction*. He believes the story deals symbolically with "the dream of the artist, the artist's freedom of expression, and the constraints of society upon that freedom."

Stanley Renner is unusual in finding Elisa unsympathetic, and in rejecting the feminist interpretations of the story that abounded in the 1970s and 1980s. He believes that Elisa is "less a woman imprisoned by men than one who secures herself within a fortress of sexual reticence and self-withholding defensiveness," as he explains in *Modern Fiction Studies*. Thus Elisa is not frustrated by her husband, but continually frustrates him by rejecting reality for a romantic fantasy.

## The Chrysanthemums: Essays and Criticism

### Overview of "The Chrysanthemums"

The many critics who have debated for decades over the reason for Elisa Allen's frustrations in "The Chrysanthemums" have focused on two ideas: that Elisa is oppressed, either by a male-dominated society or by a practical-minded one, and that her flowers are for her some sort of compensation for what is missing in her life. The chrysanthemums have been interpreted as symbols of Elisa's sexuality, or childlessness, or artistic sensibility, and all of these connections make sense when looking at Elisa's connections to her husband or to society. It is also possible, I believe, and useful, to look at the flowers as literal flowers, as signs of Elisa's connection with the natural world.

Since the rekindling of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s, and the rise of the environmental movement in the same years, writers including Annie Dillard, Alice Walker and Starhawk have wondered in writing whether the same impulses that lead men to conquer new land and dominate the environment also lead them to dominate women. In 1974, the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne applied the term ecofeminism to the philosophy that women have a spiritual connection with nature that is stronger than men's, that women and nature are dominated by men in similar ways, and that women's connections to nature can be a source of strength. Carol J. Adams explains in the introduction to her anthology *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, "Ecofeminism identifies the twin domination of women and the rest of nature. To the issues of sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism that concern feminists, ecofeminists add naturism—the oppression of the rest of nature. Ecofeminism argues that connections between the oppression of women and the rest of nature

must be recognized to understand adequately both oppressions.’’

"Oppression" seems too strong a word for the ways in which Elisa is subdued by her life as Henry's wife, yet clearly she is limited in ways that frustrate her. She is proud of her garden, but must fence it off to protect it from the domesticated animals, the "cattle and dogs and chickens." She feels she must ask Henry's permission to enjoy a glass of wine. Even the tinker, who seems to understand her at least a little bit, keeps telling her what she cannot do. "It ain't the right kind of life for a woman," he says. "It would be a lonely life for a woman."

Elisa already leads a lonely life, in terms of her connections with other human beings. Her only passion is for her garden, and when she is alone in the garden she is her truest self. As Henry says, she has "a gift with things." Her mother, too, had the gift. "She could stick anything in the ground and make it grow. She said it was having planters' hands that knew how to do it." Her connection with the garden, with nature, is something she feels but cannot explain. She tells the tinker, "I can only tell you what it feels like. It's when you're picking off the buds you don't want. Everything goes right down into your fingertips. You watch your fingers work. They do it themselves. You can feel how it is. They pick and pick the buds. They never make a mistake. They're with the plant. Do you see? Your fingers and the plant. You can feel that, right up your arm. They know." It isn't just plant life that can call up this response. For Elisa, just being outside on a dark night sends her soaring: "When the night is dark—why, the stars are sharp-pointed, and there's quiet. Why, you rise up and up! Every pointed star gets driven into your body. It's like that. Hot and sharp and—lovely."

This gift, this oneness with the plant, is a source of strength. Several times throughout the story, Steinbeck comments on her strength. As she works in the garden, her face is "lean and strong," she uses "strong fingers," her work is "over-powerful. The chrysanthemum stems seemed "too small and easy for her energy." She feels at her most powerful when she is using her planter's hands, which "never make a mistake. You can feel it. When you're like that you can't do anything wrong." The thought of sharing this connection to nature with another person—the "lady down the road a piece" who "has got the nicest garden you ever seen"—makes Elisa giddy. Her eyes shine, her breast swells, her voice grows husky. And when she has done it, when she has reached past all the men in the story across the bridge of nature to another woman, she finds her greatest strength. "I'm strong," she tells Henry. "I never knew before how strong."

What Elisa would like to do is get out of the Valley and see the world, to break her bonds with Henry and strengthen her bonds with the land. She is fascinated with the tinker's life, traveling back and forth trying "to follow nice weather." "That sounds like a nice kind of a way to live," she says. The word nice comes up again and again in her conversation with the tinker. The woman down the road has the "nicest garden you ever seen," but she would like to have some "nice chrysanthemums." "It must be nice" to sleep in the wagon, Elisa comments. "It must be very nice. I wish women could do such things." For Elisa, the word is an expression of deep and mysterious feelings, of an essential connection. But both the men in her life reveal that they do not understand, that the word is one they can use casually. When Elisa describes the feeling of being under the stars, and comes close to reaching for the man, he replies, "It's nice, just like you say. Only when you don't have no dinner, it ain't." His response makes her ashamed. She has been about to reach for a kindred spirit, and he has just brought the conversation down from spiritual fulfillment to material comfort. Henry, too, fails the test. He walks in when she is at her most artificial, when she is penciled and rouged and the least like her natural self, and declares, "You look so nice!" Her reply is swift and terrible: "Nice? You think I look nice! What do you mean by nice?"

However kindly he may be, however hard he tries, Henry just doesn't get it. For him, nature is something to be subdued, brought under control. It's how he makes his living. When Elisa is disturbed, after Henry returns from his chores, she looks down toward the river road "where the willow-line was still yellow with frosted leaves so that under the high gray fog they seemed a thin band of sunshine." When Henry is disturbed by his failure to say the right thing, he looks "down toward the tractor shed." He acknowledges Elisa's "gift with

things,' but he sees the flowers only in terms of their size, not their beauty. "Some of those yellow chrysanthemums you had this year were ten inches across.'" (Elisa knows that for men, size is all that matters when it comes to flowers, and at first she brags about her chrysanthemums in those terms with the tinker.) Henry does not understand growing things only because they are beautiful. Instead, he wishes she would "work out in the orchard and raise some apples that big.'" The tinker, even when he is trying to establish himself as a sensitive soul, makes a slip and betrays his own lack of comprehension. Just after describing their appearance he comments, "They smell kind of nasty till you get used to them." "It's a good bitter smell,'" Elisa retorts, "not nasty at all."

In "The Chrysanthemums" men are constantly at odds with nature. The first hint of human activity in the story is an image of farming: "On the broad level land floor the gang plows bit deep and left the black earth shining like metal.'" Henry and the men from the Western Meat Company make a deal for steers, or castrated cattle. Henry's roadster bounces along the road disturbing animals, "raising the birds and driving the rabbits into the brush. Two cranes flapped heavily over the willow-line and dropped into the river-bed.'" No wonder the narrator refers to the ranch as "Henry Allen's foothill ranch." These activities are not Elisa's; she literally has no ownership of them. The ultimate betrayal of nature is the tinker's, the deliberate destruction of the chrysanthemums for the sake of fifty cents and a red pot.

Stanley Renner rightly points out that Steinbeck himself was not a feminist. In *Modern Fiction Studies* he writes, "although, of course, biography need not inevitably determine a writer's perspective, Steinbeck's feelings about his marriage at the time the story was written were far from those of the implied author who would have written the essentially feminist version of the story.'" It is not at all required, however, that Steinbeck be a feminist himself, much less an ecofeminist, for the body of thought called "ecofeminism" to have something interesting to say about Steinbeck's fiction. This is a case, then, of the story standing as an example of something that is true and important—the different ways men and women might respond to nature—that the author was not aware of revealing.

Source: Cynthia Bily, Overview of "The Chrysanthemums," for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 1999.

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## A Kind of Play: Dramatic Elements in Steinbeck's 'The Chrysanthemums'

The long-standing critical assumption, routinely delivered and seldom questioned, that John Steinbeck represented an odd late flourishing of literary naturalism—rather than, as now seems increasingly clear, an innovative sort of romanticism—has had the predictable effect of retarding appreciation of his accomplishments. Among the latter are the ways in which Steinbeck's language emerges from his contexts: arises organically but not necessarily with "real-life" verisimilitude from situations which must therefore be seen as having demanded, and in a sense therefore also created, a discourse of a sometimes patent artificiality—of a rhetorical loftiness appropriate to the dramatic seriousness of the given subject matter, but unlikely as an instance of "observed" intercourse in English, American variety. For only from such a vantage point can we hope to make sense of many of the exchanges which animate such diverse works as *Cup of Gold*, *To a God Unknown*, *The Moons Is Down*, and *Burning Bright*. Yet the sorts of usage I am referring to must necessarily give pause to the reader of even *In Dubious Battle*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *East of Eden*. Recently, however, Steinbeck criticism has increasingly begun to accept the writer on his own terms, a process no more complicated than the reading closely of what heretofore has been often subjected to a routinely and callously applied imposition of extraneous critical assumptions. I think that the ways in which situation creates language—and action—can be seen in such a famously "naturalistic" piece as that famous short story which leads off Steinbeck's single lifetime collection of short fiction, *The Long Valley* (1938): "The

Chrysanthemums."

"The Chrysanthemums" occupies its keynote position in *The Long Valley* with good reason. Not only does it serve as a striking introduction to a number of Steinbeck's attainments and prepossessions, but it also achieves an astonishingly eloquent statement of Lawrentian values that is valuable in its own right. The story is usually perceived—quite rightly—as a study in psychological interconnection and revelation, and I have no wish to alter such assumptions. Rather, I would like to direct some further attention to the ways in which Steinbeck allows text to flow from context: that is, shows speech and gesture being spontaneously brought into being by means of the rigors, the labor, of interpersonal drama. It is in short, the dramatist Steinbeck who concerns me here, though it is no one of his works created for the stage that I will use as my example.

In dramatic terms, "The Chrysanthemums" involves but three main characters: a ranch couple, Elisa and Henry Allen; and an unnamed tinker. It is December in the Salinas Valley. The Valley is shut off from the rest of the world by fog, and the weather anticipates change: "It was a time of quiet and of waiting." The imminence of change is reflected in Nature herself, then: something is about to happen. Elisa Allen is already at work in her flower garden; she is a dramatic "giver," her present quantity clearly laid out by the narrator:

... She was thirty-five. Her face was lean and strong and her eyes were as clear as water. Her figure looked blocked and heavy in her gardening costume, a man's black hat pulled low down over her eyes, clod-hopper shoes, a figured print dress almost completely covered by a big corduroy apron with four big pockets to hold the snips, the trowel and scratcher, the seeds and the knife she worked with. She wore heavy leather gloves to protect her hands while she worked.

Steinbeck's list of *dramatic personae* is thus fleshed out by being given the additional accountments of sexual misidentification: Elisa wears men's clothing, and carries tools meant to prod and poke. She is also at a stage that later would be taken for granted as constituting "mid-life crisis." Moreover, the constricted world that Elisa inhabits is further limited by being divided—as more notably, later on, the world of *The Wayward Bus* is divided—into male and female precincts, domains of activity into which the members of the opposite sex shall not intrude. Elisa's world, of course, is that of her garden; at work within it, her femininity takes on a fullness it does not possess, apparently, inside her "hard-swept looking little house, with [its] hard-polished windows." She is mistress of her chrysanthemum milieu; indeed, "The chrysanthemum stems seemed too small and easy for her energy," and the flowers' insect enemies are no match for her "terrier fingers." As she looks towards where her husband is completing a deal to sell cattle to two other men—a deal he has not informed her of beforehand—"her face was eager and mature and handsome" in the enjoyment of indulgence in the creativity of helping beautiful things grow.

When her husband finally reports on his business transaction, Elisa is described as having "started" at the sound of his voice as he leaned "over the wire fence that protected her flower garden from cattle and dogs and chickens" and, presumably, husbands. When he praises her prowess with growing things, we are told that "her eyes sharpened" at the notion that she might move over into the affairs of the ranch proper by raising apples as comparably big; she has "a gift with things," she confesses—something called "planter's hands." Her husband then suggests that they celebrate his successful transaction by going into Salinas for dinner and a movie; or, he jokes, they might attend "the fights." But she "breathlessly" admits that she "wouldn't like fights." When her husband goes off to locate the cattle he has sold, she resumes her work with her flowers; the language here suggests a woman in total control of her surroundings: "square," "turned the soil over and over," "smoothed it and patted it firm," "ten parallel trenches," "pulled out the little crisp shoots, trimmed off the leaves of each one with her scissors and laid it on a small orderly pile."

Again, one must not perhaps make too much of these patently theatrical stage directions, but we are in fact being prepared for the sudden appearance of that oldest of dramatic devices—the Arrival of the Stranger. He

comes on in the form of a "big stubble-bearded man" driving a wagon which advertises his prowess at fixing just about anything—anything metallic, that is. When the man's dog is faced down by the ranch shepherds, flirtation begins immediately between Elisa and the stranger; it takes the form of an admission that the latter's dog's aggressiveness may be not all that responsive to need. Easy in his masculinity, the stranger jokes about the dog's dubious ferocity meanwhile, "The horse and the donkey [pulling the wagon] drooped like unwatered flowers." But here is a woman adept at making flowers thrive; and here is also a man with skills at fixing sharp tools. The banter falters, then continues: the man is off course; his animals, like his dog, are surprisingly vigorous "when they get started."

I should make note here of the alterations the stranger's arrival makes in the language of Steinbeck's narrative. When the husband reports his sale of cattle to his wife, her response is a tepid "Good." Indeed, she uses the same word four times in two lines, to react both to the cattle sale and to the prospect of dinner and the movies. "Good for you": it is his fine fortune and has little to do with her. But the bland textures of Elisa's existence are disturbed by the arrival of the "curious vehicle curiously drawn," and its driver. The driver's eyes are "full of the brooding that gets in the eyes of teamsters and of sailors," and if this perception is meant to be Elisa's as well, it marks her recognition of the appeal of the man's way of life—his ability to live with the simple "aim to follow nice weather." Her response is in the form of body language: she removes her gloves and hides them away with her scissors; and "She touched the under edge of her man's hat, searching for fugitive hairs." In short, she acknowledges his attractiveness by means of classic dramatic gestures.

The man's authority is equal to Elisa's within his own kingdom. "Fixed," his wagon proclaims, at the end of a listing of metallic objects which—no nonsense about it—he claims to be able to repair. No matter that the lettering is "clumsy, crooked," or the words misspelled; Steinbeck's story is a drama that relies on subtext—the unspoken—throughout. But when she is asked if she has anything needing repair or sharpening, "Her eyes hardened with resistance"; she becomes a bit metallic herself in the process of making it clear that she is not so easily won as all that. In the process of telling the man—four times—that she has no work for him to do, she manages to make him play the role of dependent inferior. "His face fell to an exaggerated sadness. His voice took on a whining undertone." The man's demeanor becomes dog-like; like an actor he uses expression and delivery to emphasize the import of his words: he is without a bit of work; he is off his usual road; he may not eat that day. Elisa is unmoved—is irritated, even.

Yet "irritation and resistance" melt from her face as soon as the man, resourceful, notices her chrysanthemums and asks about them. Hers, she avers, are "bigger than anybody around here" can raise; and since she has been pouring her private emotional existence into the raising of chrysanthemums, her boasting has a nice kind of sexual irony about it. He responds to his cue with spontaneous poetry: the flowers look "like a quick puff of colored smoke." A brief confrontation over the flowers' smell is quickly resolved; the aroma is a "good bitter" one, "not nasty at all," and the man likes it. Fine, then; for hers, Elisa claims, have produced "ten-inch blooms this year." Ah, then, returns the fellow (the dialogue by now quite strongly resembles Pinter's), there is this "lady down the road a piece" who, though she does find difficult work for him to do, has no chrysanthemums in her otherwise splendid garden. Can Elisa help this unfortunate out?

She can; she will. Assuring the man that she can send along flowers for transplanting by the other woman—"Beautiful ... Oh, beautiful" ones—she tears off her hat; she shakes out "her dark pretty hair"; and with her eyes shining, she admits the stranger into her yard. She strips off her protective gloves after running "excitedly" after a flower pot, and with her bare hands prepares a selection of her flowers for the man—who is described as standing over her as she kneels to work—to take. She indulges herself in the revelation of her private craft as she gives him instructions to transmit to the other woman; she looks "deep into his eyes, searchingly," as if trying to measure the degree of their mutual sympathy. As she does, "Her mouth opened a little, and she seemed to be listening." Mouth and eyes and ears are open to this stranger as perhaps they have been to no one before as she explains her doctrine of "planting hands," the possessors of which can do nothing wrong. Her earnestness carries her away: "She was kneeling on the ground looking

up at him. Her breast swelled passionately.’’

Again, the psychological underpinnings of this story, so Lawrence-like, have been commented on before this; what I am attempting to do for perhaps the first time is draw attention to the ways in which Steinbeck's text moves along according to imperatives which can only be termed dramatic. In other words, can the standard definitions of literary naturalism adequately account for the rising action and intensity of "The Chrysanthemums," its quasi-musical climaxing? This is fairly far from *The Jungle*, from *Studs Lonigan*, this passage; it is closer surely to *Brief Encounter*. Now the man's eyes are said to narrow as he averts his gaze "self-consciously" and begins to make a comparison to his own life; "Sometimes in the night in the wagon there—", he starts. But she interrupts, carried away by her own unexpectedly-piqued emotional empathy:

Elisa's voice grew husky. She broke in on him, "I've never lived as you do, but I know what you mean. When the night is dark—why, the stars are sharp-pointed, and there's quiet. Why, you rise up and up! Every pointed star gets driven into your body. It's like that. Hot and sharp and—lovely.’’

But Elisa's mystical attainment—her fusion of the psychosexual and the poetical—also has its natural and physical concomitant. The next paragraph says:

Kneeling there, her hand went out toward his legs in the greasy black trousers. Her hesitant fingers almost touched the cloth. Then her hand dropped to the ground. She crouched low like a fawning dog.

She has opened herself to a stranger, and shown him a part of herself which presumably no one has seen before; and in the process, she has made herself as vulnerable to him as one of his subservient animals might be. Remarkably, for its time, the story also has Elisa adumbrating a world in which male and female experience might meld in an ecstasy of shared sensitivity—so unlike the one she has known on her husband's ranch.

But the stranger refuses this gambit. He reminds her that hunger is its own setter of standards; and so Elisa rises, "ashamed," and goes off to find the man some busy-work to do so that he can maintain his independence a bit longer. In the process, he reaffirms the radical dissimilarity of their two existences: when she speaks about a woman's being able to live such a life as his, he emphasizes its loneliness and frightfulness, wholly refusing to consider the implicit offer she is making. (Or is she?) Though they share body-language during this discussion—he concentratedly sucking his under-lip, she raising her upper lip and showing her teeth; both feral—he determinedly completes his routine repair work without deigning to consider her appeal for consideration of their shared romanticism. Indeed, when he finishes his job and accepts his pay and turns to go, he has already almost forgotten the pretext of the chrysanthemums to be delivered to that other woman down the road.

As the man and his animals depart, Elisa watches them off, silently mouthing "Good-bye" after him. "Then she whispered, "That's a bright direction. There's a glowing there''"; and the sound of her whispering startles her, though only her dogs had heard. This passage might seem extraordinary or simply inexplicable were it not for the consistent identification in Steinbeck's writing of "brightness" and "shining" with the quasi-divine power of absolute nature in the universe (as Blake's "Tyger" yields Steinbeck's title *Burning Bright*); and for that matter, the name "Elisa" and its variants are fairly commonly identified with idealized femininity in Steinbeck, from *Cup of Gold* onward. Elisa's next action is a sort of ritual purification followed by a donning of vestments: she tears off "her soiled clothes and flung them into the corner" of the bathroom. "And then she scrubbed herself with a little block of pumice, legs and thighs, loins and chest and arms, until her skin was scratched and red. When she had dried herself she stood in front of a mirror in her bedroom and looked at her body. She tightened her stomach and threw out her chest. She turned and looked over her

shoulder at her back.” Interestingly, Steinbeck's writing does not seek to titillate; the description of Elisa's mikvah, if I can call it that, is asexual, as though the operation were one which could be performed on any body as part of a ritual irrespective of gender. Yet Elisa's actions are also clearly narcissistic, her self-admiration clearly premised on a sense of having finally achieved, at her life's mid-point, some kind of summit of self-worth.

But now the naked Elisa begins to dress, again using makeup and costuming for theatrical effect—rather like Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, with the context of her presumably-imminent death giving abnormal beauty to what subsists of life. She begins with “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.” One dresses—or divests oneself of clothing—this attentively, this ceremonially, only with an implicit or explicit awareness of preparing for one of the ritual events of life (including, of course, one's death). It is interesting that Elisa retreats from the world of her mannish exercises in the garden, wearing men's attire, to what is described as “her bedroom”; the two do not share a single sleeping-place. In this sort of dressing-room, then, Elisa prepares herself for a theatrical entry (or re-entry?) into life, an event in which she means to include her husband—who if he were but aware of the fact has been awarded this boon on the strength of a surrogate's efforts. Elisa neatly lays out her Henry's best clothes, so that he may do as she has finished doing, and then she goes out to the porch and sits “primly and stiffly” waiting for him, “unmoving,” her eyes seldom blinking as they pursue the last of that bright glowing that she associates with the events of the afternoon, now disappearing beneath a “high grey fog.”

When Henry finally appears, he is so taken aback at the appearance she has created for herself that he clumsily compliments her for looking “nice”—as though she seldom did. This reaction on his part comes in spite of the fact that her own self-assurance has made her “stiffen” at his approach, her face growing “tight” as she does. Henry compounds his error by defining “niceness” as looking “different, strong and happy”—again as if these were unfamiliar aspects of Elisa's demeanour. Indeed, Henry is so flabbergasted at the change in his wife's image that he unconsciously describes it as the theatricalization it actually is: “He looked bewildered. ‘You're playing some kind of a 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.’” Henry's flight of poetic utterance is a worshipful reaction to the irruption in his presence of the extraordinary in the ordinary, of the divine—the heroic, the Junoesque, if you will—into the human. At his tribute, her “rigidity” buckles briefly; she tells him that his venture into the domain of the ineffable was beyond his comprehension (instinctual?), and settles for the admission that “‘I'm strong,’ she boasted. ‘I never knew before how strong.’” She sends him for the car, deliberately fussing over the set of her hat until his turning off the engine signals an admission that a new sort of patience is now called for.

But Elisa's short happy life—the effects of her dramatic transfiguration, her irradiation—is destined for an abrupt conclusion. When she and Henry set off for dinner in Salinas, it is not all that long until she sees “a dark speck” on the road ahead. Steinbeck has told this story, as was his initial habit, largely from the outside of his characters, from close observation of their gestures and speech. In a sense, he violates that practice now, giving the reader in two words what would in the theatre be expressed through a reaction of the face and body: “She knew.” It is as if Elisa had always possessed, deep down, the certainty that her self-assurance was built upon a deception. Now, she cannot even avoid following the discarded chrysanthemum shoots with her eyes as they pass, recognizing as she ponders the tinker's apparent cruelty the fact that he left the flowers along the road because he couldn't afford to throw away the bright red flower pot she had so carefully planted the flowers in—because it was the pot that had value in his world, and not—except as conversational pretexts—the flowers. She is able, however, to turn away from the sight of the tinker's wagon when their car overtakes it moments later.

“In a moment it was over. The thing was done. She did not look back,” Steinbeck tells us. But her level of discourse, having fallen to the prospect of dinner, marks a change palpable enough for Henry to note it.

“Now you've changed again” is his assessment; and the manner of his delivery is authorially noted as “complained” had Henry himself been buoyed by the brief brightening of Elisa? Now normality returns: she pats her knee; he makes small talk. Elisa has one last attempt at escape of the life-force within her. She makes what is apparently an unusual request, one that will make small ceremony out of the coming dinner out, itself a minor sacrament of sorts: “... could we have wine with dinner?” Henry agrees, and after a time of silence, she surprises her husband by an even more uncharacteristic question: do the boxers at prize fights “hurt each other very much?” (by which she means broken noses, she explains, with enough blood running down chests to get their gloves “heavy and soggy with blood”). Henry is startled, as are we; are these Elisa's Dionysiac propensities suddenly revealing themselves, or has her experience with the tinker taken an imaginative turn towards retribution, a perverse expression of the flowering of femininity he had seemed to foster? We are not told; but Elisa asks one more question: “Do any women ever go to the fights?” Some, yes, Henry answers, as if he cannot imagine his wife among them; not having been able to imagine her, a moment ago, as even having read about such things, he now offers to take her against his better judgment.

But Elisa's questioning has subsided, whether because of the unsuitability of her attending the fights or because of the torpor induced by the thought of attending them with a partner such as Henry. Withdrawing her face—on which tears have begun to show—she states that it will be enough to settle for “wine. It will be plenty.” If the blood of Dionysiac sacrifice is not to be hers, she will settle for a conventional symbolism. Steinbeck alludes so obliquely to the Christian and the pagan at his ending that one is distracted, if at all, by the thought of how his final line—showing Elisa “crying weakly—like an old woman”—might have been ruined by claiming the strength of a metaphorical connection instead of making do with the subtlety of the simile. Elisa is, after all, only “like an old woman”; if she has nonetheless crossed a certain line in her life, it will take years, perhaps, for that fact to assert itself fully. Yet, as if she were one of the many animals mentioned throughout the story, she has made her sudden lunge towards a kind of life she may not have known she needed—only to have the constraints of her existence reassert themselves almost at once.

Whether or not “The Chrysanthemums” is what I would call it, one of the finest American short stories ever written, surely its craft is such as to reward reader attention and require critical inquiry. That craft, as I have suggested, is in great part a matter of introducing the materials of a naturalistic sort of fiction—the details of the occupations of tinker and gardener and the like—only to rise above them as a dramatist would: by raising the ante of artifice until the characters seem self-conscious of themselves as creative artists spontaneously creating a dialogue in a most poetic sort of drama, one in which the late flowers of a season of the human spirit can seem for a moment to be able to transcend their rootedness, to move farther down the road than just the town of Salinas. It is, finally, a craft by which seemingly ordinary individuals are made to see themselves as characters—persons moving in a world of “roles” and “symbols”—in search of an author who seems scarcely present at all. In the end, it is enough to make plausible a singular sort of epiphany: a bland sort of husband, likely one who has never been in a theatre in his life, being so astonished at the sight of his taken-for-granted wife suddenly appearing in “a kind of play” that he speaks, on the spot, his spontaneous rancher's ode.

Source: John Ditsky, “A Kind of Play: Dramatic Elements in Steinbeck's 'The Chrysanthemums',” in *Wascana Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Spring, 1986, pp. 62-72.

## **The Cur in "The Chrysanthemums"**

Anyone reading John Steinbeck's “The Chrysanthemums” cannot help being struck by the repeated association of unpleasant canine characteristics with the otherwise attractive Elisa Allen. These associations identify her with the visiting tinker's mongrel dog, further suggesting a parallel between the Allen's two ranch shepherds and the tinker and Elisa's husband, Henry. The correspondences between people and dogs elucidate the social and sexual relationships of the three humans, as well as foreshadow and explain Elisa's failure at the

end of the story to escape from her unproductive and sterile lifestyle.

The dog imagery related to Elisa is uncomplimentary. In her garden, she destroys unpleasant creatures such as "aphids," "bugs," "snails," "cutworms," and similar "pests" with her "terrier fingers." When aroused by the tinker, she "crouched low like a fawning dog." Finally, in response to the tinker's assertion that his life of freedom "ain't the right kind of life for a woman," she bares her teeth in hostile fashion: "Her upper lip raised a little, showing her teeth." Burrowing in flower gardens, fawning, snarling—not a very pleasant picture of man's best friend.

The last two images directly link Elisa to the tinker's mongrel, and their physical descriptions clearly parallel these two unfortunates. She kneels before the tinker like a dog would to shake hands: "Kneeling there, her hand went out toward his legs in the greasy black trousers. Her hesitant fingers almost touched the cloth. Then her hand dropped to the ground. She crouched low like a fawning dog." As Elisa bared her teeth in resistance to the tinker, so his mongrel resisted the two Allen ranch shepherds "with raised hackles and bared teeth." Additionally, the cur is "lean and rangy"; Elisa is "lean and strong." Finally, of course, the tinker's mongrel, unlike the ranch shepherds, contains a mixture of dog breeds, and Elisa's personality mixes masculine and feminine elements.

Whereas Elisa shares several characteristics with the cur, the tinker and Henry resemble the two ranch shepherds. The two shepherds were born to their jobs, which they perform instinctively. Confident that "Pots, pans, knives, sisors, lawn mores" can all be "Fixed," the tinker feels at home in his occupation and world: "I ain't in any hurry, ma'am. I go from Seattle to San Diego and back every year. Takes all my time. About six months each way. I aim to follow nice weather." Henry Allen is also successful at his job and derives satisfaction from it: "I sold those thirty head of three-year-old steers. Got nearly my own price, too." On the other hand, Elisa, like the mongrel, does not participate in the main work on which her livelihood depends, even though her husband suggests that she should become useful: "I wish you'd work out in the orchard and raise some apples that big." Both Elisa and the cur are merely companions for their respective breadwinners, their subservient position suggested by Elisa's kneeling before the tinker: "She was kneeling on the ground looking up at him."

The interaction of the three dogs closely parallels that of the three people and foreshadows Elisa's eventual failure to escape her confined lifestyle. When the mongrel darts from its accustomed position beneath the tinker's wagon, the two ranch dogs shepherd it back. The mongrel considers fighting, but, aware that it could not overcome the two dogs secure on their home ground, retreats angrily back under the wagon and protection of its owner: "The rangy dog darted from between the wheels and ran ahead. Instantly the two ranch shepherds flew out at him. Then all three stopped, and with stiff and quivering tails, with taut straight legs, with ambassadorial dignity, they slowly circled, sniffing daintily ... The newcomer dog, feeling out-numbered, lowered his tail and retired under the wagon with raised hackles and bared teeth."

Elisa, in the course of the story, moves out of her accustomed role to challenge Henry and the tinker on their home ground, their occupations and sexuality. In response to Henry's comment that she could put her skills to productive use in the orchards, "Elisa's eyes sharpened. 'Maybe I could do it, too.'" But she never does. Her challenge to his sexuality is equally unfulfilled; in response to her appearance in "the dress which was the symbol of her prettiness," Henry observes that "You look strong enough to break a calf over your knee, happy enough to eat it like a watermelon" and goes to turn on the car. Elisa directly expresses an urge to compete in the tinker's occupation: "You might be surprised to have a rival some time. I can sharpen scissors, too. And I can beat the dents out of little pots. I could show you what a woman might do." The tinker rebuts her challenge: "It ain't the right kind of a life for a woman," and her career as a tinker never gets started. The tinker's feigned interest in the chrysanthemums clearly arouses Elisa's sexual instincts: "Her breast swelled passionately," and she does her unconscious best to arouse his: "Elisa's voice grew husky ... 'When the night is dark—why, the stars are sharp-pointed, and there's quiet. Why, you rise up and up! Every

pointed star gets driven into your body. It's like that. Hot and sharp and—lovely.'” And, as had her husband, the tinker deflects the conversation to one involving a less carnal appetite: “It's nice, just like you say. Only when you don't have no dinner, it ain't.”

In each case, when Elisa threatened to encroach upon male territory, she was rebuffed and shepherded back to the refuge of her submissive and unproductive place. Elisa, like the cur, might be “a bad dog in a fight when he gets started,” but, like the cur, she rarely, if ever, gets started: “sometimes [he does] not [get started] for weeks and weeks.” The positions of the dogs after the meeting between Elisa and the tinker foreshadow her final defeat. The cur “took his place between the back wheels,” and, with Elisa's occupational and sexual challenge to the tinker rebuffed, the ranch shepherds could cease their watchfulness: “Only the dogs had heard. They lifted their heads toward her from their sleeping in the dust, and then stretched out their chins and settled asleep again.”

Interestingly, neither the mongrel nor Elisa gives up until “out-numbered.” Any previous challenges to her husband's role as breadwinner and sexual aggressor have apparently been frustrated: the story offers no evidence of her doing farm work; they have no children; and Henry responds unromantically to Elisa's effort to make herself sexually attractive. Yet her occupational and sexual challenges to the tinker show that she has not given up. After the tinker also rejects her by discarding the chrysanthemums that she had given him, Elisa, like the out-numbered cur baring his teeth at the two shepherds, vents her anger and frustration over her defeat through her description of the pain inflicted upon men in fights: “I've read how they break noses, and blood runs down their chests. I've read how the fighting gloves get heavy and soggy with blood.” Overcome by the two men, Elisa never gets started in the fight to escape her role; she even decides against vicarious participation in the fight: “I don't want to go [to the fights]. I'm sure I don't.” She retreats to the safety of her accustomed unproductive and sexless role, “crying weakly—like an old woman.”

Source: Ernest W. Sullivan, II, “The Cur in 'The Chrysanthemums,’” in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Summer, 1979, pp. 215-17.

## **"The Chrysanthemums": Study of A Woman's Sexuality**

Virtually every critic who has considered John Steinbeck's short story “The Chrysanthemums” has agreed that its basic theme is a woman's frustration, but none has yet adequately explained the emotional reasons underlying that frustration. In fact, Kenneth Kempton would consider such an explanation impossible. He professes his inability to find any consistent motivation for Elisa's behavior, and declares the work “annoyingly arty, muddy, and unreal.” But most critics who have examined “The Chrysanthemums” admire the story and find it meaningful. Warren French, after identifying the theme of the story as frustration, suggests that the central action concerns “the manipulation of people's dreams for selfish purposes”—an interesting and valid idea but one which fails to incorporate the obvious sexual overtones of the story. Another critic who overlooks the sexuality is Joseph Warren Beach. He sees the conflict in the story as a contest of wits between Elisa and the pot mender; frustration results from damage to her pride when she is outwitted. Ray B. West sees the story as “based on the assumed relationship between the fertile growth of plant life and physical violence and sexuality in human beings.” Peter Lisca explains Elisa's frustration as stemming from an unsuccessful “silent rebellion against the passive role required of her as a woman”—an excellent idea but his treatment is too brief to account for all the elements of the story. F. W. Watt is on exactly the right track when he states that the story concerns Elisa's “struggle to express and fulfill desires which are ambiguously sexual and spiritual.” Unfortunately Watt, like Lisca, has not sufficient space in his book to give this story the thorough discussion that it deserves. The only such examination thus far is that of Mordecai Marcus. But his interesting and persuasive argument that Elisa's frustration results essentially from a longing for childbirth is not entirely satisfactory. Marcus encounters difficulties with the story which I think disappear if we do not equate sexual fulfillment with a yearning for motherhood. Elisa's need is definitely sexual, but it

does not necessarily have anything to do with a longing for children.

In order to understand Elisa's emotions, we first should look closely at the relationship between her and her husband. Beach, somewhat surprisingly, observes that "Nothing is said about the relationship of this married pair, but everything shows that it is one of confidence and mutual respect." Partially true, certainly, but confidence and mutual respect are not the only qualities that Elisa Allen desires in her marriage. The evidence points to an outwardly passive, comfortable relationship between the two which satisfies Henry completely but leaves Elisa indefinably restless with excessive energy which she sublimates into the "over-eager" cultivation of her chrysanthemums, and the care of her "hard-swept looking little house with hard-polished windows." Henry is a good provider, we can be sure; he has just received a good price for thirty head of cattle. He is also thoughtful; he invites his wife to go into town that evening to celebrate the sale. A good provider, a thoughtful husband. But what else? There is a distinct lack of rapport between these two, despite all that mutual respect. And the confidence which Beach observes is an assurance of each other's capability; it is not a warm mutual confidence of things shared.

We see this lack of rapport demonstrated early in the story as Henry makes a suggestion for their evening's entertainment:

Henry put on his joking tone. "There's fights tonight. How'd you like to go to the fights?"

"Oh, no," she said breathlessly. "No, I wouldn't like fights."

"Just fooling, Elisa. We'll go to a movie."

The fact that husband and wife do not share an interest in sports is not remarkable, but the fact that Elisa responds seriously to Henry's "joking tone" suggests either that she lacks a sense of humor or that for some reason she is not amused by Henry's teasing. We discover later that she has a ready sense of humor when talking to someone other than Henry. Unmistakably, Henry has no gift with words. When he compliments his wife on her chrysanthemums, he praises their size not their beauty and does so in the most prosaic terms. When he wants to compliment his wife on her appearance, he stammers, as if in surprise—and Elisa is hardly elated by the banal adjective:

"Why—why, Elisa. You look so nice!"

"Nice? You think I look nice? What do you mean by nice?"

Henry blundered on. "I don't know. I mean you look different, strong and happy."

Henry's word choice here is particularly unfortunate since his wife has just devoted her entire attention to heightening her femininity. She has put on her "newest underclothing and her nicest stockings and the dress which was the symbol of her prettiness." "Strong" is the way she least wants to appear. But Henry manages to make matters even worse. Bewildered by Elisa's sharp retort, he is inspired to his only attempt at figurative language in hopes of making himself clear: "You look strong enough to break a calf over your knee, happy enough to eat it like a watermelon." It is hard to fancy the woman who would be pleased by Henry's agricultural comparison. Elisa is not amused.

We begin to sense the source of Elisa's discontent. She is a woman bored by her husband, bored by her isolated life on the farm. When the itinerant tinker arrives at Elisa's gate, we see that she is a woman who longs for what women's magazines vaguely call "romance." She wants, among other things, to be admired as a woman. The chrysanthemums that she cultivates so energetically produce great soft blossoms shaped like a woman's breasts. If one wishes to see the flowers as a symbol, they suggest the voluptuous softness of a

sexually mature woman. There is no evidence to suggest that Elisa is a sex-starved female, that her husband is perhaps impotent, as Kempton suggests. Henry's placidity would seem to indicate the contrary. But neither is Elisa a sexually satisfied woman. Something is lacking in her relationship with Henry, and this something has a great deal to do with sex, but it is not as simple as a need for the sex act alone. This undefined longing becomes more clear as we examine her reaction to the tinker.

Unlike Henry, who has trouble finding the right words to please his wife, the tinker seems to know them intuitively. His greeting to Elisa is a mildly humorous remark about his cowardly mongrel dog: "That's a bad dog in a fight when he gets started." Elisa gives no dead-pan response as she did to Henry's feeble joke. Instead, "Elisa laughed. 'I see he is. How soon does he generally get started?' The man caught up her laughter and echoed it heartily. 'Sometimes not for weeks and weeks,' he said." In contrast with Henry's uninspired comment on the size of her flowers, the tinker remembers that chrysanthemum blooms look "like a quick puff of colored smoke." Elisa is obviously pleased. "That's it. What a nice way to describe them," she says.

The man's physical appearance has little about it to warrant such a friendly response: "Elisa saw that he was a very big man. Although his hair and beard were greying, he did not look old." His clothes are grease-stained and disheveled, his hands are cracked and dirty. But there is one physical characteristic which would make the man appealing to Elisa: "His eyes were dark, and they were full of the brooding that gets in the eyes of teamsters and sailors." Obviously he lacks the honest, dependable virtues of Henry, the virtues a woman should cherish in a husband. But the important thing he has that Henry lacks is an aura of freedom, unpredictability, perhaps adventure, maybe even poetry, which his gypsy life produces. It has got to be this element of the man that attracts Elisa to him. His first reference to his wandering, carefree existence produces an unconscious feminine response from her. The tinker says, "I ain't in no hurry ma'am. I go from Seattle to San Diego and back every year. Takes all my time. About six months each way. I aim to follow nice weather." Elisa removes her unfeminine heavy leather gloves and "touched the under edge of her man's hat, searching for fugitive hairs. 'That sounds like a nice kind of a way to live,' she said." But instead of continuing to talk about his roving existence, the tinker begins giving her his sales pitch about mending pots and sharpening knives and scissors. Elisa becomes suddenly distant: "Her eyes hardened with resistance." She is fast losing patience with him when, in an inspired move, he inquires about her chrysanthemums. She warms towards him again almost at once: "The irritation and resistance melted from Elisa's face." After the man shrewdly asks her if he can take some sprouts to a customer down the road, she becomes enthusiastic. "Her eyes shone. She tore off the battered hat and shook out her dark pretty hair"—a movement entirely feminine and essentially seductive. She immediately invites him into the yard.

Elisa is now clearly excited. She scoops up the soil into a flower pot, presses the tender shoots into the damp sand, and describes for him how the plants must be cared for. "She looked deep into his eyes, searchingly. Her mouth opened a little, and she seemed to be listening." She tells him about her "planting hands," which pluck buds instinctively and unerringly. But the reader is aware that such emotion could scarcely be generated solely by an enthusiasm for the care and clipping of chrysanthemums. Elisa, kneeling now before the man, "looking up at him," appears to be experiencing sexual excitement. "Her breasts swelled passionately." Not breast, but breasts. Not heaved, but swelled. The man is suspicious of her strange behavior, perhaps embarrassed: his "eyes narrowed. He looked away self-consciously." She has asked him if he understands her feelings, and he begins a response so in keeping with Elisa's mood that she quite forgets herself.

"Maybe I know," he said. "Sometimes in the night in the wagon there—"

Elisa's voice grew husky. She broke in on him. "I've never lived as you do, but I know what you mean. When the night is dark—why, the stars are sharp-pointed, and there's quiet. Why, you rise up and up! Every pointed star gets driven into your body. It's like that. Hot and sharp and—lovely."

The sexual implications of her last four sentences are unmistakable, yet the sexual impact lies just beneath the surface level of meaning in the phallic imagery. Elisa is, more than likely, unaware of the sexual nature of her outburst, but her next action, while probably still unconsciously motivated, is quite overt. "Kneeling there, her hand went out toward his legs in the greasy black trousers. Her hesitant fingers almost touched the cloth. Then her hand dropped to the ground. She crouched low like a fawning dog." The tinker's matter-of-fact comment jolts her at once back to her state of natural reserve: "It's nice, just like you say. Only when you don't have no dinner it ain't." She is aware that he does not understand after all the feeling of erotic mysticism that she is trying to communicate. "She stood up then, very straight, and her face was ashamed. She held the flower pot out to him and placed it gently in his arms." To avoid further embarrassment, she goes at once to find some old saucepans for him to fix. After regaining her composure, she returns with the battered pots and chats with him as he works. She pays him for the repairs, and as he is leaving, calls out a reminder to keep the plants watered. She stands watching him go. "Her shoulders were straight, her head thrown back, her eyes half-closed, so that the scene came vaguely into them. Her lips moved silently, forming the words 'Good-bye—good-bye.' Then she whispered, 'That's a bright direction. There's a glowing there.' The sound of the whisper startled her. She shook herself free and looked about to see whether anyone had been listening. Only the dogs had heard."

After this the story returns to the portrayal of the relationship between Elisa and her husband, and in the final scenes her feelings toward Henry are clearly revealed. As the tinker's wagon moves out of sight, Elisa quickly returns to the house. The next scene portrays Elisa performing a purification ritual. She felt shame after her display of passion before the stranger. Now she cleanses herself before returning to her husband, the man to whom she should lawfully reach out in desire. "In the bathroom she tore off her soiled clothes and flung them into the corner. And then she scrubbed herself with a little block of pumice, legs and thighs, loins and chest and arms, until her skin was scratched and red." The abrasive action of the pumice suggests expiation for her imagined infidelity. Elisa then studies her naked body in a mirror: "She tightened her stomach and threw out her chest"—movements of a woman who wants to see her figure at its best, but also of a woman gathering resolution. The ceremonial preparation for her evening with Henry also has about it an element of resolve: "After a while she began to dress slowly ... She worked carefully on her hair, pencilled her eyebrows and rouged her lips." She is steeling herself for the coming evening. "She heard the gate bang shut and set herself for Henry's arrival" (*Italics mine*). Elisa, ready early, goes out onto the porch and sits "primly and stiffly down" to wait for her husband. "Henry came banging out of the door, shoving his tie inside his vest as he came. Elisa stiffened and her face grew tight." There follows the passage examined earlier in which Elisa bridles at each of Henry's inept attempts to compliment her. The scene culminates in his ill-chosen simile describing her in her carefully chosen finery as looking strong enough to break a calf over her knee. "For a second she lost her rigidity. 'Henry! Don't talk like that. You didn't know what you said.'" She seems to lose heart, to wonder if she can abide this insensitive man, but her resolution returns: "She grew complete again. 'I'm strong,' she boasted. 'I never knew before how strong.'"

In the final scene we see this strength tested to the breaking point, finally giving way and dissolving into despair. As the two are driving into town for their festive evening of dinner and a movie, "far ahead on the road Elisa saw a dark speck. She knew." The tinker has discarded her chrysanthemums, symbol of the femininity which she hopes will inspire the excitement she longs for. But he has kept the pot—an insult on any level of interpretation, to discard her treasure and keep its utilitarian container.

This symbolic rejection produces a need for female revenge in Elisa. The idea of attending a prize fight which was repugnant to her a few hours earlier has its appeal now. She asks Henry whether "the men hurt each other very much" and speculates on "how they break noses, and blood runs down their chests." But as her anger cools, she realizes the futility of vicarious vengeance. It can do little to salve her damaged ego or save her dying dream. Henry has promised her wine with dinner, and she tries to console herself with this small romantic touch. "It will be enough if we can have wine. It will be plenty," she tells Henry. But she knows it will not really be enough. She knows that she will always have good, dull, dependable Henry, but

how will she keep her mind from whispering, “There has got to be something more exciting, more beautiful in life than this”? No, wine will not be plenty. “She turned up her coat collar so he could not see that she was crying weakly—like an old woman”—like an old woman for whom all hope of romance is a thing of the past.

Source: Elizabeth E. McMahan, “‘The Chrysanthemums’: Study of A Woman’s Sexuality,” in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. XIV, No. 4, Winter, 1968, pp. 453-58.

## The Chrysanthemums: Compare and Contrast

**1930s:** The Great Depression swept across the United States and abroad, creating massive unemployment and poverty. Soup kitchens and bread lines were familiar sights. In the early 1930s, however, California still prospered because of the motion picture, oil, and fruit industries.

**1990s:** The worldwide economy is relatively solid and stable, and the economy of the United States is strong, with low unemployment and high productivity. Some economists believe that rapid fluctuations in Asian economies could spell trouble for the United States.

**1930s:** Popular movies included *King Kong* (1933), *Anna Karenina* (1935), and the movies of Shirley Temple, Fred Astaire, and the Marx Brothers. They tended to be glamorous and optimistic, providing audiences a refuge from economic and political troubles. Movies were mostly black-and-white, and a ticket cost about twenty-five cents. Roughly a third of Americans went to the movies at least once a week.

**1990s:** Popular movies showcase special effects and science fiction, and are almost exclusively in color. Many present a grim view of human problems. A ticket costs six to eight dollars. Fewer Americans go to the movies, but many watch movies at home on videocassette.

**1930s:** Although newly built homes were wired for electricity, most older homes did not have it. Housework was done by hand, without electric appliances, and keeping a house clean was hard work. The first electric washing machine for home use was manufactured in 1937.

**1990s:** Most families in the United States have either washing machines in their homes or inexpensive laundromats nearby. Typical homes have electric lights, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, and other tools to make housework easier.

**1930s:** Many farmers in the United States still used animals to pull plows and other equipment, but some, like Henry Allen, had tractors and other machines to help do their work. The sight of a horse-drawn wagon used for long-distance travel was uncommon, but not startling.

**1990s:** Except for communities which have rejected modern technology, like the Amish, American farmers use gas-powered tractors and technologically advanced equipment. Most roads do not permit horse-drawn vehicles.

## The Chrysanthemums: Topics for Further Study

Many critics have found it useful to compare “The Chrysanthemums” with another Steinbeck short story from the same collection, “The White Quail.” Read both stories. Do you agree, as some have suggested, that Elisa Allen and Mary Teller are similar characters in different situations? Or do you agree with other critics, who believe the two women are opposites?

Steinbeck was interested in plants and knew quite a lot about propagating them. Learn what you can about pollination, and about producing new plants by transplanting cuttings, as Elisa Allen does. What might Elisa's choice of methods say about her, in the context of the rest of the story?

Find out what you can about steer. What exactly are they? How are they created? What are they used for? How does the fact that Henry raises steer connect with important issues in the story?

Is Elisa Allen a victim of her circumstances? How might her situation be improved or made worse if she lived in our modern technological world?

## The Chrysanthemums: Media Adaptations

"The Chrysanthemums" was adapted as a twenty-three-minute film by Pyramid Film and Video in 1990. It is available from Pyramid as a 1/2-inch VHS videocassette.

The making of the film adaptation has itself been captured on film, in the "Behind the Camera" segment of *Fiction to Film*. The forty-minute program, which shows the mechanics of producing a film, was produced by Mac and Ava Motion Picture Productions and is distributed on videocassette by the Indiana Department of Education, Instructional Video Services.

## The Chrysanthemums: What Do I Read Next?

*The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about migrant farm workers pursuing a happy life that is always just out of reach. During the Great Depression, the Joad family leaves dustbowl Oklahoma for California, where they hope to find a better life.

"The White Quail" (1935) by John Steinbeck, collected in *The Long Valley* (1938) alongside "The Chrysanthemums." Mary Teller's dream of the perfect garden has such a firm hold on her that she gives all her devotion to it, ignoring even her lonely husband.

"The Snake" (1935), a strange story by Steinbeck, collected in *The Long Valley* (1938). A woman enters an animal laboratory, buys a male snake, and asks to see it eat a rat. Though critics have interpreted the character differently, Steinbeck claimed "I wrote it just as it happened. I don't know what it means."

*Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), a novel by Sherwood Anderson made up of thematically related stories. A young reporter encounters and learns the secrets of several of the inhabitants of his small town. Anderson's way of exploring people's secret lives influenced Steinbeck.

*The Awakening* (1899), by Kate Chopin. A woman feels bored and unfulfilled with marriage and attempts to find her true self by having an extramarital affair. A century ago, this novel caused a furor.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), by Steinbeck's contemporary, Zora Neale Hurston. An African-American woman in rural Florida learns, through her relationships with three men, to rely upon herself and her own definition of herself to become a whole person.

## The Chrysanthemums: Bibliography and Further Reading

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### **Further Reading**

Benson, Jackson J., *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer: A Biography*, New York: Viking, 1984. At over one thousand pages, the most complete of the Steinbeck biographies, and the one that explores most thoroughly Steinbeck's writing process. Includes many photographs.

Burg, David F., *The Great Depression: An Eyewitness History*, New York: Facts on File, 1996. Over one hundred first-hand accounts of life in the 1930s, including newspaper stories, interviews, letters, memoirs, photographs and documents from leaders and from common people, give the reader a strong sense of what it was like to live during this period.

French, Warren, *John Steinbeck*, Boston: Twayne, 1975.

An overview of Steinbeck's life and works, intended for the general reader. The volume includes a chronology, an annotated bibliography, and an indexed discussion of all of Steinbeck's major writings in chronological order.

Ockenga, Starr, *Earth on Her Hands: The American Woman in Her Garden*, Clarkson Potter, 1998.

Interviews with eighteen women master gardeners, who discuss horticulture and the affect gardening has had on their lives. Lavishly illustrated with color photographs.