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A STORY OF REPRESSED FEMINISM: EXPLORING STEINBECK'S WOMEN CHARACTERS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO 'THE CHRYSANTHEMUMS'

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ABSTRACT: *Historically speaking, women have been considered symbolic objects of use in a masculine structure and linguistic tokens, rather than wielders of words in their own right. Deleted or distorted by male-manipulated language, the female's quest for self-respect and fulfillment has been lost from culture and even consciousness for centuries. In the works of a writer like Steinbeck, who had strong confidence in his thorough understanding of "women's heart of hearts," one might encode indices of a forgotten language, decipherable hieroglyphs. The primary theme of the story The Chrysanthemums is one that appears throughout Steinbeck's canon, the issue of creative frustration. While The Long Valley is undeniably rich in female portraits, and in the portrayal of husband-and-wife relationships, Elisa's and Mary's portraits stand out as two sides of one conception: they seem to have been produced one after the other, if not conjointly, and to corroborate each other in the formulation of a correct relation of humans to their environment. Here understood through Elisa's constant efforts at establishing herself as a successful planter of chrysanthemums, belittled by her materialistic, practical-minded husband, Henry Allen and betrayed rather robbed emotionally by the stranger with assurances of false dreams finally making her realize that her seeds of creative desire shall always be wasted. Some critics have viewed Elisa as a feminist figure, trying to express her identity but failing constantly in a patriarchal post-depression American Labour Class Society.*

KEYWORDS*:* male-manipulated language, Steinbeck's women, repressed desires, silenced and objectified feminity.

INTRODUCTION

Petr Lisca in The Wide World of John Steinbeck comments that *"in the world of his (Steinbeck's) fiction, women seem compelled to choose between home-making and whoredom."* This however is not completely true for subsequent critics have discovered traits more noble and wholesome than these stereotypes and stigmas generally ascribed to Steinbeck's women. Although male characters and male relations dominate Steinbeck's novels, many women characters such as Liza Hamilton in East of Eden, Elisa Allen in The Chrysanthemums, Alicia in The Pastures of Heaven, Ma Joad in The Grapes of Wrath, Elizabeth and Rama in To a God Unknown and Juana in The Pearl are the more dynamic characters deserving critical academic attention. Rather than assigning women with autonomous identities, Steinbeck explores their relationship from the perspective of

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their relation with the male population of the narratives, be their presence in both professional and personal spheres or from the distinctive perspective of male expectations.

Camille Oaks in The Wayward Bus is robbed of her dreams of "*a nice house in a nice town and two children"* and cast by society into the mould of a "hustler" or "tramp" and destined to remain a "hooker" by being forced to abandon her desire of being a wife and a mother.

Sandra Beatty in A Study of Female Characterization in Steinbeck's Fiction comments, *"It would appear that Steinbeck has either consciously or unconsciously reduced the multiplicity of female roles to basically two, that of wife and that of mother, with all of his female characters fulfilling, in varying degrees, either one or both of these functions. In Steinbeck's fiction the role of wife is oftentimes synonymous with that of housewife. In fact, many of Steinbeck's wives seem to be domesticity personified. Rather than viewing this role as menial or degrading, Steinbeck sees the housewife as performing a particular task or function, perhaps the one to which she is best suited, with a pride and efficiency bordering on perfection."* There are a few women in Steinbeck's fiction who, in addition to their roles as wives, seem to fulfill, more specifically, the role of mother. However, the most significant of the qualities of Steinbeck's women, is knowledge; despite their own apparent lack of experience. In Steinbeck's novels, they come closest to an understanding of the profundities of life and the intricacies of the human nature. In the case of Liza Hamilton, it is her complete realism, her practicality, efficiency, and unshakable convictions as opposed to Samuel's dreaming, his carefree and almost child-like idealism, which keep the Hamilton family from starving. Ma]oad's ability to face adversity, to accept hardship and carry on in spite of it, enables her to drive out the despair in her husband and give the members of her family renewed strength. . She possesses knowledge far beyond her status and her experience so that she becomes, at one point, a philosopher and attains the greatness of a Maurya in Synge's Riders to the Sea.

There are certain characteristics which Steinbeck attributes to women in general that should be noted in order to present a more complete picture of the woman as Steinbeck sees her. In Cup of Gold he states, *"All girls and women hoarded something they never spoke of. . . . Another life went on inside of women... ran parallel to their outward lives and yet never crossed them"*. In The Pastures of Heaven, he interprets this -something' as *"the grain of deity in women"*. He feels that *"Nature has planted this sure knowledge in women in order that the race may increase"*. Steinbeck implies that there is some strain of knowledge inherent in women which has to do with the procreation of the species and with the life cycle itself. In addition to knowledge, Steinbeck has observed that *"there is much suffering bound up in women... They seem to carry pain about with them in a leaking package"*, but concludes that *"the bitterness of being a woman may be an ecstasy"*. If we establish the fact that women such as Alicia in The Pastures of Heaven, Elizabeth and Rama in To a God Unknown, Ma Joad in The Grapes of Wrath,]uana in The Pearl and Liza Hamilton in East of Eden represent ideal or perfect wives, then other women such as Madame Orden in The Moon Is Down, Mrs. Bernice Pritchard in The Wayward Bas, Marie Héristal in The Short Reign of Pippin IV and Katherine in The Pastares of Heaven must be viewed as inadequate or, at best, inferior wives in Steinbeck's terms. One woman, although she shares all of the qualities of Steinbeck's ideal wife —`the realism, conviction, practicality, and resignation — rejects the role of wife and uses her knowledge and understanding of her husband, Adam, to bring about his destruction.

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The iron strength, realism, practicality, conviction, efficiency, and resignation of these women make them outstanding and significant characters in their own right. Many of Steinbeck's women, because of their strength and nobility, contribute in a positive way to the impact and worth of Steinbeck's novels as a whole. A knowledge of the women and their relationships to the men in Steinbeck's fiction helps to elucidate the characters of the men themselves. In fact, the primary function of woman, in relation to man, is to provide the perfect counterpart to him. Steinbeck's women are acutely aware of the pattern of life. This awareness enables them to accept their life and their fate realistically and stoically. They are intricately bound up in reality, in simply day-to-day existence. Women in Steinbeck's fiction, because of their closeness to Nature and to the Creator Himself, instinctively understand both human nature and life, which make the need to comprehend their implications and complexities unnecessary.

Loneliness and the land dream are both personified in the characters of George and Lennie in Of Mice and Men and so critics have traditionally focused their academic interest on them. However, there is another character in the play who is portrayed as equally lonely and commands an equal measure of our understanding and sympathy because she, too had a dream that was never realized. Curley's wife may, at first, appear to play a relatively minor role in relation to the male characters in Of Mice and Men and also to the development of Steinbeck's overall theme. However, a closer study of her character reveals that she is not only a major influence in the play but a well—developed character in her own right. With her superficial impression of her being *"a cheap hustler",* Curley's wife may come on to the men as playful and seductive, but she is acutely aware of the hostile reception she is receiving from them. She realizes that they will tolerate her presence around the bunkhouse only if she uses her usual excuse*, "I'm lookin' for Curley".* Her more honest explanation and appeal, *"I'm jus, lookin, for some body to talk to. Don't you neverjus' want to talk to somebody?"* is met with coldness and resentment from the men. As we get our first glimpse of the loneliness of this woman, we begin to sympathize with her repeated attempts to befriend the men. The male need for warmth and female companionship is satisfied in part by the whore Susy in Of Mice and Men. Unfortunately, there is no such outlet for the loneliness which Curley's wife feels. She tries to make the men under stand her situation: *"Sure I got a man. He ain't never home. I got nobody to talk to. I got nobody to be with. I want to see somebody. just see 'em an' talk to 'em. There ain't no women. I can't walk to town. And Curley don't take me to no dances now. I tell you Ijus' want to talk to somebody".* Curley's wife is totally isolated on the farm. She admits that her husband provides little company, and because she has no female companionship, she turns to the men.

The character Mordeen in the play Burning Bright is more "typical" of Steinbeck's women in that she possesses many of the positive characteristics found in other of Steinbeck's memorable female characters- strength, endurance, and determination, coupled with knowledge and understanding. The audience is made aware from the beginning of the play that Mordeen knows and understands her husband Joe Saul, and that she is acutely sensitive to his needs and desires. It is this sensitivity that enables Mordeen to understand Joe Saul's burning desire for a child. Steinbeck takes deliberate care at the beginning of the play to establish the depth of the relationship between Mordeen and her husband so that the act between Mordeen and Victor does not weaken the overall intention. Mordeen's act does not weaken her relationship with her husband; it strengthens it. In the same way, Mordeen's character is not degraded or cheapened by her action, instead, she achieves a kind

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of nobility because of her unselfish sacrifice. In Burning Bright, Steinbeck's special reverence for female fecundity is made most obvious. Peter Lisca suggests that this is part of Steinbeck's biological image of man: In many species of insects and some vertebrates the female destroys the male after copulation. Steinbeck might have linked such an incident into his great biological chain of being, perhaps as evidence of the ubiquitous female drive to procreate and protect at all cost her offspring. Mordeen, the mother figure in this novel, uses Victor as a stud to provide a child for her sterile husband, Joe Saul. When the stud tries to assert his paternal rights, he is killed. Steinbeck seems to accept this behavior. There is no implicit or explicit moral censure. Reproduction has sanctity of its own. Mordeen commits adultery and murder, but motherhood negates all traditional moral responsibility. Her love was so great that she could do a thing that was strange and foul to her and yet not be dirtied by it.

In examining The Moon Is Down, the characters Madame Orden, Molly, and Annie may, at first, seem insignificant in relation to the more dominant male characters in the play. However, these female characters do perform a number of important functions which should not be overlooked. Madame Orden is not a fully-developed character but rather a stereotype of the almost frighteningly efficient counterpart to a husband who does not possess the sensitivity and depth of understanding of her husband that Mordeen does. It is Annie's courage and personal determination to get rid of the invader by whatever means was necessary, that gains for Annie the admiration and respect of both Mayor Orden and the reader.

The female characters in Steinbeck's screenplay Viva Zapata with the exception of Josefa, are all Indians, representatives of the Mexican peasant class. These women seldom speak, but Steinbeck portrays them as dynamic and memorable characters through their actions.

Although most critics have related the nature of Steinbeck's female protagonists as either the mother or the harlot, Lester]ay Marks, in his thoughtful evaluation of thematic design in Steinbeck's novels, suggests three recurring thematic patterns. One of these patterns proposes that mankind may be viewed biologically, as a "group animal" composed of individuals ("cells") but having a will and intelligence of its own, distinct from any one of its parts. Another recurring image is that of the indestructible woman, a figure who serves as a positive symbol for human endurance. And there is an interrelationship between this image and the biological theme, for most of the enduring women in Steinbeck derive their positive value from the fact that they act as the nurturing and reproductive machinery of the "group animal." Their optimistic significance lies, not in their individual spiritual triumph, but in their function as perpetuators and nurturers of the species.

While one hesitates to categorize in a writer as variable as Steinbeck, most of his indestructible women are either mothers or whores. The mothers far outnumber the whores, but the whores definitely have a positive place in the category of Steinbeck's indestructible females. For the most part their characterization is hopelessly romantic. Steinbeck is a devoted believer to the myth of the whore with a heart of gold. To that description he adds a spine of steel. The Lopez sisters in The Pastures of Heaven are a case in point. What Steinbeck seems to be saying is that the two women have the strength to deceive themselves when they can, but also to face harsh reality when the necessity arises. The story of the Lopez sisters is but one episode among many in The Pastures

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of Heaven. The story of Suzy, the gutsy little hustler is characterized by Suzy as the ideal candidate for the cliché question, *"What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"* Both]oseph and Mary (the Patron) and Fauna (the Madame of the Bear Flag) recognize that Suzy is more than the ordinary hustler. Both recognize her strength and both recognize her warmth and special qualities. On a symbolic level we are given several clues that Suzy represents not only womanhood but all the downtrodden of society. Symbolically humanity wins through her, although Steinbeck is careful to point out that Suzy's indomitable qualities are decidedly female. On the brink of her victory she becomes traditionally shy and girlish "and, as anybody knows, there is nothing more indestructible and deadly than a shy girl". Suzy is a transitional character between the whores and mothers. Though she starts off the novel as a whore, in the end as she rides off into the future with Doc, motherhood is a distinct possibility. And motherhood remains the most positive constant in Steinbeck's characterization of the indestructible woman.

Other examples in the "mother" category along with]uana and Ma Joad, are Mordeen in Burning Bright, Mama Torres in Flight, Rama in To a God Unknown, and several women in The Pastures of Heaven. The qualities which unite these very different females are motherhood and indestructibility. Helen Van Deventer, Katherine Wicks and Alicia Whiteside of The Pastares of Heaven illustrate three diverse but somewhat similar aspects of the maternal. Many of the women are strong characters, however, and their indestructible qualities are emphasized throughout. Perhaps the best example of an indestructible woman in a short story is Mama Torres in Flight. Mama Torres has suffered much. She struggles to eke a meager living from a barren land and stingy sea. Though Pepe is tracked down and killed, Mama Torres must endure to fulfill her woman's role. She remains with her other two children, undefeated and unbowed, mothering the new generation, male and female, symbolized by the two younger children in her family. Perhaps the work that most closely identifies woman with the earth as in To A God Unknown. Though later works were to suggest the woman's special affinity with nature, in this early work the identification is made blatantly clear as would be explored in The Chrysanthemums.

"It is designed to strike without the reader's knowledge. I mean he reads it carefully and when finished feels that something profound has happened."

-Steinbeck on The Chrysanthemums

One of Steinbeck's most accomplished short stories, The Chrysanthemums is about an intelligent, creative woman coerced into a stifling existence on her husband's ranch. The story appeared in Harper's Magazine in 1937, but a revised version containing less sexual imagery was published in 1938 collection The Long Valley. Andre Gide, admired the story and compared it to the best of Chekov's works. Other critics have detected the influence of Lawrence in The Chrysanthemums. John Ditsky called the story *"one of the finest American short stories ever written*" and Zimmerman was of the view that *"stylistically and thematically, the story is a superb piece of compelling craftsmanship."*

According to Wolfgang Iser, the interpreter or reader can only illustrate possible meanings of a literary text. The reader as interpreter should undertake *"not to explain a work, but to reveal the conditions that bring about its various possible effects"*. Moreover, Iser claims that a text can only take on life when it is realized by the reader. Iser provides us with a constructed reader who is

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neither an ideal nor an individual reader but *"embodies all ... predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect": the "implied reader".* This open-endedness of the characters allows them to evolve in the reader's mindscape and be subjected to multiple criticisms and allows Iser's reader to function ideally. One of the most striking features of this short story is that Steinbeck refuses to give any explicit information about the characters' thoughts. In a letter to his Stanford classmate Katherine Beswick, Steinbeck comments:

"Most of our literature was written by men. and I am inclined to believe that they have given us other men a highly erroneous idea of sex .... At least Katherine, I play safe. I use only the outward manifestations of some I have known. I make no attempt to enter their minds except where their thoughts have been obvious to me in some given experience."

In case of The Chrysanthemums , the reader is quite often forced to think about what is not said; the implied sub tone that runs through the narrative and thereby makes it a more convincing study of the protagonist's mind. Kenneth Payson Kempton comments,

"We know, at least, that she (Elisa) *longs for something. But whether it is the freedom suggested by the nomadic life of the tinker, or children symbolized by her care of the young plants, or manliness as indicated by her delight in her strength and her masochistic scrubbing of her body in the bath, or a normal sex life hinted at by her tenseness when with her possibly impotent husband, or merely her lost youth as implied at the end—who can say? Ignorant of the desire that opposes her and creates frustration, we can't know what the story means". Warren Beach says that she "harbors an unsatisfied longing for some way of life less settled than that of the rancher's wife, something typified by the shabby tinker camping nightly in his wagon underneath the stars"*

Like most literary works, Steinbeck's works have also been subjected to intense literary debates and discussions regarding the portrayal of the women characters in his creative endeavor. In 1977, the Steinbeck Society held a conference on Steinbeck's Women in which was discussed the six essays that generally categorized his female characters as alienated, masculine, strong-willed, frustrated, lonely and indestructible. Like many of his predecessors, Steinbeck has also been subjected to criticisms for having a lack of "normal" women and the characters of those depicted to be inadequately developed. For Dickens, women either represented the "Angle in the House" with her pure, "asexual" marital status, or for Nathaniel Hawthorn, as creatures endowed with natural goodness but devoid of intellectual capabilities. Hemmingway's early women were depicted as thwarted or dead in their relationship with men while their symbolic or ritualistic function stood to serve the artist and of man. William Faulkner on the other hand, was labeled as an obsessive misogynist, and although he wrote about the minority, the symbol of the southern ego of chivalry was perverted. Peter Lisca pointed out that in Steinbeck's works, *"male relationships, not women were the focus: "*(Steinbeck's) *women's allurements are overshadowed by the more solid attraction of male companionship."* He also contended that *"in all of Steinbeck's works there were only a half dozen unmarried women who were not professional whore. In the world of his fiction women do have a place. But they seem compelled to choose between home-making and whoredom"* Mimi Reisel in The Indestructible Women in the Works of Raul and Steinbeck (1986) studied quite a few female characters through biological fecunity of natural feminity and concluded that most of Steinbeck's female characters symbolize either Mother Earth, Lady Bountiful or the

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Demeter/ Persephone myth. Beth Everest and Judy Wedeles in The Neglected Rib: Women in East of Eden made a convincing argument for the centrality of the female characters in East of Eden though they excuse Steinbeck's restricting of women's activities by explaining that *"Steinbeck was limited in the roles he could assign them because of "the historical realities of the times of both the writing and the setting*." Charlotte Hadella's dissertation Women in Gardens in American Short Fiction (1989) also focused on the limitation of female characters. By examining the female characters in the idyllic, pastoral setting in The Pastures of Heaven and The Long Valley, she comments that the valley of the world depicted was often guarded, fenced, and repressed. Hadella stated that *"Steinbeck presents the quest for a romantically sterile Eden, where women are cloistered to prevent the human race from falling into sin, as a major factor in the disturbed lives of his valley characters*" in Chrysanthemums, Elisa Allen is childless as she nurtures her dreams and chrysanthemum bloom in a garden closed off by fences.

Paola Loreto in the seminal essay Women's Ways to Nature: Steinbeck's (Mock)Pastoral Diptych of Gardening (& Childless) Wives in The Long Valley comments, *"The pastoral diptych that opens John Steinbeck's volume of short stories The Long Valley (1938) retells the shaping of a distinctly American response to an equally distinctly American landscape. The mocking allusions to the myth of westering1 and frontier life invite a reflection on the contemporary degeneration of the pastoral encounter of man and wilderness, and suggest a future direction through a revision of the same impulse. The premises of Steinbeck's reflection go back to the first aporia in the transcendentalists' vision of the supposedly harmonious and functional relation of man to nature. Many critics believe the story reflected Steinbeck's own sense of frustration, rejection and loneliness at the time of the story was written. Some scholars also have speculated that Elisa Allen was inspired by Steinbeck's first wife, Carol Menning."* However, at the root of Elisa's frustration is her uncertainty of her identity and an inability to determine her relationship to her society, a problem which seems to be a peculiarly modern one.

Steinbeck's The Chrysanthemums is a story that traverses it's course in the deepest corners of an woman's heart, expressing her desires and dreams which were 'closed off' from all sides in a 'closed pot'. In fact the atmosphere that Steinbeck creates at the onset is reminiscent of an isolated sterile existence amidst profane mundanity and extreme drabness. His protagonist Elisa Allen is introduced as self-absorbed; working in her garden while 'across the yard' her husband Henry engages himself in some business activities ignorant of the elemental beauties. The distance in the conjugal relationship that Steinbeck proposes at the very onset is a typical feature of many of his tales. In fact the practical, rational, materialistic successful small-scale ranch owner Henry constantly fails to understand Elisa's thoughts. Her chrysanthemums are to him just 'strong new crop' and even his appreciation fails to touch the hidden chords of Elisa's heart. William Osborne in The Education of Elisa Allen: Another Reading of John Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums" goes on to explain, *"Like most romantics, Elisa perceives through intuition a mystical relationship between Nature and Man, a perception which she has been unable to communicate to her husband, whose inclinations are thoroughly utilitarian. Early in the story he banteringly suggests that she turn her flower-growing talent to the raising of larger apples, a suggestion neither one of them takes very seriously. Her matter-of-fact response about having "planters' hands that knew how to do it" is in remarkable contrast to her emotion-charged explanation later to the tinker when the same subject comes up. Thus, Elisa has for so long tended to deny or disguise her real feelings*

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that her behavior appears confused, contradictory, or ambivalent to the reader. To dramatize her response to claims of two different ways of life, Steinbeck provides us with two symbols: the tinker and his covered wagon, a man and a way of life which appeal to her restlessness and desire for identity; and the tractor, the "little Fordson" mentioned at the beginning of the story and linked with Henry Allen and a utilitarian life which was to Elisa unchallenging and unexciting. The literary pattern in which Elisa's ambivalence is most obviously dramatized is her unconscious blurring of her sexual identity—her behaving at one moment in a feminine and romantic manner, and then again in a ruggedly masculine and virile manner."

Elisa Allen 'blocked' within her domestic role chooses the garden as the place of being herself. The chrysanthemums are in fact her other self that she prunes and protects from all threats with her 'terrier fingers'. In fact her 'over-eager', 'over-powerful' manner of work exuded her pent-up energy with which she struggled to break-through and be herself, in a man's world where her dreaming eyes are 'blocked' by 'a man's black hat pulled low down'. Steinbeck's detailing of a working class woman like Mary and here Elisa are evident in this section. For Paola Loreto *"'The Chrysanthemums' represents the degeneration of the idea of westering. The antitype, or degenerate, type, in this tale, is not the married couple (settler and hunter), but the tinker who comes to the Allen's' farm from the road on an old, canvas-topped spring-wagon resembling a prairie schooner, and crosses Elisa's existence as an alluring, illusionary meteor of mythical westering. Hence a contrast is built not only between original types and modern antitypes, but also between modern antitypes and modern attempts to re-embody the original type; in other words, Elisa Allen herself. In Busch's interpretation, Elisa stands out as the imperfect but able heir of the American westering legacy, because of her connection to the land through the tending of her life-affirming garden, and because of her fascination with the pioneers' spirit of freedom and adventure, which is what makes her vulnerable to the tinker's materialistic and manipulative behavior. The tinker emerges as the inevitable result of a wilderness that had been transformed into myth when it ended with the closing of the frontier and that had, in any case, been earlier damaged by the reversion of the pioneers' drive from spiritual to material concerns. Elisa, however, is the result of the realization of American literati that if the wilderness had to end (or had never existed), it could be replaced by a conscious cultivation of wildness: an interior craving for an unlimited and unknown space, finally freed from greed.*

Paola Loreto in the essay Women's Ways to Nature: Steinbeck's (Mock) Pastoral Diptych of Gardening (& Childless) Wives in The Long Valley comments, "*Steinbeck's diptych of the gardening housewives in The Long Valley seems to restage the coming of age of an American biocentric consciousness. Elisa Allen is portrayed as the heir of the happy ecocentrism of John Muir. She comes first, as if Steinbeck had wanted to endorse that achieved maturity. Mary Teller, on the contrary, is portrayed as being still prey to a delusion of anthropocentric control. She comes second, as the memento of an adolescent, regressive, impulse. Elisa's position in the world is the healthier and embodies Steinbeck's vision of (and hopes for) what we would call in current theoretical terms a post human American consciousness, a relocation of the human within an ecocentric perspective purged of man's "fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism". Prior to Steinbeck's writings of the thirties, this consciousness had been developing in the thoughts and works of Walt Whitman, John Muir, Jack London, William James and Robinson Jeffers.*

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Like the functional characters of the Chekhovian tales, The Tinker in this story arrives from nowhere with a discordant curious music of the 'squeak of wheels' and 'plod of hoofs' proposing a curious encounter. He, an individual denied domesticity, mends and trades with it. The domestic threats of "pots, pans, knives, scissors" that assist him shall soon see Elisa "fixed" as if in a sedate ecstasy beaming with false hopes. His unkempt arresting charm cracks Elisa's wire fence making her pay price with her emotions. Elisa's desire to break free from the domesticity surrounding her provokes her to be arrested by the charms of this nomad from nowhere. Like a seasoned professional when he sees himself failing professionally with Elisa's resistance of establishing any domestic bonds with him, he being a thoughtful raconteur identifies her vulnerability and praises Henry's '*strong new crops'* as *"quick puff of colored smoke".* An eager Elisa is then arrested in his chorus only to be robbed her emotions eventually. Elisa with description of her chrysanthemums then beams with pride- *"ten inches blooms this year.*" She shows her essential concern with blooming and that she measures with a hope to better. The Tinker with his concocted tale advances towards Elisa who desires recognition of her creativity only to cause a trading with her emotions. While tinker plays his role Elisa gradually unites her various selves that 'ran excitedly' as she handed him the 'big red flower pot'- the pot of passion, filling it with the soil that nourished her various selves. She pours in herself with all her strength and in a trance excitedly narrates the manner in which she tends herself and her beauty- the chrysanthemums. Her communication with the Tinker conveys a sense of confused ecstasy something that desperately want the Tinker to feel the passion and pour in his so she can bloom with brightness.

"You can feel that, right up your arm."

Elisa's passionate submission and her emotionally charged words reveal how she tries to draw the strength to bloom, otherwise denied by Henry. Little does she realize that her repressed desires are struggling to erupt ("Hot and sharp and- lovely") while there is a trading with her emotions. She submits herself completely under a passionate trance and desperately tries to experience the warmth felt when one rises "up and up!" and "Every pointed star gets driven into your body." But the Tinker's reply is punctuated with cold sterile domesticity. In Elisa's relationship to her husband and the tinker there is further ambivalence and this is related to her uncertainty and confusion about her identity. William Osborne evaluates, *"There is, of course, no love interest between Elisa and the unkempt tinker, except an oddly platonic one, engendered by his apparent accord with her mystical musings. The important element in their relationship is her blind belief that he somehow understands her feelings about nature and beauty and spirit, feelings which no one else apparently has shared with her."*

Marilyn H. Mitchell likens Elisa's and Mary's situations, from which, she sees their personalities evolve differently. *"Both women struggle with society's view of what constitutes masculinity and femininity, and both, as a result, develop confused, bisexual identities reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence's female characters, with which Steinbeck was familiar. But while Mary reacts to her sexual frustration with frigidity and an autoerotic response, Elisa demonstrates a healthy sensuality. The aesthetic effect of his* (Steinbeck's) *stylistic diversity provides not only variation, but also the incremental efficacy whereby the author delivers his message. Elisa's humanity does need a warm, three-dimensional embodiment, as Mitchell suggests, while Mary needs to be "a virtual caricature of the selfish, castrating female who inspires animosity" (Elisa has an "eager and mature and handsome" face, which denotes masculine strength and sense of purpose. If*

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Mary's orgasmic response is elicited by the sight of the white quail, which she equates with her own purity, Elisa's is elicited by the illusion of sharing her life affirming power with the tinker. If Mary uses nature as a means of self-expression, Elisa is a fount whereby nature can express itself… Mary and Elisa face each other as portraits of the egocentric versus the ecocentric artist. Arthur L. Simpson maintains that "The White Quail" portrays the humanly destructive effects of "a subordination of life to an art which takes its sole value and reason for being as a unique expression of the artist's private vision." Mary aspires to be the Romantic, isolated artist who objectifies herself by projecting her personality onto her garden and the white quail, thus completing a movement "out of life and into art". Mary's perfection is in fact a perversion of the natural order: the artificial alteration of the natural process of survival of the fittest that must guarantee the immutability of the order on things by art(ifice). Steinbeck's exploration of a regenerated conception of art in The Long Valley diptych is an attempt to emancipate American culture from its degenerative turn. An art that nourishes a shared sense of harmony between man and his environment is the renewed promise of a democratic and civilizing ideal."

Paul Hintz took note of the power of language, both verbal and written, and concluded in referring to Steinbeck's Cannery Row that *"The male voice in Steinbeck as elsewhere in the culture, creates a world of silent object (the female). And the silence returns to claim its own"*. In Missing Women: The Implacable Disparity between Women in Steinbeck's Life and Those in His Fiction, Mimi Reisel Gladstein compared these literary and fictional women and argued that because the proficiency and social status between them were a world of difference, Steinbeck created and controlled his female characters rather than objectively *"reflecting the society of his time and portraying the women of his world."*

Elisa Allen thus becomes Steinbeck's depiction of the 'self-confident' American 'acting' incessantly in order to realize her dreams. She says that she has 'a gift with things' and talks of 'planter's hand' but little does she realize that she has been offered limited or no scope in this foggy wasteland. The care and concentration with which she devoted herself at her garden planting along with her various selves speaks of the fervid aspiration that she nourished within her. The urge to fulfill her nature has been channeled into her chrysanthemums. In contrast to her barrenness, they bloom profusely, giving her hope that she has "planter's hands". But those "ten-inch" blooms are just reminiscent of the fact that in the Salinas Valley nourished by the sterile 'cold pale sunshine' it is only a virtual blooming that Elisa realizes. The sterility of the Valley reminds the readers of two other great American writers- Eliot and Fitzgerald in their depiction of the barren landscape of the human psyche- the Wasteland and the Valley of Ashes respectively. For Henry, the flowers are only a "strong new crop", an indulgence made possible by his success as a farmer. He thus leans "over the wire" of Elisa's protected garden suggesting his separation. The hands she mentions here in delicate contact with plant and earth are the same ones capable of wielding a hammer to pound dents out of bent pots, and it is these ambiguous hands, sometimes sheathed with heavy gloves but now unsheathed and free, that reach out tentatively and almost touch the trouser-leg of the tinker, who, she is certain, shares her rapturous awareness of the mystical union between man and nature. When the tinker leaves, she stands transported as she watches the slow progress of his caravan:

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"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."

As a j
ournalist and special correspondent during the War, Steinbeck was not a stranger to places like Mexico. Europe, North Africa and experienced a colorful life. He not only survived the Great Depression and World War II, but also experienced the warfare of progressive women in their struggle against a patriarchal society, both publicly and privately. In view of the fact that human beings are creatures of their environment, an author's writing is inevitably colored and shaped by his or her interactions with others. Steinbeck's concern with the conditions of the Americans during the years of Great Depression is a basic tenet of most of his works and so is the case with The Chrysanthemums too that focuses on that. In fact that the Allens of the Salinas Valley are seen not so badly affected by the Depression speaks of the economic disparity that the depression gave rise to.The Tinker on the other hand represents the crisis that Americans faced during the years of Great Depression with no job and no fixed dwelling. The Tinker without any given identity, except that he mends domestic articles is a figure from those submerged suffering many.

The threat amongst which Elisa survives and struggles is not a singular one. Instead it's a double threat of blooming as herself in a man's world and that of mundane domesticity intruding her creative frame-work. Perhaps that's the reason why she fenced her flower garden protecting it from "cattle and dogs and chickens", the markers of mundane domestic existence. The leather gloves that she constantly pulls on and off and seems to protect herself from any external threats. Side by side with her masculine vigor and aggressiveness is a tendency toward romantic femininity. Her romantic temperament is never more apparent than in her description of the mystical union she feels between her hands and the tiny plants she is preparing:

"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…"

Elisa sees the ranch, which lies within the Salinas Valley, as enclosed by drabness: *"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….(T)here was no sunshine in the valley…"* In contrast, the Salinas road's "willow-line was still yellow with frosted leaves so that under the high gray fog there seemed a thin band of sunshine. This was the only color in the gray afternoon". Furthermore, the tinker described his life of travel as being guided by the *"aim to follow nice weather,"* to which Elisa affirmed, *"(t)hat sounds like a nice kind of way to live".* This desire to follow bright and colorful weather is the same as the desire to seek out new and interesting experiences.

Retracing a political dimension in the story, critic Nicholas Fetner in his essay New Historicism: The Chrysanthemums comments, *"Women were only given the right to vote with the ratification of the 19th Amendment a few years prior, in 1920. After the 19th Amendment, much of the Feminist movement lost organization and direction. Much of the political groundwork for women's rights was laid by Eleanor Roosevelt during this time. Eleanor worked with many political groups,*

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including the International Congress of Working Women and the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom to build their political power.

Many popular pieces of literature were beginning to explore the anxieties and restraints that society placed on women. The heroine of the 1910's fiction is not overly feminist, but she does strive to move beyond just the political goal and into a more creative and independent woman. The Awakening by Kate Chopin, although written a few years before, is an example of a woman expressing her anxieties of the times. Female characters in fiction during this time rebelled against familial obligations and expectations. They felt that their familiar obligations were due to an oppressive system. They believed that they had the right to live like men. We see Elisa confront this desire with the old vagabond." In her later statement, "*I could show you what a woman might do", Elisa is confronting the oppression she feels from both the vagabond and society."*

The Tinker leaves Henry's Ranch arousing in Elisa the new seeds of womanhood, new freedom that shall make her feel rejuvenated before encountering her sprouts of creativity being wasted and discarded. A rejuvenated Elisa runs wildly in newfound ecstasy little realizing that soon hot tears will run down her cheeks. Elisa, the 'strong' 'lean' woman suddenly realizes the feminine charm that was so long repressed and thus 'scrubbed' herself, while denying the past flying by the wings of the false hopes proposed. She fails to realize that the grey afternoon in actuality carries with it the sense of despair and lets her to bask in the "thin band of sunshine amidst all grayness."

The blot comes silently as it should in a time of 'quite and waiting'. A storm was raised, but within and nothing stirred except the battered soul looking at the "dark speck". Elisa knew then that her sprouts had been discarded, that she has been used and thrown away. Accompanied by Henry in the roadster she has the final experience of the futility that had courted her constant struggles. Her one final desire "could we have wine at the dinner" is an acceptance of her actual domestic role as a wife, succumbing to the social modes. When Elisa discovers that the tinker has not really been interested in her flowers, has not really understood her feeling about nature, and has, in fact, thrown over the side of his wagon her gift of tiny chrysanthemums, she becomes the disillusioned woman we see at the end of the story. His (the tinker's) actions ended Elisa's chance of becoming a strong advocate of her way of life, a vigorous, confident representative. Instead she has become a disabused romantic, a tearful, senile representative who is described in the final words of the story as "crying weakly—like an old woman". Even her refusal to attend the prize fights shows that she has at last realized despite all her struggles the society shall never recognize her strength. According to William Osborne, *"The perfect symbol for Elisa is the ambiguous chrysanthemum, that hardy, durable, oddly un-feminine flower, un feminine because of its strength and massiveness and somewhat bitter smell and yet oddly feminine too because it is a flower. From its strong, tough stem comes a fragile, tender bud and bloom and flower. The symbolism here, as in many Steinbeck stories, is almost too obvious. When the tinker rejected the flowers, he was rejecting Elisa. The death of the flowers preceded the death of Elisa's illusions."*

Although Henry may say she is 'strong', he shall always fail to understand her creative self and thus shall fail to appreciate her 'ten-inch' chrysanthemum blooms or even her beauty. Her dreams can never be realized in the Salinas Valley 'closed off' from the sky. And The Tinker like a mirage

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in a desert shall fail her hopes leaving her with the final realization, that in a 'time of quiet and of waiting', it is an eternal futile wait for her to bloom, her sprouts of desire shall always be wasted. To conclude in the words of Paola Loreto, *"Steinbeck's exploration of a regenerated conception of art in The Long Valley diptych is an attempt to emancipate American culture from its degenerative turn. An art that nourishes a shared sense of harmony between man and his environment is the renewed promise of a democratic and civilizing ideal. As in classical civilizations, it reflects a conception of beauty that belongs to the polis and is daily perceivable by all its inhabitants. For Elisa, beauty belongs to her everyday work with the earth and with the land. Her collective unconscious tells her that it is truth and that it is also good, in a way that has been lost to Mary, but it is also a reminder of a unique American tradition. Steinbeck's Long Valley front diptych resumes the American Renaissance proto-pragmatic view of art as the way to practical, concrete knowledge, a journey of discovery that serves life through an uninterrupted relation with experience. This American art is knowing and doing, or knowing by doing. It doesn't know what it will find, but when it does find something, it plants a new element there and "adorns nature with a new thing," (Emerson) each time reality stirs imagination inside an individual. In this sense, Steinbeck's art is expressive in the most original and fruitful way that American literature has known since the writings of Emerson, Whitman, Dickinson and their heirs."*

Elsa's character may be best summarised in Steinbeck's words itself :- "*I believe a strong woman may be stronger than a man, particularly if she happens to have love in her heart. I guess a loving woman is indestructible."*

— John Steinbeck, East of Eden

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