The Chrysanthemums

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN STEINBECK

Steinbeck was born the third of four children in a working, middle-class family. His father, John Ernst Steinbeck, Sr., worked as the Monterey County treasurer, and his mother, Olive Hamilton, was a school teacher. Steinbeck grew up in a small settlement town deep in the Salinas Valley and worked side-by-side with migrant laborers, gaining insight and empathy into their difficult existence. After graduating high school in 1919, Steinbeck studied English Literature at Stanford University. He remained in attendance there until 1925, at which time he left without completing his degree. While spending time traveling and writing, Steinbeck met his first wife, Carol Henning, and the couple returned to California following the publication of his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, in 1929. Steinbeck and Henning moved into a home outside of Monterey County owned by Steinbeck's father, who continued to support the couple financially so that Steinbeck could focus on his writing. During this time, Steinbeck wrote some of his most famous works, including *Of Mice and Men* in 1937 and *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939. In 1940, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. By 1943, Steinbeck and Henning divorced, and he quickly married his second wife, Gwyn Conger. Conger and Steinbeck had two sons, John and Thomas, between 1944 and 1946, but were divorced by 1948. Steinbeck married his third and final wife, Elaine Scott, in 1950. He served as a war correspondent during World War II and Vietnam, where he was wounded both physically and mentally. In 1962, Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature under controversial circumstances; some critics considered Steinbeck's work lacking the talent implied by the prestigious award. He died in 1968 of congestive heart failure having never written another word of fiction. Steinbeck remains one of North America's most celebrated writers, with his works required reading in many high schools and universities.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Steinbeck wrote and published "The Chrysanthemums" in 1937, one year after the New Deal, a series of public programs and projects implemented by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt's New Deal sought to bring relief and reformation to those who were hit hardest by the Great Depression, and Steinbeck was an open supporter of his efforts. Programs stemming from the New Deal, such as the Farm Security Administration and the Social Security Administration, provided social support for the poor, the unemployed, and the elderly. Public reception to the New Deal was split, with many conservatives maintaining it was counterproductive to new business and economic growth. Steinbeck's sympathies for those most affected by Depression-era hardships can be seen in much of his writing, as his attention is frequently focused on struggling farmhands and other disenfranchised members of society. Steinbeck's preferred settings of the Salinas Valley and other American prairies have become part of what is known as Dust Bowl fiction, chronicling the plight of rural Americans during the Dirty Thirties—a time in which a decade-long dust storm ravaged the Great Plains and worsened the economic disaster of the Great Depression.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Steinbeck was part of the artistic movement known as modernism, which originated in Europe and North America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Other modernist works such as Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* sought to "make it new," the modernist maxim coined by Ezra Pound, and did so by challenging traditional literary forms and other common beliefs and values, including social inequality and sexism. Works like Steinbeck's *The Long Valley* and *The Pearl* reflect this attempt to break from old-fashioned ideals and principles and serve as understated—yet biting—critiques of society's many injustices, while simultaneously experimenting with non-standard literary forms. Steinbeck was also known to admire American writer and contemporary William Faulkner, best known for Southern novels such as *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. Steinbeck's greatest influence, however, was marine biologist and philosopher Ed Ricketts. Steinbeck met Ricketts in early 1930 when Steinbeck's first wife took a job in one of his laboratories. Ricketts was a great supporter of ecological thinking, which espouses that humankind is only a small part of a greater chain of being, one that is too large and complicated for any one person to understand. This influence, along with an intense interest in environmental science, is reflected in Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Chrysanthemums"
- **When Written:** 1937
- **Where Written:** Salinas Valley, California
- **When Published:** 1937
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Fiction, Short Story
- **Setting:** Salinas Valley, California
- **Climax:** Elisa discovers that the tinker has thrown her

chrysanthemum sprouts onto the side of the road.

- **Antagonist:** The Tinker
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Steinbeck hated typewriters. Despite having the available technology, Steinbeck refused to write using a typewriter and wrote all of his works by hand. He reportedly used in excess of sixty pencils on any given day and only agreed to begin using a typewriter very late in his career when his editor, allegedly the only person who could read his handwriting, died.

Steinbeck as a secret agent. During World War II, Steinbeck served as a war correspondent and worked with the Office of Strategic Services, the precursor for what would later become the CIA. Steinbeck again offered his services to the CIA in 1952 during the Cold War while he was planning a tour of Europe. Reportedly, the Director of Central Intelligence, Walter Bedell Smith, was enthusiastic of Steinbeck's suggestion; however, what service he provided, if any, is unknown.

PLOT SUMMARY

The "high grey-flannel fog of winter" has settled over California's Salinas Valley, sealing it like a "closed pot." The cut hay fields appear to retain the absent sunlight of summer, conveying a sense of optimism even in December. The valley, home to Elisa and Henry Allen's farm, has entered a period of dormancy.

From her flower garden Elisa watches Henry negotiate with two businessmen in the distance. At thirty-five, Elisa is strong and has eyes "as clear as water." Her appearance is surprisingly masculine, and her dress reflects her hard work in the dirt, where she uses a pair of **scissors** to cut down the old year's **chrysanthemum** stalks. Her work is "over-eager" and "over-powerful," and the small stems seem "too small and easy for her energy." Her experienced hands quickly rid the flowers of unwanted insects and other pests. She is so focused on her work that Henry's sudden appearance startles her.

Henry acknowledges Elisa gift with the chrysanthemums, but wishes she'd focus her efforts on growing apples in the orchard. Elisa asserts her prowess, saying she has "planters' hands," and asks Henry what he was discussing with the men in business suits. Henry says he sold thirty head of cattle and suggests that they go into town that evening to celebrate. He also jokes that maybe Elisa would enjoy the local fights, though Elisa quickly rebuffs the idea. She agrees to dinner, and Henry departs to bring the cattle down from the mountain.

As Elisa continues working in her garden, a dilapidated wagon approaches the farm, advertising "Pots, pans, knives, sisors, lawn mores, Fixed." A dirty and disheveled man drives the wagon, which is pulled by an exhausted horse and a listless donkey. Elisa warmly welcomes the tinker with witty jokes about the state of his pulling team.

The tinker informs Elisa that he is lost, having left the usual route that he follows yearly from Seattle to San Diego, fixing household items along the way. Elisa is immediately drawn to the freedom and intrigue of the tinker's traveling existence, even though she claims to have nothing for him to fix, and she becomes increasingly agitated with him as he continues to attempt to sell his services. Elisa's hardened response begins to soften, however, as the tinker expresses an interest in her cherished chrysanthemums.

The tinker claims to know a woman on his usual route who has long been searching for good chrysanthemum seeds, and Elisa agrees to provide him with some sprouts to give to his customer. She kneels to dig up the chrysanthemums, her voice taking on a "husky" tone and her breast swelling "passionately" as she explains her connection to the plants. Elisa's speech takes on a distinctly sexual overtone as she progresses from talking about flowers to fervently asserting that while she's never lived as the tinker has, she knows the feeling of looking at up at a quiet night sky full of stars that "get driven into your body [...] hot and sharp and—lovely." Kneeling at the tinker's feet "like a fawning dog," she almost touches the cloth of his pants.

Elisa and the tinker are both embarrassed at Elisa's display, and she quickly agrees to give him some work in the form of a damaged saucepan after digging up the sprouts and offering them to him in a red flower pot. Elisa again expresses the desire to live a free and exciting life like the tinker does, even going so far as to say that she shares his skillset in fixing household items. The tinker quickly reminds Elisa that his life of work and travel would be lonesome and frightening "for a woman," and he is then on his way, nearly forgetting the chrysanthemum sprouts in the process.

Elisa hurries to the house to take a hot bath, during which she scrubs her entire body until her skin is red. Upon drying, she observes her naked body in the mirror, before carefully applying makeup and selecting her most beautiful dress, "the symbol of her prettiness." When Henry returns home, he tells his wife that she looks "strong and happy." As Elisa and Henry head into Salinas for their date, Elisa sees a dark speck in the distance, and realizes that the tinker has thrown her chrysanthemum sprouts out onto the side of the road. Elisa turns her head, "crying weakly—like an old woman."

CHARACTERS

Elisa Allen – The protagonist of "The Chrysanthemums," Elisa is a farmer's wife living in California's Salinas Valley in the 1930's. When first introduced, Elisa is depicted as a strong and capable

woman of thirty-five, hard at work in her **chrysanthemum** garden. It evident that she and her husband, Henry, have a cordial yet passionless marriage, and that Elisa's time, energy, and considerable skill is occupied by meticulously tending to both the couple's home and her small yet impressive garden. As Elisa works to ensure the next season's blooms, it becomes clear that she is capable of much more than flowers and aesthetic beauty. Her dedication and natural ease with plants suggests that she could contribute to their farm in a more direct and practical way, such as growing apples in the orchard, but her status as a woman limits the scope of her world to caregiving and homemaking. Nevertheless, Elisa clearly aches for a life in which she is permitted to do and be more. Elisa's unhappiness fuels her curious and sexually-charged interaction with the tinker, a traveling repairman who feigns interest in Elisa and her chrysanthemums in an attempt to secure work. By the end of the story, any hopes that Elisa has of defining her own existence are dashed when the tinker discards her cherished chrysanthemums on the side of the road and she is left feeling like a weak, old woman. Steinbeck's portrayal of Elisa illustrates the damaging effects of American patriarchy while also exposing the ridiculousness of excluding a strong and productive member of society simply on the basis of her gender.

Henry Allen – The husband of Elisa Allen, Henry is a farmer living in the Salinas Valley of California during the 1930's. Henry provides Elisa with a comfortable life (his farming business seems to do well, as he negotiates the sale of thirty head of cattle with representatives from the Western Meat Company at the start of the story) and he appears to be a kind, if traditionally-minded, husband; nevertheless, Elisa is clearly unhappy in their marriage. Unlike Elisa, Henry is content with society's prescribed gender roles and expects nothing from his wife outside of her responsibilities as a homemaker. In addition to ignoring Elisa's professional capabilities, Henry also neglects Elisa emotionally and sexually, evident by their childless marriage and Elisa's immediate attraction to the tinker as soon as he expresses the slightest attention to her personal interests and desires. In many ways, Henry's character serves as a personification of the American patriarchy—he believes very little in Elisa and expects even less. Ironically, despite being her husband, Henry knows little about Elisa, including who she is and what she is capable of.

The Tinker – A traveling repairman who journeys the west coast from Seattle to San Diego and back each year in a covered wagon, mending household items, such as saucepans and **scissors**, and chasing the pleasant weather. When the tinker arrives on Elisa Allen's farm in search of work, it is clear that she longs for the freedom that the tinker's job affords him and the excitement of travel. Steinbeck describes the tinker as a large man, who, despite his grey beard and hair, does not appear old. He is dirty and wrinkled, and his eyes reveal a darkness that is vaguely threatening and not all together honest. Indeed, the tinker dupes Elisa into believing that he is interested in her and her **chrysanthemums** to secure work for himself. He claims that another customer is in search of good chrysanthemums for her own garden, and Elisa's prize flowers are the best around. Elisa, immediately drawn to the man's positive attention, supplies him with a pot of fresh chrysanthemum sprouts—after coming on to him in an overtly sexual manner, leaving them both uncomfortable and self-conscious. Of course, the fixer doesn't really care about Elisa or her sprouts, and he throws the chrysanthemums unto the side of the road as soon as he leaves the Allens' farm. Overall, Steinbeck's representation of the tinker underscores the unfairness of America's sexist society. The tinker is willing to lie and manipulate people in order to get what he wants. Still, as a man, he is permitted to define his own existence and profession, to live his life as he desires. This contrasts with Elisa, who, despite being a good and capable person, is denied the same freedom and opportunity simply because she is a woman.

THEMES

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GENDER, POWER, AND AMBITION

John Steinbeck's 1937 story "The Chrysanthemums" depicts the strict gender roles that govern the life of Elisa Allen, a farmer's wife living in the Salinas Valley during the early 20th-century. Elisa and her husband, Henry, live a modest life on their California land, and as the story opens, Elisa meticulously tends to her small **chrysanthemum** garden while Henry is engaged in business matters, brokering a cattle deal with a large meat company. Their gender roles dictate the types of work they do, and the respect others give them, but Elisa is not satisfied with this—she finds herself disillusioned by her life and is unable to find a proper outlet for her skill and ambition. Steinbeck's depiction of Elisa's struggles against society's expectations of her underscores the damaging effects of gender inequality in American society and challenges the misconception that women are the weaker sex.

From the outset, Steinbeck depicts a society in which men's work is considered more important than women's work. This division of labor is clearest in the chores Henry and Elisa do on the farm: Elisa works in the garden maintaining an impressive display of chrysanthemums, while her husband tends cattle and negotiates livestock sales with men in business suits.

Significantly, the chrysanthemums have no practical purpose (they are simply beautiful), while Henry's cattle help sustain the family. This immediately places a greater value on Henry's work than Elisa's—something they both seem aware of when Elisa tells Henry that her that her chrysanthemums will be "strong" this year, and Henry replies, "You've got a gift with things [...] I wish you'd work out in the orchard and raise some apples that big." Here, he subtly belittles her skills, implying that they would be more impressive if she used them in the orchard, where she might grow something that actually contributes to the family.

Making this worse, when Elisa grows excited at the prospect of working in the orchard (thereby becoming more involved with the core aspects of the farm), Henry reveals that his comment was disingenuous—he has no intention of letting her work in the orchard, which he shows by redirecting the conversation. It's obvious, then, that Henry does not want to change the dynamics of their life—he prefers to throw subtle barbs at Elisa's uselessness over finding a way to make her feel challenged and fulfilled.

While Henry seems perfectly satisfied with the status quo, Elisa's actions and appearance imply that she is out of place in a traditionally-female role. Elisa's surprising masculinity is first apparent in her clothes. She wears "a man's black hat pulled low down over her eyes, clodhopper shoes, [and] a print dress almost completely covered by a big corduroy apron." The black hat obscures her physical identity as a woman, while her bulky shoes and coarse apron hide any trace of femininity that might be reflected in her dress. Instead of presenting herself in a ladylike fashion (as would have been the norm), Elisa seems most comfortable in clothing that is functional. Furthermore, Elisa is interested in traditionally-masculine roles and activities. For instance, she demonstrates in the story's final moments that she has been reading about the violence of prize fights, evidencing her curiosity about an activity that Henry seems to think isn't the proper place for a woman.

Most significantly, Elisa shows that she dreams of an entirely different life. When the tinker arrives on the Allens' farm in search of work mending pots or sharpening **scissors**, Elisa expresses an explicit longing for the tinker's nomadic life of fixing household items for money—a life that he says "ain't the right kind of life for a woman." As she watches his wagon leave, she surprises herself by whispering aloud, "That's a bright direction. There's a glowing there." Clearly, Elisa wants more than her lot has provided—and perhaps her surprise at her own words shows that she wants this more than she even knows.

While Elisa's unfulfilled dreams are tragic enough, Steinbeck deliberately suggests that they would be within her grasp were she not a woman. After all, her curiosity is met with an energy, ambition, and capability that would seem to equip her for whatever life she wants. Steinbeck suggests early on that her current life cannot accommodate such capability and ambition: while gardening, Elisa is "over-eager" and "over-powerful," and the chrysanthemum stems are "too small and easy for her energy." This suggests that her "planters' hands" (her gift with gardening) would make her a real asset to the orchard, if only Henry would allow her to become more involved in the farm. Furthermore, her curiosity about the tinker's life isn't idle—she shares his skill set and could therefore presumably do his job. "I can beat the dents out of little pots," she says. "I could show you what a woman might do."

However, despite Elisa's skill and ambition—her skill in the garden and her vocal desire to work in the orchard or live as the tinker does—Steinbeck ends the story pessimistic about the ability of even the strongest woman to transcend society's expectations of her. When Elisa shares her knowledge of gardening with the tinker, she feels empowered and useful. Someone has treated her like an expert at something, rather than simply belittling her skills, and it changes her manner. However, Elisa's new confidence—her appearance of being "strong and happy"—dissolves as she sees the chrysanthemums on the road, an indication that not only did the tinker not actually want her gardening expertise, but he also used it to manipulate her. On this day, Elisa has glimpsed a life in which her ambitions are possible, and she believes for a moment that things might change. But the tinker's manipulation of her desires leaves her devastated, making her an old and weak woman—the very destiny she hoped to avoid.

SEX AND SEXUALITY

While Elisa's husband, Henry, is cordial and provides her with a comfortable life, their marriage is devoid of any romantic spark. Their verbal exchanges are short and formal, and they never seem to make eye contact or linger over an intimate touch. What's more, Elisa becomes sexually attracted to the tinker the moment that he shows the slightest interest in her cherished **chrysanthemums**. Elisa's immediate attraction to this stranger suggests that she is sexually neglected by Henry and hungry for any sort of attention directed toward her personal interests or desires. Elisa's strength and ability as a gardener are also closely tied to her sexuality, and Henry's indifference to her work leaves her feeling powerless and undesired. The tinker's interest in Elisa's chrysanthemums, then, serves as an affirmation of her entire being, including her work and her sexuality. With Elisa's explicit display of longing, Steinbeck implies that sexuality is about more than just being desired by another person. For Elisa, a large part of feeling desired is being seen how she wants to be seen—as a strong, capable, and sexual woman.

As Elisa and Henry interact at the beginning of the story, they display little in terms of attraction or affection. In fact, they both appear to merely tolerate one another. As Henry approaches Elisa in her garden, for instance, she is startled by his presence. Elisa's surprise perhaps implies that Henry rarely ventures into her garden, indicating a lack of attention to her

personal interests. Furthermore, they exchange only basic information about their days, and when Henry proposes that they go into Salinas to celebrate his cattle sale, Elisa is hardly excited about the date. Henry teases Elisa, implying that she might like to attend the prize fights after dinner. While Elisa becomes "breathless" at the mention of the fights, Henry glosses over her interest, taking her comment that she "wouldn't like" the fights at face value and noting that he was just "fooling" in suggesting it. When he suggests going to a movie after dinner instead, Elisa's response could be read sarcastically: "Of course I'll like it. It's good to eat away from home." This whole exchange shows how poorly they communicate and how deeply Henry misunderstands his wife—no wonder their marriage is sexless.

The lack of chemistry between Elisa and Henry becomes more apparent when Elisa finds herself quickly attracted to the travelling tinker. This attraction—evidenced by her sudden wit and her quick search for "fugitive hairs" under the brim of her hat— is clearly about more than the man's physical presence, since Steinbeck describes the tinker as a large, greying man whose clothing is "wrinkled and spotted with grease" and whose laughter "disappeared from his face and eyes the moment his laughing voice ceased." The tinker's unattractiveness and his inauthentic demeanor contribute to a sense that Elisa's attraction is misplaced—her sexuality in this moment seems less about who he is and more about her own general dissatisfaction and desire for something new. This becomes only more apparent as their interaction progresses.

Elisa begins to grow frustrated with the tinker, who wants her to pay him for work she can do herself, and it's only when the tinker asks her about her chrysanthemums that her "irritation and resistance" dissipates. As she gathers sprouts for him (allegedly to take to another customer who has expressed interest in chrysanthemums), she removes her gloves and the men's hat that she is wearing, shakes out her pretty hair, and begins to dig in the dirt with her bare hands. She kneels on the ground near the tinker's foot, and her face becomes "tight with eagerness" while her breast "swelled passionately." Clearly, the tinker's interest in her—in particular, his interest in her skill and passion—has ignited her sexuality. The implication here is that Elisa has felt so unseen and overlooked in her marriage that curiosity about her skill alone is enough to make her feel sexually desired.

Elisa is thoroughly unfulfilled—emotionally, professionally, and sexually. Her passion for the chrysanthemums speaks to all three—she is someone whose interests are considered frivolous, whose skills are underused and unappreciated, and who (despite her association with fertility via the sprouts) is in a sexless marriage, as suggested by her lack of children. Therefore, when the tinker asks her to teach him about the sprouts, all the neglected aspects of her being come to life. She is suddenly an authority on something—an equal of a man—which makes her feel powerful and valuable. Furthermore, the emotional intimacy she feels by sharing her passion for gardening transitions seamlessly, for her, into sexual intimacy, as her description of the intuitive feeling of picking buds becomes a description of what sounds like an orgasm: "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." Elisa's sexuality, then, seems contingent on feeling that she can express her deepest self: the passions, skills, and interests that her husband ignores. This suggests that sexuality is not about physical desire alone, but rather about creating conditions of broad fulfillment in which a person can feel powerful and known.

Of course, while Elisa feels empowered by her interaction with the tinker, the tinker has simply manipulated her by using her pride and loneliness to convince her to give him work. Before she realizes this, though, she seems changed: the tinker has awakened a part of her that has lain dormant for so long—in particular, a hope that she might be seen for who she is. After he leaves, Elisa scrubs herself clean, examines herself naked in the mirror, and puts on her nicest clothes, including a dress that is the "symbol of her prettiness." Before they leave for Salinas, Henry tells her she looks "strong and happy," but she presses further, asking "What do you mean 'strong'?" It seems as though she is asking him to see her as she sees herself—to recognize her in the way she believes that the tinker did—and when he affirms her strength again, she seems satisfied. However, moments later, when she realizes that the moment of intimacy between her and the tinker had been a sham, it seems to break her. She cries (privately, behind her collar) "like an old woman," which implies that her sexuality has been lost, and with it any possibility of being truly known.

DESOLATION AND FERTILITY

In "The Chrysanthemums," Steinbeck draws a clear parallel between Elisa and the Salinas Valley where she lives. The farm is far away from the nearest town, which emphasizes Elisa's own isolation and loneliness. Furthermore, the Valley has entered a period of winter dormancy in which the usual crops are not growing, which mirrors Elisa and Henry's childless marriage. However, even in the face of this obvious desolation, there is a sense of latent beauty and fertility in the language Steinbeck uses to describe the Valley and in Elisa's gift with the **chrysanthemum** sprouts, which suggests both her potential for fertility and for a rich and fulfilling life. The cyclical nature of the Valley's crops and the imagery of chrysanthemums, which thrive only after they are pruned with **scissors**, suggest some hope to Elisa's otherwise bleak ending. If the Valley will come back to life from its current dormancy, then perhaps Elisa will, too.

At the story's start, the Valley has entered a period "of quiet

and of waiting" in which there is "little work to be done." The hay has been cut and the orchards have been harvested, lending a sense of emptiness to the Allens' farm. While farming usually conjures images of life and vitality, the winter landscape of the valley appears barren and cold. The Valley is also incredibly isolated. Steinbeck writes of the winter fog "closing off the Salinas Valley from the sky and from all the rest of the world." He further adds to the remoteness of this image by describing the fog as "a lid on the mountains" making the valley feel like a "closed pot." All of these details echo Elisa's own secluded existence, as well as the fact that she is utterly alone on the dormant farm. Although Elisa is described as thirty-five and healthy (evident by her "lean and strong" face and eyes that are "as clear as water"), there is no evidence to suggest that Elisa has any children. Her childless state is emphasized by her obvious loneliness, and Henry's neglect and the indifference with which he regards Elisa and their marriage reinforces the seclusion of the Salinas Valley.

Despite Steinbeck's dismal description of the Valley, there remains evidence of obvious beauty and fertility, subtly indicating the land's potential to produce and sustain life. For example, although Steinbeck notes that "fog and rain do not go together," a light wind from the southwest makes the farmers "mildly hopeful of a good rain before long" and the orchards are plowed and ready to "receive the rain deeply when it should come." Even in the bleakness of winter, then, there is a sense of optimism that rain is coming, and that the fields will continue to grow and produce. Furthermore, though it is December and there is no sunshine in the valley, Steinbeck writes that the "stubble fields seemed to be bathed in pale cold sunshine." The willows have "sharp and positive yellow leaves" that, under the contrast of the heavy grey fog, "seemed a thin band of sunshine." Much like the rain, sunshine is felt in the Salinas Valley even when it is absent. The warmth of this "sunlight" diminishes the harshness of winter and reminds readers of the upcoming growing season and the potential for new life.

Likewise, Steinbeck describes Elisa—even in her frustration, barrenness, and isolation—as full of potential. Although she does not have children and is stuck in a sexless marriage, Elisa is still explicitly associated with fertility through her "planters' hands." Elisa has a special connection to the soil and, just like her mother, she can "stick anything in the ground and make it grow." Therefore, even though Steinbeck portrays Elisa as childless, she still has the inherent ability to create and nurture life.

Furthermore, while early in the story Elisa is described as "blocked and heavy" in her frumpy and masculine gardening costume, this description gives way to beauty after her interaction with the tinker. As Elisa readies herself for her date with Henry, she works "carefully on her hair" and accents her eyebrows and lips with makeup. She puts on the dress which is "the symbol of her prettiness" and is suddenly transformed from drab and plain to lovely. While Henry is surprised by her appearance, it's clear that Elisa has always had the potential for this beauty, much as the farm always has potential for new life. Finally, Elisa clearly has the potential to do challenging work on the farm. While she tends the chrysanthemums with pride and care, Steinbeck describes them as being "too small and easy for her energy." This—and her curiosity and capability throughout the story—suggests that she is not yet living up to the full potential of her life, but that someday she might.

The story's ending, however, seems pessimistic for Elisa: she does not renew her connection with her husband, he dismisses her curiosity about the prize fights (which reiterates the limitations on her as a woman), and—worst of all—she learns that the tinker never admired or respected her skill with the sprouts. The final image of Elisa weeping into her collar on the way to Salinas suggests a desolate fate for her: the wasting of her potential leading to an unfulfilling life. However, the parallel between Elisa and the Salinas Valley complicates this tragic ending. After all, the landscape is also desolate and barren in this moment, but readers are sure that the crops will return come springtime, and Elisa's chrysanthemums—which she has pruned, much as the tinker metaphorically cut Elisa down by dumping the sprouts on the road—will come back stronger as a result of being cut. Perhaps, then, there is reason for optimism; maybe this setback will leave Elisa stronger and better prepared to one day seize the life she wants.

DECEPTION AND AUTHENTICITY

In "The Chrysanthemums," Steinbeck contrasts Elisa—a character desperate for authenticity—with the tinker, who uses deception to get what he wants. In order to manipulate Elisa into giving him work, the tinker pretends to be interested in Elisa's expertise with the **chrysanthemums**, a feigned admiration that nonetheless makes Elisa feel seen for who she is. Being seen as her authentic self (someone capable, smart, and ambitious) is Elisa's most profound desire, as she is constantly belittled, ignored, and misunderstood because of her gender. Throughout the story, Elisa bravely asks to be seen for who she is and is thwarted by both her husband, Henry, and the tinker, while the tinker's deception gets him exactly what he wants at no cost. This bitter injustice of deception reaping rewards for men while women are punished for authenticity emphasizes the obstacles facing women as they try to fulfill themselves.

Elisa is determined to be true to who she is, even if that means she is out of place within her marriage and society. For example, Elisa is strong and sturdy, not dainty and feminine as society would have her, and she is too powerful for the delicate work of gardening, as the chrysanthemum stems are "too small and easy for her energy." Elisa is clearly capable of more challenging work, and she offers to take her gardening skill to the orchard, which would let her contribute food (and not just

beautiful flowers) to the household. However, Henry rejects this possibility, emphasizing that the social norm is for her to be reliant on her husband (and showing, perversely, that she must ask permission to contribute to the family outside of the domestic sphere).

Elisa also asserts her competence in conversation with the tinker, noting that she has no work for him—and she might one day become his professional rival—because she can fix pots and pans as well as any man. Despite this capability, the tinker insists that Elisa could not do his job, as it "ain't the right kind of life for a woman." Finally, Elisa is openly sexual, not reserved or restricted her society would expect. When the tinker first arrives on the Allens' farm, Elisa quickly transitions from warmly welcoming the stranger to delivering overt sexual innuendos, and both the tinker and Elisa become uncomfortable after the exchange. Sensing his discomfort, Elisa stands up "very straight," and her face is described as "ashamed." The uneasiness between the tinker and Elisa after her sexual expression underscores the widespread opinion that, as a woman, Elisa should be more restrained sexually rather than true to her feelings.

While Elisa is committed to being her authentic self, the tinker embraces deception and attempts to be someone he is not. The tinker is extremely friendly when he pulls up to the farm and even jokes with Elisa over the sad condition of his horse and donkey, but his eyes tell a different story. Steinbeck writes, "The laugher had disappeared from his face and eyes the moment his laughing voice ceased. His eyes were dark, and they were full of the brooding that gets in the eyes of teamsters and sailors." The tinker is vaguely menacing, despite his attempts to be warm, implying that he isn't really as friendly as he acts. Worse, the tinker pretends to be interested in Elisa's chrysanthemums only after it becomes clear that she does not intend to give him any work.

Since Elisa is open about her passion for the sprouts, the tinker can use her authenticity against her, manipulating her clear desire to be respected for her skill in order to convince her to give him work. This tactic succeeds—Elisa is carried away with her own passion once he asks her to explain how she grows such large flowers—and her subsequent embarrassment leads her to relent and hire him to do work that she could do herself. The tinker's obvious duplicity (evident throughout their conversation by slips in his act, such as his observation that chrysanthemums "smell kind of nasty till you get used to them") becomes clear to Elisa only when she sees that he has dumped her chrysanthemum sprouts on the road outside the farm. In this moment, she understands that he never saw her for who she was—a capable and ambitious woman—or respected her skill, but rather he used her passion against her, reducing her to a weak and silly woman made vulnerable by emotion.

That the tinker "wins" this interaction, getting exactly what he wants through deception and effectively punishing Elisa for her authenticity, suggests Steinbeck's cynicism about human interaction and gender roles. Even though Elisa is strong, capable, and genuine, she is left unfulfilled and wanting, more devastated and broken than she was before. Meanwhile, a dishonest man easily reaps the benefits of a sexist society. Steinbeck's story does not offer any solutions to this issue—he does not suggest that a continued commitment to authenticity will eventually allow Elisa to prevail. Instead, readers are left to consider that the interaction might have ended differently if Elisa had been less herself and more what society expected her to be: reserved, unambitious, and unwilling to ask a man to treat her as his equal.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CHRYSANTHEMUMS

Throughout the story, Elisa's chrysanthemums symbolize Elisa herself, and particularly connote her latent, limited potential. Her direct association with the lovely, strong flowers implies her beauty along with her innate ability to create and sustain life. The garden plot is meticulously cared for and well-kept, much like everything else in Elisa's small world. Not only does Elisa fuss over her chrysanthemums as if they were her children, cutting down spent stalks with her powerful **scissors** and encouraging new growth, but she directly equates herself with the flowers upon the arrival of the tinker: while talking about her "planter's hands," she passionately describes how she becomes one with the plants at the same time that she offers herself to the tinker sexually. Like her beautiful flowers, though, Elisa is penned in; however capable or extraordinary she may be, her life is distinctly limited in scope and she has few outlets beyond tending to a small garden. This is because, as a woman—and particularly a farmer's wife—Elisa is restricted by society to the roles of caregiver and housewife. By offering some bulbs to the tinker, then, Elisa is symbolically giving part of herself to him, in the hopes of escaping the stifling monotony of her lot. That the tinker callously tosses the flowers aside represents his ultimate rejection of Elisa, as well as the broader, societal thwarting of her attempts to seek more out of life.

SCISSORS

Throughout "The Chrysanthemums" scissors connote a sense of masculine power and control. Elisa is rarely without her scissors throughout most of the story. She has a special pocket in her apron devoted to her scissors and she uses them in her **chrysanthemum** garden to

cut down the previous season's growth. In her garden, Elisa's "short and powerful scissors" serve as a phallic symbol, causing her feminine work to appear "over-eager" and "over-powerful." That she uses scissors to trim the plants at once suggests a certain stifling of her potential, and an assertive care that allows for new growth. When the tinker arrives on Elisa's property, much of their conversation revolves around scissors. Steinbeck draws additional attention to the tool by misspelling "sisors" on the side of the tinker's wagon, and the tinker boasts about his ability to sharpen even the dullest of blades: "Most people just ruin scissors trying to sharpen 'em, but I know how." Given the previous connotation of the tools with masculinity, this suggests a certain manly prowess, even as the misspelling subtly mocks the tinker's expertise in contrast to Elisa's. No matter how adept Elisa may be with the tools, however, their power is unavailable to her specifically because of her gender; even as she insists she can "sharpen scissors too," the tinker tells her his lifestyle "would be a lonely life for a woman."

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Long Valley* published in 1956.

The Chrysanthemums Quotes

The high grey-flannel fog of winter closed off the Salinas Valley from the sky and from all the rest of the world. On every side it sat like a lid on the mountains and made the great valley a closed pot.

Related Characters: Elisa Allen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

With these opening lines, Steinbeck describes the Salinas Valley in California where the story takes place. The valley is isolated and remote, separated from the town of Salinas by the surrounding mountain range. The association of winter fog with flannel carries connotations of coziness and warmth, and even though the weather adds to the isolation of valley, Steinbeck's language makes the valley and weather both appear less cold and harsh. Steinbeck's language is incredibly romantic and this lends a sense of desire and longing to the seclusion. The isolation of the Salinas Valley is reflected in the loneliness of the character of Elisa Allen.

Similar to the valley, Elisa is isolated and remote. Her existence on the farm that she shares with her husband, Henry, is incredibly solitary. As Henry is busy with the business matters of their farm, Elisa is left to entertain herself in her garden. Alone and neglected by her husband, Elisa's own sexual desires and longing for human companionship are exacerbated by the seclusion of the Salinas Valley.

It was a time of quiet and waiting. The air was cold and tender. A light wind blew up from the southwest so that the farmers were mildly hopeful of a good rain before long; but fog and rain do not go together.

Related Characters: Elisa Allen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Steinbeck establishes that the Allens' farm has entered the off-season and is in a period of dormancy. There are no crops growing at this time and the harvest has ended. There is not much to be done and the farmers are left to wait until the warmth of spring to resume their usual work and growth of crops. Steinbeck's use of romantic language again offers a certain warmth and comfort to the coldness of the winter month. Describing the air as "cold but tender" takes the bite out of the December wind, and the farmers are still optimistic that rain is coming even though the dense winter fog prohibits it. In this passage, the latent fertility of the land is evident, despite the inactivity of the barren farm. It is clear that the land has great potential for life and beauty.

Just like the farm, Elisa appears to be in a period of "quiet and waiting." The dormancy of the Allens' farm mirrors Elisa and Henry's childless marriage and accentuates Elisa's own barrenness by comparison. The latent beauty and fertility of the land is also mirrored in Elisa herself, as evidenced by her planters' hands and her ability to grow her impressive chrysanthemums. The fact that the valley will soon produce crops again suggests that there is some hope for Elisa to change her miserable and unfulfilled existence on the farm.

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

Related Characters: Elisa Allen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Here, in the passage that describes the character of Elisa Allen, Steinbeck portrays Elisa as a young and healthy woman of childbearing years. At thirty-five, Elisa has had plenty of time to start a family (farming families during the early twentieth-century were typically large), yet she and Henry do not appear to have any children. However, Elisa is still young and it is reasonable to assume that she could have children in the future. Steinbeck's description of Elisa as "lean and strong" is not only a sign of her health; it also is the first indicator of her incredible strength, which is anything but feminine. Elisa does not conform to the customary stereotypes of women. Where women were expected to be dainty and weak, Elisa is "blocked and heavy," and strong. She does not dress as women typically do, and instead of a fashionable dress and heels, Elisa opts for function as she works in the garden. Steinbeck's use of the word "costume" in describing Elisa's dress suggests that she is playing some sort of role, and her extreme discontent with her life as Henry's wife implies that she would rather be doing something – or anything – else. Steinbeck also states that Elisa's corduroy apron has a separate pocket to "hold the snips," or scissors, which are a reoccurring symbol of Elisa's masculine strength. The special pocket indicates that Elisa is rarely without her scissors.

> "You've got a gift with things," Henry observed. "Some of those yellow chrysanthemums you had this year were ten inches across. I wish you'd work out in the orchard and raise some apples that big."

Related Characters: Henry Allen (speaker), Elisa Allen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Henry approaches Elisa working in the garden, startling her as he appears. While he is clearly complimenting Elisa's ability to grow large and beautiful flowers, his praise is quite underhanded. By wishing Elisa would grow large apples instead of large flowers, Henry implies that her time would be better spent growing produce that actually contributes to their life and farm. After all, apples can be eaten and they sustain life, whereas Elisa's chrysanthemums are merely beautiful and do not contribute to their business of farming in any meaningful way. Henry's compliment is condescending and reflects the superiority that he exerts over Elisa. His own work on the farm (growing crops and caring for livestock) is significant and crucial to their survival, while her work is less important (if important at all) and limited to its aesthetic qualities. The chrysanthemums, a symbol of beauty throughout the story, are merely a way for Elisa to pass the long and empty winter months before the real business of farming begins. This passage highlights the importance society places on the work of men in relation to that of women and this is echoed in the division of labor on the Allens' farm.

> Her eyes sharpened. "Maybe I could do it, too. I've a gift with things, all right. My mother had it. She could stick anything in the ground and make it grow. She said it was having planters' hands that knew how to do it."

Related Characters: Elisa Allen (speaker), Henry Allen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2-3

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is Elisa's response to Henry's remark about her gift with growing chrysanthemums and his wish that she would grow apples that large instead. The sharpening of Elisa's eyes suggests that she is both up to the challenge and a bit irritated with Henry's remark. Elisa knows that Henry will never allow her to grow apples in the orchard and contribute more directly to their farm and life, and she is resentful of the role that society and Henry have chosen for

her. Yet, she is convinced that she could grow apples if given a chance. The "planters' hands" that Elisa has inherited from her mother mean that she is fully capable of growing anything on the farm, yet her social position as a woman prohibits her from contributing beyond her expected housework and the small chrysanthemum garden. Elisa's "planters' hands" suggest that her talents are wasted growing flowers, as she is capable of so much more.

Elisa saw that he was a very big man. Although his hair and beard were greying, he did not look old. His worn black suit was wrinkled and spotted with grease. The laughter had disappeared from his face and eyes the moment that his laughing voice ceased. His eyes were dark, and they were filled with the brooding that gets in the eyes of teamsters and of sailors.

Related Characters: The Tinker, Elisa Allen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Steinbeck first introduces the tinker as he arrives on Elisa's farm. He is described as a rather large man who appears disheveled in his dirty suit. The tinker is not portrayed as particularly handsome or appealing, which suggests that Elisa's sexual attraction to him is about not his appearance, but rather his attention to and interest in her desires and talents. This passage is also the first hint of the tinker's deceptive nature. His grey hair and bead are misleading and make him seem older than he really is. His eyes also betray him; there is no trace of laughter within them the moment he stops laughing. This implies that his laughter is not sincere and is merely an act. Steinbeck's description of the tinker's dark eyes make him seem slightly menacing. Steinbeck wrote this story in 1937, not long after the Great Depression, and workers' unions (such as the teamsters) were hit hard during this difficult time. Workers and laborers responded with violence and strikes when working conditions became increasingly poor with the widespread economic collapse. Steinbeck's comparison of the tinker's eyes to a sailor also carries a troublesome connotation. As sailors are often associated with womanizing and bad behavior, the connection implies that the tinker is not the pleasant man he pretends to be.

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."

Related Characters: Elisa Allen (speaker), The Tinker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

This quote takes place after Elisa tries to explain her "planters' hands" to the tinker. Elisa says that when planting and working in the dirt, her hands instinctively know what to do. The tinker begins to compare this instinct with being in his wagon at night, and Elisa immediately interrupts him, reflecting her sexual eagerness and loneliness. Her voice takes on a throaty and seductive tone, and she admits that, as a woman, she has never been permitted to live the type of life he does, traveling alone in a wagon and searching for work. Despite this, Elisa is still familiar with his explanation of the night. Her own description of the night is overtly sexual; the "sharp-pointed" stars that get "driven into your body" are phallic in nature and mimic the penetration of a sexual act. Elisa's description continues to grow in intensity until it reaches a sudden climax and abruptly resolves. In this way, Elisa's description of the night mirrors an orgasm. As Elisa is careful to refer to the tinker's lifestyle, Steinbeck implies that Elisa is not attracted to the tinker per se, but rather finds the freedom and independence of his traveling vocation appealing compared to her stifled and controlled existence as Henry Allen's wife.

Elisa stood in front of her wire fence watching the slow progression of the caravan. 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 her whisper startled her. She shook herself free and looked to see whether anyone had been listening. Only the dogs had heard.

Related Characters: Elisa Allen (speaker), The Tinker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Elisa is watching the tinker as he drives away in his wagon, continuing on his journey up the coast. Elisa stands with her shoulders straight and her head held high. Any shame that she felt after her vaguely sexual encounter with the tinker is long gone. Their strange meeting and the tinker's interest in her chrysanthemums leaves Elisa feeling empowered, and she longs for the freedom that the tinker's life affords. Steinbeck's description of Elisa's eyes as "half-closed" and the haziness of her vision as she watches the tinker drive off gives this passage a dream-like quality, and this is reflective of Elisa's own dream to live as the tinker does. Of course, as a woman, this is not permitted and Elisa is painfully aware of this. Despite this, she appears optimistic as she mouths good-bye to the tinker. Elisa refers to the direction the tinker is going in as "bright" and "glowing," which implies that a better life is available to Elisa outside of Salinas Valley – and away from her husband, Henry. She seems startled that she speaks these words aloud and she immediately turns to see if anyone has overheard. However, as usual, Elisa is utterly alone and only the dogs are present to overhear her admission.

> After a while she began to dress, slowly. She put on 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.

Related Characters: Elisa Allen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs when Elisa readies herself for her date with Henry. Elisa's strange and sexual interaction with the tinker has left her feeling sensual and attractive, and after examining her naked body in the mirror, she begins to dress. Elisa dresses slowly, appreciating her own beauty reflected in the mirror and relishing the moment. She puts on her best underwear and stockings, and the dress that she selects echoes her beauty. Elisa's hair, which had previously been tucked completely away under the men's hat of her gardening costume, is now meticulously groomed. She applies make-up and even shapes her eyebrows. This attention to her appearance is a stark contrast to the Elisa that is introduced early in the story. Elisa's gardening costume is completely utilitarian and she is described in rather plain terms. While Steinbeck states in the beginning of the story that Elisa is "handsome," as she readies herself for her date, she becomes beautiful.

> She tried no to look as they passed it, but her eyes would not obey. She whispered to herself sadly, "He might have thrown them off the road. That wouldn't have been much trouble, not very much. But he kept the pot," she exclaimed. "He had to keep the pot. That's why he couldn't get them off the road."

Related Characters: Elisa Allen (speaker), The Tinker

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

This passage transpires as Elisa and Henry drive into the town of Salinas for their date to celebrate the cattle purchase. On the way, Elisa notices that the tinker has thrown the chrysanthemum sprouts out onto the side of the road. Elisa instinctively knows what the pile of debris on the road is, and even though she doesn't want to see her flower sprouts in such a state, she cannot look away. For the first time, Elisa is aware that her interaction with the tinker was not what she thought it was. He was not genuinely interested in her or her chrysanthemums; rather, he had used her interest in flowers to trick her into giving him work so that he could afford his supper. Elisa thought that the tinker had seen her for who she really is; a capable, attractive, and sexual woman, but the discarded sprouts prove that the significance of their interaction was one-sided and meant nothing to the tinker. The chrysanthemums serve as a symbol of Elisa's beauty and when the tinker rejects the sprouts, he symbolically rejects Elisa as well. Elisa questions why the tinker did not throw them off of the road, thereby sparing her feelings in some small way. She realizes that in order to keep the new red pot in which she had placed the sprouts – the only thing that he found any value in – the tinker had to dump the sprouts onto the road as he drove his wagon along.

> She relaxed limply in the seat. "Oh, no. No. I don't want to go. I'm sure I don't." Her face was turned away from him. "It will be enough if we can have wine. It will be plenty." She turned up her coat collar so he could not see that she was crying weakly – like an old woman.

Related Characters: Elisa Allen (speaker), Henry Allen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

After the disappointment of seeing her chrysanthemum sprouts thrown out on the road, Elisa suddenly asks Henry if they can attend the fights in town after dinner. Attending the prize fights is a traditionally masculine activity, yet it is clear that Elisa has an interest in this violent form of entertainment. The empowerment that Elisa feels after her meeting with the tinker and the courage she gains to pursue her true interests suddenly fades. This loss is reflected in her lifeless position as she sits in the car next to Henry. She becomes despondent and is no longer interested in seeing the fights. Elisa appears defeated and stops trying to convince Henry that she wants to go to the boxing match. Elisa avoids looking at her husband, suggesting that she is ashamed of her feelings, and states that instead of going to the fights, having wine with dinner (something that is considered more feminine and fitting for woman, unlike attending the fights) will be enough entertainment for her. Sadly, this is not enough for Elisa, and she is left feeling more unfulfilled than before. The story ends with Elisa discretely crying "like an old woman." The distinction of being an old woman is an important one, as Elisa is worse off than when she started. As an old woman, Elisa's sexuality is lost for good, along with any possibility of ever being truly known.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE CHRYSANTHEMUMS

A "high grey-flannel fog" has isolated the Salinas Valley like a "closed pot." The cut yellow hay fields look as though they are "bathed in sunshine," though there is none in December in the valley, and a slight southwestern breeze suggests rain despite the heavy fog. The valley is home to Henry and Elisa Allen's farm, which has entered a period of "quiet and waiting."

Steinbeck's description of the valley and the isolating fog is romantic and warm, lending comfort to the otherwise cold and barren landscape. The cut hayfields resemble sunshine despite the winter season and the farmers are optimistic of upcoming rain, suggesting that the desolate farmland will soon again be bursting with crops and life.

While Henry is across the field talking to two men in business suits, Elisa busies herself in her small **chrysanthemum** garden. At thirty-five, her appearance is strong and masculine, and she aggressively cuts down the old year's chrysanthemum stalks with pair of powerful **scissors**. Her garden and her nearby home are both meticulously kept, and Elisa approaches her gardening with enthusiasm.

The division of labor on the Allens' farm reflects the strict gender roles present in the early twentieth-century. While Elisa busies herself in her garden, Henry tends to more important matters. Clearly, Henry's work is considered more important than Elisa's gardening and housework.

As Henry approaches the garden, Elisa is startled by his sudden appearance. He compliments Elisa's ability to grow such large **chrysanthemums** and suggests that she apply her gardening skills in the orchard, growing apples instead. Elisa is convinced of her skills—thanks to her "planters' hands"—and is confident in her ability to grow anything, including apples. However, Henry doesn't seem to have been serious in his invitation to work in the orchard. Henry informs Elisa of his successful business transaction and suggests they celebrate with a night on the town.

The fact that Elisa is startled by Henry's appearance implies that he does not visit her in the garden often, and his suggestion that Elisa grow apples suggests that her time is wasted working with her flowers and would be better spent elsewhere, like in the orchard. However, he doesn't actually want her to do more practical work, so his comment seems to be a subtle put-down about her frivolous flowers. Her gift with growing things makes her an asset on the farm, yet Henry has no intention of letting Elisa work more directly with business.

Henry suggests dinner in Salinas and perhaps a picture show. He even suggests that they attend the fights afterward. Elisa quickly becomes irritated, reminding Henry that she doesn't enjoy the fights. Henry insists he is only fooling around and promises her dinner at the Cominos Hotel. Elisa agrees, and as Henry departs to bring the cattle down from the mountain, she continues working in her **chrysanthemum** garden.

Henry does not suggest celebrating Elisa's own accomplishments in the garden, only his own. He jokes about going to watch the fights, yet Elisa does not find him funny. During this short interaction, it is clear that Elisa and Henry barely know each other despite being married.

As Elisa continues her meticulous work, a strange covered wagon approaches her farm drawn by a haggard horse and donkey and driven by an unkept man, advertising "Pots, pans, knives, **scissors**, lawn mores, Fixed." As the tinker, a big man with a "worn black suit," stops his wagon, he informs Elisa that he is off his usual route and is lost. Each year, the tinker drives his wagon from Seattle to San Diego fixing household items along the way, and he is happy to offer Elisa his services.

Elisa sees very little traffic on her remote farm and she is immediately curious about the tinker. His ramshackle wagon is in stark contrast to her own garden and home. The tinker is subtly deceptive. His eyes appear dark even though he is outwardly friendly. Also, since the tinker claims to have been making the trip down the coast for several years in a row, it seems unlikely that he would be off of his general route and lost.

Elisa is pleasant and warmly welcomes the tinker. She expresses an interest in his nomadic lifestyle—deeming it "a nice kind of a way to live"—and makes jokes about the state of his pulling team. Despite her friendliness, Elisa appears irritated with the tinker's continued attempts to secure some sort of work from her, and firmly insists that she does not require his services. The tinker makes one last effort to sharpen Elisa's **scissors**, claiming they are his specialty, even though she makes clear that she could do this work herself.

Initially, Elisa is kind and seemingly excited for a bit of company. It is obvious that Elisa spends most of her time alone, and even a passing stranger is a welcomed sight. Elisa is immediately drawn to the tinker's free and independent lifestyle. That the tinker wants money to do the work Elisa already does for free gestures towards her lack of power as a woman. Not only does he doubt that she could do the work, it's clear that this society would not warm to paying her for sharpening like they do the tinker.

As the tinker searches for another way to secure work from Elisa, his eyes fall on the **chrysanthemum** garden where she has been working and he engages her in a conversation about her flowers. Seeing Elisa's resolve softening, the tinker continues to ask her questions about the flowers. He claims to have an established customer who is looking for good chrysanthemum seeds and asks Elisa if she is willing to part with some. Elisa happily agrees, informing him that chrysanthemums are best grown with sprouts, not seeds.

When it becomes clear to the tinker that Elisa has no intention of giving him work, he begins to search for a way to manipulate her. He notices her work with the flowers and takes a chance, asking her about her prize chrysanthemums. It is clear that the tinker has no real interest in Elisa's flowers, he simply wants to convince her to give him a small bit of work so that he may afford some food.

Elisa runs excitedly to the back of her house and returns with a brand-new pot. She kneels in the garden and, forgetting her gloves, begins to unearth fresh **chrysanthemum** sprouts to give to the tinker. As she digs, Elisa tells the tinker how his customer should care for the sprouts. She informs him that if he keeps the sprouts moist in sand, his customer can later transplant them. The chrysanthemums should take root in about a month, but the most important thing that he must remember to tell his customer is to cut the chrysanthemums about eight inches from the ground in July, before they bloom in late September.

Elisa immediately responds to the tinker's feigned interest. This interest leads Elisa to feel seen for who she is: a strong, talented, and knowledgeable woman. Elisa longs to be seen for her true and authentic self, and the tinker's interest is the perfect opportunity for her to show of her skills and knowledge, which is her most profound desire. Notably, the chrysanthemums need to be cut down in July before they bloom later in the season. This has some symbolic significance for the story's ending, as it's possible that Elisa's tragic ending is merely her being "cut down" before she inevitably blooms.

The tinker is confused as Elisa explains her "planters' hands" and her ability to grow anything in the dirt. Elisa tries to describe how she can "feel how it is" when working with plants, and how her hands "never make a mistake" in the garden. Her hands "can't do anything wrong" where plants are concerned, and as Elisa continues to kneel and dig in the garden, her breasts "swell passionately" and her voice becomes "husky."

Elisa is explicitly associated with fertility through her "planters' hands." Her gift means that she can grow any plant she desires, suggesting an inherent ability to create and nurture life. As Elisa describes this gift to the tinker, she becomes increasingly sexual, suggesting a longing and desire to share her interests and talents with another person, something that she is lacking in her marriage to Henry.

The tinker becomes uncomfortable and tells Elisa that her "planters' hands" are similar to how he feels at night in his wagon. Elisa quickly interrupts the tinker, insisting she knows how he feels, even though she has never lived the way he does. Elisa begins to describe the quiet night sky and stars, exclaiming, "Why, you rise up and up! Every pointed star gets driven into your body. It's like that. Hot and sharp and—lovely." As Elisa kneels before the tinker, she nearly touches him, but quickly drops her hands to the ground, crouching "low like a fawning dog."

Elisa's immediate sexual attraction to the tinker reflects her loneliness and isolation. Also, her knowledge of the chrysanthemums and her "planters' hands" make her a type of authority and place her on more equal ground with the tinker. This causes her attraction to the tinker to progress so quickly that her description of the night sky seamlessly becomes a description of an orgasm. Still on her knees in a submissive position, Elisa nearly touches the tinker before dropping her hands.

The tinker quickly interjects that while the night sky may be lovely, it is difficult to enjoy on an empty stomach. Elisa, feeling ashamed, hands him the pot of chrysanthemum sprouts and goes to find something for him to fix. She returns with a broken saucepan and offers it to the tinker.

As the tinker is not truly interested in Elisa or her chrysanthemums, he interrupts her sexual display to remind her that he is hungry and is in search of work so that he might buy some dinner.

As the tinker begins to mend Elisa's old saucepan, his demeanor instantly changes. He becomes "professional," and as he assembles his tools and pounds out the dents in the pan, his mouth grows "sure and knowing." When his work becomes difficult, he begins to suck on his lower lip.

As the tinker begins to fix the old pot, his true identity begins to surface. He is clearly an expert in repair and his business of fixing small household items gives him much pride, just as Elisa's chrysanthemums do.

Elisa chats with the tinker as he works. She asks him if he sleeps in the wagon at night, and when he reports that he does, Elisa is openly jealous of his life, stating that she wishes "women could do such things." The tinker responds, "It ain't the right kind of life for a woman." When Elisa asks the tinker how he could know that, the tinker says, "Of course I don't know." Elisa pays him fifty cents for his work and states that he may soon have a rival in the tinkering business, since she can easily mend pans and sharpen **scissors** too. As the tinker readies his wagon to depart, he tells her that it would be "a lonely life for a woman."

Elisa takes this opportunity to ask the tinker about his lifestyle. She expresses an explicit longing to live an independent and free life just as he does; however, this is unheard of for a woman and the tinker reminds her of this. The tinker tells Elisa that traveling is not appropriate for her, a woman, yet he doesn't really know exactly why, outside of it being a lonely life. This comment is highly ironic since Elisa's life with Henry is already incredibly lonely.

Elisa reminds the tinker to keep the sand moist in the pot of **chrysanthemums**. The tinker responds, "Sand, ma'am?" and drives his wagon away from Elisa's farm. As Elisa stands and watches the tinker leave, she audibly whispers good-bye, startling herself with the sound of her voice. Elisa says, "That's a bright direction. There's a glowing there."

The fact that the tinker forgets about the chrysanthemums so quickly again suggests that his interest is not genuine, although Elisa does not seem to notice this. Her preoccupation with the direction that the tinker is going in and the bright light implies that there is opportunity away from her life on the farm.

Elisa runs hurriedly into the house to ready herself for her date with Henry. She checks the water tank for hot water and scrubs herself clean with a pumice stone until she is "scratched and red." After her bath, Elisa examines her naked body in a mirror and carefully applies makeup and does her hair. Elisa selects her nicest underwear and dress which is the "symbol of her prettiness." As she dresses, she hears Henry return from rounding up the cattle. Elisa sets "herself for Henry's arrival."

Elisa's interaction with the tinker has left her feeling empowered and seen. The sensuality that she experienced while talking to the tinker lingers as Elisa looks at her naked body in the mirror, and it is the reason she dresses so carefully and beautifully. The tinker's interest in her desires and talents suggests that sexual fulfillment is more than merely physical, but is also about Elisa being seen how she wants to be seen – as a strong, capable, and sexual woman.

As Henry takes a bath, Elisa sets his dark suit out on the bed, including his shirt, tie, and socks. She stands his polished shoes on the floor near the bed and goes to the porch to wait. Elisa sits "primly and stiffly" as she waits for Henry, and she notices the beauty of the willows in the foggy grey of the Salinas Valley afternoon. She does not move for a long time, and even her eyes rarely blink. When Henry appears on the porch, Elisa's face grows "stiff" and "tight."

As Elisa goes about being Henry's wife, her charged sexuality from her interaction with the tinker begins to fade. Setting out Henry's clothing is another mindless chore expected of Elisa—she even shines his shoes. As she waits for him, she becomes stiff and uptight, and even the beauty of the valley is lost on her.

As Henry loudly exits the house, he is caught off-guard by Elisa's appearance, remarking, "Why—why, Elisa. You look so nice!" When Elisa puts him on the spot and questions what he means by "nice," Henry stutters and stammers before stating that she looks "different," and then finally, "strong and happy." She continues to question his meaning and he grows increasingly uncomfortable, making a joke to compensate. Henry states, "You look strong enough to break a calf over your knee, happy enough to eat it like a watermelon." Elisa finds herself laughing, but not before she boasts about how strong she truly is. Henry goes to fetch the car and Elisa returns to the house to find her coat.

As Henry is so surprised by Elisa's polished and beautiful appearance, it appears as if he doesn't usually truly see her. Elisa longs to be seen in the way that the tinker did—to be appreciated and respected for her knowledge and abilities. As Elisa explicitly questions Henry about what he means by "nice," he becomes increasingly uncomfortable and again makes jokes to deflect. It is clear that Henry is unaware of her true strength. After all, Elisa has only just realized herself.

Elisa hears Henry drive to the gate, yet she takes a long time putting on her hat. She spends extra time fussing with it, "pulling it here" and "pressing it there." She does not put on her coat and leave the house until she hears Henry turn the car off.

Elisa is aware that she is keeping Henry waiting and she is unconcerned. She spends needless time on her hat and doesn't move to go outside until it appears that Henry is becoming impatient when he turns the car off. Here, she's exerting power over him just for the sake of doing it.

As Elisa and Henry drive into Salinas, Elisa notices a small speck in the road and instantly knows what it is. She tries to ignore the sight of her **chrysanthemum** sprouts discarded on the side of the road, "but her eyes would not obey." As the road bends, the tinker's caravan comes into view, and Elisa turns and looks at Henry so that she is unable to see the tinker's wagon as they pass. Elisa does not look back.

For the first time, Elisa becomes aware that her interaction with the tinker was not what it appeared to be. The discarded chrysanthemums prove that he was never interested in her or her flowers, and Elisa is crushed. The tinker had not really seen Elisa as capable and knowledgeable; rather, he had only manipulated her to get work.

Elisa loudly tells Henry that it will be nice to have a good dinner out. Noticing the change in her demeanor, Henry states that they should get out more often. Elisa asks if they can have wine with dinner, and after a moment of silence, she further asks Henry if the men at the prize fights hurt each other very much. Elisa reveals that she has read about the violent and bloody fights, which surprises Henry. Elisa asks Henry if women ever go to the fights, and he states that while some do, "I don't think you'd like it."

Henry immediately notices the change in Elisa. His suggestion that they get out more implies that a date is an infrequent occurrence—it is no wonder that they don't really know each other. Elisa becomes preoccupied with the fights, shedding light on her clear interest in the masculine sport. Her desire to watch the violence of the fights mirrors her anger with Henry and the tinker.

Elisa sits listlessly in her seat. She claims she really doesn't want to go to the fights and turns her face away from Henry. Hiding behind her coat collar so that he cannot see her, Elisa cries "weakly—like an old woman."

Elisa becomes lifeless in her seat and all of her previous energy and empowerment is gone. Instead of going to the fights as she desires, she settles for wine—a more appropriate activity for a woman. Elisa hides her face from Henry, suggesting shame, and cries like a weak, old woman. Elisa is now worse off than when she started. As an old woman, Elisa has lost her sexuality, and with it, all her chances of ever being known.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Rosewall, Kim. "*The Chrysanthemums.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 19 Oct 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Rosewall, Kim. "*The Chrysanthemums.*" LitCharts LLC, October 19, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-chrysanthemums.

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MLA

Steinbeck, John. The Chrysanthemums. Penguin. 1956.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Steinbeck, John. The Chrysanthemums. New York: Penguin. 1956.