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"THE CHRYSANTHEMUMS"

In *The Long Valley* (1938) appeared one of John Steinbeck's most popular and durable anthology pieces, "The Chrysanthemums." Seemingly an uncomplicated short story, it has nevertheless received highly divergent interpretations, some of these concerning the general value of the story and some concerning the nature of Elisa Allen, the protagonist. Typical of the variant readings by critics past and present are those offered by Joseph Warren Beach and Kenneth Payson Kempton. Beach finds "The Chrysanthemums" worthy of comparison with Chekhov's writing,¹ and Kempton finds it "arbitrary, self-impelled, and fuzzy work . . . its effect annoyingly arty, muddy, and unreal."² Though it is true that more than one text of the story exists in print today,³ that reason alone cannot account for such basic disagreements as those found in the work of such critics as Beach and Kempton. In the present study, an attempt will be made to examine some of these disagreements and to suggest a reading which might help to resolve some of the central problems posed by the different analyses.

The crucial area of dissent between Beach and Kempton lies in their interpretations of Elisa Allen's personality and her relationship to her husband, Henry. Beach finds this relationship "one of confidence and mutual respect" (p. 311), while Kempton writes of her "tenseness" when she is with her "possibly impotent husband" (p. 123). Beach finds her refined and feminine (p. 311), but Kempton sees a masculine trait in her personality and suggests that she may be longing for "manliness" (p. 123).

That Elisa is basically a frustrated woman both writers agree. 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" (p. 312). Kempton cannot find anywhere in the story a source for Elisa's frustration, and criticizes Steinbeck for leading the reader down too many blind alleys:

[Elisa] is constantly defeating herself in one way or another, but why and over what issue only God and Mr. Steinbeck know We know, at least, that she 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 (p. 123).

On the contrary, we can know what the story means, and though Beach and Kempton do not agree about the meaning or worth of the story, Steinbeck has given us what is requisite for an interpretation that will account for the disparity of such criticism. The theme of "The Chrysanthemums" is one that Steinbeck was to use again and again in his stories, plays, and novels: the effect of a utilitarian society on the sensitive and romantic individual. At the root of Elisa's frustration is her uncertainty of who she is and what her relationship to her society should be, a problem which seems to be a peculiarly modern one. Pioneer women, for example, seldom questioned their identities or their value. The combination of their scarcity, their child-producing potential, and their physical strength gave them value and status. Steinbeck presents Elisa as a post-pioneer woman in a culture in which such a combination has far less value, largely because machines have begun to replace people. Elisa is childless, has few responsibilities beyond maintaining a home for her husband, is a vigorous, intelligent, and romantically sensitive woman who restlessly seeks fulfillment and identity with a husband who does not particularly need her vigor and intelligence and does not understand her romantic sensitivity.

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"⁴ 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 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 (p. 10) 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.

When Beach speaks of Elisa's feminine traits and Kempton of her masculine ones, they are both correct, for she exemplifies both features. Her gardening apparel is masculine: "Her figure looked blocked and heavy in her gardening costume, a man's black hat pulled low down over her eyes . . ." (p. 10). Her energy seems vigorously masculine: "even her work with the scissors was over-eager, over-powerful. The chrysanthemum stems seemed too small and easy for her energy" (p. 10). Her desire to compete with men shows a somewhat unfeminine

aggressiveness, as when she tells the tinker that he might someday have a rival: "I can sharpen scissors, too. And I can beat the dents out of little pots. I could show you what a woman might do" (p. 19). The mark of a masculine sensibility, too, might be her reading about extraordinarily brutal prize fights, a fact which comes as a surprise to her husband (p. 23).

Side by side with her masculine vigor and aggressiveness is a tendency toward romantic femininity. Her daintiness is apparent when she dresses for an evening in town with Henry. She puts on "her newest underclothing and her nicest stockings and dress which was the symbol of her prettiness. She worked carefully on her hair, pencilled her eyebrows, and rouged her lips" (pp. 20-21). When the tinker, whose sales appeal she has cannily resisted, described chrysanthemums as being "like a quick puff of colored smoke" (p. 15), Elisa's resistance melts and her sensitivity to colorful language appears. "What a nice way to describe them" (p. 15), she says, and she is only too glad to prepare for him several of the slips. 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. You can feel that, right up your arm. They know. They never make a mistake. You can feel it. When you're like that you can't do anything wrong. Do you see that? Can you understand that? (pp. 17-18).

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:

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 (p. 20).

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. The relationship to her husband is neither as ideal as Beach suggests nor as cold as Kempton notes but somewhere between these extremes. Henry does not understand Elisa's romantic sensitivity very well, and possibly she has never conveyed her feelings to him very adroitly, as can be inferred from their inability to communicate following her extraordinary experience with the tinker:

Henry came banging out of the door, shoving his tie inside his vest as he came. Elisa stiffened and her face grew tight. Henry stopped short and looked at her. "Why—why, Elisa. You look so nice!"

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

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

"I am strong? Yes, strong. What do you mean 'strong'?"

He looked bewildered. "You're playing some kind of game," he said helplessly. "It's a kind of a play. You look strong enough to break a calf over your knee, happy enough to eat it like a watermelon."

For a second she lost her rigidity. "Henry! Don't talk like that. You didn't know what you said." She grew complete again. "I'm strong," she boasted. "I never knew before how strong."

Elisa's tone here is a blend of the satiric, playful, and admonitory. The strength she mentions here is a product of her relationship to the tinker.

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. Elisa's sudden burst of self-assurance that so surprises Henry is the strength that comes of reciprocal understanding, of mutual confidence, of a shared intimacy. In no other part of the story is she as unambiguously female as she is for a brief time following her experience with the tinker. It is during these moments that she puts on her most feminine apparel and indulges herself in the curiously feminine practice of keeping her husband waiting while she engages in last-minute preenings (a practice which if not literally true is at least probably still popularly regarded as such by men). Henry, now on the defensive, cannot account for her strange confidence:

Henry looked down toward the tractor shed, and when he brought his eyes back to her, they were his own again.⁶⁸ "I'll get out the car. You can put on your coat while I'm starting."

Elisa went into the house. She heard him drive to the gate and idle down his motor, and then she took a long time to put on her hat. She pulled it here and pressed it there. When Henry turned the motor off she slipped into her coat and went out (p. 22).

This, of course, is the last time she will appear so confident and the last time she will keep Henry waiting.

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. If she is embittered, she is not without self-knowledge and an awareness of who she is. Steinbeck's final irony is that Elisa comes into full, if painful, knowledge of her identity—she is a romantic in a utilitarian society. The tinker, who might have redeemed other members of her society by being a notable exception, was in truth no different. He threw away the flowers but kept the pot. His 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" (p. 23).

Kempton speaks of Steinbeck's reputation as a symbolist, but states that in this story we are faced with "conflicting, disestablished symbols" and that even the title is of "little help" (p. 123). For the interpretation offered here, what could be more relevant for a title than what Steinbeck provided? 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.

It is, of course, an old theme with Steinbeck: the maiming of the supersensitive individual in an increasingly materialistic society. Almost from his first to his last work he has dramatized it, and in the story under consideration, he has handled it neither as well in the Chekhovian manner as Beach avers, nor as badly in the structural sense as Kempton would have it. It is still good Steinbeck.

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NOTES

¹*American Fiction, 1920—1940* (New York, 1941), pp. 310-11. Subsequent references to this work will be cited in the text.

²*Short Stories for Study* (Cambridge, 1953), p. 124. Subsequent references to this work will be cited in the text.

³For an account of the texts of "The Chrysanthemums," see *Modern Fiction Studies*, 12 (Winter 1966-67), 479-84. The present study will make use of Text 2 referred to in the aforementioned article. See also the useful critical commentary, similar in some respects to the present one, in Marcus Mordecai, "The Lost Dream of Sex and Childbirth in 'The Chrysanthemums,'" *Modern Fiction Studies*, 11 (Spring 1965), 54-58; and Elizabeth E. McMahan, "'The Chrysanthemums': Study of a Woman's Sexuality," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 14 (Winter 1968-69), 453-58.

⁴John Steinbeck, *The Long Valley* (Cleveland, 1945). Subsequent references to this work will be cited in the text.