ANALYSIS

"The Chrysanthemums" (1938)

John Steinbeck

(1902-1968)

The story is set in the Salinas Valley of California, an Eden of the West, an archetypal Garden, a "good place" in the agrarian pastoral tradition of Jefferson. The farm wife Elisa is an American Eve who feels trapped in paradise. She longs for liberation and falls while trying to escape the Garden. It is winter in her soul with an oppressive fog closing off the Sky, making her valley feel like a "closed pot." The similes have sexual as well as spiritual connotations, as when male plowing by machine is contrasted to her "planting hands." Yellow stubble fields and wild yellow willow introduce a motif of yellow that includes her yellow chrysanthemums, varying forms of one Nature. Her capacity for spiritual transcendence is indicated by her enlightened perception: "the yellow stubble fields seemed to be bathed in pale cold sunshine, but there was no sunshine in the valley now in December." She is identifying her feelings with Nature not naively but poetically, in spiritual union: "The air was cold and tender." She feels the extremes of Nature in herself, both cold and tender.

Immigrant wives worked in the fields alongside their husbands. By the 1770s, as soon as they could afford it, American farmers liberated their wives from hard labor in the fields, giving them the leisure to raise flowers. In 1800 over 90% of Americans lived on family farms. Wives increased their authority in homes, schools, and churches by promoting the value system called Victorianism (after Queen Victoria of Britain), which defined and enforced separate gender roles primarily for the benefit of married women and children. In this story Steinbeck dramatizes the conflict between the old Victorian paradigm of gender roles and the aspirations of a modern woman. "The chrysanthemum stems seemed too small and easy for her energy." This conflict is particularly acute on a farm, where the gender division of labor is natural. At the same time, of course, on most farms husband and wife are versatile partners and do each other's essential chores whenever necessary. On this farm the wife seems to confine herself to her flower garden. The fields are separated from her garden by a river and the wife needs a fence to protect her garden from animals—in particular her beloved chrysanthemums.

Significantly, throughout the story the wife is *outside*—no Victorian angel in the house. That she is trying to individuate—to develop her masculine side--is implied by her wearing "a man's black hat pulled low down over her eyes, clod-hopper shoes, a figured print dress almost completely covered by a big corduroy apron." She is "mature and handsome," but repressed, as is evident in her cutting dead stalks with a passion "over-eager, over-powerful." She is innocent and natural, for "her eyes were as clear as water." This identifies her with the forms of water in the story—river, fog, cloud, and rain. Her spiritual elevation is implied when she looks "down" on her husband and the men in business suits from the City who "studied the machine as they talked" and when she "brushed a cloud of hair out of her eyes" like clearing away fog. In doing so she "left a smudge of earth on her cheek." She gets a little down and dirty, climaxing in the scene when she fawns at the feet of a dirty stranger. The archetypal contrast of Woman and Man identifies her with Garden and Sky, her husband with the Machine "on the level."

Her husband compliments her on the size of her chrysanthemums, prompting her to boast, "I raise them every year, bigger than anybody around here." However, he then says, "I wish you'd work out in the orchard and raise some apples that big." He encourages his wife to grow and to expand her domain. The reference to apples evokes Adam and Eve, hints at her coming fall and suggests that the marital relationship might improve if she were to become more productive in a practical way. She is thirty-five years old. Traditionally most farm wives would have had several children by her age, whereas Elisa has none. Her chrysanthemums are surrogate children. Chrysanthemums are called "mums" for short and have been popular among women attending athletic events such as football games and boxing matches. It is ironic that Elisa identifies so much with mums since she is not a mum and dislikes boxing.

A rootless man of the road interrupts her rooting. Both of them are wearing battered hats. His horse and donkey droop "like unwatered flowers." His transport is to him what her flowers are to her. The mysterious stranger is "a very big man" with dark brooding eyes. The reader does not trust him, but all he has to do is ask Elisa about her chrysanthemums and she is seduced into opening up. "The irritation and resistance melted from Elisa's face." Sprouting herself, she gives him sprouts, identifying herself with the "nice ones": "'Beautiful,' she said. 'Oh beautiful.' Her eyes shone. She tore off the battered hat and shook out her dark pretty hair." Letting her hair down, she invites the stranger into her yard. While he comes through her gate she runs "excitedly" to her bed of flowers and digs into the dirt with bare hands. The sprouts root down into the earth like fingers and reach upward sharp-pointed like stars. She fills a pot with dirt and transplants sprouts for him to give to another woman on his route.

She tells the man how she buds, how she resolves herself into her fingertips and transcends her hands in an ecstatic union with the plant. In the process she becomes the chrysanthemum, as Emerson became a weed by the wall. Both have "a good bitter smell." She explains how to pluck off buds to make the flowers bloom larger, a kind of foreplay. "She was kneeling on the ground looking up at him. Her breast swelled passionately." In Steinbeck the spiritual includes the sexual, as in Whitman and D. H. Lawrence. Although she longs to be free like the homeless traveler—"I wish women could do such things"—the wife has demonstrated that she is budding into transcendence without leaving home, as exemplified also by Emily Dickinson and Thoreau, who "traveled a good deal in Concord."

Elise tells the traveling fixer she understands transcendence: "'I've never lived as you do, but I know what you mean. When the night is dark—why, the stars are sharp-pointed… Why, you rise up and up! Every pointed star gets driven into your body. It's like that. Hot and sharp and lovely.' Kneeling there, hot in the dirt, her hand went out toward his legs in the greasy black trousers. Her hesitant fingers almost touched the cloth. Then her hand dropped to the ground. She crouched low like a fawning dog." This is *atavism*, regression to an instinctive animal state, a common theme of Naturalists such as Zola and Norris. Elisa here resembles the frustrated woman who runs outside naked in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) by Anderson. In her desperation to liberate herself, she debases herself.

This wife is no Lady Chatterly looking for a lover, she is overcome by an impulse—not nice. Ashamed, she redeems herself by giving the fixer a little work. Still envying his freedom on the road, she says repeatedly "it must be nice." But the traveler knows it isn't nice at all. "It ain't the right kind of life for a woman." In the Depression of the 1930s thousands of desperate men were on the roads, homeless and lonely with nothing to lose. Steinbeck is a Realist in debunking the romanticizing of hoboes and transients in popular culture, whereas Elisa fantasizes becoming a rival traveling fixer: "I could show you what a woman might do." When the traveler leaves, going back the way he came, with her eyes "half-closed" she idealizes his lifestyle: "That's a bright direction. There's a glowing there."

Elisa takes off her soiled clothes, scrubs herself clean, and admires her body, reinforcing the sexual implications of the preceding scene. Waiting for her husband Henry to take her out to dinner in town, she "sat primly and stiffly down." She feels a hopeful fulfillment in having passed along her sprouts to others, seeing the line of yellow willows along the river as like "a thin band of sunshine." Like the traveler, she has her own "bright direction." When Henry comes in dressed for dinner, "Elisa stiffened and her face grew tight." He compliments her: "Why—Why, Elisa. You look so nice!" Yet she reacts defensively: "What do you mean by 'nice'?" She does not want to be "nice." He compliments her some more: "I mean you look different, strong and happy." She is different in feeling no longer bound by convention, no longer "nice." She is strengthened by having asserted herself with the traveler, by reaching out to a mysterious stranger, a figure representing the Wilderness in her individuation process. It is ironic that she liberates herself by surrendering, kneeling and even "fawning" at the feet of a man.

"For a second she lost her rigidity." Though a sympathetic character with strong virtues, Elisa also has been characterized as boastful, smug, tense, prim, rigid, bitter, and nasty. This may in part explain why she has no children. After reprimanding her husband for his language like a Victorian wife, "She grew complete again. 'I'm strong,' she boasted. 'I never knew before how strong'." At this, Henry looks away from her so as not to show his true feelings in his eyes: "Henry looked down toward the tractor shed" (as if preferring the company of his machines) "and when he brought his eyes back to her, they were his own

again." His wife is so insistently strong--"over-eager, over-powerful"—that she has become overbearing, a trait men have often observed in liberated women.

Henry goes out and starts the car while Elisa "took a long time to put on her hat. She pulled it here and pressed it there." Would she really give up all her clothes and everything else to drive a wagon around the countryside fixing kettles and pots, abandoning her garden? Henry proves himself to be a tolerant husband. Elisa does not stop primping and come out to the car until he turns off his engine. When they drive along the road and come to a dark speck that turns out to be her beloved sprouts dumped in a lump of dirt on the road, she sees that the traveling fixer was not what he appeared to be at all. He did not care about her or about chrysanthemums or giving to others, he only wanted her pot. "Now you've changed again,' Henry complained." The bond she felt with the traveling fixer was not real at all. They were a "mismatched team," like his horse and burro. She is disillusioned now and resigns herself: "She did not look back." Now she is willing to give poor Henry a chance.

That she does not want to go to the fights is evidence that she is not strong enough to survive alone on a farm, let alone on the road. "I've read how they break noses, and blood runs down their chests." This is a farm wife with a fastidious aversion to blood. She could not help her husband with injured animals or birth a calf or treat a nosebleed. She may loathe her own biology. Henry must love this woman, who is unlikely ever to give him any children. The stranger hurt her feelings so much by dumping her sprouts in the road that she gives up her dream of liberation. She is no pioneer woman. She would never have gotten past St. Louis. One discouragement and she gives up--"crying weakly." Still, her tears identify her with the rain needed for chrysanthemums and crops to grow, whereas in the beginning of the story she is oppressed by fog, or confusion. Spring is coming. Elisa resigns herself to being a conventional wife, though accepting her limitations makes her feel "like an old woman." Rather than run away from herself in a romantic quest for fulfillment as a New Woman, she settles for drinking some wine at dinner.

Michael Hollister (2013)