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Failure to Reject: A Feminist Analysis of "Chrysanthemums"

A characteristic of literature that deals with men and women's relationships towards each other is the creation of the Other, "an object whose existence is defined and interpreted by the dominant male" (Bressler 173). Usually, the Other is a female character, and in order to break out of being the Other, the female needs to "define themselves, articulate their own social constructs of what it means to be a woman, and reject being labeled the Other" (173). In his short story "Chrysanthemums," John Steinbeck uses characterization and symbolism to show how a woman may recognize her Otherness, but her attempt to reject her position as the Other actually makes her more submissive.

The physical description of Elisa Allen, the sole female character, first shows her potential to be an equal partner to her husband, and then shows her Otherness. She is first described as thirty-five and having a face that is "lean and strong" (Steinbeck 348). With her youth and strength, surely she could help her husband on their farm. However, the clothing Elisa wears shows how her qualities are being put to ill use. A person that is doing hard labor tends to wear a uniform or clothes they would not mind getting dirty. Elisa wears a "gardening costume" (348). The word "costume" suggests that Elisa is merely playing dress-up and pretending that her work is actually of some use. She wears "heavy leather gloves to protect her hands" (348). This suggests that she thinks her work is rough and might be harmful. However, she is still able to wear a "figured print dress almost completely covered by a big corduroy apron" (348). Her work cannot be too hard if she is still able to look presentable in a dress, but just in case it is, she has her apron to protect her clothing. The finishing touch to her "costume" is a "man's black hat" (348). This hat is a physical

interpretation of her Otherness. Although she may be doing work that she enjoys, Elisa is still subordinate and works underneath the man of the household. Elisa's strength and youthfulness are hidden beneath her "gardening costume." She cannot be seen as the possible helper that her husband needs to run their farm. The potential is there for her to break out from her role of the Other, but the clothing she chooses to wear show that she is still willingly to submit to her husband.

Elisa is separated from the men in the story by her location on the farm. This is done to emphasize her social separation. Elisa and her husband, Henry's livelihood depends on their farm. While Henry is in charge of the running and business of the farm, Elisa is only trusted with the flower garden. As she is working in her flower bed, Elisa sees Henry and the businessmen from "across the yard" (Steinbeck 348). Elisa is physically separated from the men, as their business cannot be conducted within her presence. She must wait to be informed through Henry about the transactions taking place, showing that she is dependent upon Henry to know the inner workings of their farm. This physical separation helps characterize Elisa's social separation as well. Elisa watches Henry "talking to two men in business suits" to sell their steers, while she is "working in her flower garden...cutting down the old year's chrysanthemum stalks" (Steinbeck 348). Henry's work depicts him as the patriarch of the family, as he is the bread winner. Elisa's work depicts her as "a secondary or nonexistent player" (Bressler 173). She is in charge of making the outside of her home look beautiful, which has no real value in the family's security. Henry does make a suggestion that Elisa "work out in the orchard and raise some apples" (348). The minute she shows interest in his suggestion, "Her eyes sharpened. 'Maybe I could do it, too,'" Henry immediately steers her back to her place on the farm, "Well, it sure works with flowers" (348). Henry teases Elisa and makes her feel as though she could be an equal part on the farm. The minute she shows interest in leaving her constructed role, he puts a stop to the idea and leaves her in the flower bed, while he and another male go do the real work. Elisa's attempt at breaking from her Otherness is stopped by Henry and she does not push further for her husband to give her that freedom.

Although it may not have been his intention, Henry implants in Elisa's mind the idea that her gardening skills can be put to use to help the farm; she has found a way to define herself and has found her own idea of what a woman can do. Her interactions with the traveling tinker reflect this idea. However, the tinker uses this idea against Elisa and manipulates her into doing what he wants, therefore showing once again her Otherness. Elisa at first has no interest in having the tinker do any work for her. She is described with "eyes hardened with resistance" (350). She repeatedly tells him no, but once the tinker finds her weak spot, her chrysanthemums, he knows how he can convince her. He gains her trust by asking about her flowers, "What's them plants, ma'am?" (350). Elisa falls for this instantly. She already has the hope she can provide for the family as Henry does. Her "irritation and resistance melts" and her "breast swells passionately" (350-351) because she finds that source. By showing the interest in the flowers, the tinker has made Elisa feel equal. This is seen as "the gloves were forgotten now" (350). Elisa left behind a part of her "gardening costume," which symbolized her submissiveness. She is not worried about hurting herself with her work. She worries about helping the tinker and providing him with a service. However, the tinker does not care about making Elisa feel less submissive. He only worries about making the sale, and bends her to do his will. Elisa finishes her work and then tells the tinker, "Maybe I can find something for you to do" (351), and she ends up paying him "fifty-cents'll do" (352). Elisa never gets paid for the chrysanthemums she gives to the tinker, showing that her work was not actual work, and was only a service to the man. This shows that Elisa, although she attempts to have her own independent role on the farm, actually submits to another male.

Through his short conversation with Elisa, the tinker becomes a symbol of the patriarchal belief that men have about women's roles. He tells Elisa his ideas that women aren't meant for hard life. Elisa expresses interest in the tinker's life, "I wish women could do such things" (351). Elisa is investigating what life could be like if she weren't an Other. The tinker squashes that dream. He gives the patriarchal belief, "It ain't the right kind of life for a woman" (351). This short reply

returns to the idea that women are meant to stay in the home, while the men are out in the world. When Elisa tries to question the tinker and find out for herself why women and men cannot be equal, the pot mender simply says, "I don't know ma'am...I don't know," then hurriedly distracts her before he is asked to give an argument about why women should be left behind while the man seeks his fortune. Because Elisa does not push him further for information, this is a representation of Elisa submitting to patriarchal beliefs and accepting her Otherness.

Elisa's brief dealings with the tinker reveal her buried desires to break from her socially created role, but she very quickly returns to being submissive, as she is still unsure about how to completely leave the Other behind. As she watches the tinker leaving the farm, she sees a light in the direction he is leaving, "That's a bright direction. There's a glowing there" (352). This light represents the freedom that Elisa realizes she could have if she were to leave behind the life she has been assigned, if she were to reject her Otherness. Soon after she comes to this realization, she "shook herself free" (352). This phrase ironically shows how Elisa gets rid of the idea of being free by shaking herself free. She shakes away the chance she has to reject her submissiveness. Fearful that someone might hear her dream of rejecting her Otherness, Elisa next "looked about to see whether anyone had been listening" (352). This action also shows her submissiveness, as she knows that thinking of freedom is not part of her role on the farm. Not only is shaking away the thoughts that she has, but she is ashamed and guilty, worried that someone might have heard her dreaming of a new life for herself. Elisa's chances at leaving behind her Otherness are continually stopped by her own actions that prevent her from moving forward with the rejection and move her backwards into submissiveness.

Elisa's actions in getting ready for her date with Henry symbolize that she has returned to being submissive and has truly shaken the feelings away. She scrubs herself clean until "her skin was scratched and red" (352); she puts on her nicest clothing "which was the symbol of her prettiness" (352); she works "carefully on her hair" and does her makeup (352). Each action is

representative of her acceptance of her role as the Other. Just as she shook away her feelings of freedom, she scrubs them away until her skin is raw; the clothing and makeup she puts on is representative of a mask, hiding away those feelings. But her scrubbing and masking cannot hide her newly found realizations. As Henry passes her, he notices that she looks “different, strong and happy” (352). Henry’s approval of her new found strength allows Elisa to realize it for herself, “I’m strong...I never knew before how strong” (353). Just as she realizes these feelings, she allows a man to control her feelings. When she sees that the tinker has thrown away her chrysanthemums, she returns to her submissiveness. Henry comments that she “changed again” (353). No matter how hard she tries, Elisa is never able to fully commit and leave behind her societal role; instead she silently accepts that she is meant to be submissive.

The symbol of the “fights” that Henry wants to take Elisa to is used to show one more way that Elisa tries and fails to break from her role as the Other. At the beginning of the story, Henry suggests jokingly that they could go to “the fights,” or boxing matches, and Elisa replies “No, I wouldn’t like the fights” (348). In one way, Elisa is rejecting her Otherness, as she is refusing to go along with her husband and submit to his suggestion. Mostly, Elisa is still being submissive and accepting the typical role of a woman. Boxing matches are typically aggressive, which is more of a male characteristic than a female’s, and therefore would not be fit for a woman to attend. By refusing to go to the match, Elisa is submitting to this patriarchal belief. After they have passed the tinker’s wagon, Elisa, who is slowly realizing her glimpse of freedom from the Other slipping away, starts to show an interest in the fights. She asks Henry “Do any women ever go to the fights?” (353). This again could be seen as an attempt to hold on to the strength she had found, as she would be going against the patriarchal belief. Ultimately, she is still being submissive, as going to the fights would be going along with what her husband wants; and further, by once again saying that she doesn’t really want to go to the fights, she is giving into her Otherness completely, leaving behind the thoughts and dreams of freedom from her given role.

The chrysanthemums symbolize Elisa's submissiveness and her failure to "reject being labeled the Other" (Bressler 173). Because Elisa's only work she does on the farm is her gardening, her chrysanthemums are precious to her. She "cuts down the old year's chrysanthemum's stalks...spreads the leaves" (348). She looks for bugs that would destroy her plants and "destroys such pests before they could get started" (348). Elisa is protective of her flowers, showing that they are of some importance to her. She helps them grow and protects them from any enemy that could harm them. Therefore, when Elisa gives the tinker a few of her chrysanthemums, she is giving him a part of herself, the hope that she can become less submissive and more an equal partner to her husband. The tinker throwing away the chrysanthemums represents Elisa throwing away any chance at rejecting the Other. When she sees the flowers on the side of the road, her thoughts reflect this casting away of freedom. In Elisa's mind, "it was over. The thing was done" (353); these sentences show that Elisa is done with the idea of rejecting her label. Henry even mentions that she "changed again" (353) and does not look strong anymore. The last sentence of the story shows Elisa completely giving up, she "turned up her coat collar so he [Henry] could not see that she was crying weakly—like an old woman" (353). Elisa hides herself from Henry so he cannot see her weakness, and she gives into her submissiveness by accepting what she has become, "an old woman" (353). The strength that Elisa had from the beginning of the story and she gained throughout disappears completely as she accepts that she cannot and will not break free from her Otherness, leaving her with no choice but to return to her submissiveness.

"I am strong? Yes, strong. What do you mean by strong?" (353). Elisa Allen cannot fully recognize the freedom she attains throughout the story. With each instance of freedom, she returns to being submissive. The symbols and the characterization of Elisa are important to show throughout the story how Elisa has the potential to "define...articulate...and reject" (Bressler 173), but because she does not know any other way of living, Elisa ends up accepting her role to be the Other, to be submissive to the dominant male.

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