Impotent “Chrysanthemums”

Abstract

The short story “Chrysanthemums,” written by John Steinbeck, is about a married couple, Elisa and Henry, living life in the Salinas Valley in the mid-1930’s. Henry is a simple farmer and Elisa is a wife unhappy with her station in life. When a traveling stranger arrives on the farm looking for work, Elisa reaches out to him in an effort to escape, but in the end humiliates herself and remains trapped in her loveless marriage. A post-modern analysis of “Chrysanthemums” reveals an underlying message of impotence which may reflect Steinbeck’s image of the United States at the time.
Women emasculate men everyday. In one well known case emasculation was taken to the extreme. Lorena Bobbitt, unhappy with her husband’s abusiveness and alleged rape, severed his penis with a kitchen knife. She fled with her husband’s mutilated member in tow and later tossed his penis out the window of her moving car. Physical castration is one way in which men can be made impotent by their spouse, but another more innocuous, but just as effective way, is through verbal reduction and infidelity.

On the surface of John Steinbeck’s short story “Chrysanthemums” is a woman frustrated with her role in society and the man she castrates through belittlement and infidelity. Steinbeck’s skillful use of language adds subtle details to the story. These details may not be readily apparent to the casual reader, but a close analysis reveals a poignant message of impotency. A post-modern analysis of John Steinbeck’s short story “Chrysanthemums” highlights the effects of symbolic castration and the levels of impotence that result.

“Chrysanthemums” is set in mid 1930’s America and describes the events of one day in the lives of Henry and Elisa Allen, a married couple living on a cattle ranch in the Salinas Valley of California. Henry is a simple rancher whose day is consumed with his cattle and apple orchard. His wife Elisa spends her time in a flower garden caring for chrysanthemums, but she is unhappy. She feels stifled by society’s rules and trapped in a loveless relationship. Elisa expresses her frustration by belittling and debasing her husband. She tries to gain control over her life by taking control of her marriage. When a traveling stranger arrives looking for work, Elisa reaches out to him in the hope that he
can help her escape, but in the end all she does is degrade herself and castrate her husband.

Elisa castigates Henry because she feels superior and does not respect him. Elisa’s time is spent on cerebral activities. She reads (1210), cultivates flowers (1203), and is well versed in a wide range of topics including pest eradication (1204), the proper care of chrysanthemums (1207), and what goes on at the fights (1210). She displays a strong grasp of geography when she gives a passing stranger precise directions (1205). While Elisa considers herself an intellectual, Henry is more concerned with visceral pastimes. He is a simple rancher (1203) whose day is occupied with cutting hay, plowing his orchard, and tending cattle (1203). Henry is a very practical, down to earth person, but Elisa values intelligence over practicality. She does not respect Henry and this is evident in the excerpt “Elisa … looked down across the yard and saw Henry” (1203). She looks down on him in a literal and figurative way. Elisa’s contempt and superiority further reveal themselves when Henry pays her flower garden a compliment and she responds with smugness “in her tone and on her face” (1204). Again her superiority emerges when she orders Henry to take a bath. She barks, “Hurry up. It’s getting late” (1209). Elisa seems to speak to Henry in a very demeaning way, as if he were a child. Debra Stein suggests in her essay “Dealing with an Angry Audience” that some people tend to lash out or become angry when they feel marginalized (Stein). Perhaps Elisa speaks to Henry in a demeaning way because she feels marginalized, or perhaps she is using her language to maintain dominance over Henry.

Elisa isolates Henry by wearing concealing layers of clothing. She hides her femininity under a “blocked and heavy … gardening costume” (1203) and covers nearly
every inch of her skin under a “man’s black hat” and “heavy leather gloves” (1203). At one point Henry encounters Elisa in an instant where she is not fully clothed. “He had come near quietly” (1204) and caught Elisa with one glove off. Though she is caught in a moment of minor vulnerability, she immediately “straightened her back and pulled the gardening glove on again” (1204). In the magazine article “Body Language: Kate Kretz’s Psychological Clothing Speaks Volumes,” Janice T. Paine analyzes several pieces of art created by Kate Kretz. One interesting piece is called “Defense Mechanism Coat,” which is a heavy woolen coat that Kretz and her assistant perforated with “150 pounds of roofing nails” (Paine). This piece seems strikingly similar to Elisa’s “gardening costume” in that both are designed to keep away unwanted attention, though admittedly, Elisa’s garments are much more understated way of conveying that message. Elisa, it seems, uses her clothing as armor to hide vulnerability and to keep Henry at bay. This use of clothing is a way Elisa relegates Henry to a subordinate position in the relationship.

Elisa denies Henry the carnal pleasures typically associated with a healthy relationship, further rendering Henry impotent. Elisa doesn’t allow Henry close to her in any place that she may be vulnerable. While in her garden she is surrounded by a wire fence that protects “her flower garden from cattle…” (1204). When she bathes, she does so alone (1209). She has her own bedroom (1209) in which she dresses and presumably sleeps. Elisa even carries “snips” (1203) and “scissors” (1205) that can be used as a dangerous last resort should Henry get any ideas. Elisa, it seems, is attempting to control or eliminate sex in the marriage. In his work “The Wounded King: Bobbie Ann Mason’s “Shiloh” and Marginalized Male Subjectivity,” Greg Bentley discusses the idea that the
bedroom is the “locus of libidinal politics within the family,” and he suggests that by controlling how and when sex is available, a woman can maintain a dominate position in a relationship (Bentley). Elisa is controlling power within the relationship by controlling sex and by doing so is further reducing Henry’s worth.

Elisa’s final and most devastating act of symbolic castration is when she commits adultery. When the traveling stranger arrives unannounced we see a shift in Elisa’s behavior. With Henry, she is cold and distant, but with this strange, new man she suddenly opens up. She laughs at his jokes (1205), she removes her gloves, and “stuffs them in the apron pocket with the scissors” (1205). She is at once exposing herself and removing implied threats. She is concerned with her appearance and the stranger seems to pick up on these subtle messages and begins a halting seduction: “He drew a big finger down the chicken wire and made it sing” (1205). This seduction culminates with Elisa succumbing to the stranger’s advances: “Kneeling there, her hand went out toward his legs…she crouched low like a fawning dog” (1207). The text seems to suggest she has given into her desires and the notion is further supported by the excerpt “she held the flower pot out to him and placed it gently in his arms (1208) -- the symbolic giving of herself. In his article “Something’s Missing: Need Fulfillment and Self-Expansion as Predictors of Susceptibility to Infidelity,” Gary W. Lewandowski seeks to find common factors that are predictors of infidelity in a committed relationship. Several studies that he examined suggested that one of the leading causes is dissatisfaction with the relationship. Further, he suggests that “infidelity is a serious relationship transgression,” that is commonly listed as the leading cause of divorce in many societies (Lewandowski).
Elisa, it seems, has been unfaithful to Henry and in doing so she has completed his symbolic castration.

Why does all of this matter? If Steinbeck is indeed pointing us toward the conclusion that Henry has been symbolically castrated, why do we care? One answer may be that Steinbeck is using Henry’s impotence, as a metaphor for the United States during the 1930’s and early 1940’s. Much like Henry, the nation was castrated during this time. The darkness and foreboding of the Salinas Valley seems to mirror the actual events taking place in the United States. “Chrysanthemums” was first published in the October 1937 edition of *Harper’s*. Things were not going well for the United States at this time. In 1927 the stock market crashed and left the country in an economic depression which lasted well into the 1940’s. Douglas Hurt tells us in his book *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History*, that a devastating drought descended upon the central states region. This drought lasted for years and caused huge, black, dust storms to blanket a significant portion of the United States. Crops failed year after year and the economy became further depressed. People were desperate for relief from the drought. Churches even held “rain services” in the hope that divine intervention could end the suffering (Hurt). The country desperately needed the “rain to come”, both literally and figuratively.

Whatever Steinbeck’s true intention, in the end, he created a lasting work of fiction which resonates to this day. The idea of symbolic castration not only provides a compelling framework for the struggles of family and male/female roles within society, but it also reflects on the nation as a whole. The story “Chrysanthemums” serves as a photograph of life in the 1930’s and 1940’s. It is a vivid reflection of the struggle not
only of day to day survival, but also of the desperate rebellion of women from a male dominated society.
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