Secret Colors

The story “The Chrysanthemums” by John Steinbeck is one of the best stories ever written, even though this story might seem like a story that has no meaning behind it or even a purpose. Some readers may feel this way because of the subtle plot and the way that the story is told. However, when the reader digs deeper into the symbolism of a chrysanthemum and the different meanings that this flower has, the audience understands that this story is more meaningful than what was thought. A chrysanthemum has many meanings and purposes, which include the following: gently declining love, a proposition to ignite love, honesty, and a request for utter candor (“candor”), but much of these definitions depend on the color. For these reasons, “The Chrysanthemums” is one of the best stories ever written. Steinbeck tries to tell the story’s real meaning by using the colors yellow, red, and white, which are the different colors of a chrysanthemum.

A yellow chrysanthemum represents a slowly and gentle amorous decline. From the start of the story the narrator states the mood of the story. The narrator explains where Elisa and Henry’s relationship stands. This is described by the setting; the color yellow is present all around the field surrounding Elisa’s house. Also, the field is described to be so yellow that it “seemed to be bathed in pale cold sunshine, but there was no sunshine” (“John” para. 5). The river is also covered by yellow leaves which are “sharp and positive” (para.5). These descriptions tell the reader that this story is going to talk about a relationship that it is losing its feeling to
love. Furthermore, the narrator clarifies this by explaining that the chrysanthemums that Elisa is growing are yellow. Also, at one point Henry leaves to get the steer, and he goes across a “pale yellow hillside” (para. 7), representing Henry being distant to Elisa and the hill being the obstacle that is making their affection fade away slowly. Another obstacle that comes later on in the story is the traveler, who is given yellow chrysanthemums. This traveler could also represent a reason for Elisa and Henry’s relationship decline, as he is intervening with Elisa’s feelings. It is more than clear what Steinbeck is trying to say with the color yellow and the relationship to chrysanthemums and Elisa and Henry’s relationship.

On the other hand, a red chrysanthemum represents a proposition or an invitation to ignite a relationship. The first glimpse of red given to the reader by the narrator is when he describes red geraniums to be “closed-banked” (“John” para. 8) around the white farm house. Elisa’s purpose of planting these flowers here could be to invite Henry into her house. Furthermore, a deeper representation of the house could be Elisa’s life, world, or even her pure heart. On the other hand, Henry uses the color red by telling Elisa that he wishes that she would “raise some apples that big” (“John” para. 8). This could mean that Henry is making a proposition to Elisa. The proposition being that Elisa should cultivate their love by treating Henry’s heart with the same delicacy and passion which she grows her flowers with. Also, “raising apples” could represent Elisa making Henry’s heart grow with love. Further in the story a traveler comes and talks with Elisa. Affection is shown between Elisa and the traveler, as he seems interested and appreciative of Elisa’s “world.” The traveler asks for chrysanthemums and Elisa is willing to give him some. She “ran excitedly along the geranium-board path to the back of the house” (“John” para. 12). She came back with a red flower pot to put in the yellow chrysanthemums for the traveler to take. This is a representation of Elisa going through the
romance she wants from Henry and through their relationship, forgetting completely that it exists. Elisa is interested in the traveler. Later she goes in the house and washes and scrubs her body until is “scratched and red” and then she “roughed her lips” (“John” para. 17). At this point her body being that clean and her lips being red, only means that she wants to appear beautiful and attractive to Henry. Later on, Henry gets back to the house and he drives “the red steers into the corral” (para 5). This means that Henry is done with his duties and now he has time to focus on Elisa and take her out on the date. Another use of red happens when Henry compares Elisa’s big smile to a watermelon, “happy enough to eat like a watermelon” (para. 32). When they leave, Elisa asks if they could “have wine at dinner?” (para. 38). Dinner wine is typically red, especially on dates, and it is use to add romanticism and to stimulate love. After Elisa asks about the wine she starts a conversation about boxing fights and how the fighters end up “saggy with blood” (para. 40). This means that now that Henry is ready and tries to be romantic and show affection towards her; she becomes interested in Henry’s world, but she is yet not ready to explore it. This is shown when Elisa says that she does not want to go to the fights but says, “it will be enough if we can have wine, it will be plenty” (para. 40). Elisa says this after they went through the Salinas River Bridge, which in 1938 was red. She covers her face so that Henry does not see her cry “weakly” of joy. By Steinbeck giving the reader all of these hints, it is clear that Elisa and Henry are very distant. However, they both want to be closer and love each other deeply, but they are both scared to try it.

The last color used in “The Chrysanthemums” is white. A white chrysanthemum represents truth, sincerity, and unstained purity. In the story, the farm house is painted white, this could represent the relationship between Henry and Elisa. The house being white could mean that their love is honest and pure. On the other hand, it could mean that there is not enough love
in their relationship and there is no intimacy between them. Many times in the story fog is mentioned to be surrounding their field. However, it is never described to be white, but described as being gray. This indicates that there is no honesty or truth in Elisa and Henry’s relationship.

At one point in the story a “little grey-and-white burro” is carrying a wagon which the traveler drives. The representation here is that there are truth and lies heading towards Elisa. The traveler lies to Elisa to sell her things, he accomplishes this by appearing interested and appreciative of what Elisa does best. Elisa thinks that he is being honest and falls for the trap and falls for the traveler. Elisa tries to explain her feelings towards the traveler and gives him hints to take her with him. For example, she said, “I could show you what a woman might do” (“John”). Also, she explains to the traveler with passion why she likes him and how she is not wrong about it. She does this by comparing it to her garden. The traveler quickly gets these hints and changes the subject. After the traveler leaves, Elisa sees a glow in between all the fog at the traveler’s direction and mentions it in a soft voice. Elisa looks around hoping no one heard her. She leaves to the house and washes and scrubs her body with a “block of pumice,” which is white. This is to clean what she had just felt for the traveler and purify her body. The representation of white clearly states that there are secrets being kept between Elisa and Henry.

The reader can clearly see that throughout the story aspects are described to have of three colors. These colors are yellow, red, and white, which are the colors of chrysanthemums. A yellow one represents a slowly declining amorous relationship. A red one represents an invitation or proposition to ignite a relationship. Finally, a white chrysanthemum represents sincerity, truth, and unstained purity. Throughout the plot these colors are use to describe places, objects, and moods. The symbolism in the story might pass unnoticed if the reader does not know the meanings of a chrysanthemum. However, when the reader knows these representations in the
story, the meaning becomes easier to understand. By writing “The Chrysanthemums” John Steinbeck is clearly trying to make the reader think deeply to understand the meaning behind every sentence. When all these meanings are connected, the reader finds a deeper story with more feeling behind it, the story of two lovers who want to enter each other’s heart but are afraid and hesitant of doing so. All these reasons describe why “The Chrysanthemums” is one of the greatest stories ever written.
Works Cited


