Ensnared

Small towns are like pictures. Once a picture is taken, it never changes. Each small town has a set of unwritten rules that once established seem impossible to change. In John Steinbeck’s short story “The Chrysanthemums,” the setting is a small valley town being cut off by fog. The main characters are Elisa Allen, Henry Allen, and a traveling salesman. “The Chrysanthemums” is a powerful story that, through setting, clothes, and characters, portrays how society dictates the lives of women.

The settings in John Steinbeck’s “The Chrysanthemums” have metaphors for society’s role in maintaining the status quo of women. The opening setting begins with fog. “The high grey-flannel fog of winter closed off the Salinas Valley from the world. On every side it sat like a lid on the mountains and made of the great valley a closed pot” (Steinbeck 679). The repetition of the word “closed” gives readers a sense of being trapped. The fog is the embodiment of society and unwritten rules, allowing no escape. Fog dictates what you can see, much like the way society dictates what women can choose. Fog is a strong force of weather. It disorients those trapped inside, and it causes single minded thoughts. As Steinbeck gives the setting, he writes, “… the black earth shining…” (679), which implies potential. The term black earth refers to soil dark in color, high in nutrients, and extremely fertile, making it great for farming. Black earth offers farmers a great opportunity, the same way a woman offers a man great opportunities. Both are potential wasted if not utilized. Steinbeck brings the opening setting to a close with, “… fog
and rain do not go together” (679). This is a poetic way of saying the characters are stuck. Fog is never ending always seeming to continue forever, whereas rain is considered a cleansing weather. Rain washes away the past and brings a brighter future. By stating “… fog and rain do not go together” (679), the reader is placed in the mindset of hopelessness and depression. The setting introducing Elisa and Henry portrays the proper roles of men and women in society.

Elisa Allen is in her flower garden working alone. By Elisa being alone, Steinbeck is suggesting that she has no need to talk, or that what she has to say would not be important. However, Henry Allen is across the yard speaking to two men. The distance between Elisa and Henry implies the separation of men and women as well as their different levels of importance and what they can do. Henry and the men are described in the ideal manly setting, “The three of them stood by the tractor shed, each man with one foot on the side of the little Fordson. They smoked cigarettes and studied the machine as they talked” (680). Still, to this day, if someone were to say, picture a country boy and his home; this is the image most people would see. The fence around Elisa’s flower garden is very symbolic. The first time the fence is mentioned it is a protection device for her flower garden. But, the way Henry leans over to talk to Elisa implies it is as a cage to keep her trapped. The second time the fence is mentioned is during an interaction between the salesman and Elisa. In this setting, the fence represents Elisa’s boundary. Everything inside the fence is under Elisa’s control. Elisa determines what is done, when it is done, and who crosses the fence. The settings in “The Chrysanthemums” are infused with emotions. John Steinbeck painted a picture with his settings that makes readers question why.

Elisa’s clothing throughout the story has interesting interpretations, and specifically the type of clothing, when they are taken on and off, gives insight into the character’s feelings. The first description of Elisa’s clothing is called a “gardening costume” (680). Elisa’s costume is
made up of manly items “… a man’s black hat…, clod-hopper shoes…, a big corduroy apron… heavy leather gloves” (680). The word costume makes the reader think that she is hiding something. But, what could it be? Elisa is wearing a dress under all the manly attire suggesting that she is hiding her femininity, which makes the statement that Elisa is in her garden to work not to look pretty. Later in the story after checking that she is still alone, Elisa “took off a glove…” (680), and she uses her bare hands in the soil. Henry startles Elisa, and she “pulled on the gardening glove again” (680). The removal of the glove while alone and the donning of the glove with Henry’s presence are indicators that she is hiding herself. With the arrival of the salesman, Elisa removes parts of her costume.

This removal suggests Elisa wants to be seen. Not only is she wanting to be seen, but she wants to project her femininity and sexual awareness: “She tore off the battered hat and shook out her dark pretty hair” (683). Ch. Dangl and Tomberger describe this desire as, “… a movement entirely feminine and essentially seductive” (Dangl 21). In recent movies, this specific action is used by women for seductive purposes. Steinbeck verifies Elisa’s sexual attraction to the salesman by the description of Elisa undressing “…she tore off her soiled clothes…” (685). Using the phrase tore off lends itself to a sense of urgency felt by Elisa. The wording portrays a sense of guilt by implying Elisa’s haste and the thought of her clothing being soiled, which is why the bath. The way Elisa dresses for her date is both different and similar to how she is dressed in the beginning. “She put on her newest underclothing and her nicest stockings and the dress witch was a symbol of her prettiness”; “… she took a long time to put on her hat.”, “… she slipped into her coat…” (685-686). Both times, Elisa is covered up and hiding, but what is different are the clothing items. In the beginning, Elisa is dressed in manly items. While she is still covered up, she has done so with the appropriate clothes of a woman. While
growing, Elisa is described as handsome. Dressing for her date, she is described as pretty. These two distinctions show how Elisa identifies with her clothing. In the end, Elisa uses her clothes, be they the clothes of a man or woman, to hide from Henry by turning up her coat collar to prevent him from seeing her cry. Elisa’s clothes have been a symbol of her hiding, her wanting to be seen, her sexuality, her guilt, and her self-identification.

The male characters show social ideas of the right and wrong man. Through Elisa’s actions and interaction with each character, her urge to rebel against what society has dictated for her is evident. Henry is a small town farmer. He lives on a ranch with his wife Elisa. Since Henry has no sons and all the work on the ranch is done, Henry must be a hard worker. Henry has provided Elisa with a home, food, a ranch, and her own flower garden. By society’s definition, Henry is the right man and Elisa should be happy. Brian Railsback and Michael Meyer provide a character summary of Henry, “… a man who is not evil, but merely ignorant of his wife’s unarticulated frustrations and desires” (Railsback 59). The traveling salesman is a character that, by name alone, paints an image of a suspicious and sleazy man, the obvious wrong choice. The salesman is observed as, “A big stubble bearded man…”, “laughter had disappeared from his face and eyes the moment his laughing voice ceased…”, and “His eyes were dark, and full of the brooding…” (681-682). These observations imply the salesman is big, fake, and treacherous. The interactions between the salesman and Elisa continue to prove that the salesman is by society’s definition the wrong man. As Elisa’s character is introduced, she is working alone in her flower garden separated from her husband, Henry, and two business men. John Steinbeck describes Elisa as, “thirty-five. Her face was lean and strong and her eyes were as clear as water”, and “Her face was eager and mature and handsome; even her work… was over-eager, over-powerful” (680). These words would be positive traits when used to describe a man, but, when
used to describe a woman, they are perceived as negative. There is some foreboding when Steinbeck writes, “She was cutting down the old year’s chrysanthemum stalks…” (680). Elisa’s character is thirty-five and has been described as mature; she hasn’t had children and is viewed as no longer useful by society’s standards. Elisa is described as strong, but she utilizes items to protect her. Elisa struggles with the thought of needing protection, which is expressed in her removal of gloves to work while alone and her use of them in the presence of Henry.

Within the story, Elisa acts differently depending on which male character she is with. Elisa and Henry’s interactions through the story are stiff. Each time Henry approaches Elisa, she straightens her back and becomes stiff or ridged as though she is defensive. When Henry approaches Elisa in her garden, she keeps him at a distance physically and emotionally by making him “lean over the wire fence”, “pulled on the gardening glove”, and “In her tone and on her face there was a little smugness” (680). Even though Henry is trying to give Elisa a compliment, she is rejecting him and staying defensive showing evidence of her rebellion against society’s right choice. Elisa continues to rebuke Henry by not truly complementing him on his work. Henry’s ignorance is evident by him accepting the complement and wanting to take Elisa out. When Henry and Elisa are getting ready to leave for their date, Henry is observant enough to know something is different about Elisa, but he is not observant enough to figure it out. Henry tries to give Elisa a complement, but she becomes defensive and stiff. And, poor Henry isn’t skilled enough to smooth talk his way out of a trap. Elisa boasts, “I’m strong”; “I never knew before how strong” (686). Elisa’s statement says that she has come to a decision and is going to rebel against society and make her own choices.

Elisa and the salesman’s interactions are exciting and flirtatious. Elisa flirts with the salesman from the beginning, “That’s a bad dog in a fight when he gets started. Elisa laughed. I
see he is. How soon does he generally get started” (682). Elisa is relaxed with the salesman.

“Elisa took off her gloves… she touched the under edge of her man’s hat…” (682). By removing her gloves, Elisa is testing the boundaries. She touches her hat trying to fix her hair and look better for the salesman. Elisa truly complements the salesman. At first, she is timid and only tests her boundaries with the salesman. The salesman attempts to try and guilt Elisa into providing him work, “His face fell to an exaggerated sadness. His voice took on a whining undertone. I ain’t had a thing to do today. Maybe I won’t have no supper tonight” (682). The uses of the adjectives exaggerated and whining reiterate the feeling that the salesman is fake in his emotions. Steinbeck uses the salesman’s sleaziness to get the reader to feel sorry for Elisa. Proof of the salesman’s experience and treachery is held within the way he manipulates Elisa’s innocence.

The salesman begins looking for a new tactic, when the guilt trip did not work on Elisa. He notices Elisa’s chrysanthemums and starts a conversation. The salesman’s smooth talk nearly fails him, “They smell kind of nasty till you get used to them” (683). Elisa’s reply lets him know he offended her. The way Steinbeck states, “He changed his tone quickly” confirms that the salesman is sleazy, fake, and treacherous. Elisa’s inexperience becomes her Achilles heel. She falls for his smooth talk and fake interest in her flowers and becomes excited which is expressed as sexual arousal. “She tore off the battered hat and shook out her dark pretty hair” (683) and invites the salesman into her garden. This treachery resembles the tell of original sin, when Eve is tricked by the serpent and eats the forbidden fruit. Elisa has been seduced by the salesman, which represents freedom, opportunity, and the road not taken. The sexual innuendos continue to progress as Elisa and the salesman talk. The climax of Elisa’s excitement is expressed through her instructions of budding. Elisa feels a kinship with the salesman, and she begins to feel guilty. She runs and finds the salesman two saucepans to fix. Elisa expresses her vulnerability, “I wish
women could do such things” (684). The salesman has gotten what he came for and is done with smooth talk. He tells Elisa, “It ain’t the right kind of life for a woman” (686). The statement brings out Elisa’s rebellious side. She is mad and has decided that women can do anything a man can—society be damned. Elisa is an innocent woman who has let society dictate her life so far. Her meeting with a traveling salesman reveals her dreams for freedom, opportunity, and the road not taken, leaving behind Henry who represents society’s right choice.

In the last setting of the story, Elisa and Henry are driving to town for dinner and a show. “Elisa saw a dark speck. She knew” (686). Elisa has trouble reasoning why the salesman would leave the chrysanthemums in the road. It is the final nail in the coffin for the salesman. There is no doubting that he is a true salesman, treacherous in all deeds. Henry’s statement, “Now you’re changed again” (686) lets the reader know he may be ignorant but he is trying, which makes him the proverbial good guy. Elisa’s request for wine implies that she wants to forget, and her questions about the fights are Steinbeck’s way of indicating that she has been hurt. In the end, Elisa decides she wouldn’t like to see the fights, and wine will be enough. The last image of Elisa is of her turning, “up her coat collar so he could not see that she was crying weakly—like an old woman” (687). Elisa is using her clothing to hide from Henry just as in the beginning, suggesting that she is not strong enough to travel the road not taken. Elisa will continue to let society dictate her life for her. She may be rebellious, but, as the last words suggest, she is unable to define her own identity as an individual and a woman and is – like an old woman—weak.
Works Cited

