A PROSE STUDY

SYMBOLISM IN JOHN STEINBECK’S SHORT STORY: THE CHRYSANTHEMUMS

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A. INTRODUCTION

1. BIOGRAPHY

John Steinbeck is a famous American writer who was born on February 27th, 1902, in Salinas, California, and grew up in that place. Salinas Valley is also the place which becomes setting for some of his early stories, including *The Chrysanthemums* that we are going to discuss in this paper. The Salinas Valley was largely rural and agricultural, a place of small towns and small farms. *(From Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967, Editor Horst Frenz, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1969 http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1962/steinbeck-bio.html)*

Steinbeck also came from an immigrant family. It was his grandfather, Johann Adolf Großsteinbeck, who came to United States as an immigrant from Germany, and then shortened the family name to Steinbeck. John Steinbeck was of German and Irish descent. His father, John Ernst Steinbeck, served as Monterey County treasurer and his mother, Olive Hamilton, was a school teacher. As a boy Steinbeck was a devoted reader. It was from his mother, Steinbeck learned to love books. He wrote for his high school newspaper and attended college as an English major. Later, in 1925 he left home for New York City and took a job with a newspaper. *(Copyright © 1994-2011 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. For more information visit Britannica.com)*

When Steinbeck lived in a small rural town, he spent his summers working along the Salinas River harvesting beets on nearby ranches and later with migrant workers on. He became aware of the harsher aspects of migrant life and the darker side of human nature, which was expressed in some his literary works. Steinbeck, who used to work on ranches and with migrant workers, knew well the harsher aspects of migrant life. Some of his finest works pictured the social and economic problems of these travelling workers. *The Grapes of Wrath* which is considered by many to be among Steinbeck's best, and *Of Mice and Men*, which pictured this kind of people and the lives
they had. Many considered that his greatest works are the works dealing with the social lives of rural labor, during the Great Depression and The Dust Bowl. John Steinbeck received The Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962 for his literary works. Then he died in New York City in 1968. (From Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967, Editor Horst Frenz, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1969 http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1962/steinbeck-bio.html)

Besides a socialist who concern about social condition, Steinbeck can be said as a symbolist. He uses many symbols in describing his thought about society that he criticized. It can be seen obviously from most of his works such as; The Grapes of Wrath, Of Mice and Man, The Chrysanthemums, etc. He is well known as a socialist writer who framed his concern in society in his literary works, but instead of writing it directly, he uses many kinds of symbol as indirect critics for society. For example, in his work Of Mice and Men, he symbolized migrant workers as Lennie and George. In this paper, we will analyze John Steinbeck’s symbols in The Chrysanthemums which tells about a woman named Elisa Allen, the main character in this short story whose fate is like chrysanthemums in the flower pot.

2. REASONS

One of Steinbeck’s works which the setting was in The Salinas Valley is the short story The Chrysanthemum. This short story considered to be one of Steinbeck's most accomplished short stories. The story itself is about an intelligent, creative woman who trapped in a limited existence on her husband's ranch. Both Elisa and his life symbolized by the flower she’s planted that is Chrysanthemums.

Elisa is a symbol of women at that time, and to learn Elisa’s life through The Chrysanthemum, means we learn about gender and social condition where the short story take place.
Besides learning about the living in that era, we intend to analyze symbols in this story to enrich our knowledge about symbolism and semiotics. It is because we are realized that symbol is an important part in every literary work. There is almost no literary work which doesn’t use symbol. So, symbol could be said as a vital part of literary work that must be understood by people who learn literature.

B. OBJECTIVES AND THEORY

Semiotic is knowledge of sign and sign system. According to Hoed (via Nurgiyantoro, 1998:40), semiotic is science or analysis method to analyze sign. Nurgiyantoro said that it could be experience, thought, sense, or more clearly, something that represents something. Charles Sanders (via Sudjiman and Zoest, 1992:1) put logic as the foundation of semiotic. According to him, logic relates to how people think logically. Through sign we can think, have relationship with other people, and can give meaning to all of the things in the world.

According to Kakidjian (2005:61), the term symbol comes from a Greek verb *symballein*, which has the meaning “to put together”. In the ancient world, a symbolon was a coin or token that was broken into two. Each half belonged to one of the two parties entering into a legal contract or agreement. Each half depended on its relation to the other half. From this, it can be concluded that a symbol has two aspects; first, some object taken as a symbol and the second is the meaning it has. In other words, a symbol refers to something that stands for something else.

We can find symbols nearly everywhere in popular culture, literature, even religion institutions. In literary, symbol consists of something present whose meaning and significance depends on something absent (Kakidjian, 2005:61). It means that symbols are based on comparison between concrete images and abstract ideas. In one hand, a symbol is made up of something specific: an image, word, thing, setting, or a person. On the other hand, something else completes the symbol: a moral truth, an emotional state, or an idea. Often you can easily
identify a symbol’s meaning because the symbolic object bears a clear resemblance to the abstract concept it represents. Light is generally taken to symbolize hope and enlightenment. Darkness generally stands for opposite.

Finally, symbolism is not limited to persons or things, animals and plants can be symbols. According to Ralph Waldo Emerson, there is nothing that is not symbolic; moreover he says that there are no walls anywhere between literature and life. (Schwiebert, 2005:213).

Symbol itself, is divided into two kinds. They are:

- Universal Symbols or cultural symbols that embody ideas and emotions which writers and readers share.

  Examples: Autumn symbolizes declining life, spring symbolizes the beginning of new life, dove symbolizes peacefulness, flower symbolizes women/beauty, lamb symbolizes innocence, etc.

- Contextual Symbols is a symbol which can be a setting, character, action, object, name, or anything else in a work that maintains its literal significance while suggesting other meanings

  Examples: Elisa’s Clothing Style symbolizes her varying personalities, Chrysanthemum’s pot symbolizes Salinas Valley’s condition, Salinas Valley symbolizes isolated condition, etc.

So, the objective here is to find one or more symbols such as stated in the theory above that we intend to analyze in this short story, *The Chrysanthemum*. What the symbols are, and what they are symbolized.

C. DISCUSSION

After identifying this short story, we find some symbols that connect to the setting of place, time and society where this story takes place. They are:
1. The Chrysanthemums

The most explicit symbolism in this short story is the chrysanthemum flower. It is a kind of flower that Elisa, the main character, planted. She enjoys growing and nourishing her chrysanthemums, even she feels very proud of it. The chrysanthemums symbolize both Elisa and her limited scope of life. Like Elisa, the chrysanthemums are lovely and strong. Their flowerbed is like Elisa’s house, which is tidy and neat. Elisa explicitly identifies herself with the flower, the way she nurtures it carefully and passionately, even saying that she becomes one with the plants when she tends to them. When the tinker notices the chrysanthemums, Elisa becomes visibly brightens, moreover when the tinker says that a lady somewhere out there is looking for chrysanthemums, although this is a pure lie, she gives a pot of chrysanthemums to him and explains how to nurture them passionately. This implies Elisa’s feeling; feels that she needs more attention, since her husband never give her enough attention. Both of which the tinker ignores and tosses aside. His rejection of the flowers also mimics the way society has rejected women as nothing more than mothers and housekeepers. Just like her, the flowers are unobjectionable and also unimportant: both are merely decorative and add little value to the world. [Source: Phillips, Brian. SparkNote on John Steinbeck's The Chrysanthemums. 1 October 2011 <http://www.sparknotes.com/short-stories/the-chrysanthemums/>.]

Like stated in her husband’s remark: “I wish you’d work out in the orchard and raise some apples that big”, shows how little his interest he has for her chrysanthemums/herself. His low attention of the flowers also mimics the way society at that time treated women as nothing more than mothers and housekeepers. Just like her, the flowers are unobjectionable and also unimportant: both are merely decorative and have little value to the world.
2. **Salinas Valley**

The setting of the story itself, the Salinas Valley, symbolizes Elisa’s life place. The story opens with a description of the valley, which Steinbeck described it as a closed pot with a lid made of fog. The metaphor of the valley as a “closed pot” suggests that Elisa is trapped inside a world which offers not many spaces for women at that time. The fog in the valley also represents isolation in a world that limits her existence, despite the potential she has, and the enthusiasm of her to experience the world outside the world she knew. As she gives an interested respond to the Tinker, “*That’s sound like a nice kind of way to live*”, when the tinker explains to her the way he lives his life.

3. **Elisa’s Clothing Style**

Elisa’s clothing changes symbolizes masculine persona which becomes more feminine after the visit from the tinker. When the story begins, Elisa is wearing a genderless gardening outfit, complete with heavy shoes, thick gloves, a man’s hat, and an apron filled with sharp, phallic implements. The narrator even describes her body as “blocked and heavy.” The masculinity of Elisa’s clothing and shape reflects her asexual existence. After speaking with the tinker, however, Elisa begins to feel intellectually and physically stimulated, a change that is reflected in the removal of her gloves. She also removes her hat, showing her lovely hair. When the tinker leaves, Elisa suffers an almost ritualistic transformation. It is like what is stated in the story, “…*she scrubbed herself with a little block of pumice, legs and thighs, loins and chest and arms, until her skin was scratched and red. When she had dried herself she stood in front of a mirror in her bedroom and looked at her body. She tightened her stomach and threw out her chest*...”. These feminine items contrast sharply with her bulky gardening clothes and reflect the newly energized Elisa. At the end of the story, after Elisa has seen the castoff shoots, she pulls up her coat collar to hide her tears, a gesture that suggests a move backward into the repressed state in which she has lived most of her adult life.

4. Autumn Season

We also learn that the setting of time is December, the season in this month is autumn, and it symbolizes declining life. At autumn, there is not much sunshine around, there is not much light penetrates the valley. As described in the story, *On the foothill ranches across the Salinas river, the yellow stubble fields seemed to be bathed in pale cold sunshine, but there was no sunshine in the valley now in December. The thick willow scrub along the river flamed with sharp and positive yellow leaves.* Sunshine is often associated with happiness, while light is symbolized hope. Moreover, the air in the valley is cold and tender. This description of the weather reflects Elisa’s life, boring and colorless, as if she has no hope to obtain a different life, a completely different life from her life as a farmer’s wife.

Besides symbolism, *The Chrysanthemums* is an understated but pointed critique of a society that has no place for intelligent women. Elisa is smart, energetic, attractive, and ambitious, but all these attributes go to waste. Although the two key men in the story are less interesting and talented than she, their lives are far more fulfilling and busy. Henry is not as intelligent as Elisa, but it is he who runs the ranch, supports himself and his wife, and makes business deals. All Elisa can do is watching him from afar as he performs his job. Whatever information she gets about the management of the ranch comes indirectly from Henry, who speaks only in vague, condescending terms instead of treating his wife as an equal partner. The tinker seems cleverer than Henry but doesn’t have Elisa’s spirit, passion, or thirst for adventure. According to Elisa, he may not even match her skill as a tinker. Nevertheless, it is he who gets to ride about the country, living an adventurous life that he believes is unfit for women. Steinbeck uses Henry and the tinker as stand-ins for the paternalism of patriarchal societies in general: just as they ignore women’s potential, so does society. [Source: Phillips, Brian. *SparkNote on John Steinbeck's The Chrysanthemums*. 1 October 2011 <http://www.sparknotes.com/short-stories/the-chrysanthemums/>. ]
D. CONCLUSION

Steinbeck’s *The Chrysanthemum* has some interesting aspects that could be drawn from its symbols. In the writers’ opinion, Steinbeck wants to show his idea to criticize the inequality of gender in the society at his time through symbolism. Elisa’s fate is a symbol of women’s condition at that time. Through this short story, Steinbeck symbolized many things by using some simple things such as; women and Elisa Allen and chrysanthemum flower, also flower pot and women position and Elisa’s space of life.

This short story is also an evidence that John Steinbeck as a socialist, he cared also about gender inequality by symbolized it into one of his finest short stories, *The Chrysanthemum*.

Steinbeck’ Chrysanthemum reflects the way society at that time treated women. The story was published in 1938; while women finally got the right to vote in 1920, only 18 years prior. At that time, there was not enough opportunity for women to do what they like, despite the potential and talent they had. Moreover was the treatment from men toward women at that time which had the tendency to belittle them. Besides lack of opportunity, there was lack of appreciation also. As implied in the story, Elisa is a little bit cleverer than her husband, in doing farming works, at least in doing planting jobs, but her husband didn’t give her enough attention.

The moral of this story is to show that women (Elisa Allen representing women) can be strong, despite the opinion towards women within society at that time. "I wish women could do such things," like Elisa Allen said to the Tinker.
E. BIBLIOGRAPHY


