John Steinbeck's 'The Chrysanthemums' is a short story portraying the struggle of a lonely, strong-willed woman living in a male-dominated society. Elisa Allen is the wife of an ignorant farmer, Henry, and though passionate with her work in the garden, has hidden emotional wounds that she is determined to cover. As the reader gets familiar with Elisa, he or she can perceive her insecurities through her rigid actions and hard words. An unexpected encounter with a stranger ignites her passion, but at the same time further reflects her inner helplessness. Steinbeck also illustrates a natural setting, which serves as a parallel to the theme of the story, "the high gray-flannel fog of winter closed the Salinas Valley from the sky and from the rest of the world." creating a certain repressive mood to set the tone for the plot. Throughout this short story, John Steinbeck reflects the main character's constant struggle against her own identity, deep internal conflict, and oppression by her surroundings.

Several times in this story, Elisa's feminist attitude comes in to play. The people surrounding her, particularly her husband, contribute to her defensive nature towards women and their potential. An example is when Henry casually teases her, saying, "I'd wish you'd work out in the orchard and raise some apples that big," unknowingly how much it may have hurt her feelings. However, Elisa responds to this comment by 'sharpening' her eyes, assuring her husband that she is a talented worker in the garden. One can hypothesize through this dialogue that Elisa must have to face and fight the bold insensitivity of her husband day in and day out. Later on in the story, her exchange of conversation with the stranger affirms that the male superiority complex exists beyond her household as well. When talking about beating dents out of pots, Elisa adds "I could show you what a woman might do," expressing her bottled up desire to prove herself. However, the stranger calmly puts her back in her place, concluding that "It would be a lonely life for a woman, ma'am..." before riding away. Thus, however hard she may try to argue and prove equal to the males around her in every way, Elisa remains to be pushed aside every time, left unheeded and ignored.

Elisa's excessive external battles leave her without an opportunity to assert her own identity and reflect over the development of her own personality. Because she constantly has to fight off some threat to her integrity or another, she has placed a shield around her in defense. She
feels that this shield serves as protection, but little does she realize that this barrier has prevented even herself from reaching inside and attending to her own desires. It is only when the stranger somehow manages to pull down this barrier, that she surprises herself by letting her guard down. The clever man moves her by displaying interest in something she has a deep passion for—chrysanthemums. At their mention, the resistance in Elisa is described to be ‘melted’ away. She immediately enters into a passionate, and invigorated state of mind as she eagerly describes to the stranger the meaning of ‘planting hands’. The passage, “She was kneeling on the ground looking up at him. Her breast swelled passionately” shows a sensual version of Elisa that had not been even hinted at before. Thus, showing that she very rarely allows herself to indulge in feelings that give her utmost pleasure. It is feelings shame, confusion, and remorse that follow afterwards which confirm that she doesn’t let herself admit to her vulnerability, and therefore is running away from accepting her true identity.

Although she may try to cover it up, it is obvious that Elisa is actually very frustrated, unhappy, and depressed with her way of life. She is confined to doing chores and housework, and more importantly is deprived of respect and understanding from the people around her. In the beginning of the story, their house is described as a clean and “hard-swept looking house”, and that “the chrysanthemum stems seemed to small and easy for her energy”. This suggests that she is a woman with too much time on her hands, and that she might be better off with more responsibilities in her life. Once again, in the midst of her conversation with the stranger, she changes and gives away her longing for a different kind of life when she says “I’ve never lived as you do, but I know what you mean. When the night is dark—the stars are sharp-pointed, and there’s quiet. Why, you rise up and up!” She almost goes into a dream in which is liberated from all confinements. The lines “It must be very nice. I wish women could do such things” further convey her yearning to break away from her current life. These thoughts give Elisa the faintest of hopes to surmount all the oppression, which is expressed by the “glowing” she sees in the direction stranger travels. The stranger’s way of life allows her to be carried away imagination, which is something her regular state of mind life would have never have yielded to.

Although her strong feminist side stands out distinctively in the story, there have been limited references to her as feminine. She is described as “lean and strong”, wearing a man’s hat and a dress that is covered by a large apron. Gradually, her ‘dark pretty hair’ is revealed, and yet
a detailed description of her features and body is avoided. This is meant to symbolize her own ignorance of her physical appearance. After her embarrassing display of passion in front of the stranger, Elisa takes shower and scrubs herself until she is scratched and red, almost as if she feels she needs to be punished for her openness. Surprisingly, she then looks at looks at herself in the mirror at length, “She tightened her stomach and threw out her chest.” She becomes, suddenly, very aware of her appearance. She then goes out of her way to pencil her eyebrows and rouge her lips, and sits pretty waiting for her husband to appreciate her efforts. To her disappointment, all she gets from him is “You look strong enough to break a calf over your knee”. The dialogue which takes place here shows Elisa’s need for her physical appearance to be praised. At this point, she needs comfort, and re-assurance of her beauty which she had so long ignored herself. The gradual revelations and explorations of her looks are deeply associated with her identity and the internal conflicts that she suffers.

Elisa’s encounter with the stranger, which is the most climax of the story, stirs up a lot of change within her character and brings out some of the essential struggles she is facing. First of all, her defense of her role as a woman in society is tested, in addition to all the tension that is evident in her relationship with her husband. In contrast, she is extremely moved by the stranger’s interest to her dear chrysanthemums, and immediately transforms into a sympathetic, passionate woman whom even she herself had not recognized. During the moments she changes, one is also able to witness Elisa admit her desire to possess a different lifestyle. The entire visit of the Stranger leaves her feeling a changed person, more hopeful and wholesome than ever before. However, when she sees the Chrysanthemums on the road, thrown away by the stranger who had impacted her so greatly, she is shattered. She realizes that all her precious release of emotion and freedom of her mind had been merely provoked by a cheap man who wanted a pot. All the conflict and struggle which had for a moment seemed to weigh less on her, crumbled back down on her, this time seeming heavier and more devastating than ever. In less than ten pages John Steinbeck conveys the message, and captures the essence of the internal conflict and struggle of an isolated woman in a stereotypical society.
In John Steinbeck’s *The Chrysanthemums*, the protagonist, Elisa Allen, suffers an internal conflict rooted in a struggle to realize her self-identity, a subdued fear of emotional vulnerability and a frustration with pastoral life. The story takes place in the rustic valley town of Salinas, enveloped in “the high gray flannel fog of the winter” that “closes it off from the sky and the rest of the world”. Immediately, with Steinbeck’s vivid use of imagery, the reader is introduced to the dominant theme of oppression. Much like the town she lives in, Elisa endures an inner dejection, repressed by a male-dominant society and a lack of variety in life. The plot revolves around this mundane lifestyle and Elisa’s dysfunctional marriage, which neither fills her time nor fulfills her desires. Elisa’s husband, Henry, although essentially well meaning, is unresponsive to her needs, which he seek to cover with easy banter. Elisa’s general discontent, thwarted maternal impulses and excess energy are thus transferred to domestic affairs, her prized garden and “hard-swept” and “hard polished” house.

Elisa’s internal conflict is first depicted through the introduction of her character. Steinbeck describes Elisa through the use of masculine attributes: her “figure looked blocked and heavy in her gardening costume, a man’s black hat pulled low down over her eyes and clodhopper shoes”, to indicate her efforts to conceal her feminine form under manly apparel. Steinbeck’s description of Elisa highlights her deliberate rejection of her womanhood. Elisa face is “handsome” and “lean and strong”. However, her innate femininity is revealed through “her eyes [which] are as clear as water”, belying her tough, outward visage. Elisa recognizes that her secondary status as a woman renders her emotionally and physically vulnerable. It is to overcome this vulnerability that she attempts to suppress her feminine attributes.
This fear of emotional vulnerability within Elisa is portrayed throughout the story, reflecting her struggle to achieve self-realization. Elisa embodies the historic feminist, kept from personal fulfillment by the socially determined conception of a woman's role in life. Countering this notion, Elisa repeatedly affirms that she can perform the same tasks as men: "You might be surprised to have a rival sometime. I could show you what a woman could do." Here, Elisa attempts to attain fulfillment by creating a frontage to conceal her vulnerability, all the while, aiming to convince herself of her own strength. When Henry mockingly suggests that she "work out in the orchard and raise some apples," Elisa professes, "[she] could do it too." This exchange not only shows illustrates the muted tension between husband and wife, but also allows the reader to perceive Elisa's internal insecurity, as disguised by an external facade of strength. Both rooted in Elisa's struggle of her identity and her fear of venerability, the inconsistency of Elisa's outward appearance and inner emotions thus parallel the discrepancy of her actions and assertions as a character.

Elisa and her garden are connected by a single soul; in some respect, a chrysanthemum is a symbol of Elisa's inner spirit. Both Elisa and the flower have a unique beauty, characterized by masculine overtones. The reader learns that Elisa fears physical pain in any form, wearing "heavy leather gloves to protect her hands." Elisa embodies sensitivity masked by masculinity; her protective layer is a form of self-defense. This fear of physical vulnerability is instinctively transferred to her garden, towards which she feels a sense of maternal attachment: "a wire fence protected her flower garden from cattle and dogs and chicken." Elisa insists that in order to grow successful chrysanthemums, one must "cut them down...before they bloom." Much like her flowers, Elisa requires tender care in order to bloom, however; unlike her flowers, she has not been given adequate nourishment.

Both Elisa's life and internal emotional turmoil take a new turn as she encounters a tinker, who is indifferent to the conventions of time and place. "Big, stubble bearded and graying" with "eyes dark and full of brooding", the stranger serves as a complete contrast to her husband. His life of whim typifies the very freedom and impulse that Elisa
is deprived of, triggering in her an acute sense of longing to be released from social oppression. Before long, the stranger, who is skilled at emotionally manipulating his customers, cleverly praises her chrysanthemums. Her uninhibited passion about her garden is released, and soon becomes an expression of the suppressed romance in her life; “Her hand went out toward his legs in the greasy black trousers. Her hesitant fingers almost touched the cloth.” Here, the reader senses a release of feminine desire within Elisa; an unconscious revelation of her emotional vulnerability. Elisa finds solace in, and in a sense, experiences an intimate connection with this stranger. She “[ears] off the battered hat and sh[akes] out her dark, pretty hair,” and her “voice g[rows] husky”, drawing attention to her feminine features for the first time in the story. As the stranger leaves, Elisa remarks that he heads off “in a bright direction”. Once again, the reader is reminded of Elisa’s dissatisfaction with pastoral life, and the social constraints that tie her down to it. The exchange between the tinker and Elisa serves as a turning point in story, signaling Elisa’s submission to her femininity.

While Elisa attempts to obscure her womanhood at an outward level, at the same time, she has an inward desire to be regarded as feminine. This inner desire is further stimulated by her encounter with the stranger, and hereafter, the reader can sense an apparent reflection of womanly pride in Elisa. When Harry proposes a night out in town for dinner, Elisa “put[s] on the dress which was the symbol of her prettiness, working carefully on her hair and rouging her lips.” Here, the effort that Elisa usually puts into cleaning the house and tending to her seedlings is abruptly redirected into a physical transformation of herself. She attempts to play the socially ascribed role of the dutiful wife; “la[yng] [Henry’s] dark suit on the bed, and shirt and socks and tie beside it”, in the hopes that Henry will appreciate and acknowledge her. However, her efforts are slighted, once Henry comes home and “throws his tie aside.” The climax of the story is reached with Elisa’s avowal, “I am strong,” signaling to the reader that she has reached a moment of realization. This epiphany is characterized by a consciousness of her fortitude and strength of character and a triumph over her internal conflict.
John Steinbeck’s *The Chrysanthemums* marks the internal conflict of its protagonist, Elisa, who struggles to achieve self-realization, resist emotional vulnerability and overcome the oppression of rural life. In his short story, Steinbeck depicts the trials of a woman attempting to gain influence and power in a male-dominated world. While the plot is simple, the story is enriched with elements of irony and imagery that sharply contrast the fruitful land with the sterile marriage and the fertile crops with Elisa’s inner emptiness. Elisa’s encounter with the tinker is integral to the development of her character, as it ultimately allows her to achieve epiphany, in which she comes to appreciate her own strength of spirit.