

Literary Analysis of “The Chrysanthemums”
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The weather, like human emotion, is universal and omnipresent. Just as attitudes can change in different settings, the weather can vary from one place to another. John Steinbeck recognized these parallels in his 1937 short story, “The Chrysanthemums,” when he used the foggy winter weather of the Salinas Valley to mirror Elisa Allen’s inner feelings.

Those feelings are predominantly ones of loneliness and isolation. Elisa lives on a ranch with a husband, Henry, who does not understand her sentiments; for example, when Elisa shows Henry her chrysanthemum plants, he does not praise her flowers but instead wishes that she would apply her gardening abilities to the orchard (1224). This husband is Elisa’s primary source of human interaction, for most of the visitors to the remote ranch—including the Western Meat Company men—speak with Henry, while Elisa watches from her garden (1223). Elisa indicates her desire to travel beyond this lonely place when she tells the traveling tinker that “I wish women could do such things” as moving from town to town and sleeping in one’s wagon (1228). The tinker’s visit gives Elisa a taste of life beyond the ranch, making the Salinas road on which the tinker travels represent to Elisa the outside world, full of new people and new experiences.

Elisa’s attitudes toward these two places—her ranch and the Salinas road—is reflected in and reinforced by the weather. Elisa sees the ranch, which lies within the Salinas Valley, as enclosed by drabness: “The high gray-flannel fog of winter closed off the Salinas Valley from the sky and from all the rest of the world. On every side it sat like a lid on the mountains and made of the great valley a closed pot....[T]here was no sunshine in the valley...” (1223). In contrast, the Salinas road’s “willow-line was still yellow with frosted leaves so that under the

high gray fog there seemed a thin band of sunshine. This was the only color in the gray afternoon” (1229). Furthermore, the tinker described his life of travel as being guided by the “aim to follow nice weather,” to which Elisa affirmed, “[t]hat sounds like a nice kind of way to live” (1225). This desire to follow bright and colorful weather is the same as the desire to seek out new and interesting experiences.

Elisa is tired of her monotonous and isolated ranch life and dreams of new experiences—which she begins to find in the tinker’s brief visit. Steinbeck illustrates the drabness of the Salinas Valley by describing it as enclosed by fog; meanwhile, he reinforces the attractiveness to Elisa of a life of travel in depicting the Salinas road as the only source of bright color. Elisa’s sentiments are reinforced by their illustration in a similar phenomenon, the weather, that is familiar to us all.