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Women Trapped in Early American Society

John Steinbeck is an American author from the 1930s-1960s, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature, and is widely known for his novels, non-fiction books, and collections of short stories. *Of Mice and Men*, published in 1937, is one of his most popular books. There are many important themes and characters throughout the book, one of the most interesting and mysterious being Curley's wife. Steinbeck's portrayal of women in some of his writing is fascinating, he shows his females not as weak, but as misunderstood and lonely. He shows his women as being trapped. Another example of this is the character Elisa Allen in Steinbeck's short story "The Chrysanthemums." Curley's wife and Elisa Allen have many differences, similarities, and differences in similarities, and they both play a major role in the works of writing that they are in. They both help to show how women were trapped in the given time period.

Elisa Allen is not a typical female. She dresses in black men's clothing, and lets her hair be messy. She appears to care about the physical appearance of her house and garden more than she cares about the physical appearance of herself. She wears heavy boots and large gardening gloves, and is quite aggressive when she gardens. Perhaps the reason for this is that she's trying to get Henry's attention. Her physical appearance changes in the denouement, her second attempt at getting her husband to notice her more for who she is and not for who society wants her to be.

Although Elisa appears confident in her work most of the time, she is also very trapped. She is second to her husband, and almost wants to be set free. She is really alone, she has no one to talk to, no one who can relate to her, and no one to listen to her. She is lonely and caged.

Things change when a man shows up at her house while Henry is gone, and she gets a taste of what life could be like away from Henry's ranch. The Tinker is a fascinating person to Elisa, and she enjoys talking to him about gardening and how much work it is, and most of all, about her most precious chrysanthemums, which she gives to Tinker along with exact gardening instructions. Elisa's relationship with Tinker is so much about Elisa being excited by his way of life, and wondering what it would be like to live like that. She wants a change in her way of life. She takes off her gardening gloves and lets some of her hair down, showing that Elisa is possibly interested in the Tinker. The climax of the story happens when she sees the chrysanthemums that she gave Tinker to treasure and take care of in the road. She is very hurt and angry at this sight, and something changes inside of her.

The story's denouement is about Elisa's mental and physical changes after the climax. Elisa walks to Henry dressed in much more feminine clothing and with an almost determined way about her to prove that she can be what society wants her to be. It's as though she's given up trying to be who she is, the opposite of what she is supposed to be, and given in because she realizes that no matter how hard she tries to stand out and show that women don't have to be what they are told to be, no one will appreciate her. She will always be Elisa Allen, Henry's trapped wife.

Curley's wife has no name that the reader knows of. She belongs to Curley, therefore she is known simply as Curley's wife. She is misread by everyone on the ranch from the very

beginning. She is accused of being a whore due to her very feminine appearance, she paints her nails red, wears heavy makeup, always wears a dress, and keeps her hair in tight curls. She craves attention from her husband, and when she doesn't get it, she tries to get attention from anyone she thinks might possibly give it to her, but the only way she knows how to get the attention she wants is through flirting and sexuality. Why she feels that this is the only way to get attention is debateable, she's very young and made a terrible mistake when she married Curley. He is abusive and traps her. She is trapped.

No one cares about Curley's wife. Bad things are constantly being said about her, and no one ever even thought about trying to get to know her. She is very alone in her own world, and wants to get out. Although it's never said, there's a good chance that her husband is physically abusive towards her, and if he isn't yet, he soon will be. She later tells Lennie that she doesn't like Curley. She wants to be free.

Her conversation with Lennie helps the reader understand Curley's wife a little bit better. She originally wanted to be an actress, she doesn't like her husband, and she wants to be free. After they talk for awhile, she invites Lennie to touch her hair, telling him that it's soft. He does this and immediately becomes attached and obsessed with her smooth curls. He grabs onto her hair and doesn't let go. He eventually breaks her neck and kills her, setting her free.

Curley's wife's denouement shows a few of the main men on the ranch looking at her dead body. She looks peaceful after being euthanized by Lennie who has run away. She will never have to feel the pain of being a woman in that time period, or the pain of being married to Curley ever again. She is no longer trapped.

The idea of being trapped appears in the stories of both characters. They are both trapped by society, they are both trapped by their husbands, and they are both trapped by their environment. Elisa Allen is married to Henry who is definitely not a bad person, he just won't listen to her or notice her trying to get his attention. Henry is oblivious. Curley, however, is extremely abusive, and shows his wife no respect whatsoever. It's debatable whether he's oblivious, or if he notices his wife and just doesn't care about her and what she has to say and what she wants to do. Both women wanted to be treated as equals to men, and both will never get that feeling of complete equality.

Elisa takes an interest in the Tinker's way of life in a similar way to the way that Curley's wife takes an interest in Lennie's life. Both want to know what it's like to be a man, what it's like to be favored in society, and what it's like to be free. Both get killed by the men that they talk to. Elisa gets killed emotionally, and Curley's wife gets killed physically. For Curley's wife, it really was like euthanization. She was asking to get out of her caged life. Things were slightly more complicated in Elisa's situation. When she saw the chrysanthemums on the side of the road, it hurt her. It was emotional slaughter. It changed her. She changed her look, and she tried her best to almost change who she was, but a person can't completely change who they are. She will always be hurt and damaged. She will never be released like Curley's wife was. She may be trapped forever.

John Steinbeck was able to give his readers a very good idea of what it meant to be a trapped woman in the time period that he was writing about. Society pushed women back and men were always the ones in power. No one cared about what a woman had to say. Even their own husbands were blind to what their wives wanted, and didn't care at all. Elisa Allen and

Curley's wife are most certainly not unintelligent, and both in many ways are smarter than their husbands. Both know what they want, but neither of them can find a way to get to it. Complete equality, some authority, the chance at power. Society wins. If you are a woman in the early American society, you are trapped.