

An Analysis on *The Chrysanthemums* based on the Perspective of Archetypal Criticism

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Abstract: *The Chrysanthemums* is a short story written by John Steinbeck, a modern American writer. The short story reveals the heroine's inner pain and spiritual pursuit by taking the chrysanthemums as a central image and clue. The paper aims to analyze the short story based on the perspective of archetypal criticism. It mainly includes three parts: the first one is about archetypes of images and characters, the second part is to analyze the archetype of motif, and the third part is about the archetype of narrative structure.

Keywords: *The Chrysanthemums*; Archetypal criticism; Images; Characters; Motif; Narrative structure

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1. Introduction

Elisa Allen, a country woman, is the main character in *The Chrysanthemums*. Elisa is completely devoted to her chrysanthemums. She feels lonely and miserable without her husband's understanding. A tinker visits her yard one day and compliments her chrysanthemums with pleasant comments. Elisa has the misconception that the tinker is the one who truly appreciates her chrysanthemums and understands herself, allowing her to feel confident and happy. However, she eventually discovers that the chrysanthemums have been destroyed. She then succumbs to loneliness and misery once more. The development of literature, according to Frye, is a cycle movement based on myth and archetype. He considers the Bible to be the foundation of literary structure. Although some scholars have studied *The Chrysanthemums* based on the perspective of archetypal criticism, there are no articles giving any detail nor an all-sided analysis. In this paper, *The Chrysanthemums* is analyzed based on the perspective of archetypal criticism in all aspects, including images, characters, motifs and narrative structure.

2. Archetypes of images and characters

2.1. Archetype of the Garden

According to *Genesis*, Adam and Eve live a peaceful and carefree existence in the *Garden* of Eden, which God created. They can eat fruits when they are hungry and rest under the tree when they are tired in the *Garden* of Eden. Around them are lovely blossoms and gentle animals. For them, the *Garden* of Eden is a utopia where only happiness and pleasure exist. Elisa Allen's garden is a retreat as well as an utopia for her. Elisa's spouse is unaware of her passions and does not appreciate her chrysanthemums. He is just concerned with material things and money. Elisa should raise apples instead of chrysanthemums, he says. Furthermore, in such patriarchal environment, woman is denied the opportunity to explore the outside world as a male. She spends her days doing housekeeping and looking after her family. As a result, it's clear that Elisa's

marriage and life aren't going well. Staying in her yard and tending to her chrysanthemums is the only way to make her happy. She can get rid of her husband, who doesn't understand her inner world, and the tiresome cleaning in her garden. Nothing can get in her way. She can converse with her spirit because she is the person herself. The chrysanthemums represent her or her spirituality. By growing them, she can feel the charming and beauty of herself, which brings great pleasure to her. In short, the garden is a place where Elisa can feel herself and gain happiness.

2.2. Archetype of *The Chrysanthemums*

The archetype of the scapegoat can be found in the *Old Testament*. Jehovah required Abraham to sacrifice his only son as a tribute to him in order to prove his allegiance. When Abraham raised his sword to slay his son, Jehovah was impressed by his sincerity and commitment and intervened to prevent him from carrying out his plan. When Abraham untied his son, he noticed a sheep caught in the thicket and unable to move, so he sacrificed it as a sacrifice to God. The scapegoat archetype of chrysanthemums can be considered. The chrysanthemums represent Elisa's spirit and identity. She wishes to go around the world and live a free life. But she is unable to do so. She is pleased with herself when she delivers the tinker a pot of chrysanthemums. As the chrysanthemums, in her opinion, can go outdoors on her behalf. She wants to be that pot of chrysanthemums so she can live a free life in the outer world. Elisa also has a thing for the tinker. She has a strong desire to accompany him outside. The tinker, on the other hand, throws the chrysanthemums down the road. It represents the tinker's lack of appreciation for her beauty and understanding of her inner life. All the tinker cares about is money and a comfortable existence. Elisa, in fact, is the one who gets left behind. The discarded chrysanthemum is nothing more than a convenient scapegoat.

2.3. Archetypes of tinker

She is pleased with herself when she delivers the tinker a pot of chrysanthemums. Due to the chrysanthemums, in her opinion, can go outdoors on her behalf. She wants to be that pot of chrysanthemums so she can live a free life in the outer world. Elisa also has a thing for the tinker. She has a strong desire to accompany him outside. The tinker, on the other hand, throws the chrysanthemums down the road. It represents the tinker's lack of appreciation for her beauty and understanding of her inner life. All the tinker cares about is money and a comfortable existence. Elisa, in fact, is the one who gets left behind. The discarded chrysanthemum is nothing more than a convenient scapegoat. Because they both disguise themselves and lie to others, it's logical to say that Satan is the archetypal of the tinker. The tinker tells lies in the garb of someone who understands Elisa and loves the beauty of her chrysanthemums, while Satan disguises him as a serpent. Furthermore, they both achieve their objectives. The temptation is too strong for Eve and Adam, and they succumb to it and eat the forbidden fruit. Tinker deceives Elisa, who believes he is the one who truly appreciates herself and the beauty of her chrysanthemums. She is overjoyed and even has a crush on the tinker after that. As a result, she locates something that can be repaired by the tinker. In addition, the tinker can be regarded as an evil invader as Satan. Before Satan enters into the *Garden of Eden*, Eve and Adam lived a happy and carefree life without pain. Nevertheless, because of Satan, they fall into an unhappy life. For Elisa, although she is not happy and satisfied with her life. But she finds great consolation through growing chrysanthemums in her garden. Although being unhappy, she is peaceful. However, the appearance of the tinker in her garden disturbs her peace. He gives her a false impression that he understands her beauty and her feelings, which makes her rapturous and seems to give her a rebirth. But soon she finds that she is cheated, which deeply hurts her and makes her feel much sadder than before. Obviously, the tinker is an embodiment of evil for Elisa; he brings greater pain to Elisa.

In the ancient Greek myth, Pandora is a beautiful woman with a perfect image created by gods. She is

an incarnation of all talents and beauty. Zeus gives Pandora to mankind as a gift, and her task is to bring endless disaster and suffering to human. She comes to the world of human with a box full of gifts that are harmful to humanity. In the end, she opens the box, and then, the disaster in the box slowly permeates the world, eroding the human mind and destroying the original peaceful life of mankind. Although the tinker is a poor and uneducated man, his archetype still can be seen as Pandora. First of all, he is a perfect person in Elisa's eyes. For Elisa, he lives a free and wonderful life that Elisa wants to have. And, he understands her spiritual life and appreciates her beauty and the beauty of her chrysanthemums. His image is as perfect as that of Pandora in Elisa's first view. Secondly, the reason why the tinker enters into Elisa's garden to approach her and please her is that he wants to ask something from her to repair. He is a cunning person carrying his own intention and desire like Pandora. Thirdly, the tinker evokes Elisa's inner desire and brings great pain to Elisa. When Elisa finds that the tinker is a liar, she is in great suffering. The tinker not only breaks her peaceful life, but also makes her feel more painful than before, which is similar to what Pandora does to human beings. Therefore, it's reasonable and acceptable to see Pandora as the archetype of tinker.

2.4. Archetypes of Elisa Allen

When it comes to Elisa, there also are many archetypes of her. The paper lists her two archetypes: Eve and Europa. When staying at her garden, Elisa is happy and enjoyable. Because she can find her value and feel her own charming in the process of taking care of the chrysanthemums. Although she is lonely, she can communicate with her spirit and soul there, which is her pursuit. But when the tinker appears in her garden and lets her misunderstand that he really knows her inner world, she is deeply attracted by the tinker and even wants to have sexual relationship with him. Although she doesn't put the sexual impulse into action, she gives him her precious chrysanthemums that represent herself. In other words, she has put her spirit into his hands, which can be seen as a spiritual bonding. She betrays her husband in the spiritual aspect, which is not better than physical betrayal. Therefore, we can say that Elisa also eats the "the forbidden fruit." However, the result is that the tinker throws away her chrysanthemums on the road. When she finds out the truth, she totally collapses and suffers a lot. So, Elisa is like Eve. Both of them can't resist the temptation, and then fall into a painful situation.

In the ancient Greek myth, there is a beautiful princess named Europa. Zeus loves her beautiful appearance; thus, he seduces her in the guise of a bull. However, when Zeus succeeds, he deserts Europa. Apparently, Elisa is like Europa. In order to gain his own benefits, the tinker pleases Elisa by disguising himself as a person who knows and understands her. The lonely Elisa thinks that the tinker really understands her spirit, and then feels happy. She gives the tinker her chrysanthemums that is a symbol of her spirit and herself. But the tinker throws away the chrysanthemums after he is out of Elisa's sight, which means Elisa or her spirit is abandoned. Zeus doesn't love Europa herself but loves her beautiful appearance. Similarly, the tinker doesn't understand Elisa or appreciate her beauty but wants to gain something from her to earn money. When the tinker gets what he wants, he discards the chrysanthemum that is the symbol of Elisa. Elisa is as miserable as Europa. Both of them are used by others and then abandoned by them.

3. Archetype of motif: The quest

In ancient Greek myth, great heroes often experience a lot of sufferings. They usually go through a long journey and devote themselves to pursue their goals and ideals. In the end, they complete the pursuit and achieve ultimate success through their unremitting efforts. In *The Chrysanthemums*, the motif of quest can be found in Elisa and the tinker. Both of them are in the quest of ideals.

Elisa's quest is different from the traditional one. In ancient Greek myth, the heroes usually succeed in achieving their pursuits. Although Elisa fails to achieve her ideals, she pursues the richness of her spiritual life and wants to live a free life. However, in that patriarchal society and remote countryside, her

ideals are very hard to realize. Elisa always keeps her ideals in mind and helps herself in her own way. On one hand, in order to have her own spiritual world, she stays at her garden and takes care of the chrysanthemums. When she enters into her garden, she goes into her own spiritual world. Nevertheless, it's not enough because she is still under suppression and influence of her husband. On the other hand, she gives her chrysanthemums to the tinker. In her view, the chrysanthemums can be the symbol of herself. She wants the chrysanthemums to live a free life by following the tinker. It's like that she can feel the outside world and live a free life if the chrysanthemums can go outside. Sadly, the tinker discards the chrysanthemums when he is out of her sight, which symbolizes she fails in her pursuit.

For the tinker, his goal is to get something to repair and his pursuit is to earn money. That's why he rides in his wagon to walk around. To achieve his goal and pursuit, he does his best to please Elisa by flattering words. Then, he gets something from Elisa to repair, which indicates that he is successful in his pursuit.

4. Archetype of narrative structure

Frye puts forward the U-shaped and Inverted U-shaped prototype narrative structure ^[1] in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. It is obvious that Elisa's experience reflects Inverted U-shaped narrative structure. Before the tinker shows up, although she is not happy with her life and marriage, it is calm and peaceful. She is able to pursue her spiritual life and find consolation in her garden through her own way. When the tinker appears, she slowly believes that there is still someone who understands her inner world and appreciates her beauty. As a result, she feels excited and seems to have a rebirth. In other words, the appearance of the tinker leads herself and her life to going up till the peak of Inverted U, but when Elisa finds the truth that the tinker lies to her and cheats her, she feels desperate, which is worse than before. Then, she falls down to the bottom from the peak of that Inverted U. Consequently, it is obvious that the author uses the Inverted U-shaped prototype of narrative structure in this short story.

5. Conclusion

The paper presents a concrete analysis on *The Chrysanthemums* from the perspective of archetypal criticism as possible as it can, covering images, characters, motif and narrative structure. There is no doubting that those traditional works are the source of our literature. Archetypal criticism provides us a way to analysis literary works from an original perspective and helps the following generations to attach great importance to our original and traditional works. Through archetypal criticism, people are able to learn more about our traditional literary works, which is beneficial to the cultural inheritance of human.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

[1] Frye N, 1982, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York.