

Teaching with
50 Great Short Stories,
edited by Milton Crane

Vocabulary, Comprehension Tests, and Writing Activities

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J. WESTON
WALCH
PUBLISHER

Portland, Maine

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THE CHRYSANTHEMUMS *John Steinbeck*

Vocabulary Give the definition and part of speech for each word as it is used in the story. Write sentences with ten words of your choice, and underline the words in the sentences.

foothills	shares	scrub
shaggy	clod-hopper	snips
scratcher	smudge	coupe
aphids	sowbugs	cutworms
terrier	transplant	crisp
burro	flaps	skirling
rangy	taut	ambassadorial
daintily	hackles	calloused
fords	asperity	fugitive
mongrel	patented	fawning
anvil	luxurious	pumice
primly	stubble	

Questions Write brief answers for the following questions.

1. Describe the setting. Why was it a time of “quiet and waiting”?
2. Who is Elisa Allen? What is she doing as the story opens? Be specific.
3. What statement does Henry make about Elisa’s talent for gardening, and how does he wish she might use her talents?
4. What business deal has Henry just made?
5. How does he plan to celebrate?
6. How does Henry joke with Elisa? What is her response?
7. Who arrives, and what is his mission?
8. What does the author suggest when he says that the man’s eyes are full of “the brooding that gets in the eyes of teamsters and of sailors”?
9. What is the tinker’s annual route, and how long does it take?
10. At first, Elisa is annoyed by and resistant to the tinker’s sales pitch. What does the tinker do to change her attitude?
11. Why does Elisa give the tinker a pot of chrysanthemum shoots?
12. Do you believe the tinker’s story about the other woman’s garden? Why or why not?
13. What effect does Elisa and the tinker’s discussion of flowers have on Elisa? Describe it.

(continued)



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14. Describe her reaction to the tinker's visit as she prepares for her evening out.
15. Comment on the kind of communication that exists between Henry and Elisa based on his comments on her appearance. What is the dark speck in the road, and how does it get there?
16. What does Elisa realize when she sees the dark speck?
17. Elisa asks to have wine at dinner and suggests she might be willing to go to the fights. Why does she do this?
18. Is Elisa aware of the importance of her need to communicate with her husband? If so, how does the reader know?

Writing

"The Chrysanthemums" is a story about communication in a marriage that is not unhappy but does have its limitations. Neither Elisa nor Henry can explain the psychological aspects of their relationship, but the author suggests that Elisa needs more than the marriage offers. She is lonely; she finds more joy and fulfillment in planting her flowers and being close to the earth than she does in her marriage.

Often, relationships are difficult and unfulfilling because people fail to articulate their needs, sometimes because they do not understand what these needs are. One might extend this example of a lack of communication to other family relationships. For example, consider the adolescent and parent who go round and round in repeated arguments that never resolve anything.

Can you think of any situation that might have had a better outcome if methods of communication were improved? Consider a situation you've observed or experienced in which efforts to improve communication have had good results. Examples might involve the use of an apology, constructive criticism, praise, or an explanation.

Write a one-page composition, first presenting a situation, next describing what happened, and then explaining whether communication could have been improved and, if so, how.



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QUIZ

A. Use each of the following words in a sentence of your own. Underline the word in the sentence.

aphids _____

skirling _____

hackles _____

asperity _____

pumice _____

B. Write "True" or "False" for each of the following statements about the story.

_____ 1. Henry sells the three men an oil well.

_____ 2. Elisa is a woman who enjoys caring for her flowers.

_____ 3. The tinker repairs two old aluminum saucepans for Elisa.

_____ 4. In appreciation she invites him in for a cup of specially brewed coffee.

_____ 5. Elisa asks Henry if they could have wine for dinner, and she asks him questions about the prize fights.

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Key to Questions

1. A farming and ranching area on the Salinas River. It is a cold December day, and the farmers are waiting for a good rain.
2. She is a thirty-five-year-old farmer and rancher's wife who enjoys her gardening and who meticulously tends her chrysanthemums as required at different seasons of the year. As the story opens she is working in her flower garden.
3. She has a "gift with things," and he wishes she would use her talents in his orchards to raise larger apples.
4. He has sold thirty head of three-year-old steers.
5. He will take Elisa to dinner and to the movies.
6. He says he will take her to the fights, to which she objects.
7. A tinker who repairs pots and pans and sharpens knives and scissors.
8. Open-ended. Perhaps because such people are never satisfied in life. They always want more; they are restless and always on the move.
9. He goes from Seattle to San Diego every year, six months each way.
10. He starts questioning her about her chrysanthemums.
11. The tinker says he will take them to a woman who has no chrysanthemums in her garden.
12. Answers may vary. No. He uses it as a sales pitch.
13. As Eliza talks about her flowers, the reader can sense her passionate and potentially uncontrollable energy.
14. She becomes aware of her own body as she bathes, and she dresses especially carefully as she prepares for her night out with her husband.
15. They are verbally awkward and clumsy in their efforts to communicate. He tries to tell her how nice she looks; her reaction is confused, stiff, and standoffish.
16. The bunch of chrysanthemum shoots that were thrown off the wagon by the tinker.
17. That the tinker is a con man. He has thrown away the chrysanthemum shoots and kept the pot.
18. She is trying to reach out to bond with her husband.
19. She varies her behavior in order to try to change things, first by asking to have wine with dinner, which is a way of relaxing, and second by suggesting she might accompany him to the fights, something she doesn't think she will like but she will participate in to please her husband. He doesn't understand her needs, but he does care for her. She realizes this, and she tries to get closer to him through changing her own behavior.

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Key to Quiz

A. Answers will vary.

B. 1. False 2. True 3. True 4. False 5. True