

Marginalisation and Alienation in Saturday Market

By Elizabeth Black

'Saturday Market' depicts the social and personal consequences of female transgression through the figure of an unnamed woman who is scrutinised and isolated as a result of an undefined misdemeanour. The specific nature of the woman's crime remains ambiguously concealed behind the obscure description of an exposed "red dead thing". However, the vivid corporeality of the blood soaking through the woman's shawl carries associations with an array of feminine 'sins' and shame such as miscarriage, abortion or infanticide.

*See, you, the shawl is wet, take out from under
The red dead thing—. In the white of the moon
On the flags does it stir again? Well, and no wonder!
Best make an end of it; bury it soon.*

The excruciatingly public nature of the woman's exposure accentuates the precarious position of females in patriarchal society. The poem is set within a close-knit rural community gathered at the weekly market to trade goods and gossip. Mew views the market from the perspective of the outsider, describing it as a nightmarish bombardment of sights, smells and sounds combined with disconcerting sexual undertones: "Pitchers and sugar-sticks, ribbons and laces,/ Posies and whips and dicky-birds' seed". This is an anti-pastoral scene of trauma rather than refuge, where women are subject to social judgement by locals who leer voyeuristically at their shame. The underlying anxiety of the poem is the idea of the female body as a site of disease, madness or aberration; a potential risk to society which must be policed and scrutinised. As in many of Mew's poems, rural places are particularly dangerous for women and other marginalised individuals who are vulnerable to small town scandal. The serious consequences of personal trauma being turned into gossip are evident in the rejection of the woman from society, leaving her exiled and vulnerable to the duplicitous suggestions of the unidentified speaker who sinisterly urges her towards isolation and suicide.

*What were you showing in Saturday Market
That set it grinning from end to end
Girls and gaffers and boys of twenty—?
Cover it close with your shawl, my friend—
Hasten you home with the laugh behind you,*

In 'Saturday Market' the reader is positioned with the sufferer: the persecuted woman who is guided towards complete isolation by the malevolent speaker. This shift in perspective encourages greater awareness of the social pressure on women to conform by depicting the painful consequences of failing to do so. This focus on the female experience of social isolation in rural areas presents an alternative perspective on the modernist theme of alienation that illuminates the experience of vulnerable individuals beyond the centre. For such individuals, the modernist idea of the mass or crowd is not a subject of revulsion but a space of safety in which they strive to blend in and conceal their otherness. By aligning the reader with the persecuted woman, the poem has the potential to create sympathy or empathy for female

experience. For the woman in 'Saturday Market', her choices are narrowed as she is denied refuge within the human sphere and encouraged to go "out of sight". Nature is often associated with the female, but here isolation is made absolute as the natural world is taken from her and she is systematically displaced from the world.

*Think no more of the swallow,
Forget, you, the sea,
Never again remember the deep green hollow
Or the top of the kind old tree!*

As in many of Mew's poems, interiors are associated with burial or enclosure: an ending alluded to as the speaker ambiguously encourages "a long, long rest". Banished from human society and dissuaded from retreat in the natural world, Mew depicts a pessimistic portrait of the fate of marginalised individuals in modern society. The poem develops the reader's empathy by emphasising the real experience of alienation beyond its intellectual conceptualisation and showing the consequences of transgression that limit altruism between the vulnerable.

- Extract from "Bury Your Heart": Charlotte Mew and the Limits of Empathy. *Humanities* 2019, 8, 175.