

Charlotte Mew: The Farmer's Bride

"Shy as a leveret, swift as he,

Straight and slim as a young larch tree..."

The Farmer's Bride describes the life of a young girl married to a much older man; she is clearly miserable in the relationship and tries to run away – only to be hunted down like an escaped animal and locked up in the farmer's home. Narrated from the perspective of the farmer, it slowly becomes clear that the farmer thinks only of how his young wife might fulfil his own wants and needs. By the end of the poem, the reader has the uncomfortable suspicion that he might force himself on her – if he has not done so already. In this way, the poem illustrates rigid gender expectations held in English society of the time, whereby women were robbed of autonomy and humanity and treated as sexual objects or menial servants.

Born in 1869 during England's Victorian era, Mew would have been all too familiar with the position of most women in society. Women had few legal rights and were considered the 'property' of their fathers or husbands: marriage was akin to a transfer of property from one to another. Traditionally, a young woman could be expected to look after the household, cook, clean, and be obedient to her husband. A woman's greatest success was being a mother. Age gaps between men and women were common, with some women marrying as early as age 12 or 13, and marriage agreements being made even earlier.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know this poem?

1. A major theme of the poem is dislike, contempt of or discrimination against women.

- (a) Misanthropy.
- (b) Misogyny.
- (c) Misunderstanding.
- (d) Misandry.

2. How long ago did the farmer choose his bride?

- (a) One year.
- (b) Two years.
- (c) Three years.
- (d) Five years.

3. Like the _____ of a winter's day...

- (a) Close.
- (b) End.
- (c) Shut.
- (d) Turn.

4. The name of a deliberate break or pause in the middle of a line of poetry:

- (a) Caesura.
- (b) Syncopation.
- (c) Sibilance.
- (d) Assonance.

5. Repeated letters at the beginning of or within words is called:

- (a) Sibilance.
- (b) Assonance.
- (c) Alliteration.
- (d) Consonance.

6. "Out among the _____ her be," they said...

- (a) Cows.
- (b) Chickens.
- (c) Sheep.
- (d) Pigs.

7. What is the prevailing meter of the poem?

- (a) Iambic pentameter.
- (b) Trochaic dimeter.
- (c) Iambic tetrameter.
- (d) Anapestic octameter.

8. Which animal is the farmer's bride NOT compared to in the poem?

- (a) Leveret.
- (b) Rabbit.
- (c) Mouse.
- (d) Bird.

9. A symbol of fertility in the poem:

- (a) Red berries.
- (b) Beasts in stall.
- (c) Brown oak trees.
- (d) A magpie's feather.

10. Where does the farmer's bride sleep?

- (a) In the barn.
- (b) In the attic.
- (c) In the bedroom.
- (d) On the sofa.

Understanding and Interpretation

1. How would you describe the speaker's attitude towards his wife at the start of the poem?

2. At several points in the poem the farmer's bride is either associated with animals, or directly compared to them. Find one or two examples and explain what you think is the effect of these **comparisons**:

3. The poem suggests that the farmer and his bride are not suitable companions. How does it do this? In what ways do they **contrast**?

4. How do you think the farmer's bride feels at various points in the poem? How does the poem indirectly reveal her feelings?

5. What is the effect of hearing the story told from the **perspective** of the farmer?

6. How does the poem end? Is it possible to feel any sympathy for the Farmer at the end of the poem? What thoughts and feelings does the end of the poem suggest to you?

Poetry Study: Types of Alliteration

'More like a little frightened fay...'

Poems are made of words. No other choice a poet makes is more important than words, which are the bricks and mortar of the poem. Words stimulate: our ears prick up with the pleasure of listening to familiar or unfamiliar words arranged in new combinations. Sometimes, people listen to poems read in a language they cannot understand; the sentences *sound* real and arouse feelings regardless. People listening to African writer Isak Dinesen said her voice sounded like rain falling. Little children love listening to the sound of their parents reading, even if they are too young to follow the story. Just sounds, and patterns of sound, connect to our senses and stimulate our imaginations.

Poets strengthen certain aspects of language, including sound, on purpose to create effects.

Alliteration is one of the oldest formal devices in English poetry. Repeating an initial consonant sound used to be called **head-rhyme**; *Beowulf*, an Anglo-Saxon epic poem composed between 650 – 750AD, has 3,182 short, alliterating lines! In these lines from a fifteenth century anonymous poem, a vexed writer was kept awake by the clattering anvils of a blacksmith working at night, and he wrote:

*Swarte smeked smithes smattered with smoke
Drive me to deth with din of here dintes.*

Consonance differs from alliteration only in that alliteration repeats the first letter while consonance repeats sounds within words as in this couplet by Alfred Lord Tennyson:

*The moan of doves in immemorial elms
And murmuring of innumerable bees.*

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds within lines of poetry. In *The Farmer's Bride*, Charlotte Mew employs assonance in line 25, as the farmer reaches out to touch his wife, she recoils:

"Not near, not near!" her eyes beseech.

These long vowel sounds create an almost audible sound of fear and pain, such as an animal's frightened whine, evoking a sense of the girl's fear when men are near.

Activity

This table describes six different **categories of alliteration and consonance** made through the repetition of certain letters. Can you find an example of each type of alliteration in *The Farmer's Bride*? Suggest specific effects created by Charlotte Mew:

Type of alliteration / consonance and general effects	Example(s) from <i>The Farmer's Bride</i>	Specific Effects
Nasal: N, M. The blocking of air inside the mouth and nasal cavity creates the 'N' and 'M' sound. Nasal is historically used to create strong, negative emotions such as reluctance or denial. However, it can also be soft, dreamy, and musical, like the sound of humming.	<i>Three <u>summers</u> since I chose a <u>maid</u>, Too young <u>maybe</u> – but <u>more</u>'s to do...</i>	The opening lines are filled with nasal sounds as the Farmer begins to tell us about his wife. As these sounds are made by trapping air in the nose, they could represent his 'trapped' negative feelings such as his mounting frustration that she will not talk to him – or permit herself to be touched.

<p>Dental: D, T.</p> <p>Dental creates a harsh, clearly defined, short consonant sound. By the very nature of the sound produced, this is classed as hard. Dental is often combined with plosive to emphasise similarly strong, pointed, violent, sudden or abrupt ideas.</p>	<p><i>Too young maybe – but more's <u>to do</u> At harvest <u>time</u> than <u>bide</u> and <u>woo</u>.</i></p>	
<p>Fricative: F, V, Th.</p> <p>Fricative sounds are produced by forcing air through a compressed space, either using lips or teeth. Because of the way the sound is made it can easily express effort. It can also be used to express emotions such as frustration, can mimic the sound of weather, and can suggest soft movements.</p>		
<p>Plosive: B, P.</p> <p>The name plosive derives from the explosion of breath from the lips created when the letter is pronounced. The harsh sounds of plosive alliteration often highlight strength, negativity, violence or suddenness. It is classed as a hard sound.</p>		
<p>Aspirant: H</p> <p>Aspirant alliteration is created by expelling air all the way through the mouth. The breath can be audibly heard as the 'H' sound is being said. As such this sound is good for expressing a release of emotion, such as a heavy sigh, or a sudden indrawn breath. It is classed as soft.</p>		
<p>Sibilant: S, Z, Sh.</p> <p>Sibilance draws out the 'S' sound, creating a hissing noise. This is sometimes associated with evil. In modern poetry, the 'S' can represent many things such as the sound of the wind, the movement of water, a tearing sound and other effects. It is classed as a soft sound.</p>		

Poetry Study: seasonal images

'Short days shorten and the oaks are brown...'

The Farmer's Bride isn't the only one of Charlotte Mew's poems in which the seasons symbolise different stages of life, but it is one of the most poignant. Beginning with a reminiscence of summer and a full harvest, the poem moves through various seasons, including autumn ('Fall') when his young bride runs away; a spring full of 'wild violets' over which the farmer fantasizes; and winter, which makes the farmer's childless home seem even emptier.

In fact, the entire fifth stanza is given over entirely to **images** of winter which seem lifeless and full of decay. The gloomy winter scene seems to symbolise his own fears of ageing. The chilly images of brown oak trees and a 'low grey sky' grow darker as the winter landscape seems to reflect his own loneliness back at him. In poetry, when the features of the natural world reflect human emotional states, it is called **pathetic fallacy**. The sequence of mournful images in this stanza reflect the speaker's own sadness everywhere his eyes fall.

Just as the reader may begin to feel a touch of sympathy for the old farmer, though, the **images** in stanza five change. He imagines Christmas as a lonely time and fixates on the image of 'reddening berries.' These round, ripening shapes **symbolise** fertility – once again, the farmer places his own desires before any consideration of his frightened young wife. He sees her primarily as a sexual object whose most important function is to bear his children.



Activity

How many **seasonal images** can you find in the poem? Complete this list:

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------|
| Line 1: 'summers' | Line 35: |
| Line 3: 'harvest-time' | Line 36: |
| Line 6: | Line 37: |
| Line 9: | Line 38: |
| Line 32: | Line 39: |
| Line 34: | Line 40: 'Christmas time' |

Discussion Point: **dramatic monologue**

A narrative poem told from the point of view of a fictional speaker is called a **dramatic monologue**. Thanks to poets like Charlotte Mew and Robert Browning (for example, *My Last Duchess*) this type of poem was popular in the late 19th century. Hearing a character tell a story in their own voice allows the reader to imagine him or her as a real person, making the poem seem almost like a real encounter. The verses of the poem are long and irregular, as if the farmer is telling a story to his friends ‘down at t’ pub’. Related to storytelling, the **dramatic monologue** helps create dramatic, story-telling effects – such as suspense, tension, humour, pathos, irony and so on.

Discuss the monologue’s speaker. Is he a good speaker? Does his monologue draw you in or create suspense? Can you judge him by what he says and does? Do your feelings towards him change at different points in the poem? Can you question any of his choices? What effect is created when he suddenly gives you a very short stanza?

Study Questions

Practice writing analytical paragraphs by including embedded quotation and comment on the effect of words, images, or poetic and literary devices.

1. How does the first verse establish the speaker’s attitude towards his wife?
 2. What makes verse two so disturbing to read?
 3. How is the young girl dehumanised in stanza three?
 4. Discuss the way Mew employs seasonal images in verses four and five. What do these images represent? How do the images in these two verses compare and contrast?
 5. How does the final verse create an ominous impression of danger coming?
 6. What is your opinion of the Farmer’s character after reading the poem? Is he an entirely selfish character? Are there moments where you find yourself sympathising with him?
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Did You Know?

Charlotte Mew was not the only late 19th century poet questioning established gender roles and challenging the rigid social status-quo. Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barret Browning were also writing revolutionary poetry about injustice and inequality. Together, women like Mew and her contemporaries helped create the archetype of the **New Woman**: empowered, educated, ambitious, and independent. In her lifetime, Mew would witness victories for women’s rights in England, such as winning the right to vote in 1921.