Charlotte Mew: Saturday Market

"Bury your heart in some deep, green hollow,

Or hide it up in a kind old tree…"

Saturday Market describes a close-knit rural community who, on a weekend, descend to the local market to trade goods and socialise. The poem is narrated by somebody who seems to hang back on the edge of the market, not really getting too close or too involved. So she has an ideal vantage point to witness the crowd cruelly single out another woman to jeer and jostle. It's not immediately clear why the people at the market have suddenly turned on her, but, as the poem follows her home, we see her dispose of a 'red dead thing' and wonder what really happened?

Whilst Charlotte Mew could be warm and affectionate with her friends (like Alida and Harold Munro), she did not enjoy her small fame and preferred to remain aloof from wider literary society. She was stung by critics who did not take well to her early published work and mistrusted people easily. Her short stature and refusal to play the part of a docile, submissive female (she walked unescorted about London, rolled her own cigarettes, and wore her hair in a bob) often placed her at odds with 'polite society' which she felt was restraining. As time passed, she found herself increasingly alienated – a theme that resonates powerfully in *Saturday Market*.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know this poem?

1. Where should you hide your heart?
(a) In the ground.
(b) Up a tree.
(c) Across the sea.
(d) In the hearth.

2. *In Saturday's Market there's _____ a'plenty…*
(a) Eggs.
(b) Ducks.
(c) Leeks.
(d) Cheese.

3. Which of these products is NOT at the market?
(a) Ribbons.
(b) Sugar-sticks.
(c) Flowers.
(d) Fruit.

4. Which of these people is NOT at the market?
(a) Old men
(b) Boys of twenty.
(c) Prostitutes.
(d) Priests.

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5. The name of the technique by which items in a list are connected by 'and':
(a) Polysyndeton.
(b) Epizeuxis.
(c) Asyndeton.
(d) Enjambment.

6. *Cover it close with your _____, my friend* –
(a) Scarf.
(b) Hat
(c) Shawl.
(d) Shirt.

7. What does the girl do with the 'red dead thing'?
(a) Burn it.
(b) Bury it.
(c) Sell it.
(d) Throw it away.

8. 'Anapest' is a foot (group of syllables) arranged:
(a) Unstressed-unstressed-stressed.
(b) Stressed-unstressed.
(c) Unstressed-stressed.
(d) Stressed-unstressed-unstressed.

9. The 'red dead thing' is a:
(a) Simile.
(b) Symbol.
(c) Metonymy.
(d) Caesura.

10. What is the last word of the poem?
(a) Swallow.
(b) Sea.
(c) Hollow.
(d) Tree.

Understanding and Interpretation

1. Look carefully at the first verse. Who do you think the poem is addressed to? Do you think it significant that the swallow in the first verse is described as ‘she’? Do you think the speaker is a ‘he’ or ‘she’?

2. Look closely at the descriptions of the Saturday Market in verse two. How would you describe the **atmosphere** of the market? Does it seem to be a friendly place? Why / why not?

3. Can you describe the position of the speaker in relation to the other people in the scene? How does she relate to the people at the market? What about the embarrassed girl?

4. What is the ‘red dead thing’ in verse four? Is there more than one possibility? Think about literal and **symbolic** meanings:

5. Why do you think the poet repeated the images form the first verse in the final verse? What has changed?

6. The speaker clearly sympathises with the woman who is chased out of the market. Why, then, do you think the speaker doesn’t try to help the girl?

Poetry Study: *rhythm and meter*

'When a murder is over and done why show it?

In Saturday Market nobody cares.'

Languages naturally have **rhythm**. The pace of speech, the beats of sentences, the inflection of voices, rhymes – all of these things occur naturally in spoken and written language. When poets purposefully arrange these devices on a page, they are simply heightening these elements to create effects. This 'organisation' of words into patterns which can be measured is called **meter**. And the technique of discovering a poem's meter is called **scansion**.

The basic unit of measurement in a poem is called a **foot** (because the earliest Greek poets matched the speaking out of their poems to dance steps). Each foot is made of an arrangement of syllables (usually two or three) which are either stressed or unstressed. You can hear these stresses if you speak out loud: for example, '**Please** can you **turn** out the **light**?' has three stressed beats (in **bold**) and four unstressed beats.

In general, most feet will only have one stressed beat (there are some exceptions to this, but it's a good starting point nevertheless). By marking strong beats with an accent, a pattern will start to appear:

Please/ can you **turn**/ out the **light**?/

As you can see, there are three feet in this line; two of these feet are arranged 'unstressed-unstressed-stressed'. The name of this foot is **anapest**. As there are three beats in the line, the rhythm (or meter) is **anapestic trimeter**.

Depending on whether there are one, two, three, four (and so on) feet in a line, meters are called **monometer, dimeter, trimeter, tetrameter, pentameter, hexameter** (or alexandrine), **heptameter, octameter, nonameter** and **decameter**. Of these, by far the most common are tetrameter and pentameter.

Once you have identified the number of feet per line, you can proceed to determine the pattern of accents and stresses. The most common order in English poetry is *unstressed syllables before stressed syllables* (although again, this is far from a rule, and you will find many different arrangements in different poems).

Here are the most common syllable patterns in English poetry:

Unstressed - stressed	**Iamb**	*Or **hide**/ it **up**/ in a **kind**/ old **tree**/*
Stressed - unstressed	**Trochee**	*…/**deep** green /**hol**low*
Unstressed – unstressed - stressed	**Anapest (anapaest)**	***Pitch**/ ers and **sug**/ ar-sticks, **rib**/ bons and **la**/ (ces)*
Stressed – unstressed - unstressed	**Dactyl**	*/**Bu**ry your /**heart** in some…*
Stressed - stressed	**Spondee**	***See**, **you**,/ …*

Activity

Scansion is not an exact science. You may scan a line of poetry slightly differently from your neighbour, depending on how you 'hear' the emphasis in your mind's ear. What is important is to try to discover the **prevailing meter** of a verse or poem. In other words, in what pattern are most of the feet arranged? Don't worry about the odd exception. Actually, when you notice a disturbance to the prevailing rhythm, this might be something worth investigating. Interrupting a set rhythm is a guaranteed way to create an effect on a listener, who will subconsciously hear the variation and 'feel' the disturbance.

Scan the following verses from *Saturday Market* and mark the patterns of stressed beats (**feet**). Can you discover the rhythms of the poem? The first has been **scanned** as way of demonstration:

/**Bu**ry your /**heart** in some /**deep** green /**hol**low

Or **hide**/ it **up**/ in a **kind**/ old **tree**;/

/**Bet**ter still, /**give** it the /**swal**low

When/ she goes **ov**/ er the **sea**./

In Saturday's Market there's eggs a 'plenty

And dead-alive ducks with their legs tied down,

Grey old gaffers and boys of twenty—

Girls and the women of the town—

Pitchers and sugar-sticks, ribbons and laces,

Poises and whips and dicky-birds' seed,

Silver pieces and smiling faces,

In Saturday Market they've all they need.

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,

Over the down—, out of sight,

Fasten your door, though no one will find you,

No one will look on a Market night.

In completing this exercise, you may have discovered that Mew alternates her lines in a specific way: in every verse, if one line ends in a stressed syllable, the next ends in an unstressed syllable. These contrasting lines are called **rising** and **falling rhythms**.

Line ends in an unstressed syllable (falling rhythm).

/**Bu**ry your /**heart** in some /**deep** green /**hol**low

Or **hide**/ it **up**/ in a **kind**/ old **tree**;/

Line ends in a stressed syllable (rising rhythm).

In general, rising rhythms are more emphatic; historically, rising rhythm was also called **masculine rhythm**. By contrast, the falling rhythm is gentler, more lyrical; falling rhythm used to be termed **feminine rhythm**. In some cases, alternating lines of rising and falling rhythm create balance and equilibrium – in other cases this alternation might create conflict or tension. You might like to consider these ideas in light of the tension the speaker feels pervading the scene at the Saturday Market – and the way the crowd suddenly turns on a young woman for reasons that are not entirely clear. Does the opposition between rising and falling lines evoke this social tension?

A particular quirk of Charlotte Mew's poetry is her tendency to break the prevailing meter of a poem or verse. You may have seen this quirk in *The Farmer's Bride* when in verse two, as the mob of villagers chases the young girl across the fields, one line is suddenly extended to eight beats:

So **ov**/ er **sev**/ en-**ac**/ re **field**/ and **up**/ -al**ong**/ acr**oss**/ the **down**/

We **chased**/ her, **fly**/ing **like**/ a **hare**/

Mew employs this same feature in *Saturday Market.* Scan verse five – what happens to the meter of the poem? What would you say is the effect created when Mew lengthens her lines of poetry in this way?

Then lie you straight on your bed for a short, short weeping

And still, for a long, long rest,

There's never a one in the town so sure of sleeping

As you, in the house on the down with a hole in your breast.

Discussion Point: *'feminine sins'*

In her essay *'Bury Your Heart': Charlotte Mew and the limits of empathy*, Elizabeth Black writes:

'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.

What do you think of Black's phrase 'feminine sins?' Is it true that in some places women and girls are discriminated against and ostracized because of feminine issues, such as periods, pregnancy, miscarriage and so on? What do you know about menstruation taboos and their impact on girls and women? Discuss this issue in light of *Saturday Market*.

Study Questions

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

1. Discuss the presentation of nature in the first stanza. Is nature placed in opposition to the human world in this poem? How?

2. Comment on the methods Mew employs to create a disturbing, nightmarish scene in verse two.

3. In what ways does Mew evoke the **theme** of alienation particularly strongly in the third verse?

4. What makes the fourth verse particularly vivid?

5. What changes in verse five? Why does Mew create this change here? How does the **meter** of the lines complement the content of this verse?

6. Discuss the thoughts and feelings created through the repetition of the final verse (**refrain**).

Did You Know?

Charlotte Mew has been associated with a Victorian literary archetype: the Fallen Woman. This character exists on the margins of society. She may be a prostitute, is certainly poor, and is otherwise morally dubious. She is a shadowy, solitary figure who haunts the streets of Victorian towns and cities – and the imaginations of Victorian readers. Throughout her poetry, Mew seeks to 'befriend' or at least sympathise with the Fallen Woman, something you can see in her reaction to the scene in *Saturday Market*.