

The Dangers of Empathy in Ken

By Elizabeth Black

The complexity of empathetic feeling between vulnerable individuals is central to 'Ken'. In the poem, an unnamed speaker witnesses growing tension between the residents of a small town and a mentally impaired man, with the growing social intolerance of his behaviour resulting in his institutionalisation. The speaker is greatly affected by Ken's incarceration, yet despite his direct appeal to them, they fail to speak in his defence when he is taken away. Whilst the speaker's gender is not explicitly stated, their inability to challenge Ken's persecution seems rooted in the non-central social position inhabited by women. This peripheral status informs their fear of revealing a similar sense of difference that could lead to the same fate, as seen in the speaker's panicky insistence that Ken stops knocking on their door. The speaker's empathy for Ken suggests the possibility of an active compassion between marginalised individuals. However, the powerlessness of both individuals, and the fear of exposing similar signs of otherness, overrides the possibility of community or cooperation between the speaker and Ken.

In many of Charlotte Mew's poems, individuals consciously attempt to conceal difference or trauma in order to avoid social scrutiny. However, Ken's physical differences and lack of awareness of social codes preclude him from doing so and therefore exacerbate his vulnerability. The speaker's first encounter with Ken is marked by their awareness of his difference, as they describe him as showing barely "a trace/of likeness to a human face". This initial impression of otherness is emphasised by his position on a "half-lit stair": a repeated symbol of boundaries in Mew's poems. Ken's difference is confirmed by the physicality of his movements as he "ploughed up the street,/Groping, with knarred, high-lifted feet/And arms thrust out as if to beat/Always against a threat of bars." However, the speaker's compassion for Ken and understanding of his essential goodness grows. The description of Ken as an "uncouth bird" initially appears dehumanising, but it also recognises his fundamental gentleness and vulnerability beyond his intimidating physicality. This birdlike description also has feminine associations that further diminishes his separateness from the speaker by emphasising the shared experiences of marginalised people. It also sharpens the later cruelty of caging him in an asylum. With this recognition, the speaker's response to Ken alters, with this shift revealing a dangerous difference between their perceptions and that of mainstream society, which makes it necessary for them to conceal compassion.

A key difference between the speaker and Ken is the speaker's awareness of the importance of adhering to social convention. Ken's unconsciously antisocial behaviour is the opposite of the speaker's self-protection and inhibition. The town is described as austere, monotone and claustrophobic: "A place of bells and cloisters and grey towers,/And black clad people walking in their sleep". Its dominating religious institutions ("watched from end to end/By the great Church above") reflect a rigid moral code and social hierarchy, to which Ken's irreverence is seen as an affront. Rather than recognising his peripheral status, Ken sees himself at the centre of human and non-human society: ". . . all the children and the deer,/Whom every day he went to see/Out in the park, belonged to him." There are clear parallels between Ken and Christ in his innocence, gentleness, and final persecution. This is most apparent in his response to a statue of the crucified Christ in the church. His cry to "Take it away" is interpreted by the townsfolk as evidence of his profanity and ungodliness. However, it is a pure and instinctive expression of

compassion in response to an image of the violent persecution of another human; a public protest against suffering that the speaker is unable to replicate when Ken is taken away.

Whilst Ken's differences and inability to conform to social convention continue to elicit resentment from the narrow-minded town's people, the speaker's sensitivity to his humanity is met with a sense of recognition by Ken and an attempt to communicate:

*Nothing was dead
He 'said "a bird" if he picked up a broken wing,
A perished leaf or any such thing
Was just "a rose"; and once when I had said He must not stand and knock there anymore
He left a twig on the mat outside my door.*

The speaker rejects Ken's message because it threatens to expose a shared 'otherness' that could endanger them in a society that persecutes difference. The reality of this threat and the importance of passing is confirmed by the removal of Ken from the town to an asylum. Interiors are often prisons in Mew's poetry and by locking Ken away from sight the town exposes its fear of those who are different or fail to observe society's rules. Given Ken's love of freedom, this is a significant cruelty. Life in the town moves on unaffected by his absence, but the speaker remains anxious about Ken's treatment "Beneath those twenty windows in a row", ominously remarking "What happen there?/ I do not know."

Ken's final act of self-preservation is to appeal directly to the speaker: "So when they took/Ken to that place, I did not look/After he called and turned on me/His eyes. These I shall see." Despite his impairments, Ken recognises shared characteristics and the possibility that they may speak for him. For 'safe' members of the community, such an act of protest could be interpreted as merciful or Christian, but voicing opposition is more dangerous for marginal members of society who need to avoid scrutiny. The poem foregrounds the painful complexities of empathy for vulnerable people, for whom moving from compassion to altruism risks exposure and harm in societies that fear difference. By failing to challenge Ken's treatment and choosing instead to protect their own freedom, the speaker is complicit in his imprisonment. This poem has personal resonance for Charlotte Mew, who guarded the secret of her siblings' confinement in mental institutions throughout her life. In the context of the new science of eugenics, fear of passing on mental or physical defects was particularly sensitive for Mew, whose poetry is marked by such anxiety about female bodies. However, the strongest impact of her siblings' experience is the foregrounding of empathy for the vulnerable that resonates in 'Ken' and throughout the poems.

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