

## The Asylum Looms (*The Changeling*, *Ken*, *On the Asylum Road*)

*“Do roses grow beneath those twenty windows in a row... What happens there? I do not know.”*

Charlotte Mew’s poetry comes from a period when British society was deeply anxious about mental illness, yet ill-equipped to understand it. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the rapid expansion of the asylum system reflected fears of a growing ‘epidemic’ of madness. Diagnosis was blunt: grief, social nonconformity, poverty, alcoholism, and trauma were labelled as forms of mania, and even linked with moral failure as an explanatory cause. With the field of clinical psychology in its infancy, institutionalisation became society’s primary response to psychological distress, particularly when that distress was inconvenient to families and communities. Throughout the collection, mental illness is intensified by misunderstanding, superstition, and neglect. In *The Changeling*, a child’s difference is seen as something inhuman, allowing society to explain away difference as something supernatural and twisted. *Ken* presents the thin line between sensitivity and instability in a town that slowly withdraws support for an unfortunate man who presents the mind of a child. And *On the Asylum Road* explores an interaction with a group of patients from the nearby asylum, showing the uneasy distance maintained by the public. Over these poems, the shadow of the asylum looms, revealing Mew’s deep fear of the traits she may have inherited: after all, her oldest brother and youngest sister were both committed to asylums from which they were never released.

---

### Knowledge Check

*Try to answer these questions from memory:*

**1. But I, so wild, your disgrace with the \_\_\_\_\_ face...**

- (a) Small pinched
- (b) Queer brown
- (c) Sullen dark
- (d) Shy green

**2. What sound do squirrel’s feet make?**

- (a) Patter
- (b) Tap-tap
- (c) Scuffle
- (d) Stamp

**3. How does the speaker describe the atmosphere in her nursery?**

- (a) Squall
- (b) Storm
- (c) Riot
- (d) Prison

**4. What was the speaker’s punishment for her withdrawal?**

- (a) Beaten
- (b) Neglect
- (c) Sent away
- (d) No punishment

**5. Where does Ken live?**

- (a) The gabled house
- (b) Behind the church
- (c) On top of the hill
- (d) The wooden cottage

**6. To what is Ken compared by the speaker?**

- (a) An uncouth bird
- (b) A stray cat
- (c) A wretched dog
- (d) A shy leveret

**7. He left a \_\_\_\_\_ on the mat outside my door.**

- (a) Rose
- (b) Bird
- (c) Gift
- (d) Twig

**8. What is the speaker’s last memory of Ken?**

- (a) His voice
- (b) His face
- (c) His eyes
- (d) His tears

**9. What do the villagers ‘throw’ to the asylum inmates in *On the Asylum Road***

- (a) Bread
- (b) Coins
- (c) Sticks
- (d) Smiles

**10. What does the speaker of *On the Asylum Road* call the inmates of the asylum?**

- (a) Brother shadows
- (b) Sister darkness
- (c) Mirror images
- (d) Mad siblings

---

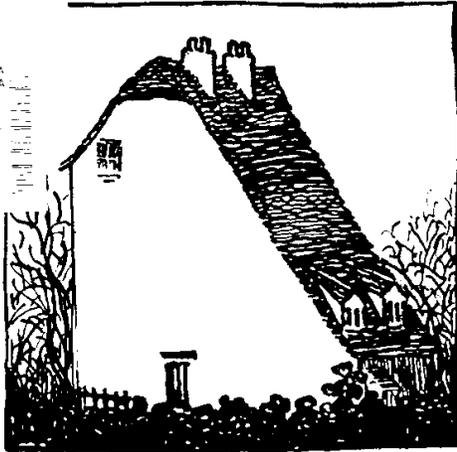
## Understanding and Interpretation

1. How does Mew convey both a sense of her speaker's difference and people's reaction to her difference in *The Changeling*?
2. What role does the fairy world play in *The Changeling*? How does Mew's poetry evoke ideas about this world?
3. How do the speaker's impressions of Ken develop and change throughout this poem? What about readers' impressions? How do you respond to Ken as the poem unfolds?
4. For what reasons does the poem suggest people become more suspicious and intolerant of Ken?
5. How does *On the Asylum Road* present the issue of difference? How are the asylum inmates depicted? How do people relate to them in the poem?

---

## Important Theme: *imprisoning interiors*

*“Theirs is the house whose windows – every pane – are made of darkly stained or clouded glass...”*



*This is the front cover of *The Farmer's Bride* published in 1916. The exterior of the house is forbidding, with one lonely window and a tiny door restricting access in.. or out.*

Throughout Charlotte Mew’s poetry, interior spaces become significant. To Mew, rooms, bedrooms, attics, and stairways are not simply physical settings, but psychological and emotional spaces as well. These are the places in which her speakers and their subjects are often contained, imprisoned, and silenced. In the three poems you’ve looked at in this lesson, interior spaces hide those who suffer mental illness, or are ‘different’ away from the fearful eyes of wider society, helping people defer responsibility and assuage panic.

In *The Changeling*, the speaker’s home becomes a place of neglect; while the child lives at home, she is emotionally exiled; spoken about, watched and judged, but never truly cared for or understood. The home – traditionally a place of nurture and safety – becomes a silent, forbidding space. In *Ken*, the speaker first encounters her titular subject half-hidden on a stairway in a “*gabled house*” facing a castle wall,

creating a sense of the tightly proscribed boundaries of his life. He internalises the taboo against people who are different, seeming to “*beat... against a threat of bars*”, an image that foreshadows his eventual imprisonment. When he’s finally confined to the asylum outside the town, the interior is hidden from view, a dark impenetrable space where all kinds of unspeakable tortures and treatments happen. The asylum is the ultimate expression of Mew’s imprisoning interiors, offering not sanctuary and protection, but separation from society. What happens inside matters less than the simple fact that the mentally ill are confined inside and therefore out of sight. *On the Asylum Road* makes this theme clear: society responds to mental illness not through compassion or understanding, but by removing it from view and placing it somewhere else. Interior spaces protect the sane from discomfort rather than protecting the ill from harm.

### Activity

Skim through *The Farmer’s Bride* collection to find interior spaces like rooms, houses, institutions, and other enclosed landscapes. Consider what they reveal about how society responds to vulnerability, difference, and mental distress. Are interiors ever places of comfort or refuge? Or are they spaces of confinement, withdrawal, or control? Look for moments where interiors show diminished empathy, help manage social fear, hide difference, or are sites of fear, trauma, or abuse. You might also notice how interior spaces contrast with exteriors such as roads, fields, and public places. Record your observations in a format of your choosing: you could make a mind-map, create a chart, or even use your artistic skills to depict an interior space embellished with lines, quotes, notes, and explainers of Mew’s poems.

---

## Poetry Study: *sensory imagery*

*“Far and away I heard... the dearest, clearest call of a bird.”*

In *The Changeling*, Mew constructs an extraordinary image of her child speaker’s mental world. Mirroring the way mental illness was perceived rather than diagnosed, Mew doesn’t explain the child’s thoughts (or her ‘neurodivergence’) in medical terms. Rather she immerses the reader in her speaker’s perceptions of sight, sound, movement, and touch to evoke a world that seems vividly – almost painfully – alive. The window is the crucial threshold between the worlds of inside (nursery, safety, and order) and the outside: night, wind, rain... and strangeness. As a mysterious fairy creature appears at her window, the verb “*scratched*” sets up a pattern of imagery that straddles auditory and tactile perceptions, conveying the invitation from outside as a persistent intrusion that plays on the mind of the child. The “*pinched brown face*” is not monstrous or evil, simply a small, nervous, agitated creature whose arms “*waved*” and wings “*quivered*” faintly against the glass, quick, repetitive movements evoking – or mirroring – the child’s anxiety. From here, sound imagery intensifies, culminating in a ghostly “*Who –*”, a breathy, owl-like, half-wind howl that suggests the loss of control. The child knows the fairies “*had come for me*” to lure her into their wild world: “*All night long they danced in the rain, tried to make me scream and shout and fling the bedclothes all about.*” The fairies’ dance torments the speaker, who experiences it with a mixture of fear and excitement, something conveyed by the sensory imagery of Mew’s writing: “*fling*”, “*scream*”, “*round and round in a dripping chain.*”

Outside, Mew immerses the reader fully in the fairies’ environment. The speaker perceives “*feathers growing*”, “*hearts beating*”, “*pebbles pushing*”, “*rushes talking*”, “*bats swishing*”, “*bluebells ting-tinging*”. Motion, sound, and texture combine to create a world that’s not just alive, but warm, intimate and communicative. The child perceives subtle movements and rhythms that others cannot (or choose not to): “*no one listened or seemed to see.*” Despite her reaction against the noise of the nursery, paradoxically she feels connected to the fairy’s gentler babble, where “*everything there is to hear in the heart of hidden things.*” By constructing the sensory world of the child’s own perceptions, Mew allows us to see, hear, and feel how she is misinterpreted and misdiagnosed by adults. She can’t do her sums, not because she’s stupid, but because she’s overwhelmed. Her silence is not sullen sulking or refusal to obey; it’s a defense mechanism for a hypersensitive child amongst the “*nursery riot*” of shouting children and enforced tasks. The nursery – supposed to be a safe space – is intolerable, but this is not understood by adults, and the child is accordingly punished and mislabeled.

Across *The Farmer’s Bride* collection, readers see the same pattern: those labelled ‘mad’ or ‘strange’ or ‘wrong’ have more perceptive power than those who define and judge them. Mew divides people into two groups: those who watch, diagnose, and label versus those who feel, sense, and perceive. In *The Changeling*, the child hears and sees the world too intently, whereas adults do not see, listen, or notice. Ken is sensitive, emotionally aware, and responsive, whilst those around him are judgmental, unsympathetic, and remote. *The Farmer’s Bride* cannot or does not explain herself; yet she perceives the world around her intensely whereas her husband, who narrates, cannot understand. Through sensory imagery, Mew reconstructs the invisible worlds of the ‘mad’ and marginalized, encouraging readers to see, hear, and feel the world from a different perspective – and question whether failure lies inside the asylum, or outside.

### **Analytical Writing Practice**

Choose a speaker from a poem like *The Changeling* or *Saturday Market* or a character such as Ken or *The Farmer’s Bride*. Write an analytical piece using sensory imagery to support the idea that those who are labelled ‘mad’ or marginalized are, in fact, more perceptive and sensitive than those who hold power over them.