

## A Woman's Place: (The Farmer's Bride, The Quiet House)

*"Shy as a leveret, swift as he, straight and slim as a young larch tree..."*

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.

*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 he thinks only of how his young wife might fulfil his own wants and needs, showing little interest in her fear, autonomy, or emotional life. And in *The Quiet House*, Mew shows how a similar dynamic exists under more common domestic arrangements: women are not always violently pursued or restrained. But when they are kept at home 'for their own protection,' women are denied autonomy and individuality nevertheless.

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### Knowledge Check

*How well do you know the poems?*

**1. How long ago did the farmer choose his bride?**

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

**2. Like the \_\_\_\_\_ of a winter's day...**

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

**3. "Out among the \_\_\_\_\_ her be," they said...**

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

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

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

**5. A symbol of fertility in the poem:**

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

**6. Which of the speaker's brothers and sisters is NOT mentioned at the start of The Quiet House?**

- (a) Tom
- (b) Sophia
- (c) Janey
- (d) Ted

**7. How long has the speaker been kept in the house?**

- (a) Two weeks
- (b) A month
- (c) Six months
- (d) A year

**8. Which colour is the 'strangest pain to bear'?**

- (a) Red
- (b) Purple
- (c) Black
- (d) Green

**9. The speaker feels the painful beauty of which flower?**

- (a) Ivy
- (b) Lily
- (c) Rose
- (d) Nasturtium

**10. At the end of the poem, what does the speaker hear outside?**

- (a) An owl
- (b) Music
- (c) A bell
- (d) Shouting

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## Understanding and Interpretation

1. The story of the farmer's bride is told in a **dramatic monologue** from the perspective of her husband. What effect does this create?
2. How does the poem indirectly reveal the farmer's bride's thoughts and feelings? What can you infer that the farmer is unable to understand?
3. Of what use does the poem make of the surrounding environment: natural landscape, farm, house, village, and hills?
4. After reading the poem, is it possible to find any sympathy for the farmer? Why / why not?
5. Compare the Father from The Quiet House with the farmer from The Farmer's Bride. How does he exert control over his daughter? Is the dynamic similar or different?
6. What impression of the world outside compared to the world inside does Mew develop in The Quiet House?

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## Poetry Study: *pathetic fallacy*

*'The short days shorten and the oaks are brown, The blue smoke rises to the low grey sky, One leaf in the still air falls slowly down...'*



*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 when his young bride runs away; a spring full of "wild violets" over which the farmer fantasises; and winter, which makes the farmer's childless home seem even emptier. In doing so, Mew makes sustained use of pathetic fallacy.

Pathetic fallacy is a literary technique in which human emotions, thoughts, or states of mind are reflected in the natural world. Weather, landscape, seasons, and occasionally built environments like towns and villages are not simply backdrops to the action, but echo or intensify what characters feel. In *The Farmer's Bride*, the seasonal movement mirrors the farmer's emotional trajectory and the emotional absence at the centre of his marriage. Autumn coincides with loss and flight; spring, traditionally associated with renewal and life, becomes distorted into frustrated sexual longing; winter reflects isolation and emptiness. The farmer fixates on bright red berries that seem to mock him with the promise of fertility. Nature does not console him; it reflects his frustrations and exposes what is missing in his life.

Elsewhere in *The Farmer's Bride* collection, Mew repeatedly uses landscape and weather in similar ways. Natural settings often register fear, tension, or enclosure rather than comfort. Fields, woods, roads, and seasons reflect the psychological states and social pressures of the poems' inhabitants, particularly for women and those who are powerless. Occasionally nature offers an escape from psychological or social captivity – but at the same time often warns of the hidden costs of living outside social boundaries. Instead of presenting nature as simply harmonious, Mew's depiction of nature is as complex as the psychology of her speakers, or the fractured communities she depicts.

### Activity

Explore the seasonal imagery from *The Farmer's Bride* and/or images of nature from other poems. Create a quotation bank or mind-map revealing how the natural world, weather, seasons, and landscape echo the concerns and emotional states of the characters and speakers in *The Farmer's Bride* collection.

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## Important Theme: *the thin line between protection and control*

*“To get away to Aunt’s for that week-end was hard enough: (since then... he scarcely lets me slip out of his sight–)”*

In late Victorian and Georgian England, protection was a justification for authority, especially over women, children, and the ‘weak-minded’. Vulnerable people were supposedly kept safe from harm through institutions such as marriage, the family home, the church, school, and institutional care. Mew’s poems frequently test this assertion, prompting the reader to think about what it looks and feels like when protection stops being about keeping the vulnerable safe and instead begins serving the comfort of others.

For example, in *The Farmer’s Bride*, marriage is presented as a protective institution. The farmer thinks of himself as a provider: he gives his wife a home, food, warmth, and social status. At the beginning of the poem, he excuses his hasty choice of a too-young bride by pointing out that *“more’s to do at harvest time than bide and woo”*. Yet, slowly but surely, the poem reveals how his protection equates to ownership of her. When she runs away, he hunts her down like an animal, forcibly returning her to the house, where she is locked up inside. Despairingly, from the farmer’s perspective, all of this is justified. He believes he’s acting reasonably and within his rights. The community agrees with him; in fact, farmhands and villagers go so far as to help the farmer catch and punish her (*“we chased her, flying like a hare before our lanterns”*). The bride’s fear and wants are irrelevant; claims to protect her instead remove her autonomy and agency.

*The Quiet House* alters the dynamic from marriage and sexual entitlement to a form of loving surveillance. Grief-stricken by the death of his wife, compounded by previous family arguments and losses, the father traps his daughter in the prison of his own bereavement. Because he cannot bear further loss, he restricts and controls his daughter’s movements, infantilizing her by preventing her own psychological and emotional development. While *“the world goes on the same outside,”* inside the house life has stopped. In this way, Mew shows that spaces that claim to care for women and girls ultimately deny them the right to develop, desire, and grow.

Across the collection, Mew shows women, girls, and the vulnerable under a form of controlling care that purportedly protects. In *The Fete*, supervision is disguised as care, but generates fear instead (the pion watches the girls *“like an evil cat”*) ...and even when they are *“let out”* for a brief visit to the fair, Mew reinforces that liberty is a privilege they are given rather than a freedom to enjoy.

### Analytical Writing Practice

Choose one or two moments in the poems you’ve read in which the language of protection masks control. Look for a poem in which the home, marriage, a school, or another ‘official’ institution promises safety or protection, yet appears more as a restraining, confining, or repressive force. Practice your analytical writing by explaining how Mew’s poetry reveals the boundary between care and control in *The Farmer’s Bride* – and how easy it is for society to cross that line.

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