

On the Margins: (In Nunhead Cemetery, Saturday Market)

"Bury your heart in some deep, green hollow, or hide it up in a kind old tree..."

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 (*The Farmer's Bride* was initially not popularly received) 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* and other poems in the collection.

Saturday Market and *In Nunhead Cemetery* both describe ambiguous scenes. Mew keeps details about what has happened to the figures in each poem deliberately spare. Both poems are grief-tinged and, as we read about a 'red dead thing' or get lost in the memories of a speaker standing bereft in a rain-soaked cemetery, we slowly put the stories back together in our minds.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know this poem?

1. When is the last time the speaker of In Nunhead Cemetery saw the listener of the poem?

- (a) Yesterday
- (b) A week ago
- (c) Last month
- (d) Last year

2. Which train is passing the cemetery?

- (a) Croydon
- (b) Wimbledon
- (c) Crystal Palace
- (d) Charlton

3. Where does the speaker imagine standing and kissing the poem's listener?

- (a) On the clifftops
- (b) In the cemetery
- (c) At home
- (d) In church

4. What kind of weather is the speaker of the poem experiencing?

- (a) Sunshine
- (b) A thunderstorm
- (c) High winds
- (d) Rain.

5. At the very end of the poem, what does the speaker imagine?

- (a) Digging up all the graves
- (b) Her unborn child's life
- (c) Leaving on the train
- (d) Christmas time

6. In Saturday Market, where should you hide your heart?

- (a) In the ground
- (b) Up a tree
- (c) Across the sea
- (d) In the hearth

7. In Saturday's Market there's _____ a'plenty...

- (a) Eggs
- (b) Ducks
- (c) Leeks
- (d) Cheese

8. Which of these products is NOT at the market?

- (a) Ribbons
- (b) Sugar-sticks
- (c) Flowers
- (d) Fruit

9. What does the girl do with the 'red dead thing'?

- (a) Burn it
- (b) Bury it
- (c) Sell it
- (d) Throw it away

10. What is the last word of Saturday Market?

- (a) Sea
- (b) Moon
- (c) Tree
- (d) Hollow

Understanding and Interpretation

1. A theme of *In Nunhead Cemetery* is the power of unresolved grief. What images, details, and ideas from the poem help the writer and reader see this theme?
2. Mew is deliberately ambiguous about the story of *In Nunhead Cemetery's* speaker. What details help you infer what may have happened to her?
3. Mew often wrote about people who are socially ostracized. How does the figure in *In Nunhead Cemetery* compare or contrast to any other figure you have read about in *The Farmer's Bride* collection?
4. Look closely at the descriptions of the poem *Saturday Market*. How would you describe the market? Does it seem to be a friendly place? Or a sinister one? Explain what creates the market's atmosphere for you.
5. What is the 'red dead thing' in verse four? Is there more than one possibility? Think about literal and symbolic meanings:
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: *liminal spaces*

'This is not a real place; perhaps by-and-by I shall wake –'

A liminal space is a transitional or in-between zone. The word 'liminal' comes from Latin meaning threshold; indeed, liminality is often depicted in doorways, windows, or passageways, at dawn or dusk, between the changing of seasons, or on the boundary of a town as it melds into the countryside. A liminal space is a place of uncertainty or transformation. People in liminal spaces are neither one thing nor another: neither a child nor an adult, stuck between the present and the past, or between dreams and reality. Liminality is a space where rules and roles are temporarily suspended, where time can be frozen, and emotional states mixed. Charlotte Mew loves this place. Some of her best poems are placed at a threshold where reality feels unstable and uncertain. Her speakers feel half connected to the world, half trapped, unable to fully cross into life, love... or even death.

In Nunhead Cemetery places the reader in a classic liminal space. Nunhead Cemetery, one of London's grandest and most famous cemeteries, is a space where the living and dead can mingle. It's simultaneously beautiful and decaying, comforting and frightening. Liminal by design, the cemetery becomes a site where the past and present co-exist, and where memory overwhelms reality. From the opening lines, Mew establishes a sense of liminality through mentioning people who are *'half afraid'*. Her speaker holds a *'broken flower'* in her hand, a clear symbol of liminality: the flower is not fully alive, but not yet dead (*'It will not live another hour'*). For now, the flower is trapped between states, just as Mew's speaker is trapped between the present and the past, between her longing and her fear. The poem is full of images of liminality, most obviously birds, or shadows of birds, who are visible one moment, and gone the next. The liminality of the cemetery reinforces the speaker's paralysis: she cannot move forward.

Another classic liminal space is the marketplace. Blending the familiarity of home with the strangeness of the street, it's temporary (only open on a certain day), and full of transience. It's a place where social classes mix and where private griefs can suddenly be exposed to public view. The girl figure depicted in *Saturday Market* appears fragile, stuck on the margins of society, or on the boundary of childhood and adulthood. Just like *In Nunhead Cemetery*, early in the poem Mew gives us a clear symbol of liminality in dead-alive ducks with their legs tied down. While still living, by the end of the day they will be dead, bought, killed, and cooked for somebody's supper. There's a nagging sense that the bright and lively market hides darker truths, where harsher reality threatens to overwhelm the dreams of those who venture into the marketplace. Liminality is not always a literal place. Sometimes it appears in the poem's tone, pacing, or structure of the lines. A sudden shift, interruption, or abrupt turn can signal that the poem is operating in a liminal way. Throughout her collection Mew shows that while transformation is possible it's not guaranteed and liminal spaces are dangerous indeed.

Activity

Skim and scan *The Farmer's Bride* collection to identify the ways Charlotte Mew depicts liminal spaces and symbols. Look for physical thresholds (such as stairways, windows, doorways) and places (e.g. cemeteries, fields on the edge of town) that lead into uncertainty. What is liminality symbolised by? Flowers that are drooping or broken, unstable seasons, shifting light and dark? Finally, try to connect liminal sites and symbols with the inner lives of Mew's characters who are at emotional thresholds.