

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Love and Relationships

The Farmer's Bride - *Charlotte Mew*



THE FARMER'S BRIDE

Charlotte Mew

Brief Summary

The poem is about a farmer who marries a young girl who eventually runs away. She is chased down by people from the area and brought back to the farm. The farmer's bride doesn't engage with her husband and is clearly miserable.

Synopsis

- The farmer relates how three years ago he chose a bride who even he admits was too young.
- Once married she became fearful of her husband
- Eventually she ran away across the farm
- The farmer and others chased her and eventually caught her
- When brought home they locked the door on her
- The farmer now says how she meekly does the housework and is happy to be part of nature
- As it becomes winter, the farmer laments the fact that she will not give him a child
- He then complains about the physical distance between them and objectifies her

Summary

Context – With a history of mental health in the family, Mew resolved to never marry // Women were victimised in their relationships.

Structure - Gradual progression throughout the poem as the farmer becomes more despondent // Eventually he indulges in self pity.

Language – Objectification // Possession

Key Points – A young girl is forced into a relationship // She is depicted as a small animal.

Context

Charlotte Mew (1869-1928)

Mew's family were upper middle class and her parents had many children. However, three died young and two experienced mental illness from when they were little. The impact of these experiences on Mew influenced her work heavily, and is reflected in the darker undertones of her poetry. Mew apparently made a pact with one of her sisters to never marry out of fear of becoming mentally ill, or passing on mental illness to their children.

The poem was written at a time where issues were beginning to be raised about the way in which **men possess women**. At the time, suffrage was beginning to gain prominence so Mew is expressing her view that **women shouldn't have their identity tied to their husband**.



The Farmer's Bride

. The first line is straight to the point, showing that the speaker feels no guilt for their actions. "maid" is often taken to mean virgin which highlights her young age and vulnerability. Relates to the title, as she's never transitioned from being his 'bride' to 'wife', through the act of consummation. Suggests the relationship is empty and pointless.

The farmer's busyness means that he does not have time to get to know his wife. Additionally, the countryside can be often considered a metaphor for fertility.

The use of **syndetic listing** here creates a disjunct rhythm to represent their dysfunctional relationship.

The continuing use of a farming **idiolect** adds to the authenticity of the poem.

This has harsh, hunting-like connotations. The farmer doesn't at any point question why she has run away, he instead jumps straight to solving the problem.

This shows him to be more functional than emotional and makes a point about men marrying to fulfil expectations.

This demonstrates that she is treated in the same way the farmer would treat an animal that had run away.

This **simile** makes her seem quiet and timid. He never views her as a human being, only another animal he can own.

Three Summers since I chose a **maid**,
Too young maybe – **but more's to do**
At harvest-time than bide and woo.
When us was wed she turned afraid
Of love **and me and** all things human;
Like the shut of a winter's day
Her smile went out, and 'twasn't a woman –
More like a little **frightened fay**.
One night, in the Fall, she runned away.

'Out 'mong the sheep, **her be,**' they said,
Should properly have been abed;
But sure enough she wasn't there
Lying awake with her **wide brown stare**.
So over seven-acre field and up-along
across the down
We chased her, flying like a hare
Before our lanterns. To Church-Town
All in a **shiver** and a **scare**
We **caught her**, fetched her home at last
And turned the key upon her, **fast**.

She does the work about the house
As well as most, but **like a mouse**:
Happy enough to chat and play
With birds and rabbits and such as they,
So long as men-folk keep away.
'Not near, not near!' **her eyes beseech**
When one of us comes within reach.
The women say that beasts in stall
Look round like children at her call.
I've hardly heard her speak at all.

Shy as a **leveret**, swift as he,
Straight and slight as a young larch tree,
Sweet as the first wild violets, she,
To her wild self. But what to me?

Mew's use of a hyphen shows that the relationship is not important to the speaker.

"**When us was wed**" shows the farmer's **idiolect**.

Mew uses **fricatives** in "**frightened fay**" to emphasise the harshness of the wife's treatment. "**fay**" means fairy which shows how she is more childlike than a woman and definitely not old enough to enter an adult relationship.

"**wide brown stare**" likens her to a vulnerable animal.

The **sibilance** in "**shiver**" and "**scare**" creates an ominous tone surrounding her returning to the farmhouse.

"**fast**" is a **homonym** which could mean that she was locked in securely as well as the speed needed to contain her.

Enjambment continues the line however, to show that she only seeks solace in nature and is still isolated.

It is sad that she is unable to communicate her fears out loud.

The **sibilance** used in "**Straight and slight**" shows that despite the beauty of the nature he compares her to, there is a maliciousness behind this simile.

This **pathetic fallacy** shows everything getting darker. It also shows how time has passed and they have been together for a long time.

This shows that he is not thinking straight and also contrasts with his wife's affinity for nature.



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,
A **magpie's spotted feathers** lie
On the black earth spread white with rime,
The berries redden up to Christmas-time.
**What's Christmas-time without there be
Some other in the house than we!**

She sleeps up in the attic there
Alone, poor maid. 'Tis but a stair
Betwixt us. Oh! my God! the down,
The **soft young down** of her, the brown,
The brown of her – her eyes, her hair, her
hair!

He never questions why this is, this could also be a statement by Mew that women speaking out against men is not unfounded and only their bad experiences have made it necessary.

A leveret is a young hare so this characterises her as vulnerable and flighty.

The simile used here shows that the farmer loves his wife yet still does not see her as a person.

The description of "One leaf" shows that the speaker's field of vision has narrowed and he is becoming increasingly obsessive.

The farmer is beginning to indulge in self pity here despite his isolation being his own fault.

It's like she's his child or servant not his wife.

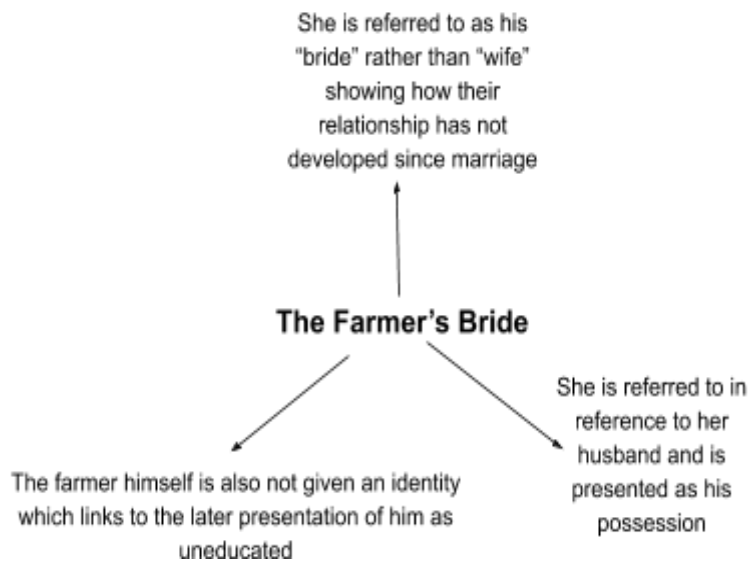
He is wishing for a baby here.

This use of patronising sarcasm increases the listener's dislike for the farmer. He is upset that despite there being little physical distance between them, she is not close to him.

Here she is both infantilised and sexualised which implies that the farmer has a paedophilic obsession with her.



The title “The Farmer’s Bride”



Perspective

The poem is from the farmer’s perspective, preventing his bride from having a voice. The farmer’s perspective appears self centred as he relates the events to his own feelings about it. **Mew mixes the past and present which reflects the deeply personal and idiosyncratic writing style that Mew is known for.**

The opening

“The Farmer’s Bride” begins with the **temporal deixis** “**Three summers since**” to give the impression of their relationship dragging out. The speaker admits that his wife was “**Too young maybe**” which establishes from the outset the fact that she is innocent and victimised.



“Too young maybe”

Three Summers since I chose a maid,
Too young maybe – but more’s to do
At harvest-time than bide and woo.
When us was wed she turned afraid

Structure/form

The poem shows the farmer progressively becoming more despondent about his marriage. At no point however, does he try and solve his problems by caring for his wife. In the final stanza, there is a range of punctuation used to **manipulate the rhythm** which reflect the troubles



experienced between the couple in their relationship. This contrasts with the farmer's desire for his wife showing how he likes the idea of marriage but not the reality.

Enjambment is employed occasionally throughout the poem:

*She sleeps up in the attic there
Alone, poor maid*

The **enjambement** here places emphasis on these lines to highlight the distance between the couple. For example, "alone" is separated onto a different line, which displays how isolated the maid is. This may work to set the reader against the speaker, as isolating a human is cruel and inhumane. The use of enjambment also adds to the narrative form of the poem.

Language

Objectification

Mew's use of language shows the way in which the farmer **objectifies** his wife.

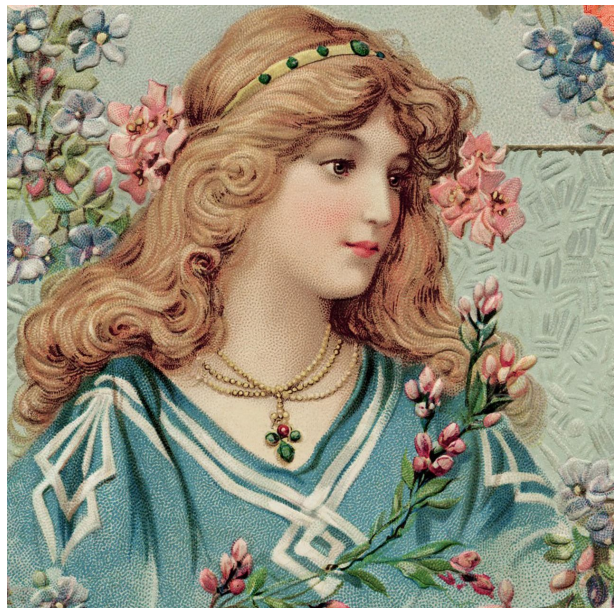
- The **fricative alliteration** in "**frightened fay**" emphasises the almost violent objectification of her.
- The way in which he sees her as more of an object than a person is shown further in "**I've hardly hear her speak at all**", the **alliterative** "h"s in "**hardly heard her**" create an uncomfortable sound for the listener.
- This impression is similarly created in the **metaphor** "**her smile went out, and twasn't a woman**" in which the speaker explicitly states that he doesn't see her as a person anymore.
- Her isolation from humanity is shown in Mew's use of **syndetic listing** in "**she turned afraid // Of love and me and all things human**".

"her smile went out,
and twasn't a
woman"

Further **objectification** occurs in the frequent comparisons of the farmer's bride to an animal.

- She is described as "**Shy as a leveret**" which characterises her as flighty and innocent (a leveret is a young hare).
- The speaker further **infantilises** his wife in "**The soft young down of her, the brown, // The brown of her - her eyes, her hair, her hair!**" which aligns her with a baby animal.

The **repetition** of "**brown**" and "**hair**" shows the speaker's paedophilic obsession. This **imagery** is continued in the description of her "**wide brown stare**"



in which the **colour imagery** shows that **the speaker can't see beyond her appearance, showing his superficiality**. The idea of a wide stare implies that she is more aware than her naive husband and her misery stems from this.

Although the speaker's attribution of natural traits to her is oppressive, she is shown to gain strength from it in **"Out 'mong the sheep"** which is comforting, showing how she seeks solace in nature.

Possession

Mew shows the way in which women are oppressed in marriage. The farmer is shown to be **possessive** in **"I chose a maid"**. At the time **"maid"** often meant virgin which highlights her young age and innocence. The idea of him choosing her shows that he sees her as something to possess.

His bride is shown to be imprisoned through the overwhelming **listing** **"We caught her, fetched her home at last // And turned the key upon her, fast"**.

Their relationship is presented as **archaic and subservient** due to the **domestic connotations** in **"She does the work about the house"**. It is clear that in their relationship, the farmer is looking out solely for himself. The **rhetorical question** **"But what to me"** and the patronising sarcasm in **"Alone, poor maid."** show his selfish nature.



Comparisons

Love's Philosophy

| | |
|--------------|---|
| Similarities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both speakers express frustration at their desire remaining unrealised. Shelley creates this impression through his use of sibilance in "single", "kiss", "clasp", "sea" and "disdained". Mew's speaker is shown to be similarly dejected in "Tis but a stair // Betwixt us" and "What's Christmas time without there be // Some other in the house than we!". |
| Differences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In "the farmer's bride", nature becomes a symbol for the girl's oppression through the use of violent fricatives in "frightened fay" and the prey-like connotations of "flying like a hare" and "shy as a leveret". Opposingly, Shelley references nature to create beautiful images in the listeners mind through the personification in "fountains mingle with the river" and "the sunlight clasps the earth". |



Porphyria's Lover

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| <p>Similarities</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The speakers in both poems are similarly characterised as a possessive, objectifying male. Browning's speaker fulfils this role because of his assumption of Porphyria's feelings in "No pain felt she" and the repetition in "she was mine, mine". Mew shapes a similar speaker by showing him presenting his wife as a small animal in "flying like a hare", "like a mouse" and "shy as a leveret". Given that the speaker is a farmer so takes advantage of animals to make a living, this implies that he is abusing his wife. • The type of love presented in both poems is destructive. This is shown in "Porphyria's lover" in the physical destruction of Porphyria in "Her head, which droops". In "The farmer's bride", the woman is mentally rather than physically destroyed which is shown in her silence in "She sleeps up in the attic there // Alone, poor maid." • Both poems are similarly long, showing the speaker's obsessive tendencies. • In "Porphyria's lover", Browning shows how the speaker's love is not reciprocated in Porphyria's non committal "murmuring how she loved me". Similarly, in "The farmer's bride", Mew shows the farmer's bride disregard for her husband through her self imposed isolation in "She sleeps up in the attic there". |
| <p>Differences</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The farmer's bride speaker seems more aware of the suffering he is inflicting than the Porphyria's lover speaker. • Mew shows her speaker to be somewhat aware of the suffering he is inflicting on his lover through his confessions "Too young maybe" and "I've hardly heard her speak at all.". The speaker of "Porphyria's lover" is however, less self aware. He seems to believe that Porphyria enjoys or has benefitted from his actions. Browning uses lexis from the semantic field of romantic love and alliteration in "Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss:". |

