Charlotte Mew was an English poet, whose work spanned the Victorian and modernist eras. Her life was tragic from beginning to end, as she was one of seven children, however her father died young without leaving adequate provision for the family. Furthermore, three of her siblings died in childhood, and two were deemed insane and committed to institutions. After these tragic events, Charlotte and her remaining sister, Anne, made a pact never to marry for fear of passing on insanity to their children. (Many scholars have noted that Charlottewas in fact a repressed lesbian, which was socially unacceptable at the time). When her sister died of cancer in 1907. Charlotte descended into a deep depression, and committed suicide by drinking Lysol. Some of her poems discuss mental illness, and many are in the form of dramatic monologues, including The Farmer’s wife, which is a study of her first collection of poetry, bearing the same name.

Context – The Farmer’s Bride was written by Charlotte Mew and published in 1916.

The Farmer’s Bride

Stanza 1

Three summers since I chose a maid,
Too young maybe—but more’s to do.
When we was wed she turned afraid
Of love and me and all the things human.
Like the shut of a winter’s day
Her smile went out, and ‘twadn’t a woman—
More like a little frightened fay.
One night, in the Fall, she ran away.

Description

The opening stanza of The Farmer’s Bride introduces the two main characters: the farmer and his wife. The poet uses similes to describe the woman’s features, such as “flying like a hare”, “hunting like a mouse”, and “running like a little frightened fay”. These similes help to create a sense of movement and emphasize the woman’s fear and suspicion.

Stanza 2

“Out morn the sheep, her, they said,”
“ Should properly have been abed;
But sure enough they were
Lying awake with her wide brown stare.
Still played a toil at their setting down across the down.
We chased her, flying like a hare.
Before out lanterns, To Church-Town
All in a driller and a scar.
She caught her, fetched her home at last
And turned the key upon her, fast.

Description

In this stanza, the farmer recounts the events leading up to his wife’s capture. He describes the woman as “wide brown stare” and “driller and a scar”, which suggests her appearance is striking and unusual. The poet uses enjambment at the end of line 43 to emphasize the distance between the farmer and his wife.

Stanza 3

She does the work about the house
As well as most, but like a mouse
With birds and rabbits and such as they,
So long as man-tall keep away.
Not near not near! her eye be seesch
When one of us comes within reach.
The woman say that beasts in stall
Look round like children at her call.
I’ve hardly heard her speak at all.

Description

The third stanza focuses on the daily routine of the farmer’s wife. The poet describes her as “like a mouse” and “like a little frightened fay”, which suggests she is both timid and fearful. The use of similes helps to create a sense of characterization.

Stanza 4

Shy as a levant, swift as she,
Straight and slight as a young larch tree.

Description

In this stanza, the farmer describes his wife as “shy as a levant”, which suggests she is reserved and shy. The poet uses similes to describe her appearance, which helps to create a sense of character.

Stanza 5

The short days shorten and the oaks are brown,
The blue smoke rises to the low grey sky,
One leaf in the still airs falls slowly down,
The solitary leaf is seen.
On the black earth spread white with rings,
The berries redden up to Christmas-time,
What the Christmas-time without there be
Some other in the house than we!

Description

The fifth stanza continues the description of the wife’s appearance, which is characterized by her reserved and shy nature. The poet uses similes to describe her appearance, which helps to create a sense of characterization.

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text. The Farmer’s Bride explores themes of mental illness, romantic love, and the isolation of rural life.

Mental Illness – Mental illness is alluded to throughout several sections of the poem. For example, the suggestion that the wife is “flying like a hare” or “hunting like a mouse” implies she is not in her right mind. The poem’s emphasis on the distance between the farmer and his wife also suggests a sense of alienation.

Romantic Love – Romantic Love is a theme throughout the poem in terms of both its presence and its absence. For example, there was an absence of romantic love in the way the farmer married her. He says “There comes a choice of twain”, implying that the marriage was not founded on love. However, the farmer does express some concern for his wife, as shown by his enjambment at the end of line 43.

Poems for Comparison

Sonnet 29

I think of thee,
The Farmer’s Bride can be contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of Mental Illness.

Persephone’s Lover

The Farmer’s Bride can be contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of Mental Illness.

Critical of the Poem

“Throughout her poetry, Mew has an unsettling facility for inhabiting the minds and voices of others. She speaks of a certain dislocated, the damaged, and the disable. It is no mistake that she wrote two dramatic monologues: the first is the perfect vehicle for such a mentality of souls, in that it allows her to reenact in the speaker (dramatic monologues are always addressed to a silent other). In Mew’s poems, the speaker is often in some form of distress, a tortured beloved one, a distant, unreachable God.”

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