

The Farmer's Bride



POEM TEXT

1 Three summers since I chose a maid,
 2 Too young maybe—but more's to do
 3 At harvest-time than bide and woo.
 4 When us was wed she turned afraid
 5 Of love and me and all things human;
 6 Like the shut of a winter's day
 7 Her smile went out, and 'twadn't a woman—
 8 More like a little frightened fay.
 9 One night, in the Fall, she runned away.

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

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

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

 34 The short days shorten and the oaks are brown,
 35 The blue smoke rises to the low grey sky,
 36 One leaf in the still air falls slowly down,
 37 A magpie's spotted feathers lie

38 On the black earth spread white with rime,
 39 The berries redden up to Christmas-time.
 40 What's Christmas-time without there be
 41 Some other in the house than we!

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



SUMMARY

Three summers have gone by since I picked a young girl to marry. She might have been too young, but it was time for my crops to be harvested, so I was too busy to wait around and try to win a woman over. Once we got married, she grew afraid of me, intimacy, and society itself. She stopped smiling, which reminded me of light going out early at the end of the day during wintertime. She wasn't a woman, but more like a small, scared fairy. One fall, she ran away in the middle of the night.

"She's outside with the sheep," the townspeople told me when she definitely should've been in bed. But, as they expected, she wasn't lying in bed with her brown eyes wide open like she normally is. So we chased her all across the seven-acre field, up and over the hill. She rushed onwards as quickly as a hare in front of our lamps. Once we made it to Church-Town, we captured her while she shook in fear, finally brought her back to the house, and quickly locked her up.

She does the housework as adequately as most wives, but timidly, reminding me of a mouse. She happily spends time with animals, as long as there aren't any men around. Whenever one of us comes close enough to touch her, her eyes beg, "Don't come near me, don't come near me!" Local women say that the farm animals seek her out like children when they hear her voice. I've barely heard her speak a word.

She is as shy and quick as a young hare. Her body is slim and without curves like a sapling. She's as sweet as the first wildflowers that bloom—at least, she is that way towards her own wild, unrestrained self. But what is her attitude towards me?

There is less and less daylight as the fall and winter months go on, and the leaves on the trees have turned brown. Blue frost drifts into the grey sky where clouds hang low, and a single leaf sinks through motionless air. Bird feathers with bold markings

lie on the ground. The soil is black, but it's covered in a layer of white frost. The berries will continue to mature, growing redder until Christmas. It wouldn't be Christmas without new life around the house!

She sleeps in the attic all by herself, poor girl. There is only a staircase separating us. Oh god! I imagine the soft, fine hair that covers her and the brown color of her features—especially her eyes and hair. Oh, her hair!



THEMES



GENDER, MISOGYNY, AND POWER

“The Farmer’s Bride” describes the marriage of a farmer and his much younger wife, who is clearly miserable in their relationship. Having had no say in the marriage, the young bride is terrified of her husband and tries to run away—only to be chased down like an animal and effectively imprisoned in the farmer’s home. The farmer, meanwhile, thinks only of how his wife might fulfill his own desires, and the poem ends with him ominously lusting after her body in a way that suggests he may soon force himself on her (or perhaps that he already has). In this way, the poem illustrates the misogyny of patriarchal gender roles, wherein men hold disproportionate authority while women are seen as sexual objects and homemakers. Such rigid gender expectations, the poem implies, prioritize men’s wants while robbing women of their autonomy and full humanity.

From the start, it’s clear that the farmer, and the world in which he lives, sees his wife’s needs as inferior to his own. And while the girl has no voice in the poem—in fact, the farmer “has hardly heard her speak at all”—her husband’s desires are centered throughout.

The speaker says “I chose a maid,” for example, as though he were shopping, and admits that she was probably “too young” to be married in the first place. And despite being terrified and unhappy after the wedding, the young bride’s concerns are disregarded. Three years into the relationship, the speaker defends his decision by saying that he was simply too busy to consider if she was ready. There’s “more’s to do / At harvest-time” than seek out the most suitable woman, he says—reflecting a traditional belief that men’s work is more important than women’s needs and implying that women all fill a similar role.

The speaker compares the girl to animals throughout the poem—a hare, a mouse, a leveret—reinforcing the idea that he doesn’t actually see her as an equal human being, but rather as a meek creature that he easily dominates. When she runs away in a desperate attempt to escape, for example, a group of people help the farmer hunt her down “like a hare.” The farmer says he “caught” and “fetched her” as though she were a piece

of property, again revealing that the girl has no power in this relationship and that what she wants doesn’t matter.

The search party brings her back through the “Church-Town” (a reminder that society has approved of this unequal union) before locking her at home. The girl must then conform to the typical expectations of a wife, including “[doing] the work around the house” and, it’s implied, pleasing her husband sexually. The girl clearly dreads these so-called responsibilities, as she completes her chores “like a mouse” and shouts at men to stay away from her.

However, the speaker again deflects attention from his wife’s feelings by focusing on his own. He fantasizes about her lying in bed, imagining “the young soft down of her [...] the brown of her—her eyes, her hair, her hair!” He knows she’s scared and uncomfortable, “lying awake with her wide brown stare,” but the poem ends with the suggestion that the speaker won’t hold his lust in check for long (if he hasn’t given into it already). The poem thus ends on a disturbing, ominous note, reiterating the idea that conventional gender roles strip away women’s autonomy and humanity.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-46



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*Three summers since I chose a maid,
Too young maybe—but more's to do
At harvest-time than bide and woo.*

The “Farmer” of the poem’s title begins this dramatic monologue by telling the story of his wedding—not, as it will turn out, an especially happy occasion. In a strong rural English dialect, he explains that he got married about three years ago to a wife who was probably too young, either for him or for marriage in general. Whatever the case, the speaker is clearly aware that his wife was not an appropriate partner. He defends his decision nonetheless, claiming that he was too busy harvesting crops to wait around for the perfect wife and spend time winning her over.

But even as he defends his choice, he seems conflicted about his decision to marry such a young girl. The suggestion that she might have been “too young” is the very *first* idea that comes into his mind when he thinks about their engagement. But just as quickly as the idea that *he* is responsible for the struggles of the marriage pops up in the speaker’s mind, he brushes it off and moves on. The [consonance](#) in these lines reflects his guilt and denial:

Too young maybe—but more's to do

At harvest-time than bide and woo.

Those sharp /t/ sounds accentuate the speaker's brusque dismissiveness, making it sound as if he's irritatedly batting away his own doubts about his marriage.

The speaker's language here also establishes the power imbalance in this relationship. He says, "I chose a bride," making it clear that the decision to marry was his alone. Plus, the speaker's excuse that he was simply too busy to find the perfect bride implies that, in this speaker's world, a man can pick up a bride as casually as he might buy a new shirt—and not be too picky about it if he's in a rush.

The poem's first few lines also establish the poem's rural setting (and its [symbolic](#) power). The speaker measures time with the passage of the seasons ("Three summers," "At harvest-time"), which will come to represent the phases of life—and the substantial age gap between the speaker and his young bride. He also defends himself with the claim that he was focused on his harvest, calling attention to his career as a farmer and hinting at his fixation on fertility: getting a good "harvest" of children from his wife will become one of his central concerns.

LINES 4-9

*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 'twadn't a woman—
More like a little frightened fay.
One night, in the Fall, she runned away.*

The speaker remembers the early days of his marriage, when his wife became afraid of him and seemingly all humanity—until, eventually, she ran away from him.

The speaker starts his description of the girl's misery with the heavily [alliterative](#) words "When us was wed," drawing special attention to the fact that *the marriage* brings on her pain. And look at how he uses [polysyndeton](#) here:

When us was wed she turned afraid
Of love and me and all things human;

That repeated "and" draws out this list to accentuate the real depth of his wife's terror.

The first fear that the speaker lists is "love," which suggests physical intimacy or sex in this context—hinting that he made unwanted advances shortly after they were married. This fits in with what the speaker has already said: this girl was clearly far "too young" for the marriage, and for all that comes with marriage. Her fear of "love" turns into a fear of the speaker himself, and then "all things human"—words that suggest she has become something *other* than human. It's as if the speaker is himself a little frightened of how completely his bride shut

down after their wedding: he feels as if she's become a strange creature, not a "woman" at all.

While the speaker has already waved away the thought that perhaps he married his wife "too young," he still seems to feel some guilt, some sympathy, and some real unease. Listen to the way he describes her after their marriage:

*Like the shut of a winter's day
Her smile went out, and 'twadn't a woman—
More like a little frightened fay.*

There are two poignant [similes](#) here.

In the first simile, the girl's smile goes out as suddenly and dismally as the sun sets in winter: its light disappears too soon, cutting off the day's potential, just as the girl's youthful, hopeful happiness comes to an abrupt end when she's married. This line is even [enjambéd](#), breaking in the middle of the sentence to give the impression that it, too, has been cut off prematurely.

In the second simile, the speaker returns to his sense of his bride's strangeness. After their marriage, she reminds him of nothing so much as "a little frightened fay": a delicate, terrified fairy. There's both sympathy and fear in his voice here: thinking he'd married a "woman," he found himself wed to someone who strikes him more as a feral, otherworldly creature (and one that wants absolutely nothing to do with him).

If this girl is so miserable, and so like a wild creature, it's no wonder that she "runned away" at last.

LINES 10-13

*"Out 'mong the sheep, her be," they said,
'Should properly have been abed;
But sure enough she wadn't there
Lying awake with her wide brown stare.*

The poem's second stanza describes the girl's attempt to escape the speaker's home after they're married. First, the local townspeople warn the speaker that she has fled. When the speaker checks to see if she's in bed, he indeed finds that the girl is missing.

These lines give readers some rather unnerving background on the life this unhappy couple has led so far. For instance, take a look at the [imagery](#) the speaker uses here:

*But sure enough she wadn't there
Lying awake with her wide brown stare.*

That "wide brown stare" evokes the girl's huge, childlike eyes—and suggests that she's spent most of her nights in her new husband's home frightened and awake, perhaps prepared to fend off his sexual advances.

And when she runs away, she goes "'Out 'mong the sheep,'" in the words of the villagers who rat her out. Clearly this tiny,

frightened, fairy-like girl feels a lot more comfortable among animals than she does when she's around "all things human." From the context readers have gathered so far, that seems more than reasonable: not only has she been married off "too young" to a man who's clearly a lot older than she is, she's surrounded by people who tell him where she is when she tries to run away from him!

In other words, this girl doesn't just seem to feel more at home among the sheep. She's being *treated* like a sheep, like livestock that the farmer has to go and round up.

LINES 14-19

*So over seven-acre field and up-along across the down
We chased her, flying like a hare
Before out 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.*

When his wife runs away, the farmer ends up hunting her down like a wild "hare." A whole search party of townspeople assembles to capture his wife and bring her back to his farm. When they catch her, they don't try to comfort her or ask her what's wrong: they just lock her up in the farmer's house.

The poem's [meter](#) mirrors the drawn-out terror and stress of this pursuit. Up until now, the poem has mostly been in [iambic tetrameter](#)—that is, its lines use four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. But look what happens in lines 14-16:

So ov- | er sev- | en-a- | cre field | and up- | along |
across | the down
We chased | her, fly- | ing like | a hare
Before | out lan- | terns. [...]

Line 14, with its eight iambs in a row, feels as long, hilly, and breathless as the path the townspeople take over the hills, pursuing the desperate girl. And the momentum doesn't stop there: all the lines here are [enjambéd](#), so they seem to rush speedily on. This wild, driving rhythm—and the [simile](#) comparing the girl to a fleeing hare—suggest, not a rescue party, but a hunt.

And that impression only gets stronger when they catch her: she's shaking, terrified as a prey animal about to get eaten. Her escape attempt comes to an end with a grim bump in this stanza's final, emphatically [end-stopped](#) lines:

We caught her, fetched her home at last
And turned the key upon her, **fast**.

Here, the word "fast" suggests both that they lock the girl up tight, and that they have to do it pretty quickly, or she'll only try to escape again.

All through this stanza, then, the reader gets the strong sense that this farmer sees his bride purely as a possession. While he has enough empathy to notice that she's "all in a shiver and a scare," he can only lock her up in response. He's certainly not happy about this state of affairs—but nor does he pause to think about what he might do to make his bride feel *less* terrified.

LINES 20-24

*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.*

After her failed escape attempt, the farmer's bride settles down as best she can to her life in the farmer's house. The poem's third stanza describes her day-to-day life: she does the typical duties expected of a wife "as well as most" (words that suggest the speaker has a pretty clear and perhaps rigid picture of how a wife is meant to behave). But she still seems to prefer animals to people—and especially to men.

As elsewhere in the poem, the speaker describes his bride not just as preferring to "chat and play" with "birds and rabbits," but as rather like a nervous little creature herself. In yet another animal [simile](#), he observes that she does her chores "like a mouse." If that's true, she's quiet, timid, fearful, and meek. But she's still also somehow *wild*, uninterested in participating in the normal human world as the speaker sees it. She's compliant enough—but only "so long as men-folk keep away."

Take a look at what the [rhyme scheme](#) does in these sad, ominous lines:

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*.

Lines 20-23 here ease readers into a singsongy AA BB pattern of rhymes: "house/mouse" and "play/they." These simple, nursery-rhyme-like sounds suggest the girl's simple, quiet day-to-day life (and hint at her poignant youth).

But then that pattern breaks: rather than introducing a new C rhyme, line 24 adds another B rhyme, "away," like an afterthought—and that afterthought changes the tone of all the lines that have come before. With that last line, the poem moves from the rather sweet image of an elfin girl doing chores and playing with rabbits, into the implication that that girl has suffered terribly at the hands of "men-folk." The girl's fear not just of her husband, but of men in general, hints that she might have endured sexual abuse even before she was married off.

LINES 25-29

*"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.*

The speaker continues to contrast his wife's behavior around animals and her demeanor when men are near. Her eyes seem to plead for men to stay away, and the speaker has "hardly heard her speak," while local women claim that she can charm the livestock with the sound of her voice.

Again, the speaker seems to have a pretty complicated relationship with his strange, traumatized wife here: his words suggest a mixture of sympathy, frustration, incomprehension, and fear.

For instance, he's perfectly capable of interpreting the terror in her eyes when a man comes near her:

*"Not near, not near!" her eyes beseech
When one of us comes within reach.*

The [epizeuxis](#) and the [alliterative](#) /n/ sounds in "Not near, not near!" draw attention to that desperate cry—and also to the fact that the girl isn't actually saying these things out loud! The speaker is putting words to the fear he sees in her "eyes": he clearly understands that she's absolutely petrified of men, and seems to feel for her.

But he also still sees her not as a traumatized child, but as an otherworldly "fay," capable of taming "beasts in stall" with her gentle voice. He hasn't seen this happening himself: the "women" of the town have reported it to him, again suggesting that this girl's refusal to play along with what society expects of her makes her a curiosity all through this small community. (There's something claustrophobic about these lines, too: whether this poor girl is trying to escape or chatting with the livestock, there always seems to be a towns person there to report back to her husband.)

The speaker [juxtaposes](#) the girl's mesmerizing calls to animals with her silence in his presence, claiming "I've hardly heard her speak at all." The soft alliterative /h/ sounds in "hardly heard her speak" evoke her timid silence—and make it clear that, for all that the speaker feels bad about his wife's terror, he also hasn't found a way to talk to her about it, or to try to make her feel more at home. He seems to feel as if he's living with a hare or a fairy—a wild creature, not a human being.

LINES 30-33

*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?*

These lines introduce a new and ominous note to the poem, exploring not just the farmer's bewilderment over his strange, frightened wife, but his lust for her.

The poem's first three stanzas have all been nine or ten lines long, and written mostly in [iambic](#) tetrameter. This short, intense stanza breaks all of those patterns. Listen to the quiet intensity of the [meter](#) in lines 30-31:

*Shy as a | leveret, | swift as he,
Straight and | slight as | a young | larch tree,*

Suddenly, the stresses move to the front of the lines: line 30 uses [dactyls](#), feet with a DUM-da-da rhythm, and line 31 uses mostly [trochees](#) (DUM-da). All these front-loaded feet feel urgent and energetic: they have a galloping sound, as if the speaker feels like he might be about to break into a run. The insistent AAAA [rhyme scheme](#) of these four lines only adds to their intensity.

And it's the thought of his wife's beauty that's inspiring all this new energy. Yet again, the speaker imagines her through a series of [similes](#) taken from nature: she's like a "leveret" (a young hare), a "young larch tree," the "first wild violets." All these images again cast her as a wild creature—the speaker even [repeats](#) the word "wild" twice in two lines. And all of them suggest just how heartbreakingly young she is. The image of the "straight," "slight" larch sapling in particular suggests that she might be barely pubescent: she doesn't even seem to have grown any adult curves.

The thought of all this wild, youthful beauty seems to be driving the speaker distracted. As he's made very clear all through the poem, this girl doesn't want anything to do with him. So there's something particularly ominous in the [rhetorical question](#) with which he closes this short, driving stanza:

*Sweet as the first wild violets, she,
To her wild self. But what to me?*

In other words: "What about me?" It seems that this speaker is starting to feel not just bewildered and anxious about his traumatized wife: he's starting to feel sexually frustrated—and self-righteous about it.

LINES 34-41

*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!*

The speaker's tone shifts dramatically in this stanza. He's just

been caught up in frenzied lust for his wife's youthful beauty. Now, in the most conventionally "poetic" passage of the poem so far, he paints a picture of a gloomy winter scene—a scene that seems to [symbolize](#) his own feelings and fears about aging.

All the images of the young bride in the previous stanza referred to new life and spring: "wild violets," a "young" sapling, a baby hare. Here, the [imagery](#) gets a lot chillier and darker: the "oaks are brown," there's a "low grey sky" overhead, and a single, lonely leaf "falls slowly down." Clearly, this speaker is reading his feelings about his own age and loneliness in the landscape around him. His bride might be young and lovely as spring, but around him he only sees reminders of decay, death, and isolation.

Listen to his [parallelism](#) in lines 34-35:

The short days shorten and the oaks are brown,
The blue smoke rises to the low grey sky,

These similarly-shaped sentences help to create the poem's new moody, thoughtful tone: it's as if the speaker is looking bleakly from one thing to the next, seeing his unhappiness reflected everywhere his eyes fall. The long list of wintery images also slows the poem's pace down considerably. Moments ago, the speaker's words were galloping along, swept up in lust; now, he's just taking in the sad sights of winter, one by one.

But he doesn't only see decay. He also sees the "berries redden[ing] up" as "Christmas-time" draws nearer—an image of ripening and hope, even in the midst of winter. He doesn't seem to take much pleasure in that image, though. Take a look at the way his [diacope](#) suggests the movement of his thoughts here:

The berries redden up to Christmas-time.
What's Christmas-time without there be
Some other in the house than we!

Merely thinking of "Christmas-time" reminds him of what he lacks. Christmas will feel empty to him without "some other in the house than we"—that is, without a child.

He makes this point in the form of a [rhetorical question](#)—and thus implies that anyone would agree that it wouldn't properly be Christmas-time without new life. In other words, the speaker believes that getting his wife pregnant is the "right" or "proper" thing to do, the natural order of things. All his seasonal symbolism only underscores that point: he seems desperate to persuade his wife to participate in the natural cycle of sex and reproduction with him before the "winter" of death and old age sweep in.

This meditative stanza paints a more complex picture of this farmer. He's certainly not doing a great job of relating to his traumatized young bride—of treating her like a person instead

of an elf or a hare or livestock. But the obvious fear and sadness in these lines humanize him: he's not a cartoonish monster, but a sad, limited man. This stanza makes this poem into something more like a tragedy than a horror story.

And that sense of tragedy will crystallize in the poem's final stanza.

LINES 42-46

*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!*

In the last stanza, the farmer's frustration seems to be coming to a boiling point. As he thinks of his bride asleep in the attic all alone—and reflects that only a "stair" separates him from her—he gets swept away once more by intense, compulsive desire.

There's real danger in the air in these lines. Take a look at the [enjambment](#) here:

Alone, poor maid. 'Tis but a stair
Betwixt us. Oh! my God! the down,

This line break mimics that mere "stair" that separates them—a thin, weak barrier, easy to cross. And the speaker is clearly excited by that thought, crying, "Oh! My God!" and launching into another urgent description of the girl's beauty.

The last time the speaker got caught up in his lust for his wife, he spoke in [similes](#), imagining her as a young flower or a baby hare. Now, he gets a lot more concrete and direct. Listen to his intense [repetitions](#) here:

[...] Oh! my God! the down,
The soft young down of her, the brown,
The brown of her—her eyes, her hair, her hair!

The [epizeuxis](#) and [parallelism](#) in these lines make the speaker sound obsessive, almost insane. And the words he's lingering on are all plain descriptions of his wife's body: the "down" of her skin, her "brown" coloration, and finally just her "eyes" and "hair." He's stopped thinking in symbolic terms and started thinking very literally indeed. It's not just the [symbolic](#) fertile spring of her youth he desires now, but her body, plain and simple.

But he's still unable to see the forest for the trees—the person behind all these desirable body parts. While he pauses for a moment's sympathy ("poor maid"), he still can't quite see his bride as a real, complete person—a person who's more than the sum of her lovely "eyes" and "hair."

And that spells tragedy for his unfortunate young wife. This

poem closes on a note of gathering intensity, as if a thunderstorm were rumbling on the horizon. The speaker's obsessive urgency here suggests that it won't be long before he forces himself on the "poor maid" in the attic. Perhaps this is just what she expects: her fear of "men-folk" suggests it won't be the first time she's been abused this way.

This farmer might not mean to be cruel. But he also never quite manages to see his young wife—purchased like livestock, hunted like a hare—as a human being. When men in particular and society in general treat women as interchangeable "brides," this poem suggests, only misery can follow.



SYMBOLS



THE SEASONS

The seasons in "The Farmer's Bride" [symbolize](#) different phases of life—and the distance between the farmer and his young bride.

The older farmer fantasizes about his bride's youth by comparing her to "the first wild violets" that bloom in spring. But after she's married, she's so traumatized that that "spring" seems to come to an abrupt end: her "smile" vanishes like "the shut of winter's day."

Later, more images of winter symbolize the farmer's sexuality and his frustrated desire for his frightened, evasive wife—as when he describes berries "redden[ing] up to Christmas-time," getting plumper and riper like a pregnant belly. But he also notices time passing and plants dying: "one leaf" falls to the ground, the earth is "white with rime," and the days get shorter and shorter. These images of autumn and winter reflect his anxiety and frustration about growing older without having children: his wife might be lovely and enticing, but she's also too young and frightened to let him come near her, let alone sleep with her.

The seasonal images here thus symbolize both ripe youth and withered old age—and all the anxiety and frustration the poem's speaker feels about desire and aging.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "summers"
- **Line 3:** "harvest-time"
- **Line 6:** "the shut of a winter's day"
- **Line 9:** "Fall"
- **Line 32:** "first wild violets"
- **Line 34:** "short days shorten and the oaks are brown"
- **Line 35:** "blue smoke rises to the low grey sky"
- **Line 36:** "One leaf in the still air falls slowly down,"
- **Line 37:** "A magpie's spotted feathers lie"
- **Line 38:** "black earth spread white with rime"

- **Line 39:** "berries redden up to Christmas-time"
- **Line 40:** "Christmas-time"



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Emphatic [alliteration](#) draws readers' attention to some of the poem's most dramatic moments.

For instance, alliterative sounds appear throughout the first stanza, when the speaker describes his wife's fear and reluctance around him. In line 4, for instance, /w/ alliteration reinforces the idea that the bride began to change "When we was wed"—suggesting that a big part of the problem here is that the two were "wed" at all, while she was still far "too young." Later on, the quiet, delicate /l/ and /f/ sounds in "more like a little frightened fay" evoke the girl's fragile youth—and her terror.

And later, alliteration intensifies the tone when the speaker thinks about how his wife's eyes seem to beg him to stay away:

"Not near, not near!" her eyes beseech
When one of us comes within reach.

Here, repeating /n/ sounds accentuate the girl's desperation not to be touched—and make it clear that the speaker understands very well that she doesn't consent to his advances, even if she never says so out loud.

Alliteration also allows the poem's sounds to mimic the ideas it describes. For instance, when the speaker claims that he has "hardly heard her speak at all," the faint /h/ sounds imitate his wife's hushed tone, evoking her fear and voicelessness in the marriage.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "summers," "since," "maid"
- **Line 2:** "maybe," "more's"
- **Line 4:** "When," "was," "wed"
- **Line 6:** "winter's"
- **Line 7:** "went," "woman"
- **Line 8:** "like," "little," "frightened," "fay"
- **Line 9:** "Fall"
- **Line 10:** "sheep"
- **Line 11:** "Should"
- **Line 12:** "sure," "she"
- **Line 13:** "awake," "with," "wide"
- **Line 14:** "So," "seven," "up," "along," "across"
- **Line 18:** "her," "home"
- **Line 21:** "most," "mouse"
- **Line 25:** "Not," "near," "not," "near"

- **Line 26:** "When," "one," "within"
- **Line 29:** "hardly," "heard," "her"
- **Line 30:** "swift"
- **Line 31:** "Straight," "slight"
- **Line 32:** "Sweet"
- **Line 33:** "self"
- **Line 36:** "still," "slowly"
- **Line 37:** "spotted"
- **Line 38:** "white," "with"
- **Line 46:** "her," "her," "her," "hair," "her," "hair"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#), like [alliteration](#), both gives the poem some music and draws attention to important moments.

For instance, when the speaker says that his wife is "Sweet as the first wild violets, she," assonant long /i/ and /ee/ sounds sound just as deliciously "sweet" and "wild" as the beauty these words describe.

And listen to the vowel sounds in this painful moment:

"Not near, not near!" her eyes beseech

The long /ee/ sounds here mimic a frightened whine, evoking the girl's terror around men.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "like," "frightened"
- **Line 9:** "night"
- **Line 14:** "So," "over," "seven," "up," "along," "across"
- **Line 15:** "chased," "flying like," "hare"
- **Line 20:** "about," "house"
- **Line 21:** "mouse"
- **Line 25:** "near," "near," "beseech"
- **Line 26:** "one," "us," "comes," "reach"
- **Line 30:** "he"
- **Line 31:** "slight," "tree"
- **Line 32:** "Sweet," "wild," "violets," "she"
- **Line 33:** "me"
- **Line 37:** "magpie's," "lie"
- **Line 38:** "white," "rime"
- **Line 39:** "berries redden," "time"
- **Line 44:** "down"
- **Line 45:** "down," "brown"
- **Line 46:** "brown"

ASYNDETON

The [asyndeton](#) in "The Farmer's Bride" helps to give readers a sense of the speaker's voice—especially as he becomes more and more emotional and volatile toward the end of the poem.

Because asyndeton runs ideas together swiftly, it sometimes

makes the speaker seem caught up in his own thoughts. For instance, take a look at the short stanza in which he muses on his skittish wife's beauty:

Shy as a leveret, swift as he,
Straight and slight as a young larch tree,
Sweet as the first wild violets, she,

The lack of conjunctions here makes the speaker sound almost hypnotized, as if he's getting lost in his desire for this strange, wild young girl.

Later on, asyndeton builds the poem's momentum, accentuating the speaker's urgency and distress. For example, look at the poem's last two lines:

The soft young down of her, the brown,
The brown of her—her eyes, her hair, her hair!

Asyndeton makes the speaker's thoughts here feel increasingly frenzied and relentless, as if he can no longer control his desires. The gathering speed and momentum here gives readers the uneasy feeling that the speaker might be just on the verge of losing control and violating his frightened wife.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 30-32:** " Shy as a leveret, swift as he, / Straight and slight as a young larch tree, / Sweet as the first wild violets, she,"
- **Lines 34-39:** "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"
- **Lines 44-46:** "the down, / The soft young down of her, the brown, / The brown"
- **Line 46:** "her eyes, her hair, her hair"

CONSONANCE

Like [assonance](#) and [alliteration](#), [consonance](#) emphasizes important images and ideas, and makes the poem musical.

For example, listen to the consonant /l/, sharp /t/, and [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds in this passage:

Shy as a leveret, swift as he,
Straight and slight as a young larch tree,
Sweet as the first wild violets, she,

Those soft, quick sounds imitate the very "swift[ness]," "slight[ness]," and beauty these lines describe.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “summers since,” “maid”
- **Line 2:** “maybe,” “more’s”
- **Line 3:** “time”
- **Line 4:** “When,” “was wed”
- **Line 6:** “winter’s”
- **Line 7:** “went,” “twadn’t,” “woman”
- **Line 8:** “like,” “little,” “frightened fay”
- **Line 9:** “Fall”
- **Line 10:** “sheep”
- **Line 11:** “Should”
- **Line 12:** “sure,” “she”
- **Line 13:** “awake,” “wide,” “stare”
- **Line 14:** “So over seven”
- **Line 15:** “flying like”
- **Line 16:** “lanterns”
- **Line 17:** “scare”
- **Line 18:** “caught”
- **Line 20:** “house”
- **Line 21:** “most,” “mouse”
- **Line 23:** “birds,” “rabbits”
- **Line 25:** “Not near, not near”
- **Line 26:** “When one”
- **Line 27:** “say,” “beasts,” “stall”
- **Line 28:** “Look,” “like children,” “call”
- **Line 29:** “hardly heard,” “speak,” “all”
- **Line 30:** “leveret,” “swift”
- **Line 31:** “Straight,” “slight,” “larch,” “tree”
- **Line 32:** “Sweet,” “first,” “wild violets”
- **Line 33:** “wild self”
- **Line 34:** “short,” “shorten,” “oaks,” “brown”
- **Line 35:** “blue,” “smoke,” “sky”
- **Line 36:** “leaf,” “still,” “falls slowly”
- **Line 38:** “white with”
- **Line 39:** “berries redden”
- **Line 40:** “without there”
- **Line 41:** “other,” “than”
- **Line 42:** “sleeps up”
- **Line 43:** “’Tis but,” “stair”
- **Line 44:** “Betwixt,” “down”
- **Line 45:** “down,” “brown”
- **Line 46:** “brown,” “her,” “her,” “her hair,” “her hair”

ENJAMBMENT

This poem's [enjambments](#) help to speed up the pace and create anticipation, and often turns up in dramatic or suspenseful moments.

For example, take a look at this heavily enjambed passage, in which the speaker describes chasing and capturing his wife (lines 14-18):

So over seven-acre field and up-along across the
down

We chased her, flying like a hare
Before out 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.

All these lines run into each other as swiftly as the young bride flees her pursuers. This technique builds suspense as the audience waits to learn if the girl got away—and makes her eventual capture all the more memorable. After all those rushing enjambments, the stanza closes with a jolting [end-stop](#) as firm and final as the imprisonment it describes.

Enjambment also helps to evoke the speaker's gruff voice in the poem's first few lines:

Too young maybe—but more's to do
At harvest-time than bide and woo.

The way this sentence runs on over two lines makes the speaker sound impatient and brusque, which fits right in with what he's saying here: he doesn't have time to wait around for child brides to grow up, he's got farming to do!

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** “do / At”
- **Lines 4-5:** “afraid / Of”
- **Lines 6-7:** “day / Her”
- **Lines 14-15:** “down / We”
- **Lines 15-16:** “hare / Before”
- **Lines 16-17:** “Church-Town / All”
- **Lines 17-18:** “scare / We”
- **Lines 20-21:** “house / As”
- **Lines 22-23:** “play / With”
- **Lines 27-28:** “stall / Look”
- **Lines 40-41:** “be / Some”
- **Lines 43-44:** “stair / Betwixt”

IMAGERY

The speaker uses vivid [imagery](#) throughout the poem to describe his wife and the natural world around him.

The speaker's elaborate descriptions of the landscape establish the rural setting and fill it with [symbolic](#) meaning. In lines 34-39, for instance, the speaker illustrates a bleak, barren, wintery scene complete with shortening days, “brown” leaves, and “still air.” These images don't just paint a vivid picture of the winter landscape: they also suggest the speaker feels that he, like the year, isn't getting any younger. Feeling his age, the speaker searches for possible signs of new life, landing on “redden[ing]” berries that spur him to imagine getting his wife (unwillingly) pregnant.

All this heavily symbolic imagery suggests that the speaker also

feels that there's something unnatural about his wife's resistance to him: women, his images imply, are naturally *meant* to want sex and babies, and he just can't figure out why his young wife doesn't.

Vivid imagery also evokes that unfortunate wife's heartbreaking youth. For instance, when the speaker says that she's "straight and slight as a young larch tree," readers get the sense that his bride is so young that she still has a childlike, curveless body. Later, when the speaker fantasizes about "the soft young down of her," he uses a term associated with both peach fuzz and the feathers of newborn birds. Even her "wide brown stare" suggests huge, childlike eyes.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "Lying awake with her wide brown stare"
- **Lines 31-32:** " Straight and slight as a young larch tree, / Sweet as the first wild violets, she,"
- **Lines 34-39:** "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"
- **Lines 44-46:** "the down, / The soft young down of her, the brown, / The brown of her—her eyes, her hair, her hair"

PARALLELISM

[Parallelism](#) evokes the speaker's increasingly intense feelings as the poem comes to an end.

For instance, take a look at lines 30-32:

Shy as a leveret, **swift** as he,
Straight and **slight** as a young larch tree,
Sweet as the first wild violets, she,

All of these lines focus on the girl's physical beauty and liken her to a plant or animal, strengthening her association with the natural world. Plus, the speaker exaggerates the youth and fragility of each plant or animal—the hare is just a young "leveret," the larch tree is a "slight" sapling, and the violets are the "first" to sprout in spring. The repeated phrasing here thus matches a repeated *idea*: the speaker's sense that his wife is delicate, wild, and beautiful, all at once.

In lines 34-39, parallelism paints a wistful picture of the coming winter. Describing "the short days," "the blue smoke," and "a magpie's spotted feathers" in these structurally similar lines, the speaker seems to be looking bleakly around him at all these reminders of his own mortality, noting them one by one. These differently-flavored parallel lines also contrast with those of the previous stanza: if his wife is in the spring of her life, he's very

much in the autumn of his.

Parallelism also evokes the speaker's passionate frenzy at the end of the poem:

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!

In this case, parallelism reinforces the speaker's fixation on his wife's body: here, he seems to be drooling over her desirable parts, not seeing her as a whole person. These similarly-shaped phrases evoke his obsession: by the end of the poem, he seems barely able to hold himself together as he cries "her eyes, her hair, her hair!"

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 30-32:** " Shy as a leveret, swift as he, / Straight and slight as a young larch tree, / Sweet as the first wild violets,"
- **Lines 34-35:** " The short days shorten and the oaks are brown, / The blue smoke rises to the low grey sky,"
- **Lines 36-39:** " 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."
- **Lines 44-46:** "the down, / The soft young down of her, the brown, / The brown of her"
- **Line 46:** "her eyes, her hair, her hair!"

REPETITION

The different forms of [repetition](#) throughout the poem give readers some insight into the characters' feelings.

For example, the speaker says that his wife's eyes plead "Not near, not near!" when men are around. An example of [epizeuxis](#), this repeated command evokes the young bride's terror of men in general and her husband in particular.

Moments of [polysyndeton](#) also play up her fear of men and her general misery. First, the speaker claims that his wife is scared "of love **and** me **and** all things human." The repeated "and" here extends the list to exaggerate the girl's terror, as if she has infinite fears. Later, however, the speaker says that she is "Happy enough to chat and play / With birds **and** rabbits **and** such as they." Here, polysyndeton exaggerates the many creatures the girl is comfortable around, in contrast to her behavior around anyone "human."

[Diacope](#) also reveals the speaker's most intense inner worries and desires. For example, in lines 32-33, he dwells on the idea that his wife is "wild," or resistant to the traditional role that she has been forced to fill. Similarly, in lines 39-40 he repeats "Christmas-time," concerned about the winter months passing without new life and insisting that there should be a baby in the

house by the holidays.

Finally, the intense repetition throughout the poem's last several lines implies that the speaker's thoughts are spiraling out of control. These lines contain several forms of repetition, including:

- Diacope: "the down, the soft young down of her"
- Epizeuxis: "the brown, / The brown" and "her hair, her hair"
- [Parallelism](#) (and [anaphora](#)): "the down, / The soft young down of her, the brown, The brown of her" and "her eyes, her hair, her hair!"

These repetitions make the speaker seem sexually obsessed, returning to the same images of his wife's body over and over again. Each time these images reappear, the speaker's violent impulses seem to get stronger—and the reader leaves the poem with the sense that he won't keep himself in check for much longer.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "and," "and"
- **Line 7:** "and"
- **Line 22:** "and"
- **Line 23:** "and," "and"
- **Line 25:** "Not near, not near"
- **Line 32:** "wild"
- **Line 33:** "wild"
- **Line 39:** "Christmas-time"
- **Line 40:** "Christmas-time"
- **Line 44:** "down"
- **Line 45:** "down," "of her"
- **Lines 45-46:** "the brown, / The brown"
- **Line 46:** "of her," "her," "her hair," "her hair"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker's [rhetorical questions](#) reveal his anxieties about his marriage—and his limitations.

For instance, take a look at the way the speaker works up to a question in lines 32-33:

Sweet as the first wild violets, she,
To her wild self. **But what to me?**

This question introduces notes of both sorrow and cruelty to the poem. On the one hand, the speaker seems understandably forlorn here, sad to be living with a woman who wants nothing to do with him. On the other hand, by this point, readers have heard him describe how he married his wife "too young," then hunted her down like a "hare" when she tried to escape. This rhetorical question thus also reminds the audience of *the girl's* suffering, suggesting that the farmer's "What about me?"

attitude is all part of his disrespect for his unwilling bride. She obviously fears and dislikes men in general and him in particular, but this question suggests that none of that ultimately matters much to him.

Later, the speaker describes ripening berries in a desolate winter landscape, then asks another rhetorical question:

The berries redden up to Christmas-time.
**What's Christmas-time without there be
Some other in the house than we!**

The speaker here wonders if it would even *be* Christmas without a new life in the house. His question suggests that he sees having a child as a way to create a "proper" or "successful" household, and that he's indignant that his bride won't consent to doing things the "right" way. The exclamation point that ends this question adds another note of danger here: the energy of this cry makes it seem that this farmer is on the verge of forcing his wife to get pregnant whether she likes it or not.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 33:** "But what to me?"
- **Lines 40-41:** "What's Christmas-time without there be / Some other in the house than we!"

SIMILE

The speaker uses several [similes](#) to describe his wife, comparing her to elements of the natural world: plants, animals, and seasons. These descriptions all suggest that he sees his wife both as a beautiful wild creature and as a lower form of life, an animal he can own and hunt.

The speaker's descriptions of his wife often characterize her as timid, flighty, and easily overpowered. For instance, he says she does housework "like a mouse" and that she is as "shy as a leveret" (that is, a young hare). Similarly, the speaker likens her to a "slight" sapling and the vulnerable "first" wildflowers that bloom in spring. These similes suggest that speaker sees his wife as something more like a delicate pet than an equal human being.

At the same time, the speaker's similes also play up the girl's "wildness"—her desire to be free in nature, rather than confined in the home (and the marriage). According to the speaker, she runs away "flying like a hare" and is as "swift" as a leveret. This connection to nature even gives her a mystical quality: she can tame beasts to "look round like children at her call," and she seems "like a little frightened fay" (or fairy) on their wedding night.

Similes also evoke this strange, sad girl's own feelings:

Like the shut of a winter's day
Her smile went out, and 'twadn't a woman—

This simile allows readers to visualize the girl's misery, linking it to the familiar sinking feeling of a day being cut short when the sun sets early in the winter. The image gives the audience a fuller, more vivid understanding of the girl's suffering, encouraging them to sympathize with her—and suggesting that even the brusque, uncomprehending, and frustrated speaker feels for her, in his way.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "Like the shut of a winter's day / Her smile went out"
- **Line 8:** "More like a little frightened fay"
- **Line 15:** "flying like a hare"
- **Line 21:** "like a mouse"
- **Line 28:** "Look round like children"
- **Line 30:** "Shy as a leveret, swift as he"
- **Line 31:** "Straight and slight as a young larch tree"
- **Line 32:** "Sweet as the first wild violets"



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Farmer's Bride" is a dramatic monologue—a poem whose events are told from the perspective of a particular character. Readers are left to draw their own conclusions about this monologue's speaker, judging him by what he says and does. (Perhaps, for instance, readers might question the farmer's choice to marry a girl "too young" for him because he just doesn't have time to "bide and woo"!)

This farmer tells his story in an irregular shape, not using a standard form like a [ballad](#): the six stanzas here are all different lengths. And the variation between these stanzas helps to create some dramatic effects:

- For instance, the first three stanzas are all nine or ten lines long: rambly passages of storytelling you might expect from a farmer sitting at the pub.
- But the abrupt fourth stanza uses only four lines—and ends on the uneasy question, "But what to me?"

This change in shape suggests that the farmer's attitude toward his bride might be starting to shift: he's moved from thinking about how she behaves to thinking about his own needs and desires. This sudden change to the form thus feels ominous: it hints that the farmer might be getting closer and closer to going to drastic, cruel lengths to get what he wants from his wife.

METER

This poem is mostly written in [iambic](#) tetrameter, which means that each line uses four iambs, [metrical](#) feet with a da-DUM rhythm. This bouncy meter evokes the farmer's casual, jovial tone, and makes an uncomfortable contrast with what he's describing: his bride's misery.

But the poem often breaks from this pattern to create drama and surprise. For instance, there are three additional iambs in line 14, which describes the speaker chasing his wife after she runs away:

So ov- | er sev- | en-a- | cre field | and up- | along |
across | the down

This long, tense line evokes the girl's desperate attempt to escape, and increases anticipation as the audience waits to learn if she got away.

Similarly, the poem's final line contains an extra iamb, creating suspense as the speaker menacingly fantasizes about his wife's body:



VOCABULARY

Maid (Line 1, Line 43) - A girl or young woman.

Bide (Line 3) - Stay in the same place. The speaker means that he didn't want to wait around for the perfect bride.

Woo (Line 3) - Court, seduce.

'Twadn't (Line 7) - A dialect word meaning "it wasn't." The speaker's thick accent gives readers a sense that he's from the countryside.

Fay (Line 8) - A fairy.

Abed (Line 11) - In bed.

Down (Line 14, Line 45) - In line 14, the word "down" refers to a broad, low hill with a gentle slope. But in line 45, it means the fine layer of hair that covers the face and/or body, what we'd call "peach fuzz" or "baby fur" today. Both of these homonyms evoke the girl's youth, fragility, and connection to the natural world.

Beseech (Line 25) - Beg, plead.

Leveret (Line 30) - A young hare.

Slight (Line 31) - Slender and slim.

Larch (Line 31) - A kind of evergreen tree.

Magpie (Line 37) - A black-and-white bird related to crows and ravens.

Rime (Line 38) - Frost.

The brown | of her— | her eyes, | her hair, | her hair!

The mounting momentum suggests the speaker's frenzied frustration, and perhaps that he's on the verge of doing something violent.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem has an irregular [rhyme scheme](#): no two stanzas use the same pattern. Instead, the poem varies its rhymes for dramatic effect, helping to evoke the farmer's voice and feelings.

For instance, take a look at the way rhymes work in the first stanza, where the scheme runs like this:

ABBACDCDD

- In the first four lines here, the speaker seems to interrupt his own train of thought: the pair of B rhymes (in which he discusses his reasons for choosing a bride "too young" to marry) split up the A rhymes, and thus feel like an aside.
- Then the stanza moves into a more flowing, predictable CDCD pattern as the farmer gets into gear, settling into his storytelling.
- And when he hits a surprising moment, describing how his wife "runned away," his rhyme also does something surprising, adding another D rhyme where readers are expecting a C!
- Overall, then, the rhymes here fit right in with the speaker's tone as he puzzles over his strange bride and sexless marriage.

Rhyme keeps on reflecting the speaker's voice and energy all through the poem. In lines 30-33, for example, when the speaker starts getting caught up in thoughts of his wife's beauty, the rhymes look like this:

AAAA

These urgent, insistent rhymes suggest the speaker's growing intensity: his frustrated desire is only getting stronger.



SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is a farmer contemplating his strained marriage, wondering why on earth it didn't go well when he casually "chose" an adolescent bride who was probably "too young."

Although his exact age and background are unclear, the speaker's pronounced dialect suggests that he's a working-class person—and one from the same late-19th-century rural England that Charlotte Mew herself grew up in.

Worried about his own advancing age and his desire to have a child, this speaker is increasingly troubled that his wife won't let

him come near her, and he's getting sexually frustrated—a combination that doesn't bode well for his frightened bride. While the farmer at first seems merely puzzled by his strange, fairy-like wife (and her urgent desire to escape him), his habit of describing her as a wild hare suggests that he sees her as prey—and means to hunt her down sooner or later.



SETTING

"The Farmer's Bride" takes place on a farm in the English countryside, a landscape full of hares, downs, magpies, and larch trees. The poem's speaker, a farmer, is closely attuned to the natural world around him, and often uses the beauty of the spring flowers or the slow death of winter as images of his desire for his wife and his anxieties about old age.

The setting here also suggests a contrast between the farmer, who manages and controls the land, and his wife, who seems to be a *part* of it: as "shy as a leveret," she seems more at home with the "beasts" than the home where her husband locks her away.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Charlotte Mew (1869-1928) first published "The Farmer's Bride" in 1912—a breakthrough moment in her literary career. While Mew had already published several stories, essays, and poems, "The Farmer's Bride" catapulted her to fame with its unvarnished look at sexual oppression and its sympathetic treatment of both the speaker and his unfortunate young bride. The literary world was also fascinated by Mew's rejection of gender roles: she cut her hair short, wore men's clothing, and refused to marry.

Mew's work often explores themes like those in "The Farmer's Bride": for instance, alienation ("[Saturday Market](#)") and sexuality ("[The Fête](#)"). Unusually experimental in its time, her poetry stood out for its conversational rhythms, everyday language, sprawling lines, and frank, shocking themes. Writers from [Thomas Hardy](#) to [Virginia Woolf](#) praised her innovative work.

But this poem also fits right in with Mew's contemporary poetic world. For instance, thanks to poets like [Robert Browning](#), the dramatic monologue became a popular late-19th-century form. And woman poets such as [Elizabeth Barrett Browning](#) and [Christina Rossetti](#) were also decrying the rigidity and injustice of conventional gender roles in their work. The figure of the New Woman—educated, ambitious, and self-sufficient—emerged around the turn of the 20th century, and Mew might be seen as a pioneer of this kind of female liberation.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Charlotte Mew was born in 1869 during England's Victorian era, which can be taken as the poem's setting and historical backdrop. During the Victorian era, women were seen as the property of either their fathers or their husbands, and had few legal rights of their own. (For instance, English women didn't legally own their own earnings until 1870, and weren't allowed to vote until 1918.) Traditionally, a young woman's main duties including being an obedient wife and looking after the household, with motherhood being her greatest accomplishment. And substantial age gaps between older husbands and younger wives were common, even standard, as they were thought to reflect the "natural" dominance of men over women.

Mew herself was all too well acquainted with these expectations—and firmly resisted them. Shockingly for her time, she refused to marry, cut her hair short, wore men's clothing, and pursued relationships with women.

While part of Mew's resistance to marriage might have been that she preferred women, she publicly claimed that she would never marry because she didn't want to have children, fearing that she'd pass along her family's mental illness. Mew and her six siblings all struggled with their mental health: most ended up living in institutions, and several took their own lives. Mew herself committed suicide in 1928.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [A Short Biography](#) — Learn more about Mew's life and literary career from the Poetry Foundation.

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/charlotte-mew>)

- [The Poem Aloud](#) — Listen to a reading of "The Farmer's Bride." (<https://youtu.be/1y6WHZ98Tks>)
- [The Poem's History](#) — Learn more about this poem's powerful style and long influence. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2008/sep/01/poemoftheweekthefarmersb>)
- [Mew's Legacy](#) — Learn more about a recent biography of Mew, whose work (long overlooked) is starting to come back into style. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/may/19/this-rare-spirit-a-life-of-charlotte-mew-review-in-praise-of-a-victorian-new-woman>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CHARLOTTE MEW POEMS

- [The Trees are Down](#)



HOW TO CITE

MLA

Soa, Jackson. "The Farmer's Bride." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 16 Jan 2020. Web. 21 May 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Soa, Jackson. "The Farmer's Bride." LitCharts LLC, January 16, 2020. Retrieved May 21, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/charlotte-mew/the-farmer-s-bride>.