

## Article

# “Bury Your Heart”: Charlotte Mew and the Limits of Empathy

Elizabeth Black

Library Services, University of Roehampton, Roehampton Lane, London SW15 5PU, UK;  
Elizabeth.black@roehampton.ac.uk

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**Abstract:** Charlotte Mew’s strikingly original and passionate poetry remains under-examined by modernist critics, yet it holds great importance in presenting an alternative version of modernism that foregrounds issues surrounding gender, sexuality and otherness. Mew’s work explores key modernist themes such as alienation, fragmentation and psychological disruption from the perspectives of those on the margins of society, and in doing so challenges narrow definitions of the movement by highlighting the multiplicity and plurality of voices and concerns within it. Whilst Mew’s decentred position often informs painful reflections on shame, exclusion and powerlessness, the culmination of so many marginalised voices in the poems and Mew’s overriding compassion for the vulnerable creates a powerful challenge to the centre that contests traditional accounts of modernism as defined by white, European men. This article will explore how female experience informs Mew’s exploration of empathy between the marginalised and how personal experience of gender-based oppression inspires compassion for other vulnerable groups who suffer under similar power dynamics or social prejudices. It will consider how female experience shapes both the content of the poems and her choice of poetic forms that allow for concealment of self against the fear of exposure. It will also draw upon contemporary feminist readings of modernist literature and emotion to examine the ways in which gender informs Charlotte Mew’s treatment of key modernist themes and how this challenges conventional understanding of the movement.

**Keywords:** Charlotte Mew; Modernism; empathy

A central feature of Charlotte Mew’s poetry is her emotionally sensitive examination of painful feelings of vulnerability and alienation. Throughout her poems, Mew focuses on the experiences of individuals existing on the peripheries of society whose vulnerability is often heightened by isolation, suppressed desires or feelings of shame. The authenticity and intensity of Mew’s engagement with these themes reflects her personal understanding of the experience of occupying multiple forms of otherness. As a woman attempting to conceal her queer identity, family history of mental illness and financial difficulties, Charlotte Mew understood the challenges of attempting to suppress difference and pass in society. This knowledge can be seen as informing the poems’ complex engagement with the complexities of empathy, especially between marginalised people for whom voicing objections to the suffering of others risks personal exposure and harm. This alternative perspective on alienation, powerlessness and compassion challenges ideas of empathy as a ‘soft’, feminine emotion, and instead shows it to be a morally complicated and potentially dangerous feeling that places marginalised people in direct confrontation with self and society.

The experience of empathy and the challenge of expressing compassion are not limited by gender. However, in many of Charlotte Mew’s poems, female experience is both the source of empathetic feeling and the central obstacle to acting upon it. In the poems, the women who are most in danger of social isolation or persecution are those who fail to conform to conventional models of femininity and are therefore unable to pass in patriarchal society. The constant threat of social exposure and

oppression is essential to the development of female empathy for other marginalised individuals or groups. However, the inherent powerlessness of their precarious social position is also the key factor that prevents them from publicly defending such people. This complex struggle between personal empathy and social conformity is evident throughout Mew's work, but especially in 'Ken', 'Saturday Market' and 'The Farmer's Bride'. Each poem explores the complex interactions between the empathetic individual, the sufferer and the reader in a way that not only illuminates a vital aspect of Charlotte Mew's poetry, but also challenges preconceptions of modernism as a movement that rejects compassion and emotion. In this way, Mew shows the importance of recognising alternative voices and experiences beyond the centre in order to understand the multiplicity and diversity of perspectives within the movement.

## 1. Modernism, Gender and Empathy

Prior to the emergence of Affect Theory and the broader shift towards recognising the plurality of the movement, empathy was not an emotion immediately associated with modernist literature. The movement has been more persistently characterised by an interest in the psychological complexities of self, the interior life and the solitary figure in the crowd. These preoccupations have often been placed in opposition to notions of compassion, fellow feeling or empathy: forming the impression that modernism "was not concerned with tracing relations between people" (Martin 2013, p. 11). There are multiple reasons why "still-pervasive notions of modernism's hostility to notions of feelings for others" persisted (Martin 2013, p. 10). Julie Taylor identifies the role of modernist critics in creating a lasting impression of modernism as unemotional, arguing that "scholars have tended to emphasise modernism's aesthetic preferences for irony and detachment over embodied sentiment . . ." (Taylor 2015, p. 2). Whilst it is important to recognise the extent to which critics shaped narrow perceptions of modernism, the movement's association with a cynical, detached perspective on the world was also self-created. A distinctive feature of modernism is its preoccupation with defining itself through manifestos and pronouncements that set out standards for what is considered modern, good or new, and what is not. These edicts and proclamations often reject literature characterised by sentiment, sympathy or "the appeal to feeling" (Clark 1991, p. 38). A clear example of this is the Futurist manifesto, which celebrates war, masculinity and aggression whilst explicitly opposing feminism and declaring "scorn for women" (Marinetti 1970, p. 22). With more restraint, high modernism also dissociated itself from emotion and personal experience, with T. S. Eliot describing poetry as "an escape from emotion" and "an escape from personality" (Eliot 1972, p. 58). More generally, literary modernism's devotion to the new often involved a conscious separation from perceived weaknesses of the past: the whimsy of the Georgians, the sentimentalism of Victorian literature and the emotion of Romanticism. These factors combined to create a "pervading sense that early twentieth-century writers were hostile to messy emotion and particularly to empathy" (Martin 2013, p. 11).

This rejection of literature considered sentimental, sympathetic or conventional has a strong gender bias that reflects the broader historical marginalisation of female voices within the modernist movement. The celebration of avant-garde experimentation and the cool detachment of the new made subjects associated with women's writing and experience "both a past to be outgrown and a present tendency to be despised" (Clark 1991, p. 2). The role of critics in shaping this perception is again significant. Suzanne Clark identifies a direct relationship between critical responses to female writing and the treatment of emotion: "Modernist criticism located women's writing within the obscenity of the sentimental" (Clark 1991, p. 2). As Clark continues, within this bias the association of women's writing with excessive emotion went unchallenged: "The gendered character of this condemnation seemed natural: women writers were entangled with sensibility, were romantic and sentimental by nature, and so even the best might not altogether escape this romantic indulgence in emotion and sublimity" (Clark 1991, p. 2). This bias not only demeans women's writing but dismisses emotion as a less valuable or intellectual approach to poetic subjects; a characteristic of less accomplished writers who are unable to achieve modernism's sophisticated style of detachment. Charlotte Mew was not

exempt from this form of judgement, with her writing being defined, both positively and negatively, in relation to emotion. Edith Sitwell's loaded compliment that "it is usual for the poems written by women to be unendurably embarrassing when they deal with emotion, but Charlotte Mew's poems ... never cause one embarrassment" values Mew's work almost exclusively in terms of its "emotional integrity and to the fine and truthful power of expressing emotion" (Sitwell 1929, p. 131). In contrast, emotion is the aspect Michael Holroyd criticises in relation to Charlotte Mew's war poetry, claiming that: "Her approach to subjects, by the side door of emotion, possibly rendered her inadequate to deal with the direct horrors of war" (Holroyd 1967, p. 157).

This pressure to remove emotion, sentiment and personal experience from poetry added to existing challenges for female poets. As Jane Dowson explains, women writers were already confronting the need to distance themselves from the pejorative Victorian label of 'poetesses' and its associations with flimsy, whimsical and emotional writing (Dowson 2002, p. 1). The added prejudices and constraints of modernist conventions increased pressure on women to either conform to the demands of male defined modernism in an attempt at acceptance or create their own forms and risk further exclusion. Both options positioned women's writing in response to dominant male standards within an already restrictive literary environment. For some women writers, such as Edith Sitwell, these standards were internalised and turned outwards to protect their own status within the movement. Explicitly foregrounding technical virtuosity and formal and linguistic experimentation over emotion, Sitwell used prejudice against female writers to establish her superiority. Speaking from her elevated position, she advised female poets to reject confessional or personal styles and write "in as hard and glittering a manner as possible, and with as strange images as possible" (Greene 1998, p. 253). The implication being that women must adopt a masculine writing style in order to have their work taken seriously.

In this, as in many other ways, Charlotte Mew stands slightly apart. Although she lived in Bloomsbury, was involved in the Poetry Bookshop and admired by leading figures such as Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf and Edith Sitwell, she had no ambitions to access the inner circles of literary modernism. Mew's lack of self-promotion, sense of educational inferiority and fierce self-possession kept her at the peripheries of literary culture and prevented her from receiving the recognition she deserved. However, it also meant that whilst she engaged with key ideas of the time, she did not shape her writing to meet any prescribed standards. Mew experimented with voice, form and lineation on her own terms, weaving Victorian themes and motifs with modernist ideas of fragmentation, gaps and multiple voices. Central to her poetic form and voice is the emotional intensity of her writing and its engagement with heightened experiences of trauma, shame and desire. The unifying thread between the poems is the significance of empathy in her depiction of those who experience these painful emotions. This focus on alternative experiences and perspectives reflects wider modernist ambitions to be "a vehicle to jolt its readers out of quotidian modes of perception" (Taylor 2015, p. 1). However, Mew's work is distinguished from mainstream modernism by its predominant focus on female experience and emotion.

Charlotte Mew's poetic engagement with the complexities of empathy and emotion can be usefully examined in relation to the broader critical recognition of the significance of affective qualities to the modernist movement. Encompassing a range of interdisciplinary approaches to emotion, the emergence of Affect Theory and the related 'affective turn' has encouraged greater awareness of the importance of feeling and emotion in literature. In relation to modernism, critics such as Kirsty Martin, Suzanne Clark and Julie Taylor have played a central role in challenging the previously dominant view of the movement as 'cold, hard and cerebral' (Taylor 2015, p. 2). In re-evaluating the role of emotion in modernist literature, theorists have emphasised the centrality of affect. Julie Taylor, for example, describes it as an aspect that has been 'hidden in plain sight', claiming that 'while modernists and their scholars have always been full of feelings, we have been slow to turn a critical eye towards them' (Taylor 2015, p. 1). Such challenges to the 'image of an anti-emotional modernist' (Taylor 2015, p. 3) have led to discussions of a range of emotions present in the movement, of which sympathy, fellow feeling and empathy are central.

Kirsty Martin's assertion that "sympathy was central to modernism" summarises a broader and more complex re-evaluation of sentimental literature by critics and philosophers (Martin 2013, p. 10). Whilst sympathy and sentiment are part of Charlotte Mew's poetry, the term 'empathy', which is being particularly suited to literary modernism as it came into usage at a similar time, is the most relevant to her work (Hammond 2016, p. 1). The distinctions between empathy and related terms such as sympathy, pity or sentiment are important. Identifying differences between empathy and sympathy, a term regularly used in the period preceding modernism, is especially important to understanding Mew's work. A central distinction here is the distance between the person who witnesses suffering and the sufferer. Suzanne Keen succinctly describes this difference as empathy being "I feel your pain" and sympathy being "I feel pity for your pain" (Keen 2007, p. 5). The degree of psychological separateness from the other's experience is what distinguishes feeling for the sufferer, to feeling with, or to reference the original German *Einfühlung*, "feeling into" (Ratcliffe 2008, p. 30). For Suzanne Keen, literature has a particularly vital role in developing empathy. Directly supporting the potential for writing to generate compassion in the reader, she describes empathy as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, [which] can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (Keen 2007, p. 4).

Empathy, rather than sympathy, is central to Charlotte Mew's poetry because it does not allow for the comfort of claiming incomprehension in response to the suffering of others. The challenge of Mew's poetry is not to understand the feelings of another person but choosing how to respond to this knowledge when the empathetic individual is also vulnerable to discrimination. Her concern is for private compassion concealed by public distance. In the poems, empathy is a more confronting and difficult emotion than sympathy because the psychological distance between subject and object is dissolved by a strong identification with the source of their pain, provoking challenging questions about personal morality and social conformity. Within this complex dynamic, the positioning of the reader in the poems shifts between the object of suffering, the empathetic individual and mainstream society: posing difficult questions about prejudice, social norms and individual responsibility. Issues of gender and intersectionality further complicate the extent of the reader's empathy or sympathy dependant on their position within or outside different social hierarchies. Independent to the reader's response, the poems depict individuals who are consistently passive in response to their own suffering and the suffering of others. This reflects the wider powerlessness and silencing of marginalised people that prevents altruistic acts. This passivity is necessary for self-protection, but it also emphasises the loneliness and isolation of outsiders and the difficulty of building a sense of community between those on the fringes of society.

## 2. 'Ken'

The complexity of empathetic feeling between vulnerable individuals is central to 'Ken'. In the poem, an unnamed speaker witnesses growing tension between the residents of a small town and a mentally impaired man, with the growing social intolerance of his behaviour resulting in his institutionalisation. The speaker is greatly affected by Ken's incarceration, yet despite his direct appeal to them, they fail to speak in his defence when he is taken away. Whilst the speaker's gender is not explicitly stated, their inability to challenge Ken's persecution seems rooted in the non-central social position inhabited by women. This peripheral status informs their fear of revealing a similar sense of difference that could lead to the same fate, as seen in the speaker's panicky insistence that Ken stops knocking on their door. The speaker's empathy for Ken suggests the possibility of an active compassion between individuals marginalised by what Erika Cudworth terms the "multiplicities of domination" (Cudworth 2005, p. 2). However, the powerlessness of both individuals and the fear of exposing similar signs of otherness overrides the possibility of community or protest.

In many of Charlotte Mew's poems, individuals consciously attempt to conceal difference or trauma in order to avoid social scrutiny. However, Ken's physical differences and lack of awareness of social codes preclude him from doing so and therefore exacerbate his vulnerability. The speaker's first

encounter with Ken is marked by their awareness of his difference, as they describe him as showing barely “a trace/of likeness to a human face”. This initial impression of otherness is emphasised by his position on a “half-lit stair”: a repeated symbol of boundaries in Mew’s poems. Ken’s difference is confirmed by the physicality of his movements as he “ploughed up the street,/Groping, with knarred, high-lifted feet/And arms thrust out as if to beat/Always against a threat of bars.” However, the speaker’s compassion for Ken and understanding of his essential goodness grows. The description of Ken as an “uncouth bird” initially appears dehumanising, but it also recognises his fundamental gentleness and vulnerability beyond his intimidating physicality. This birdlike description also has feminine associations that further diminishes his separateness from the speaker by emphasising the shared experiences of marginalised people. It also sharpens the later cruelty of caging him in an asylum. With this recognition, the speaker’s response to Ken alters, with this shift revealing a dangerous schism between their perceptions and that of mainstream society which it is necessary for them to conceal.

A key difference between the speaker and Ken is the former’s awareness of the importance of adhering to social convention. Ken’s unconsciously antisocial behaviour is the antithesis of the speaker’s self-protection and inhibition. The town is described as austere, monotone and claustrophobic: “A place of bells and cloisters and grey towers,/And black clad people walking in their sleep”. Its dominating religious institutions (“watched from end to end/By the great Church above”) reflect a rigid moral code and social hierarchy, to which Ken’s irreverence is seen as an affront. Rather than recognising his peripheral status, Ken sees himself at the centre of human and non-human society: “... all the children and the deer,/Whom every day he went to see/Out in the park, belonged to him.” There are clear parallels between Ken and Christ in his innocence, gentleness and final persecution. This is most apparent in his response to a statue of the crucified Christ in the church. His cry to “Take it away” is interpreted by the townsfolk as evidence of his profanity and ungodliness. However, it is a pure and instinctive expression of compassion in response to an image of the violent persecution of another human; a public protest against suffering that the speaker is unable to replicate when Ken is taken away.

Whilst Ken’s differences and inability to conform to social convention continue to elicit resentment from the narrow-minded town’s people, the speaker’s sensitivity to his humanity is met with a sense of recognition by Ken and an attempt to communicate.

Nothing was dead  
 He ‘said “a bird” if he picked up a broken wing,  
     A perished leaf or any such thing  
     Was just “a rose”; and once when I had said  
 He must not stand and knock there anymore  
 He left a twig on the mat outside my door.

The speaker rejects Ken’s message because it threatens to expose a shared otherness that could endanger them in a society that persecutes difference. The reality of this threat and the importance of passing is confirmed by the removal of Ken from the town to an asylum. Interiors are often prisons in Mew’s poetry and by locking Ken away from sight the town exposes its fear of those who are different or fail to observe society’s rules. Given Ken’s love of freedom, this is a significant cruelty. Life in the town moves on unaffected by his absence, but the speaker remains anxious about Ken’s treatment “Beneath those twenty windows in a row”, ominously remarking “What happen there?/ I do not know.”

Ken’s final act of self-preservation is to appeal directly to the speaker: “So when they took/Ken to that place, I did not look/After he called and turned on me/His eyes. These I shall see.” Despite his impairments, Ken recognises shared characteristics and the possibility that they may speak for him. For ‘safe’ members of the community, such an act of protest could be interpreted as merciful or Christian, but voicing opposition is more dangerous for marginal members of society who need to avoid scrutiny. The poem foregrounds the painful complexities of empathy for vulnerable people,

for whom moving from compassion to altruism risks exposure and harm in societies that fear difference. By failing to challenge Ken's treatment and choosing instead to protect their own freedom, the speaker is complicit in his imprisonment. This poem has personal resonance for Charlotte Mew, who guarded the secret of her siblings' confinement in mental institutions throughout her life. In the context of the new science of eugenics, fear of passing on mental or physical defects was particularly sensitive for Mew, whose poetry is marked by such anxiety about female bodies. However, the strongest impact of her siblings' experience is the foregrounding of empathy for the vulnerable that resonates in 'Ken' and throughout the poems.

### 3. 'Saturday Market'

In 'Ken', the speaker fails to protest against the treatment of a marginalised individual because they fear their empathy will expose their own alternative identity. This anxiety is shown to be credible by the description of the treatment of a woman who has been publicly exposed in 'Saturday Market'. The poem depicts the social and personal consequences of female transgression through the figure of an unnamed woman who is scrutinised and isolated as a result of an undefined misdemeanour. The specific nature of the woman's crime remains ambiguously concealed behind the obscure description of an exposed "red dead thing". However, the vivid corporeality of the blood soaking through the woman's shawl carries associations with an array of feminine 'sins' and shame such as miscarriage, abortion or infanticide.

See, you, the shawl is wet, take out from under

The red dead thing—. In the white of the moon

On the flags does it stir again? Well, and no wonder!

Best make an end of it; bury it soon.

The excruciatingly public nature of the woman's exposure accentuates the precarious position of females in patriarchal society. The poem is set within a Best make an end of it; bury it soon.

See, you, the shawl is wet, take out from under

The red dead thing—. In the white of the moon

On the flags does it stir again? Well, and no wonder!

Best make an end of it; bury it soon.

Close-knit rural community gathered at the weekly market to trade goods and gossip. Mew views the market from the perspective of the outsider, describing it as a nightmarish bombardment of sights, smells and sounds combined with disconcerting sexual undertones: "Pitchers and sugar-sticks, ribbons and laces,/Posies and whips and dicky-birds' seed". This is an anti-pastoral scene of trauma rather than refuge, where women are subject to social judgement by locals who leer voyeuristically at their shame. Similarly to 'Ken', the underlying anxiety of the poem is the idea of the female body as a site of disease, madness or aberration; a potential risk to society which must be policed and scrutinised. As in many of Mew's poems, rural places are particularly dangerous for women and other marginalised individuals who are vulnerable to small town scandal. The serious consequences of personal trauma being turned into gossip are evident in the rejection of the woman from society, leaving her exiled and vulnerable to the duplicitous suggestions of the unidentified speaker who sinisterly urges her towards isolation and suicide.

What were you showing in Saturday Market

That set it grinning from end to end

Girls and gaffers and boys of twenty—?

Cover it close with your shawl, my friend—

Hasten you home with the laugh behind you,

In 'Ken', the reader is positioned with the speaker: an individual who witnesses the cruel treatment of a marginalised individual from their position within mainstream society. In 'Saturday Market' the reader is positioned with the sufferer: the persecuted woman who is guided towards complete isolation by the malevolent speaker. This shift in perspective encourages greater awareness of the social pressure on women to conform by depicting the painful consequences of failing to do so. This focus on the female experience of social isolation in rural areas presents an alternative perspective on the modernist theme of alienation that illuminates the experience of vulnerable individuals beyond the centre. For such individuals, the modernist idea of the mass or crowd is not a subject of revulsion but a space of safety in which they strive to blend in and conceal their otherness. By aligning the reader with the persecuted woman, the poem has the potential to create sympathy or empathy for female experience. For the woman in 'Saturday Market', her choices are narrowed as she is denied refuge within the human sphere and encouraged to go "out of sight". Nature is often associated with the female, but here isolation is made absolute as the natural world is taken from her and she is systematically displaced from the world.

Think no more of the swallow,  
 Forget, you, the sea,  
 Never again remember the deep green hollow  
 Or the top of the kind old tree!

As in many of Mew's poems, interiors are associated with burial or enclosure: an ending alluded to as the speaker ambiguously encourages "a long, long rest". Banished from human society and dissuaded from retreat in the natural world, Mew depicts a pessimistic portrait of the fate of marginalised individuals in modern society. The poem develops the reader's empathy by emphasising the real experience of alienation beyond its intellectual conceptualisation and showing the consequences of transgression that limit altruism between the vulnerable.

#### 4. The Farmer's Bride

'The Farmer's Bride' presents a more complex examination of empathy in terms of the positioning of the reader. The poem is written from the perspective of an anguished farmer who oscillates between sympathy and unreciprocated sexual desire for his terrified, young bride. The dramatic monologue form means that the unnamed woman is voiceless and seen only from the speaker's perspective; positioning the reader, initially, in alliance with the farmer's concern and incomprehension towards her actions. However, despite the narrative bias, closer reading of the poem reveals his sympathy to be more complex and less selfless than it first appears. In response, compassion shifts to his silent wife, who is imprisoned in an unwanted marriage within a patriarchal rural society that physically enforces narrow definitions of the female role. The lasting impression of the desperate plight of this woman reiterates Mew's consistent compassion for the lives of vulnerable individuals who suffer due to their inability to conform to social norms.

A key influence on the relationship between the farmer and his wife is their patriarchal rural community. As a male landowner in a socially secure position, the farmer is safely placed within the centre of society. The centrality of his social status is reflected in the conformity of his beliefs, particularly in relation to the role of women. From his conventional perspective, his wife's fear of men and inability to fulfil her role as wife and mother is an unfathomable rejection of a 'natural' maternal inclination towards nurturing. However, his attempts to categorise her behaviour as unnatural are inconsistent with his descriptions of his wife as "a leveret", "a hare" and "a mouse": all definitions rooted in the natural world and traditionally associated with women. What is clear is that placement in either category puts the woman in danger. Dehumanising her as an animal creates perilous affiliations with the non-human world within a patriarchal rural society based on anthropocentric domination of nature, whilst her 'unnatural' refusal to fulfil her prescribed gender role as wife and mother leaves



her placeless within society. Between these narrow dichotomies, she occupies, or is constructed as occupying, a suspended state between humans and nature: having her freedom restricted by humans like an animal, but also being subject to unwanted desires due to her human form.

The claustrophobic atmosphere of the poem and the increasing threat to the vulnerable woman shifts sympathy away from the farmer. Despite her narrative absence from the poem, glimpses of the woman's behaviour create a sensitive depiction of a painful and isolated existence, with her silence reflecting her lack of a voice within society. As in 'Saturday Market', female vulnerability increases in small communities, where narrow views of accepted femininity and restricted opportunities for anonymity produced a heightened atmosphere of gossip and persecution. The community are ominously referred to as a homogenous 'they', who police the woman's behaviour and make unanimous statements on her rightful place: 'Should properly have been abed'. The vulnerability of the woman is fully exposed when she attempts to escape her husband only to be hunted down like an animal and locked away:

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.

As in 'Ken', society responds to outsiders by imprisoning them. Here the tension of the domestic sphere is intensified by the proximity of the farmer to his terrified wife, which threatens to overspill into sexual violence. At this point, sexual desire overrides the speaker's earlier professions of concern. The potential for sexual assault further endangers the silent woman, whose husband's privileged position as a man in patriarchal society would protect him from experiencing any consequences for his actions. The limits of social compassion are for her, not him. This hopeless situation implies further trauma for the girl and a bleak future for women who do not comply with the norms of patriarchal society:

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!

To some extent, the fate of the farmer's wife is due to a lack of empathy. Throughout the poem, the farmer expresses sympathy for his wife, but his incomprehension of alternative versions of femininity and his failure to understand women who inhabit roles unrelated to the domestic sphere prevents empathy. This incomprehension is furthered by his inability to understand the experience of powerlessness. Despite his apparent tender feeling towards his wife, he is the dominant figure in the relationship. From the start, he describes how he "chose a maid", removing her agency or choice. He then continues to diminish her self-hood by removing her femaleness and humanity: "... 'twasn't a woman -/More like a little frightened fay". He also exposes himself as part of the community that physically curtails her movement: "We chased her", "We caught her". This absence of empathetic understanding increases the woman's vulnerability as the psychological distance between husband and wife restricts the speaker's ability to understand versions of femaleness that are not in relation to himself: "To her wild self. But what to me?" Empathy describes a sense of recognition between two sufferers; in 'The Farmer's Bride' the more distant emotion of sympathy is expressed. The difference between the two terms, in relation to the poem, is that sympathy is shown to be more insidious and self-deceptive. This is evident at the end of the poem, where the speaker prefixes his desire to cross the



stair into her room with the description of her being “alone, poor maid”. This protestation of pity for her isolation is in direct contrast to his previous description of her desire for men to keep away from her and implies a construction of sympathy to enable self-fulfilment. This strategy then creates a false moral framework that would allow the farmer to cross the threshold and fulfil his desires. This threat shows the limits of sympathy and the difficulties of achieving empathy for female experience within the narrow confines of patriarchal society.

## 5. Conclusions

The study of empathy in the poetry of Charlotte Mew is important in revealing the moral complexity of compassion between individuals made vulnerable by their otherness. By depicting the tensions between empathetic feeling and the need to pass in society, Mew shows empathy to be a challenging, confronting and potentially dangerous emotion, and in doing so challenges its associations with feminine softness or simplicity. The focus on the experience of those on the periphery of society also exposes the hypocrisy and cruelty of those at the centre of mainstream society and the consequences of their narrowmindedness on the lives of vulnerable people. The poems’ depiction of empathy and the consequences of its absence could have a didactic or moralising tone. However, there is an absence of moral superiority in Mew’s poems, as each speaker wrestles with the challenge of developing empathetic feeling into altruistic action within a patriarchal society that observes and constrains difference.

Charlotte Mew’s complex engagement with empathy, compassion and female experience creates a direct challenge to traditional definitions of modernism. As Kathleen Bell argues, “If Mew is to be accepted as a modernist, perception of Mew should change but so should the perception of modernism” (Bell 1997, p. 14). This change is now underway as new critical and theoretical approaches foreground and value the role of emotion within the modernist movement, as well as challenging outdated and erroneous associations of emotion as a ‘soft’ subject for women writers. Meghan Marie Hammond’s point that ‘despite the vacancy in literary theory, empathy is very present in the practice of modernist writing’ has been recognised by recent scholarship, which has begun to “unearth the wealth of empathy buried in modernist history” (Hammond 2016, p. 26). Valuing writers such as Charlotte Mew who voice alternative experiences of marginalised individuals contributes to knowledge of this aspect of the movement, as well as to the wider process of deconstructing narrow definitions of the movement and recognising the plurality of voices within it.

For the contemporary reader, the final shift in empathy is to Charlotte Mew herself. The poems’ authentic treatment of alienation and marginalisation is rooted in the lived experience of concealment and otherness. Whilst modernist writers felt the pressure to abandon traditional female subjects related to personal experience, Mew used hers to create a community of voices speaking from the margins of society. This connection between her lived experience and her writing is explained by Jeredith Merrin: “Mew presents her private experience of pain into the service of a wider but not facile or presumptuous empathy. She shows us how passion (in the sense of solitary suffering) can become compassion (in the etymological sense of suffering with)” (Merrin 1997, p. 217). For a poet who was intimately familiar with what Jane Dowson terms “the psychological tensions between self-renunciation and self-realisation”, Charlotte Mew knew and valued the importance of empathy in making life more bearable (Dowson 2002, p. 176). Despite the social and personal constraints on her happiness, Mew wrote to her friend that “We only have about half-an-hour” (on this earth) “Let’s do what we can” (Fitzgerald 1984, p. 112). In her tragically shortened time, Charlotte Mew produced poetry that, without preaching or moralising, gave a voice to the marginalised, vulnerable and suffering, and made a claim for the importance of empathy as complex, challenging but ultimately essential component of human experience.

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