



# ***THE FARMER'S BRIDE***

CHARLOTTE MEW

notes taken from *various sources*

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## FULL POEM

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

'Out 'mong the sheep, her be,'they said,  
'Should properly have been abed;  
But sure enough she wadn't there  
Lying awake with her wide brown stare.  
So over seven-acre field and up-along across the down  
We chased her, flying like a hare  
Before 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.

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

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

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





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

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

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## HOW TO FIGURE OUT A POEM

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If you want to figure out a poem you have to figure out how the speaker is seeing the world

- If you want to figure out how the speaker is seeing the world you have to look at the symbolic language the speaker is using
  - There are many kinds of symbolic languages but one of the most important is metaphor
    - Metaphor is a counter-logical use of language but makes all the sense in the world on a higher level
      - This is how you know you are dealing with a metaphor
      - It makes no sense on the literal level
        - But it makes sense on a 'higher' level
    - We use metaphorical language everyday
      - 'the Whitehouse announced today that...'
      - 'she is a flower, the glory of the day'
        - the beauty, fragility, freshness, fragrance etc are all appropriate to the description of the woman
  - when the features of the thing which the speaker is comparing the subject to become so overwhelming that they have stopped seeing the differences, then we can see how the speaker sees the world

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## OVERVIEW

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*The Farmer's Bride* is about innocence and ignorance.

- The bride is too young to marry a man she hardly knows.
  - The Farmer's bride is a dramatic monologue in which a nineteenth century farmer considers his relationship with his wife.
    - He relates how they were married,
      - she ran away,
      - he forcefully recaptured her
      - and her current state in the house.





- o It ends with him expressing his sadness and frustration that they have no children and expresses his physical longing for her.

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## IMAGERY

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The imagery of the first stanza is of a smiling, attractive, competent girl whom the farmer has chosen because she will make a good farm wife.

- Unfortunately, her youthful innocence is matched by the farmer's insensitivity toward the young, frightened girl and his ignorance of a woman's needs and humanity.
  - o He chooses her as he would his cattle, seeing no need to woo her.
    - Having no concern for her feelings, he expects her simply to step into the role of his wife.

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## CONCEPT: THE FARMER'S VIEW OF HUMAN AND ANIMAL NATURE

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To him, as a farmer, human nature is not much more complicated than animal nature.

- The pairing of two people is not guided by more than
  - o the natural urge to procreate
  - o the social roles of man and wife
  - o and the man's need for someone to keep house for him.

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## CONCEPT: CONVENTION vs CRUELTY (and MADNESS)

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Mew indicates that the man is not cruel, only conventional, in her description of the townspeople's chasing her and locking her up.

- 'We caught her, fetched her home at last  
And turned the key upon her, fast.'
  - o The imagery suggests she is out of control and needed to be locked up
    - There seems to be an allusion to madness, which Victorians were preoccupied with
      - Time and time again, it is women who are presented as more susceptible to madness in Victorian literature:
        - o Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brontë, 1847)
          - Brought over from a mysterious plantation in Spanish Town, Jamaica, she is confined to a solitary space in the attic because, according to Rochester, 'she is mad; and she came from a mad family'
            - Bertha is imprisoned in a space in which the Victorian 'home' is effectively transformed into an asylum for women
              - o The resemblance to 'The Farmer's Bride' is striking





- o They seem to think the same way the farmer does: A wife, even a young, frightened wife, belongs at home with her husband.
  - Even the women make little attempt to help her; they are perhaps busy with their chores or have forgotten their own transition into married life.

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## CONCEPT: CONVENTION

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Their expectations and actions are based on what “should properly” be done.

- Although they run after her and bring her home forcibly, they are acting, in their minds, according to what is socially, and even naturally, prescribed.
  - o What the poem depicts is a somewhat frightening scene—the townspeople chasing a young woman as hounds chase a hare—most likely seems protective to them, since she is cold and afraid and ‘belongs’ home in her bed.
    - In a similar way in which Browning makes us question the objective and subjective reality of truths and perspectives, Mew appears to be doing the same here
      - While the imagery suggests she is being locked away and associated with madness

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## CONCEPT: THE CAUSE OF HIS UNREQUITED LOVE

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By the end of his monologue, the speaker has revealed his love and his bewilderment that it is not returned.

- By the last two stanzas, when readers see his desire for children and his longing for his wife, their sympathy is with the farmer’s unrequited love.
  - o Readers fully understand what he dimly understands: His wife has again fled from him (this time emotionally),
    - and he has been complicit in alienating her.

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## CONCEPT: HUMAN MISUNDERSTANDINGS OF CLASS AND GENDER

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Critics have found this poem unrealistic, saying that a farmer would have forced himself on his new bride without qualms.

- Yet the brilliance of the poem comes from the characterization of a man, a common hardworking farmer, with a sensuous appreciation of the life around him and with respect and gentleness toward his wife.
  - o Thus, what could have been a clichéd poem about an oppressive brute or a failed marriage becomes instead an insightful study of human misunderstanding that explores problems of class and gender

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## FORM: DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE DEVELOPMENT

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- The form of a poem can highlight the kind of relationship the poet desires to create with the reader
- During the Romantic period, many poets adopted a first person, confessional style, **creating intimacy with the reader through direct address**
    - William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (begun in 1799, but revised many times) is an autobiographical account of the poet's journey to artistic maturity
      - Browning and Tennyson's innovation, however, was to write in the voice of a fictional personae
  - Developed during the early to mid-nineteenth century
  - The dramatic monologue may be the most distinctive structure of the Victorian period
    - Robert Browning used this form often and has been credited, together with Tennyson, for its creation
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## FORM: DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE GENERAL FEATURES

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Dramatic monologues tend to focus on interiority rather than action

- It gives us an interior view of the workings of the speaker's mind
    - Browning wished to make us feel the complex and unstable nature of an individual person
      - In the preface to *Sordello*, he writes:
        - 'My stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul. Little else is worth study'
          - Accordingly Browning pays the least possible attention to outward nature.
  - It is a poetic form in which there is one imaginary speaker addressing an imaginary audience
    - The speaker ('I') cannot be identified with the poet
    - Speaker addresses an audience within the poem
  - The dramatic monologue represents someone presenting a case to an auditor
    - '*Porphyria's Lover*' is slightly unusual in this respect
    - there doesn't seem to be an auditor in the poem
    - the woman in the poem may be the auditor but this is debatable
  - *My Last Duchess* is a poem in which there is one imaginary speaker addressing an imaginary audience
    - In *My Last Duchess* the speaker appears to confess to the murder of the wife he is hoping to replace
      - This self-revelation is a hallmark of Browning's monologues
  - Characters in dramatic monologues often teeter on the verge of madness or delusion
    - Elsewhere they may represent themselves directly to the reader, perhaps pleading for understanding or anticipating judgment for their actions
      - *Porphyria's Lover*
  - In most dramatic monologues, some attempt is made to imitate natural speech
    - Use of enjambment
    - Iambic pentameter
    - Careful use of linguistic techniques
  - It represents the distillation of a crucial moment of human experience, focusing on a particular occasion that becomes a revelation of an almost religious nature as the speaker tries to transcend the finite
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## DRAMA\*





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The dramatic monologue form allows the poet to dramatise the human condition

- It works as a piece of drama
  - The form makes it possible to combine rhyme, rhythm and metre with narrative
    - Browning's monologues are concerned with situations, episodes of lives that are still in the process of developing
      - They focus on examples of self-occupied men and women as they attempt to overcome the limitations of their physical lives
        - In this case, it may be that the Duke's sense of jealousy is his limitation as he is unable to set himself free of it
          - So he orders the murder of the Duchess in order to preserve an eternal sense of control
      - His limitation may also be his enormous sense of pride regarding his '900 year old name'
        - His name is so precious to him that he does not think anyone else, especially his last duchess is worthy of it
          - 'Somehow I know not how as if she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame  
This sort of trifling?'
            - So if anyone disrespects the name in anyway, or if he perceives that anyone would disrespect his name in any way, he will have them executed
              - But the dramatic monologue form means that this perception is extremely subjective
                - Particularly for someone on the verge of madness or delusion
- In nineteenth-century examples, dramatic monologues are often presented within dramatic scenarios, as if talking to or interacting with others
  - *My Last Duchess* begins with 'that's my last Duchess'
    - Emphasizing the relative pronoun illustrates that this conversation has been going on for some time
      - This is an example of 'in media res'
        - The duke is referring back to something he said earlier and we are catching up with him
        - The adjective 'last' is ambiguous
          - On one hand, it could show how there has been a succession of them
          - This may also hint that perhaps he has killed more than one
        - The possessive first person pronoun 'my' may indicate that he sees his wife as a possession, therefore perhaps he sees all of his Duchesses as possessions, not as fully rounded human beings (see 'CONTEXT: WOMEN'S RIGHTS' p.3)
          - But it is also part of natural human speech
- The dramatic quality of the verse derives from the speaker's appeal, the disjunction between their understanding of the world and the listeners' and, perhaps, their own growing appreciation for the reality of the situation





## FORM: A PERCEIVED RATHER THAN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL VIEWPOINT

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The form of a poem can highlight the kind of relationship the poet desires to create with the reader. For example, the lyric is often based on autobiographical material and is written from a personal point of view, thus allowing the poet to forge a link between the reader and herself; however, the dramatic monologue creates a different kind of relationship between poet, subject matter and reader

- It gives us an interior view of the workings of the speaker's mind
- The poet and 'I' are separate entities; imagination replaces experience; and the viewpoint is 'perceived' rather than personal
  - In the 1970s and 80s, women poets used real, fictional, mythical and historical personae as an alternative means of exploring what it meant to be a woman – or at times, a man.
  - They often used this technique to challenge gender, racial, social and religious expectations through the characters they create
- Dramatic monologues are also seen as a method for inviting sympathy for the speaker
  - We judge them but we are also sympathetic towards them
    - In this case, modern readers especially

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## FORM: THE ROLE OF THE SILENT INTERLOCUTOR

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It is the role of the silent interlocutor, more than anything else that gives the Victorian monologue its innovative distinctiveness, though this is less true of Tennyson than of Browning.

- With few exceptions – *The Holy Grail* being the most important – Tennyson represents the speaker addressing a not very closely defined audience.
- By contrast, Browning's silent interlocutor is always a specific personage, whose role and reactions are inferred from the speaker's words
  - The outstanding example is *My Last Duchess*, in which an Italian Renaissance duke, addressing an envoy of a prospective father-in-law appears to confess to the murder of the wife he is hoping to replace. This sort of self-revelation is a hallmark of the Browning monologue
  - In certain other poems of Browning's, the speaker is not himself the object of interest, but either addresses in imagination the character who is, or describes the character to an unnamed person

