‘The Farmer’s Bride’
Charlotte Mew was born in London in 1869 to an upper middle class family but due to her father’s financial mismanagement lived most of her life in poverty. Three of Mew’s siblings died in early childhood and another two suffered from mental illness and were committed to asylums for the insane at an early age. The fear of passing on insanity to their children resulted in Charlotte and Anne making a pact never to marry and have children.

The Farmer’s Bride was published in 1916 and Mew’s work was admired by prominent literary figures of the time such as Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf and Siegfried Sassoon. Mew’s writing was deeply influenced by the tragedies that happened in her life and insanity, death and depression appear time and time again in her work.

How does Mew’s life experience link to the content of the poem?
What is the poem about?

A farmer has been married for three years but this bride is frightened of him and other men.

In the poem he tells the story of how the relationship went wrong. He doesn’t question whether he has any responsibility for his wife’s fear.

He finds her rejection of him almost unbearable, but he expresses his thoughts in a fairly matter-of-fact way. He desires his wife, and by the end it seems he may be struggling to resist taking her by force.
‘The Farmer’s Bride’

Feelings and Attitudes

He wants to have a sexual relationship with her and have children, but she’s unwilling and uncommunicative.

The farmer is clearly attracted to his wife. This is expressed both in the imagery he uses to describe her and the way he breaks down at the end of the poem.

The farmer’s wife is clearly afraid. There is also a sense of foreboding - the farmer is struggling to control his desire for her, and there is little to suggest that there will be a happy ending for the married couple.
‘The Farmer’s Bride’

Shows system of patriarchy (male authority over authority) – suggests she didn’t have much choice about their marriage. This is reflected in the title – it sounds like she belongs to him.

Hints that the farmer had a practical and unromantic approach to marriage.

She wasn’t afraid until after they were married – this could hint that he’s responsible for her fear in some way.

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

    When we was wed she turned afraid
    Of love and me and *all things human*;
    *Like the shut of a winter’s day*

    Her smile went out, and ’twasn’t a woman—
    More like a little frightened fay.

    One night, in the Fall, she runned away.

Simile shows how sudden this change was – winter days go dark very quickly.

Dialect of the farmer – we can hear his voice, and it’s one he shares with his community.

Anticipates the comparisons to animals that follow. It’s a strong statement, but the source of this fear is a mystery.
‘The Farmer’s Bride’

Dialect of the farmer – we can hear his voice, and it’s one he shares with his community.

Her fear is expressed physically, like a hunted animal – “scare” is rhymed with “hare”, which emphasises the comparison.

Hunting imagery – suggests her terror.

The whole village seems to be involved – this adds to the sense that she’s being hunted.

"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.

The rhyming couplet emphasises the decisive action of locking her away and makes it sound sinister.
The change to the present tense emphasises his resigned, baffled tone. She’s a fairly good housewife – she does what is expected of her in the relationship, apart from loving her husband.

She’s linked with small prey animals to show her vulnerability.

She is nearly silent and only speaks to animals. She sounds withdrawn and depressed.

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.

Simile shows that the farm animals trust her and look to her for care – may suggest he’s jealous of them.

Rhyming triplet emphasises the narrator’s frustration at his wife’s behaviour.
Repeated use of sibilant sounds emphasises her link with nature. The irregularity of this short stanza could reflect the farmer’s growing agitation by this link and his unfulfilled desire for her.

Links back to the imagery of the hunt – she still feels under threat.

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?

Has connotations both of an unspoilt freedom and of a rejection of people.

Rhetorical question – breaks his happier thoughts of her in springtime and takes him back to the winter scene.
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!

Sad, lonely image – symbolises his sinking hope that she will ever come to him freely.

Winter is used to suggest the decay and death of his hopes.

Christmas is about the birth of a child – they have no children because of her refusal of him.
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Sounds sympathetic but also suggests that she’s still a virgin – a “maid” is a young, unmarried girl.

He is aware of her physical closeness, adding to his frustration.

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!

Animal-like descriptions show his desire for her – even though these qualities are also the source of his frustration. Internal rhyme of “brown” and “down” emphasises his desire and frustration.

Frantic-sounding repetition of the half-rhyme “her hair” – he’s breaking down and losing control.
Poem Dictionary

Bide- wait
Woo- try to win someone’s love
Fay- a fairy
Leveret- a young hare
Rime- frost