

‘The Road beyond Men’s Bolted Doors’: The Poetry of Charlotte Mew’¹

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RESUMEN

Este artículo se centra en el análisis de la dicotomía creación poética/feminidad en varios poemas de la poetisa británica Charlotte Mew (1869-1928). Omitida del canon modernista por aquellos que no han querido ver más allá del aparente convencionalismo de sus poemas, Mew nos ofrece una voz subversiva que intenta transgredir el mito de la creatividad masculina mostrando aspectos poco convencionales de la experiencia femenina. En sus poemas se aprecia la imposibilidad de reconciliar la creatividad y la experiencia, lo que se traduce en imágenes de encierro y aislamiento y en multiplicidad de voces poéticas que pretenden huir de cualquier limitación de género.

En Mew se observa una postura ambigua ante la evocación de la experiencia femenina, por un lado es necesario recrearla, pero por otro lado se aprecia un deseo de huir de esa experiencia hacia un espacio neutral. Así, en poemas como «The Farmer’s Bride» la mujer rechaza su labor reproductora para encerrarse en un ático que la separa de ese rol tradicional y que se convierte en un lugar que la lleva al descubrimiento de sí misma, o en «Saturday Market», uno de los poemas que mejor recrea el sacrificio de la maternidad en aras de la creación poética que sin embargo, no resulta del todo gratificante.

Mrs Browning and Christina Rossetti, among whose writings passion, exotic and mystical, plays so conspicuous a part, have never surpassed, if they have ever equalled, this love-song of a woman who never loved. (*CPP*, p. 365)²

This woman “who never loved” was Emily Brontë, and the woman who writes in her praise is the British poet Charlotte Mew (1869-1928). The admiration for Emily Brontë is also felt in her poetry, where the anxieties towards passion and the imaginative experience are parallel to the conflicts in Brontë’s verse.³ Like Brontë, Mew is troubled by the relationship towards the sources of creativity which she sometimes equates with death. In her

poems there is always an impasse between poetic power and the passionate energy that must be repressed.

Despite the rich quality of her apparently conventional poems, Charlotte Mew's poetry has been neglected. The reason for this omission is to be found in the critics' failure to see beyond the apparent conventionality of her verse. However, a close analysis of these poems reveals a palimpsestic writing. Under the apparent traditionalism of her lines lies the subversive voice that attempted to overcome the myth of male creativity by portraying unconventional aspects of female experience. The subtlety of description of heterodox women's experience such as abortion or lesbian eroticism which, as Hardwick points out, were normally suppressed in women's writing since they limited their access to publishing markets, turned Charlotte Mew into an unwonted poet

She is thematically and formally innovative, attempting to articulate "unpermitted" experience in forms which break out of the constricted lyrics then thought appropriate for a woman poet. Her poetry, however, does not offer an unqualified celebration of sensual experience, but, ultimately, advocates withdrawal and self immolation, familiar strategies in much 19th century women's poetry.⁴

Her "withdrawal" from physical experience does not mean a continuity of the confessional modesty of nineteenth century women's poetry; in Mew "withdrawal" is a strategy that allows her to escape the gender constraints imposed upon women poets. It appears that she reinforces the value of those "unpermitted" themes of women's experience and challenges the growing public interest in an undervalued women's poetry portraying qualities of femininity which in the end, undermined women poets' sense of poetic authority. Though she first approves women's physical experience, she cannot reconcile experience and creativity. She chooses isolation, the strategy of withdrawal that turns to be positive in images of enclosure which, paradoxically, constitute a first step towards her utopian vision of complete freedom, away "from any accident of sex."⁵

The depiction of female sexuality and the conflicts it brings forth pervade in many of Mew's poems. Although Mew concentrates her creative power on the treatment of themes related to women's experience, her

position towards it is ambiguous, for though she refers to it, in the last resort she chooses self-exile from physical sensations. Her poetry fluctuates between the decision to give voice to those aspects of women's experience that had traditionally been discarded and the necessity to recede from them. The aim of this essay is then, the scrutiny of the opposition between creativity and femininity that resolves itself in a number of themes and symbols which mould Mew's deepest conflicts. The analysis of these themes shows Mew's desire to flight from the incarceration of the body towards an open space, a "road beyond men's bolted doors"⁶ whose frontier, however, can never be fully overstepped.

It is fairly obvious that Mew outgrows the Victorian feminine role of the poetess and in her poetry she is more involved with the rendering of the female consciousness. This self-awareness as a writer is seen in her poetry, in the particular distribution of words in the page which inscribes the material forces that shaped women's lives, and at the same time locates her as a poet who challenges the forces that tried to mute women's voices. Thus, without rejecting the exploration of women's sexuality and physical experience she chooses in many occasions a mask that disguises her self. The election of other speakers points to the fact that her subjectivity is felt as a process where the subject of discourse identifies with other subject positions. It seems as if her conscious subjectivity could not be contained in a single identity and searched new subjectivities which allowed her to portray unconscious repressed meanings. She preferred –borrowing Sandra M. Gilbert's term, "costumes of the mind," impersonations that would unsettle the gendered hierarchical order of society. The ultimate aim is the blurring of gender distinctions, as Sandra M. Gilbert acknowledges "where so many twentieth-century men have sought to outline the enduring, gender connected myths behind history, many twentieth-century women have struggled—sometimes exuberantly, sometimes anxiously—to define a gender-free reality behind or beneath myth, an ontological essence so pure, so free that "it" can "inhabit" any self, any costume."⁷

When she selects a male speaker, she is being conscious of the problems of portraying female subjectivity.⁸ On other occasions she appoints a speaker of ambiguous gender, an "I" which also addresses a nonspecific "You" in an attempt to unfix gender in the multiplicity of an androgynous self as Woolf did in *Orlando*. This is also the result of Mew's awareness of the gender bias associated with artistic creation hence her

endeavour to defend a sort of collaboration between an “androgynous mind” and “her womanhood” in the neutral creative consciousness. She is unwilling to dwell on the binary opposition between women’s reproductive power and men’s productive potency and therefore disavows male fertilising potential in her attempt to transform her mind into a source of energy which both produces and reproduces. This way of working with the poetic subject as an unstable entity which assumes several genders is her particular strategy for dealing with female identity as a process.

Her ventriloquism might then be considered as an attempt to achieve the completeness of the self, to find a neutral voice which allows her to assemble the fragmented pieces of her body. The polyphony of voices flowing in her verse also functions as a way of separating the poet’s real self and the poetic I which appears in the poems. The use of this strategy is, as Hardwick says, what grants her escape from the limiting constraints of the “womanly I” that appeared in previous Victorian women’s poetry (p. 64).

Among the poems where we find an awareness and a withdrawal of sexual experience is the poem which names her first collection of poems “The Farmer’s Bride.” The poem has a marked narrative character which is seen in the use of parallel short clauses and a peculiar typographical disposition with irregular stanzas of ten, nine, eight, and four lines. It is voiced by a male speaker who uses a dialect⁹ and depicts a marriage relationship based on the wife’s submission to the husband. Apart from the peculiar language the speaker uses, there are unequivocal traces of his condition of common farmer who has a peculiar idea of measuring time, typical of peasants: “Three Summers since I chose a maid” (l. 1). The farmer explains that his “choice” of a wife is not based on love but necessity, he needs a woman to help him with the harvest to the extent that she is seen as a commodity in the hands of the farmer:

Too young maybe —but more’s to do
At harvest time than bide and woo. (ll. 2-3)

There is an implicit sexual content in the poem that tells us about the woman’s sexual fear: “When us was wed she turned afraid / Of love and me and all things human;” (ll. 4-5). The reification of the woman is evident in the comparison the farmer establishes between the bride and

those elements which form part of the farmer's world. He attempts to find a place for the woman in a confined "womanly" sphere, married and with children.

Apart from being trapped within a heterosexual relationship she is afraid of, the woman is also victim of society. The response of the community is introduced through the pronoun "they": " 'Out 'mong the sheep, her be,' they said," (l.10). Appearances in the poem deceive us, and there is always darkness beneath the outward beauty of the rural life.¹⁰ The apparent peace of the country is disrupted by the hunting scene: "So over seven-acred field and up-along across the down / We chased her, flying like a hare / Before our lanterns." (ll. 14-16).

The comparison of the woman with a female animal, the hare, suggests a typical patriarchal association of women to the reproductive power of mother nature: "*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?" (ll. 30-3), (emphasis mine). Patriarchal domination is evident in the use of the verbs which emphasise male agency towards the prey, the woman: we *chased* her, we *caught* her, *fetch*ed her home, *turn*ed the key upon her, whilst the woman is "All in a shiver and a scare" (l. 17) (emphasis mine).

The bride's rebellious act is punished with her enclosure in the attic: "And turned the key upon her, fast" (l. 19). Though the woman in the poem is not given any voice ("I've hardly heard speak her at all," l. 29), her frightened look speaks for her: " 'Not near, not near!' " her eyes beseech / When one of us comes within reach" (ll. 25-6). The power of her sight is emphasised throughout the poem, which might suggest the woman's visionary power, her "stare": "Lying awake with her wide brown stare" (l. 13). Far from being defeated, she enjoys her enclosure, her own private world, away from malicious society. The seclusion in the attic is a retreat into the mind, a concentration on the inner self. She manages to avoid the reproductive function which is expected from her, rejects pregnancy and is able to keep "straight and slight."

The imagery of autumn reinforces the sexual theme and the allusion to the voluntary sterility of the bride: "One leaf in the still air falls slowly down, / A magpie's spotted feathers lie / On the black earth spread white

with rime” (ll. 35-8). The stained feathers of the bird suggest sexual aggression and the cold white landscape indicates absence of reproduction. Despite the forceful sexual contact, the woman’s body refuses to be a mere biological receptacle. Her body remains white and contrasts with the red colour of the berries which “redden up to Christmas-time.” The enclosure of the woman leads the farmer to mourn the absence of children in the house: “What’s Christmas-time without there be / Some other in the house than we!” (ll. 40-1).

The picture of the madwoman in the attic is depicted in the last stanza. Whilst the woman is alone, maybe channelling her power through other means apart from the reproductive, the man pities himself for not enjoying her as his wife: “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!” (ll. 42-6). The allusion to the hair, the only thing that remains after death, as Val Warner points out, “reiterates the poem’s pathos.”¹¹ For Suzanne Raitt, the bride’s hair “signifies both her desirability and her unattainability,” “the absence of genital body.”¹²

The motif of the stair, frequent in Mew, implies separation which is crucial to divide two totally opposed worlds. This division is emphasised through the choice of a male speaker, an effective device that allows the portrayal of the stereotypical image men have of women, and the strategies women employ to escape from male domination.

The end of the poem depicts the expected dramatic conclusion with the autonomous woman in a separate sphere away from the imprisoning world of male sexual influence.¹³ Though the farmer pities his wife “Alone, poor maid,” we think that it is him who ought to be pitied in his pathetic lamentation, unable to fulfil his sexual desires. According to Hardwick, this withdrawal of Mew’s female characters to enclosed rooms links Mew to those writers Showalter inscribed within the phase of the “female aesthetic.” This enclosed space “came to be identified with the womb and with female conflict.”¹⁴ However, I find it hard to agree with Hardwick’s statement that “Mew’s stair takes her only into emptiness.” Mew’s reference to inner spaces is not always powerless. Initially, houses, convents and rooms are negative images which force the speaker to live a life of seclusion; however she turns those spaces into places of self-discovery. When she

understands what these narrow places mean she wants to open the door, to reach a stair that will lead her to a "space of sleep," on the white road out, where she can exert her imaginative power, away from the constraints of the physical world.

The fear of the sexual act is linked to women's phobia of being mere receptacles for reproduction. Nevertheless, this rejection of heterosexual sexuality cannot be extended to the rejection of sex in itself. In this poem, it is the sexual encounter with a man which is rejected, but in other poems the reaction to physical passion is more ambiguous. In some of them she is attracted by physical passion but the inner conflicts derived from a stern morality come into force and she feels trapped within a mesh of gender prejudices which oppose creativity and femininity.

The neutralisation of the sexual urgency is exposed in her ambivalent relation to artistic creativity. One of the poems where this is clearly evident is "Fame," written in a long undivided stanza

Yet, to leave Fame, still with such eyes and that bright hair!
God! If I might! And before I go hence
 Take in her stead
 To our tossed bed,
One little dream, no matter how small, how wild.
Just now, I think I found it in a field, under a fence—
A frail, dead, new-born lamb, ghostly and pitiful and white,
 A blot upon the night,
 The moon's dropped child! (ll. 15-23)

The slow rhythm of the poem is only interrupted in the last lines which mark the climax of the poem: "A blot upon the night, / The moon's dropped child" (ll. 23-4). Though the speaker is an artist, he questions whether he will be able to liberate himself from the world of common things, what would happen "If I went back and it was not there?" (l. 11). Besides, he can no longer be free from sexual passion: "Yet, to leave Fame, still with such eyes and that bright hair" (l. 16). Fame is also here the mask for the muse whose deviant relationship with the speaker brings forth "the little dream," the aborted foetus: "A frail, new-born lamb, ghostly and pitiful and white" (l. 22). The varied metre of this line serves to pinpoint this negative gradation of adjectives in this dream-child metaphor which refers

to the artistic work, the product of creativity. Again, the impasse produced by the conflict between biological and artistic creativity is seen in the colour white, the colour of frustrated sexual experience and passionless art.

The weight of the thwarted reproductive function is charged upon "Fame," now turned into a woman and is inevitably linked to unfulfilled artistic motherhood. The allusion to the moon is matched to the female biological cycle in the metaphor of the "moon's dropped child." The moon, the goddess of fertility which so frequently appears in Mew's poems, is white, the colour of the speaker's dream which is also an "unborn child;" white is the colour of the frustrated experience turned into art. It is also the colour of renunciation that dramatises the conflict between artistic and biological creativity. This self-imposed sterility is suffocating for her since she desires motherhood but feels that it is incompatible with poetic creation.¹⁵ It seems as "if artistic creativity is likened to biological creativity, the terror of inspiration for women is possessed, taken, had, broken, ravished—all words which illustrate the pain of the passive self whose boundaries are being violated."¹⁶ It seems that for Mew, anatomy is destiny hence her efforts to steer clear of it. The depiction of the abortion mirrors women poets' aborted creativity. Mew cannot surpass the patriarchal imposition that books and children are mutually exclusive. Creation and procreation, word and womb cannot be reconciled.¹⁷

There is just one occasion where the child-poem is enjoyed: in the poem "Ne Me Tangito" where the speaker can embrace the dream vision, the image of creativity. Now, the dream of motherhood is redeeming, the dream and the dreamed child fuse into one and the speaker is the mother of a child, the mother of the poem

So I will tell you this. Last night in sleep,
 Walking through April fields I heard the far-off bleat of sheep
 And from the trees about the farm, not very high,
 A flight of pigeons fluttered up into an early evening mackerel sky;
 Someone stood by and it was you:
 About us the great wind blew.
 My breast was bared
 But sheltered by my hair
 I found you, suddenly, lying there,

Tugging with tiny fingers at my heart, no more afraid:
The weakest thing, the most divine
That ever yet was mine,
Something that I had strangely made,
So then it seemed—
The child for which I had not looked or even cared,
Of whom, before, I had never dreamed. (ll. 12-26)

The voluntary decision to remain sterile is best depicted in “The Quiet House.” It is also one of the most explicit references to women’s experience, criticism of conventional love, and sexuality. The poem, divided into eight stanzas, lacks a defined rhyme and flows through a mainly iambic rhythmic pattern. The female speaker begins with some reflections on her childhood.¹⁸ She remembers the happy noisy moments with her nurse, and the unhappy quiet moments when “Ted and Janey and then Mother died,” the family history of insanity as well as her sexual awakening:

At first I did not like my cousin’s friend,
I did not think I should remember him:
His voice has gone, his face is growing dim
And if like him now I do not know.
He frightened me before he smiled—
He did not ask me if he might—
He said that he would come one Sunday night,
He spoke to me as if I were a child. (ll. 13-20)

The description of the sexual encounter oozes some kind of sexual aggression on the man’s part, which is emphasised by the parallel lines. He treated her in the way some men treat women, expecting passivity from them: “He spoke to me as if I were a child” (l. 20). The encounter, disappointing as it was, awakened her passion and changed the world for her: “The colours of the world have turned / To flame, the blue, the gold has burned / In what used to be such a leaden sky” (ll. 25-7). The embers of passion are still there, they are not yet cold ashes: “But everything has burned, and not quite through” (l. 24).

Self-denied passion and voluntary sterility are depicted through an imagery of colours. Red is the colour of passion, and of female experience to which she painfully renounces:

colour of sin, a sin from which she shows no trace of repentance as we can see in the use of the oxymoron: "the pain is deadly sweet" which emphasises the contradictory forces in her. Aware of the conflict that sexual passion brings, she relinquishes it in her life but not in her dream: "The things that kill us seem / Blind to the death they give: / It is only in our dream / The things that kill us live" (ll. 49-50). The dream is here a way of portraying a psychological conflict through an irrational discourse. The monotonous passage of time is depicted in the use of parallel structures: "The sparrows fly across the Square, / The children play as we four did there, / The trees grow green and brown and bare," (ll.53-5). The red colour of passion is replaced by the whiteness of her father's hair and a world of repressed passion.

The absence of sexual passion leads her to concentrate on herself and to search for identity as we can see in the final iambs. Thus after hearing a bell outside she goes to open but nobody is there, though she discovers that "I think it is myself I go to meet" (l. 68). Her identity is split, her self is disrupted, that is why she searches the other part of her self to reconstitute her subjectivity. When she realises that this is not possible, she aims at the physical extinction of her divided unfulfilled self "some day I *shall* not think; I shall not *be!*" (l: 70).

The impossibility to reconcile sexual desire and poetic creation is a double edge conflict in her poetry. The renunciation of the body pleasures entails death. However, there is something attractive in the extinction of physical sensation. The renunciation of the carnal lust is a first step of the stair to reach a truth which stands above the reproductive power. The death of physical sensation implies the birth of her creative power; the decay of the imprisoning body gives way to the eternal permanence of her creation ("I shall grow up, but never grow old" (*CPP*, p. 14)). This obsession with permanence is always present in the recurrent allusion to hair which unlike flesh does not decay, but recalls the body that once was. Hair is also the line which links the living and the dead, the only thing which, like her poems, persists once the body disappears. The image of hair is also connected with her emphasis on transcendence, on everything that escapes the boundaries of the body and embarks on a journey towards imagination.

The dramatisation of the conflict between artistic creativity and sexuality is central in the poem "Saturday Market." In it, grief, sin, death, artistic creation and sexuality merge. The initial quatrain begins with an

order of a neutral speaker for a woman to bury her heart. According to Angela Leighton, this might be seen a response to the male reaction against sentimental poetry which pervaded in Victorian women's poetry and which undoubtedly prevented women from being taken seriously in the literary market.²² Thus the initial dactyls foreground one of the main motifs of the poem:

Bury your heart in some deep green hollow
 Or hide it up in a kind old tree
 Better still, give it the swallow
 When she goes over the sea. (ll. 1-4)

The agitating atmosphere of this market is full of different things: "In Saturday Market there's eggs a' plenty / And dead-alive ducks with their legs tied down, / Grey old gaffers and boys of twenty—/ Girls and the women of the town— / Pitchers and sugar-sticks, ribbons and laces / Posies and whips and dicky-birds' seed, / Silver pieces and smiling faces," (ll. 4-10). The parallel structures and the varied rhythm formed mainly by dactyls and trochees contribute to create the boisterous environment in which the addressee, a woman, is just a commodity, something to bargain for just like any object of the market:

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,
 Over the down—, out of sight,
 Fasten your door, though no one will find you
 No one will look on a Market night. (ll. 12-19)

The burden she has to hide "the red dead thing," the aborted foetus, is also a metaphor for her artistic creativity. The secret stands for the poem itself, the product of her artistic power which she thinks is the object of everybody's scorn. We know that Mew was not a confident poet and the result of the selling of her poems in the market and the little critical acclaim they produced diminished even more her expectations to the extent that she blamed herself and perceived her failure as an artist.²³ To avoid the painful wounding of public exposure, the speaker advises the woman to

bury her heart-child-poem, for as the poem progresses the heart becomes the aborted child-poem:

See, you, the shawl is wet, take out from under
 The red dead thing—. In the white of the moon
On the flaps does it stir again? Well, and no wonder!
 Best make an end of it; bury it soon.
If there is blood on the hearth who'll know it?
 Or blood on the stairs,
When a murder is over and one why show it?
 In Saturday Market nobody cares. (ll. 20-27)

The murder is committed, and this is the subversive power of the female body. The woman can be a pervert for she has power over her body. Though there is nothing in the poem suggesting that this act is fulfilling, what is important is what is behind the mere act of killing the foetus: power over one's acts, female autonomy. The red colour of the abortion contrasts with the whiteness of the moon which suggests physical sterility. The rejection of female experience suggests the subversion of traditional ideology imposed upon the woman writer who could never depart from her creation of traditional evocations of motherhood.²⁴ By portraying an abortion as a conscious act the poet is transgressing the norms, depicting unknown aspects of female experience. Freeing herself from the terrible burden will bring rest, as these lines suggest:

Then lie you straight on your bed for a short, short weeping
 And still, for a long, long rest,
There is never a one in the town so sure of sleeping
 As you, in the house on the dawn with a hole in your breast.
(ll. 28-31)

After the great pain endured, the woman is dead for the world, she is entitled to forget the world of experience and take refuge in an austere world of artistic creation.²⁵ For Mew, renunciation of sexuality is always painful, the substitute for passion, imagination, cannot make up for the absence of physical sensations. The power of the body has to be subordinated to the creative spirit but ultimately artistic power is not fulfilling. In Mew's poetry, the child almost never survives and its loss is expected to be overcome through art. Mew's relentless search for autonomy

and self-sufficiency was fulfilled in her strategy of seclusion and her concentration upon the process of creation detached from the bodily experience. Although it is certain that as a result of sexual politics, a beautiful woman's body and its creative potential could help women assert their poetic authority, Mew rejected this in her life, through her shabby appearance and her spinsterhood, and in her poetry, where neither the beauty of a female nor the strength of her biological power are seen positively.

An attentive examination of Mew's poems evinces the poetic influence of previous women writers. She often goes back to some of the themes in the poetry of her predecessors perhaps as an attempt to lay the foundations of a literary sisterhood to which she could adhere. However, the relation with the precursors is ambiguous. Though she was undoubtedly influenced by women such as Rossetti, in some of her poems the traditional themes worked out by female precursors seem to imprison her, to "infect her sentence," as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar had asserted, hence her effort to subvert them.²⁶

Though she needed the supportive ties of her predecessors to confront herself with a long time established male tradition seeking the empathy of other women's experiences, she gives a new meaning to the themes that constituted the poetic scaffolding of her predecessors and anticipates those strategies which will be echoed in the poetry of later modernists and contemporary poets as Marianne Moore, H.D., or Adrienne Rich.

Mew looks for the stability of a consolidated women's tradition; however, when she looks back to the poetry of her predecessors, she becomes aware of its limitations and like the narrator of her short story, "Passed," she feels strange, anxious and alone. She can't feel at home in the house of tradition, because this traditional home only leaves a small space for women's development. However, in her poetry she is always restless looking for a home, a place of rest, where her desires can be fulfilled. The "convent" poems and those which are located in rooms reveal to a certain extent this ambivalence of the home, a desire to feel safe in women's tradition, and the terrible enclosure it implies if she is to follow the ideal of "womanliness" found in many of her predecessors.

The poem entitled “The Sunlit House” seems to evoke the presence of the precursors, the dwellers of a ghostly derelict house with a neglected garden full of dried vegetation nobody cares to look at, except the speaker, the stranger who walks along the abandoned garden; the woman poet examining the neglected work of her predecessors.

White through the gate it gleamed and slept
 In shuttered sunshine: the parched garden flowers
Their fallen petals from the beds unswept,
 Like children unloved and ill-kept
 Dreamed through the hours.
Two blue hydrangeas y the blistered door, burned brown,
 Watched there and no one in the town
 Cared to go past, it night or day,
 Though why this was they wouldn't say, (ll. 1-10)

First, the speaker stays at the house and tries to root out the weeds that grow amid the flowers of the garden; she wants to get rid of the traps that triggered her predecessors' failures but finally abandons the ghostly house of the past when she understands that she must follow her own path. She cannot either amend the troubles of the past, or continue with the rewriting of the same themes of her precursors. She, a stranger in that house, must find her own way and follow the call of inspiration that tells her that having searched her mother's garden she found her own:²⁷

But, I the stranger, knew that I must stay,
 Pace up the weed-grown paths and down,
 Till one afternoon—there is just a doubt—
 But I fancy I heard a tiny shout—
 From an upper window a bird flew out—
 And I went my way. (ll. 12-16)

The call of inspiration is also the theme of the poem “The Call”. The poem presents the speakers sitting by the fire, passive, in a kind of death-in life state when suddenly a call that “flung wide the door” is heard. This call “snapped” the chain of seclusion freeing them:

To-night we heard a call,
A rattle on the window-pane,

A voice on the sharp air,
 And felt a breath stirring our hair,
 A flame within us: Something swift and tall
 Swept in and out and that was all.
 Was it a bright or a dark angel? Who can know?
 It left no mark upon the snow,
 But suddenly it snapped the chain
 Unbarred, flung wide the door
 Which will not shut again;
 And so we cannot sit here any more.
 We must arise and go:
 The world is cold without
 And dark and hedged about
 With mystery and enmity and doubt,
 But we must go
 Though yet we do not know
 Who called, or what marks we shall leave upon the snow. (ll. 6-26)

This poem's images of passive women sitting by the fire in the conventional atmosphere of the hearth at the beginning of the poem recreate the Platonic myth of the cavern: "From our low seat beside the fire / Where we have dozed and dreamed and watched the glow / Or raked the ashes, stopping so / We scarcely saw the sun or rain / Above, or looked much higher / Than this same quiet red or burned-out fire" (ll. 1-6). However, in the gloomy atmosphere of the conventional home, women heard, "a call," "A voice in the sharp air" that moves them, "And felt a breath stirring our hair, / A flame within us:" (l. 10). The flame is the call, the muse, somebody or "Something swift and tall / Swept in and out and that was all. / Was it bright or a dark angel? Who can know? / It left no mark upon the snow, / But suddenly it snapped the chain / Unbarred, flung wide the door / Which will not shut again;" (ll. 11-17). The power of inspiration will free women for ever "And so we cannot sit here any more" (l. 18). Though there are perils outside the home, women must abandon the house of tradition and take risks in the literary market: "The world is cold without / And dark and hedged about / With mystery and enmity and doubt, / But we must go / Though yet we do not know / Who called, or what marks we shall leave upon the snow." (ll. 20-5).

The plural “we” agglutinates the presence of women poets like Mew herself, who, though unsure of the road ahead, must “arise and go,” face the ruthless world outside and start their careers. They must liberate their imagination to go outside the imprisoning house of tradition. Women have to fling open the door and follow the muse which is “. . . a ruthless, cold-hearted creature, who destroys human love and choice.”²⁸ Though there is doubt ahead, the woman poet has to go out and fill the “blank page” of her writing which as Angela Leighton says “. . . is a place of risk, winter and ‘doubt’.”

The same idea is the leading thread of the short story “White World.” In this story a woman lies by the fire while the snow covers the fields outside: “FIRELIGHT lapped the chamber: the flames murmured feverishly wasting like waves in futile utterance their wordless life away. All was white outside” (p. 260). As in the poem, here we find a dumb environment, “a world of death”. The dying girl sitting by the fire lives with her sister and her father, “a huge white personage who seemed to take at one a vigorous possession of the frail chamber” (p. 264). The father figure represents the power and hardness which stands against the girls’ powerlessness and frailty. He is the hunter of birds which, like his daughter, lie helplessly in the chamber. The girl is awaiting for a lover, a presence that will liberate her from the darkness of the chamber and lead her to the world of snow: “Freedom stood —she saw it plainly— beckoning, awaiting her, outside in the vast universe of snow” (p. 268). When she remains in the doorstep of the chamber she tastes the freedom long time longed for.

She owned him, she was his exultantly, she tasted at his bidding unsurpassable and unsuspected life . . . This sudden strange renewal of physical and mental vigour seemed marvellously to remake or re-create her soul. Its dubious powers sprang into assertive being, its furtive impulses gathered prevailing force, it was no longer, as it once had been, a faint recipient of light, it had become itself a spark, a strong emittent ray; passive reflectiveness gave place to actual fire. (p. 268)

The woman is not the passive object of contemplation, she is not “a faint recipient of light” but “a spark” which will light the fire in her. The woman’s entrance to the outside world following the lover’s call, is parallel to the woman artist tracking the call of inspiration, tasting the fruits of her

creativity, asserting her right to be herself. Even though she follows the lover, the woman is “in control psychologically having willed their flight in the first place.”²⁹ This is an act of transformation which renders the woman a new self which the lover cannot recognise:

[t]his man, turning a wondering glance upon the wraith of her he came to seek, was baffled and stood marvelling whither the being tangibly desired was fled; what shadow mocked its absence in the familiar stranger’s form. (p. 269)

This new woman puzzles the man, she is just more than a mere body she is a spirit enjoying the creative power: “I see no fetters, and my sight is free —no windows and no mists obstruct it —it is strong and shuns no glare” (p. 270). The woman finally dies but the act of dying has in itself both positive and negative overtones.

Once the woman dies, she abandons the home-cage she inhabits and goes into the world of whiteness from which she will never come back. This world of whiteness is an ambivalent symbol, whiteness is the colour of coldness but ironically that coldness is the woman’s only escape, white is then the colour of the muse that will inspire her. Mew’s poetry is sometimes an expression of a ceaseless longing for rest. The woman cannot fulfil her dreams in a physical world, she is enfolded in a sanctuary of rest and sleep.

There is no recurrent and explicit gender of the muse in Mew’s poetry. Sometimes, the muse is depicted as the masculine lover, as in the short story “White World,” whereas in other occasions the muse is defined as an “inhuman thing.” Mew is more fascinated with the road itself which leads to the muse, to the final stages of the creative journey, to art, than with the end of the journey. This road, appears in many of her poems, for example “On the Asylum Road,” “The Pedlar” where the road “beyond men’s bolted doors” is the place which stands far from the world of the beloved, as the speaker acknowledges “There shall I walk and you go free of me” (l.6). The same happens in “The Forest Road” where the road is seen as the path to imagination, to creativity, a path full of uncertainty

The forest road,
The infinite straight road stretching away
World without end: the breathless road between the walls

Of the black listening trees: the hushed, grey road
 Beyond the window that you shut to-night
 Crying that you would look at it by day—
 There is a shadow there that sings and calls
 But not for you . . . (ll. 1-5)

In this road, the muse calls the speaker-lover but not the sleeping beloved. The speaker tries to describe the unreal dreamy world of imagination, a place which cannot be easily portrayed since everything is blurred. The road is then compared to a stair on the top of which stands the smiling face of the muse

...What *is* this singing on the road
 That makes all other music like the music in a dream—
 Dumb to the dancing and the marching feet; you know, in dreams,
 you see
 Old pipers playing that you cannot hear,
 And ghostly drums that only seem to beat. This seems to climb:
 Is it the music of a larger place? It makes our room too small: it is like
 a stair,
 A calling stair that climbs up to a smile you scarcely see,
 Dim, but so waited for; *you* know what a smile is, how it calls, (ll. 42-9)

This world is incompatible with the world of the flesh that is why the speaker wants to free herself from the arms of her beloved: “If I could hush these hands that are half-awake, / Groping for me in sleep I could go free . . . / If, without waking you, I could get up and reach the door—!” (ll. 11-12, 59). To reach the door implies physical extinction symbolised in the death of the heart

I cannot strike your lonely hands. Yes, I have struck your heart,
 It did come so near. Then lie you there
 Dear and wild heart behind this quivering snow
 With two red stains on it: and I will strike and tear
 Mine out, and scatter it to yours. Oh! throbbing dust,
 You that were life, our little wind-blown hearts! (ll. 63-8)

Once the road is slightly glimpsed, there is a feeling of ecstasy in the completeness of the self when body and soul are finally reunited

The road! The road!
 There is a shadow there: I see my soul,
 I hear my soul, singing among the trees! (ll. 40-7, 66-9)

More often than not, to embark on this journey “beyond men’s bolted doors” is, as we have already acknowledged, only possible through a symbolic act of death. This longing for the afterworld might remind us of Christina Rossetti’s poetry, however, Mew’s desire of going beyond the physical world through a life of self-abnegation is not because she knew that the world of religion was more satisfying than the world of the body; she feels trapped in the world of physicality which prevents her from developing her creativity that is why she aspires to an intermediate stage between life and death, a sort of dream-state, a narrow edge that she almost never succeeds in describing.

The end of the road is best depicted in “Moorland Night” where after burying the heart, the speaker is free

My heart is against the grass and the sweet earth; —it has gone still, at last.
 It does not want to beat any more,
 And why should it beat?
 This is the end of the journey;
 The Thing is found. (ll. 5-9)

The heart symbolises her creation which must be concealed, for as the speaker acknowledges

But it is not for long in any life I know. This cannot stay,
 Not now, not yet, not in a dying world, with me, for very long. (ll. 18-19)

There are, however, two occasions where the road seems to be a path to the fulfilment of passion. In “On the Road to the Sea”, the speaker is reluctant to reject the enjoyment of physical love. The male speaker fantasises about the total possession of the woman; first he eroticises the presence of the woman:

To-day is not enough or yesterday: God sees it all—
 Your length on sunny lawns, the wakeful rainy nights—; tell me—; (how vain to ask), but it is not a question—just a call—;

show me then, only your notched inches climbing up the garden wall,

I like you best when you are small. (ll. 16-19)

We know that this is an erotic dream as the speaker recognizes:

Is this a stupid thing to say
Not having spent with you one day? (ll. 19-20)

The aloofness of the woman who rejects the lover contrasts with the impetuosity of the man addressing her in a sort of *carpe diem* motif

But I want your life before mine bleeds away—
Here—not in heavenly hereafters—soon,—
I want your smile this very afternoon,
(The last of al my vices, pleasant people used to say,
I wanted and I sometimes got—the Moon!) (ll. 32-6)

The speaker sees himself alone walking along that road: “No shadow of you on any bright road again” (l.41). He unwillingly sacrifices his happiness for the peace the woman desires. He, however, would prefer dying in the turmoil of passion

Peace! Would you not rather die
Reeling, —with all the cannons at your ear?
So, at least, would I, (ll. 46-8)

In “The Road to Kéřity,” the landscape of the road fluctuates between two stories of fulfilled and unfulfilled love. Thus, the bleak landscape which surrounds the old couple contrasts with the warm passionate embrace of the two lovers on the lane

Do you remember the two old people we passed on the road to Kéřity,
Resting their sack on the stones, by the drenched wayside,
Looking at us with their lightless eyes through the driving rain, and
then our

again

To the rocks, and the long white line of the tide:
Frozen ghosts were children once, husband and wife, father and mother,

Looking at us with those frozen eyes; have you ever seen anything
quite so

chilled or so old?

But we—with our arms about each other,

We did not feel the cold! (p. 35)

Sometimes a kind of eroticism between the lover-muse and the speaker is established as in the poem “Absence.” The speaker is determined to answer the call of the lover-muse in spite of Christ’s opposition. The decision to avoid Christ’s wishes may suggest that we are confronted with a female speaker but there is ambiguity regarding its gender. As Celeste Schenck points out, this is a poem which “evokes both delight in female sexuality and conflict over its homoerotic expression.”³⁰ Though it is true that women arose intense emotional responses in Mew, it does not seem probable that she dared to depict her interest in women in an explicit way, so that she adopted “masks” in an attempt to disguise her sexual orientation. However, this is one of the few occasions where she does not feel guilty of substituting the divine love for the secular:

Turn never again

On these blind eyes with a wild rain

Your eyes; they were stars to me.—

There are things stars may not see.

But call, call, and though Christ stands

Still with scarred hands

Over my mouth, I must answer. So

I will come—He shall let me go! (ll. 13-20)

The closed couplets of the first couplet-rhymed quatrain portray an erotic lyricism where the central image is the beloved’s hair: “It is a wind from that sea / That blows the fragrance of your hair to me” (ll. 3-4). The image of physical passion occupies the third quatrain

In sheltered beds, the heart of every rose

Serenely sleeps to-night. As shut as those

Your guarded heart; as safe as they from the beat, beat

Of hooves that tread dropped roses in the streets. (ll. 9-12)

The rose, traditional symbol of female sexuality, is here guarded from “the beat, beat / Of hooves that tread dropped roses in the streets,”

that is, it is harboured from sexual aggression, portrayed through the allusion of the beat of hooves that reminds us of Sappho's imagery.

The abandonment of religion for a life of physical passion is the theme of "Again" where the speaker instills in the beloved the idea of renouncing to Christ personified in the "stranger scarred from head to feet" and accepting her sexuality:

One day, not here, you will find a hand
Stretched out to you as you walk down some heavenly street;
You will see a stranger scarred from head to feet;
But when he speaks to you will not understand,
Nor yet who wounded him not why his wounds are sweet.
And saying nothing, letting go his hand,
You will leave him in the heavenly street—
So we shall meet! (p. 41)

This sense of oppression can be seen in the poem "Left Behind." The speaker's inner contradictions are depicted in the last stanza where images of enclosed spaces stand against a wish to be free from the oppressive constraints that obstruct her life:

I wait thy summons on a swaying floor,
Within a room half darkness and half glare.
I cannot stir—I cannot find the stair—
Thrust hands upon my heart—; it clogs my feet,
As drop by drop it drains. I stand and beat—
I stand and beat my heart against the door. (ll. 9-14)

The dichotomy between physical passion and the retreat to religion is the focus of other poems. The ambivalent position of the speaker in "The Little Portress," torn between the admiration and the pity for the nun's life contrasts with the outspoken rejection of convent life in "At the Convent Gate."³¹ The speaker mocks the convent life of the nun in the first stanza: "Why do you shrink away, and start and stare / Life frowns to see you leaning at death's gate—" (ll. 1-2). The speaker tells the woman her taking up convent life to avoid sin and passion is useless for it is too late to repent: "Ah! Sweet, it is too late: / You cannot cast these kisses from your hair" (ll. 3-4); she will face again the feelings from which she withdrew

in a renewal of a sexual awakening: “Oh! lips worn white / With waiting! Love will blossom in a night / And you shall wake to find the roses there!” (ll. 6-8). The woman however, rejects the speaker’s words and is determined to surrender herself to the arms of Christ: “Oh! Christ, Thine own again!” (l. 14).

The retreat to religion is a way of rejecting the inner conflicts which she felt were devious and therefore morally punishable as Val Warner points out

And what of that curious craving for religion which so often went hand in hand with inversion? Many such people were deeply religious, and this surely was one of their bitterest problems. They believed, and believing they craved a blessing on what to some of them seemed very sacred — a faithful and deeply devoted union. But the Church’s blessing was not for them. Faithful they might be, leading orderly lives, harming no one, and yet the Church turned away; her blessings were strictly reserved for the normal.³²

In tracing Mew’s relation with her predecessors one must not fail to mention her obsession with the figure of the Fallen Woman. According to Mizejewski, “Mew’s Fallen Woman poems are heirs to half a century of Victorian sociological, religious, and literary interest in this subject — the prostitute who as sociologists now point out, was a curiously necessary accoutrement of a culture that insisted on the essentially sexless purity of ‘good’ women.”³³ Moreover, the figure of the Fallen Woman is equated with the power of the creative imagination, as Angela Leighton states

The figure of the fallen woman is also, however, a sign for women of the power of writing. Her wandering, outcast state seductively expresses the poet’s restlessness and desire. To summon her is not only to assert a political purpose which breaks the moral law, but also to claim the power of writing as necessarily free of control, of rule. The fallen woman is the muse, the beloved — the lost sister, mother, daughter, whose self was one’s own. In poetry, above all, the social gesture of reclamation and solidarity becomes also an imaginative gesture of integration and identity.³⁴

There is a radical change in the depiction of the Fallen Woman in Mew’s poetry. She is no longer the mute, repentant, sentimentalised figure

which appears in some of her Victorian predecessors. Though Mew's evocation of the Fallen Woman recalls the literary tradition, she recreates a "New Fallen Woman" where her sensuality of the woman is not chastised. "In Madeleine in Church," she depicts the criticism of the constraints of marriage and motherhood. Thus, though she is dealing with the traditional theme of the Fallen Woman, she subverts it, and her Madeleine has a voice that enhances her sensuality.

This sense of unfulfilled desire of motherhood that lingers in her poems is equated to the frustration she felt about her writing. It represents the "anxiety of authorship," the fear that she couldn't create, that she was unable to "mother" the text, and therefore unable to become a true poet. She strove to escape gender stereotypes, to be a sexless creature, hence her efforts to eliminate the patriarchal assumption that links women to the reproductive role which stands against the productive power of the male. She sensed the fear of being drawn to passivity, of being carried away from creative self-sufficiency and being turned into an object if she followed the poetic models which supposedly represented women's poetry. Mew looked for a solution to this impasse in her work where she searched, like Brontë, "a passion untouched by mortality."

NOTES

- ¹ This article forms part of a research project on women's poetry which has been funded by Xunta de Galicia (grant no. PGIDT99PXI20403 A)
- ² "The Poems of Emily Brontë," in Charlotte Mew, *Collected Poems and Prose*, ed. Val Warner (London: Virago (Carcenet), 1981). Subsequent references to Mew's poems, essays and short stories are taken from Warner's edition.
- ³ Suzanne Raitt points out the admiration Mew felt for Brontë, an admiration which was also shared by a woman of vital importance in Mew's life: May Sinclair. Thus, she states: "For Mew and Sinclair, Emily Brontë's achievement was to have found a language for desire which was exactly not the language of the body's secrets or of the random accidents of gender." "Charlotte Mew and May Sinclair: A love-song," *Critical Quarterly* 37 (Fall, 1995): 7.

- ⁴ Ann Hardwick, *Voices from the Garden. Aspects of Women's Poetry, 1910-1939* (Loughborough University, 1988), p. 6.
- ⁵ Charlotte Mew, "The Poems of Emily Brontë," p. 363.
- ⁶ Charlotte Mew, "The Pedlar," (l. 5), p. 11.
- ⁷ Sandra M. Gilbert, "Costumes of the Mind: Transvestism as Metaphor in Modern Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Winter, 1980): 394.
- ⁸ This is a common problem in women's poetry. Thus, Carolyn Burke in a review essay on women writers analyses Mina Loy's choice of a masculine voice in "Aphorisms on Futurism" concluding that her writing "raised questions about the tensions between her desire to write from within a female subjectivity and her consciousness of the problems surrounding subjectivity itself." "Supposed Persons: Modernist Poetry and the Female Subject," *Feminist Studies* 11 (Spring, 1985): 132.
- ⁹ Mary C. Davidow points out some connections between this poem and Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. She notes that the poem has an unknown dedicatee and an epigraph from Psalm 21:4 which "is uniquely suited for one who is advanced in years and who has acquired an aura of immortality" (p. 439). She draws concomitances between the woman, the bride and Sue *Bridehead* [sic] and she defines both as "epicene women" (p. 440). Both hate the sexual act and the same sort of vocabulary appears when describing the two women's reaction to sexual intercourse. Thus, after Phillotson found Sue in a closet, the narrator describes the scene like this: "*She looked so pitiful and pleading* in her white night gown against the shadowy lumber-hole that he was quite worried. *She continued to beseech him not to disturb her*" whereas the farmer's voice in Mew's poem says: "*Not near, not near! Her eyes beseech / when one of us comes within reach*" (pp. 440-441). Sue is described as "a sort of fay, or a sprite—not a woman!" and the farmer describes the bride as "More like a *frightened fay*" (p. 442). The situation between Sue and Phillotson, and the farmer and the woman is the same: "*'Tis but a stair / Betwixt us*" (*FB*) whilst we read in Hardy's book "After this subject of marriage was not mentioned by them for several days, though living as they were, *with only a landing between them*, it was constantly in their minds" (p. 443). "Charlotte Mew and the Shadow of Thomas Hardy," *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities* 81 (1978).

- ¹⁰ Ann Hardwick, *Voices from the Garden* (Loughborough University, 1988), p. 93.
- ¹¹ Val Warner, "Mary Magdalen and the Bride," *Poetry Nation* 4 (1975): 99.
- ¹² Suzanne Raitt, "Charlotte Mew and May Sinclair: A love-song," *Critical Quarterly* 37 (Fall, 1995): 14.
- ¹³ Davidow tells us that Mew rejected Cockerell's suggestion to change the final lines of the "Farmer's Bride" on the grounds that "they do not seem a natural *cri de coeur* for the baffled farmer." To which she answered: "I could only change my farmer by making him someone else—as, so far as I had the use of words, they did express my idea of a rough countryman seeing and saying things differently from the more sophisticated townsmen—at once more clearly and more confusedly. I am afraid, too, that the point you touch on is more than merely technical—as it seems to me that in the '*cri de coeur*' (I use your phrase) one either has or has not the person, and if the author is not right here he is wrong past mending—judged by Flaubert's implacable '*Le mot ne manque jamais quand on possède l'idée.*'" "Charlotte Mew and the Shadow of Thomas Hardy," *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities* 81 (1978): 439-440.
- ¹⁴ Elaine Showalter, "The Female Tradition," in *Feminisms*, ed. Robyn Warhol and Diane Price (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1991), p. 284.
- ¹⁵ Apropos of Charlotte Mew's desires of motherhood, Val Warner writes: "It is tempting to read Madeleine's *cri de coeur*, 'If there were fifty heavens God could not give us back the child who went or never came,' as wrenched from the poet's own circumstances, but perhaps neither Madeleine nor Charlotte would really have enjoyed the domestic work of bringing up small children" or as Alida Monro stated " 'it is probable that she adored the idea of a mother rather than the woman herself' ." This reasoning does not seem to be preposterous especially if we take into account that Mew highlights in her poetry the sorrows of motherhood which may be taken literally (the physical act of giving birth to a child), or figuratively (giving birth to the text). Val Warner, "Mary Magdalene and the Bride: The Work of Charlotte Mew," *Poetry Nation* 4 (1975): 96.
- ¹⁶ Susan Gubar, "The 'Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity," in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), p. 86.

- ¹⁷ For a thorough study of the childbirth metaphor see: Susan Stanford Friedman, "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor," in *Feminisms*, ed. Robyn Warhol and Diane Price (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1991), pp. 371-92.
- ¹⁸ Mew described this poem as "the most subjective, to me, of the lot." Val Warner, *Collected Poems and Prose* (London: Virago, 1981), p. xiv.
- ¹⁹ Judith Butler gives us a definition of the "abject" which "designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered "Other." This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion. The construction of the "not-me" as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject." *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 133.
- ²⁰ Susan Gubar discusses women's exclusion from the creation of culture in the connection between women's body and textuality. See "The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity," in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), pp. 73-93.
- ²¹ For critics such as M. Schmidt, Mew's stair "leads to a physical place." *An Introduction to Fifty Modern British Poets* (London: Pan Books, 1979), p. 63.
- ²² For Suzanne Raitt, the secret may also stand for the lesbian inclinations Mew struggles to conceal. "Charlotte Mew and May Sinclair: A love-son," *Critical Quarterly* 37 (Fall, 1995): 3-17. Mew's own sexual orientation has given rise to criticism which dwells on biographical data. There is often no accord regarding her sexual inclinations. Thus, Mary C. Davidow criticises an article by T.E.M. Boll entitled "The Mystery of Charlotte Mew and May Sinclair: An Enquiry" (*Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 74 (September, 1970): 445-53) which orientates his search for "the truth" that lies behind Mew's poems of lesbian inclinations towards May Sinclair. Davidow considers this "tenuous and at times inconsistent with other related facts" and centres the "mystery" of her life "on the man she dedicated her slender volume of seventeen poems [*The Farmer's Bride*]" and whose love is celebrated in poems such as "I Have Been Through the Gates" (*Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 75 (1971): 295-6). There are several opinions which point to Mew's heterosexual relationships. Val Warner points out

that one of her cousins declared that in the early 1890 she “was ‘walking out’ with a young man” (*Collected Poems and Prose* (London: Virago, 1981), p.xiii). Davidow reads “the little incident about May Sinclair” which Alida Monro published in 1954 as a satirical statement, and to prove the truth of this, she mentions some opinions of Mew’s friends which underline Mew’s “probity” (p. 298). Davidow mentions that Mew had a sort of relation with one of her friends’ brother, Samuel Chick, brother of Margaret Chick (p. 299). With regards to the “little incident” Davidow states: “Assuredly, something did occur causing Charlotte Mew, in her letter to her hostess, to charge the latter with having a ‘complicated mind.’ But that a sexual attack by a Lesbian occurred is totally incongruous with the tone of May Sinclair’s letter.” (p. 299)

Though the purpose of this essay is not to sustain the meaning of the poems on biographical substratum, it is undeniably true that in her verse an implicit communion between women is always felt, though most of the time disguised in voices of ambiguous gender.

²³ After the publication of *The Farmer's Bride* nobody was really interested in reviewing it. This lack of literary success prompted Charlotte’s disappointment as we can observe in her letter to Harold Monro in 1916:

“I am sorry to hear you think the FB is going dead. Of course I hoped for reviews. I rather expected one or two decent ones, but I know only a few literary people and not intimately . . . even if I knew them better I couldn’t ask them to get me notices, because I am simply not the person ...When I see what and how other verses are noticed, I can’t think the War is wholly responsible for mine being left on the shelf. If it is good for anything, I am afraid it is simply that work doesn’t go for much in England if it has to stand by itself”. Qtd. in Hardwick, *Voices from the Garden. Aspects of Women's Poetry 1910-1939* (Loughborough University, 1988), p. 65.

²⁴ For Suzanne Raitt, refusing to reproduce is a way to fight against heredity. She states that the ‘red, dead thing’ is also the ‘sad secret’ of Mew herself: the children that would never be born both because of her family history, and because of her lesbianism.” “Charlotte Mew and May Sinclair: A love-song,” *Critical Quarterly* 37 (Fall, 1995): 12.

- ²⁵ Raitt establishes a connection between the burial of the heart and the woman's sexual orientation: "The woman returns to her bed for a kind of death-in life, 'a long, long rest'—either the rest of suicide ('with a hole in your breast') or the rest of the body without a heart, without pleasure or fertility: the kind of lesbian body that Mew imagined for herself." "Charlotte Mew and May Sinclair: A love-song," *Critical Quarterly* 37 (Fall, 1995): 12. If we follow this reading, neither the child nor the poem could survive. The former for being the product of inverted sexuality, the latter for being the recreation of 'unpermitted' experience.
- ²⁶ The allusion to the muse and the precursors is more clearly seen in her short stories. In one of these entitled "Passed" a girl images the return to her home after visiting a poor girl's house as a nightmarish experience, where the home is a place in which she can no longer feel comfortable. As Angela Leighton points out, her idea of home is destroyed and now the speaker, like Mew herself, feels the displacement of being "an outsider both of the present and of the past." *Victorian Women Poets. Writing Against the Heart* (Exeter: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 267.
- ²⁷ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).
- ²⁸ Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets. Writing Against the Heart* (Exeter: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 289.
- ²⁹ Val Warner, "Mary Magdalene and the Bride: The Work of Charlotte Mew," *Poetry Nation* 4 (1975): 97.
- ³⁰ Celeste M. Schenck, "Charlotte Mew (1870-1928)," in *The Gender of Modernism*, ed. Bonnie K. Scott (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1990), p. 318.
- ³¹ The poem echoes Rossetti's "The Convent Threshold" and the title also reminds us of Austin Dobson's "At the Convent Gate" in the depiction of the convent life motif:
 Look, there is one that tells her beads;
 And yonder one apart that reads
 A tiny missel's page;
 And see, beside the well the two
 That, kneeling, strive to lure anew
 The magpie to its cage!
 Qtd. in Hönninghausen, *The Symbolist Tradition in English Literature. A Study of Pre-Raphaelitism and Fin de Siécle* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), p. 225.

- ³² *Collected Poems and Prose*, (London: Virago (Carcenet), 1981), p. xv.
- ³³ Linda Mizejewski, "Charlotte Mew and the Unrepentant Magdalene: A Myth in Transition," *TSL* 26 (Fall, 1984): 283.
- ³⁴ "Because men made the laws': The Fallen Woman and the Woman Poet," *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. Joseph Bristow (London: New Casebooks, 1995), p. 242.

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