

Ecologies of Resistance: Urban Nature, Ecofeminism, and Nonhuman Agency in Charlotte Mew

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Abstract

This paper studies selected works of Charlotte Mew (1869-1928), a Yellow Book find, through the ecocritical and ecofeminist lens, to probe into the complex human-nature relationship in her writings. Much of the existing critical scholarship on Mew has emphasised gender, trauma, and psychological realism. This study foregrounds the ecological dimensions of her work. Through close readings of her urban pieces — “Passed,” “Men and Trees” (I and II), and “The Trees Are Down,” the paper challenges the prevailing reductive assumption that urban literature is intrinsically anthropocentric and environmentally sterile. It also examines her rural and semi-rural poems — “Saturday Market,” “The Farmer’s Bride,” and “Ken” to argue for the impact of trauma, marginalisation, and grief on human interaction with the natural world. Mew presents Nature as an active moral and emotional force rather than a passive backdrop in human drama, anticipating contemporary debates in urban ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and posthumanist theory.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; Ecofeminism; Charlotte Mew; Urban Ecology; Modernist Poetry; Nonhuman Agency

Introduction

Charlotte Mew (1869-1928) was frequently relegated to the periphery in the late Victorian and early twentieth-century British literary studies. Despite being praised by such notable contemporaries as Thomas Hardy and Virginia Woolf, her work gathered dust on the fringes of Modernist canonical literature for a long time (Leighton 214). Over the past few decades, there has been a resurgence of critical scholarship on Mew. Using feminist, psychoanalytic, or biographical approaches, critics, including Valerie Pitt and Penelope Fitzgerald, have considerably focused on the emotional intensity, psychological trauma, social alienation, existential anxiety, gendered oppression, and spiritual uncertainty mostly in Mew’s poetry (Fitzgerald 142; Pitt 3). Feminist critics have also explored the expression of female subjectivity under oppressive patriarchal social structures in her poetry, particularly with reference to “The Farmer’s Bride” (Leighton 221). However, the ecological aspects of her works still remain underexplored. The present study adopts ecocritical, ecofeminist, and posthumanist frameworks to examine how

Mew's works construct relationship between the human and non-human life in both urban and rural environments, thereby extending the scope of existing scholarship beyond predominantly biographical interpretations. Current ecocritical research patterns prompt readers to re-evaluate literary texts according to their representation of human-nature relationships. The general understanding of ecocriticism as the study of environmental literature aims at studying the role of cultural narrative in the shaping of ecological awareness and environmental ethics (Garrard 5). In this expanding realm of study, academics have increasingly focused on the need to study urban landscapes and industrial modernity vis-à-vis traditional pastoral landscapes (Buell 7). These strategies are especially pertinent to studying Mew's works, where human experience is often put in the context of environments created by the forces of Nature and those of the city. Certain select works of Mew readily render to be interpreted through ecocritical analysis because they demonstrate her influence on early twentieth century Modernist literature while linking her work to present-day environmental humanities and ecofeminist debates (Garrard 6). A close analysis reveals that Mew not only contests the traditional dichotomy between nature and city but also shows that ecological relations are the intersections of gendered oppression, social marginalisation, and psychological trauma.

The ecological significance of Mew's work especially gains ground when situated within the context of industrial modernity at the turn of the nineteenth century. The rapid urbanisation of England, the expansion of capitalist modernisation, and the rising alienation between human beings and Nature—all profoundly shaped the literary consciousness of this period. In contrast to much of Georgian pastoral poetry that idealised rural life, Mew presents urban Nature as fractured, unsettling and resistant to human control. Her rural poems reveal the violence inherent in patriarchal and agricultural systems.

This article thus raises three main questions:

- a. How does Mew re-think human-nature relations in urban and rural settings?
- b. How does her poetry reveal the intersections of gendered oppression and ecological degradation?
- c. In what ways do nonhuman elements like animals, plants, landscapes and natural forces act as agents within her poetic world?

The paper argues that Mew develops a proto-ecological consciousness that anticipates subsequent developments in ecofeminism and posthumanist ecocriticism by engaging closely with her works like, "Passed," "Men and Trees," "The Trees Are Down," "Saturday Market," "The Farmer's Bride," and "Ken."

Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism: From Nature Writing to Urban Ecology

Early ecocritical studies primarily focused on representations of wilderness, pastoralism, and environmental ethics (Glottfelty and Fromm xviii; Garrard 10). According to Buell, the environmental texts usually recognise the presence of nonhuman environment in such a way that human history seems implicated in natural history (6). This is significant for understanding Mew's works, where Nature constantly pervades human, emotional, and social structures.

Subsequent developments in urban ecocriticism emphasised that cities are themselves ecological systems shaped by material interactions amongst humans, architecture, pollution, vegetation and industrial modernity. Michael Bennett and David Teague argue that the urban environment is not opposed to Nature; rather, they are complex ecological spaces where environmental anxieties are especially visible (3). Mew's urban pieces— a corpus of poems, prose fiction, and essays - anticipate such perspectives to a significant degree by portraying the city as porous and ecologically entangled rather than environmentally sterile.

This wider urban ecocritical view is particularly useful for assessing late Victorian and early

Modernist literature, where industrialisation produced both fascination with and anxiety about technological progress. While canonical Modernist poets often depict urban modernity in terms of fragmentation and alienation, Mew is distinctive in that she embeds ecological consciousness within these depictions. Her poems register the violence of modernisation not just on human subjects, but also on trees, animals and landscapes.

Ecofeminism and Gendered Ecologies

Another crucial theoretical framework for interpreting the ecological aspects of Mew's works is ecofeminism that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s. This theory analyses the patriarchal systems in the light of how they establish interconnected forms of domination over both women and Nature (Gaard 2). In "The Death of Nature," Carolyn Merchant demonstrates how scientific modernity transformed Nature into feminised object to be controlled, exploited, and mechanised (193). Val Plumwood argues hierarchical dualisms like man/woman, culture/nature, and mind/body, created by Western philosophical traditions, give precedence to masculine rationality over women and the natural world (4). Ecofeminist theorists believe that such dualistic structures support systems of domination that span over gender, environment, and relations among species. Greta Gaard also insists on the fact that ecofeminism has to not only tackle gender inequalities, but also larger forms of social injustice, such as class oppression and exploitation of species (5).

In Mew's poetry, the ecofeminist views help to understand how the patriarchal systems dictate, coerce, and control female bodies and Nature. Instead of romanticising women as being closer to Nature, her poetry reveals how such associations are imposed by patriarchal systems to legitimise domination and exposing, in the process, the violence embedded in social and environmental hierarchies.

Posthumanism and Nonhuman Agency

Posthumanist thinkers say that human beings are not separate from the natural world, but are deeply embedded within complex ecological and material networks of animals, plants, technology and environmental processes. Stacy Alaimo uses the idea of "trans-corporeality" to describe how human bodies are physically linked to environmental systems through pollution, climate change, and ecological exchange (2). Likewise, Donna Haraway's idea of "naturecultures" avoids any strict division between human and nonhuman life, foregrounding the interdependent relationship among biological, cultural and ecological existence (Haraway, *The Companion Species* 4). Jane Bennett further advances this argument with the notion of "vibrant matter," a notion that conceives of nonhuman material forms as active agents in social and ecological reality (xvi).

These theoretical approaches are particularly useful for understanding Mew's work (with due attention to the historical context), where trees, animals and landscapes are seldom passive background elements. Rather than reading early twentieth-century texts through the lens of posthumanist theories developed much later, this analysis demonstrates how Mew's poetic imagination anticipates later ecological concerns, depicting humans and nonhuman life as deeply entangled in common structures of vulnerability, violence, and survival.

Analysis and Discussion

Passed: Urban Ecology and Modernist Disquiet

"Passed" (1894), an early short story published in *The Yellow Book* (Vol. 2), demonstrates an extraordinary ecological consciousness within the framework of urban modernity, showing how natural imagery penetrates the urban environment in spectral and disturbing ways.

Brief references to light, weather and air currents create an environment that destabilises the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. Throughout the evening, there is “cold grey light” that makes the city look drained both emotionally and physically (Mew, *The Yellow Book*, Vol.2 125). This subdued natural imagery creates an environment in which human suffering merges with the environment.

The city of “Passed” is not ecologically barren, but intensely porous. Nature pervades in shadows, winds, and passing sensations in ways beyond human control and challenge anthropocentric assumptions that modern urban zones lack environmental presence. Rather, Mew imagines urban life as haunted by ecological traces that resist industrial domination. There are multiple references to engulfing darkness and shifting sunlight implying that Nature continues to loom large over the cityscape despite encroaching industries.

This is where the liminality of the story becomes important. Human figures traverse spaces which seemingly belong to two different realms of existence — from the bustling city to a quiet, morbid environment; from the cozy confines of the narrator’s room to the bitter coldness of the city’s poorest quarters. All along, the environment silently witnesses this transience. This resonates with Buell’s assertion that awareness of the environment emerges when human history is perceived as inseparable from natural processes (7). Mew, thus, turns the urban space into a site of ecological awareness.

The spectrality of Nature in “Passed” reflects wider anxieties of industrial modernity. The woman appears ghost-like in the urban crowd and the environment around her pitilessly reflects her marginalisation in the society (Mew, *The Yellow Book*, Vol.2 121). Nature here does not comfort or harmonise; it rather amplifies the feeling of alienation and transience, typical of modern city life. Mew depicts ecological entanglement as fragmented, disturbing and unresolved much like modern urban existence.

“Passed,” the lone short story included in this study, though different in generic form, complements Mew’s other tree-based works through its depiction of nature’s precarious presence within the urban environment. The story juxtaposes London’s decaying streets with glimpses of trees, smoke-obsured skies, and fading daylight, highlighting the tension between the natural world and industrial modernity. It employs urban ecology and anthropomorphic imagery to critique mechanised progress, thereby challenging the anthropocentric assumptions of the Anthropocene. In a way, it also anticipates the ecological interconnectedness associated with the Symbiocene. Its shared emphasis on biocentrism and environmental grief therefore justifies its inclusion alongside Mew’s other ecologically-oriented urban poems and essays.

Men and Trees (I & II): Ethical Confrontations

Trees are not just a part of the landscape here. They bear a constant, mute testimony to human existence and death. Mew contrasts the permanence of trees with the impermanence of human life. She suggests that Nature is primeval as compared to human civilisation: “Man is so much less than trees” (Mew, *Collected Poems and Prose* 74).

Both the essays point to the profoundly paradoxical relationship between human utilitarianism and vegetal endurance. While man seeks to dominate and exploit Nature for his own selfish interests, the trees boast of an age-old existence and are quietly resilient to human onslaught: “The trees stand up quietly in the wind” (75). They can simply continue to exist. This representation anticipates later ecological and posthumanist thought, particularly that of Jane Bennett’s “vibrant matter,” in which nonhuman entities have agency and material force of their own.

Mew does not use conventional pastoral imagery to romanticise Nature. Trees are not idealistically portrayed as symbols of harmony or refuge. Their silent endurance evokes awe

and mocks at the arrogance of modern industrial culture that forgets that trees are living entities and reduces them to a commodity. This critique gathers voice when read alongside her poem “The Trees Are Down.” Thus, Mew lays bare the broader dehumanising features of industrial society, showing how urban expansion, ecological exploitation, and human alienation often go hand in hand.

The Trees Are Down: Elegy, Violence, and Modernity

This is an elegy mourning the destruction of an urban green space — Euston Square Gardens, London. The speaker draws attention to the aesthetic beauty and ecological importance of trees in the city. Mew uses the imagery of loss and grieving in the line: “They are cutting down the great plane trees at the end of the gardens” (69). This act of annihilation is sudden and violent rather than natural or harmless.

It is not a natural corollary to the growth of the city. It is a traumatic disruption of its ecological makeup. The speaker’s sorrow is deeply evident in the line, “But I, all day, I heard an angel crying: ‘Hurt not the trees’” (69). According to Mew, the trees are not decorative or passive elements but living entities. She grants agency to nonhuman life in her use of images, like the lonely bough that hangs green and high in the fine grey rain. The destruction of trees is both violence against the environment and a breach in the human-nature relationship.

In this respect, the poem pre-empts contemporary anxieties about ecological degradation, loss of green spaces, and the consequences of unchecked urbanisation. “These were great trees, it was in them from root to stem,” the speaker observes, emphasising that the trees organically belong to the urban ecosystem, and suggesting a harmonious coexistence between human and nonhuman life threatened by industrial modernity (69). The poem, therefore, criticises utilitarian perceptions on Nature and demands a more ethical and respectful relationship with the urban environment within society.

Saturday Market: Human–Animal Entanglement

“Saturday Market,” gruellingly depicts a bustling marketplace filled with people, animals, and a vulnerable woman uncovering a “red dead thing” (Mew, *Saturday Market* n.pag.). The market, a place of ruthless transactions, turns not only animals into mere objects of consumption: “In Saturday’s Market there’s eggs a’ plenty/ And dead-alive ducks with their legs tied down,” but also forcibly isolates the woman who has probably deviated from conventional patriarchal expectations (n.pag.). Mew’s poem exposes the cruelty and violence underlying the façade of the Saturday market. Beneath the veneer of community socialising, the market acts as an instrument of patriarchal social control and has no compassion for the suffering and marginalised soul: “Then lie you straight on your bed for a short, short weeping / And still for a long, long rest,” (n.pag.). The erring woman is ultimately forced “out of sight”.

Most importantly, Mew stresses that there is no distinction between human and animal suffering and both are on the same scale. The helpless condition of the “dead-alive ducks” and the woman with the “red dead thing”, who cannot even show or specify what it is, but must “Best make an end of it; bury it soon” is much the same (n.pag.). This human-animal entanglement echoes Plumwood’s ecofeminist critique of hierarchical domination that constructs animals and women as inferior “Others” to be exploited for economic and patriarchal purposes (41-44).

The poem posits the speaker as an ethical witness. As the embarrassment and pain of the woman comes in sight, the surface normality of the marketplace ironically cracks up. Mew declines any kind of sentimental idealisation: “In Saturday Market nobody cares” (Mew, *Saturday Market* n.pag.). The market is neither completely corrupt nor benign. Instead, it serves as a microcosm of contemporary social relations, where exploitation and vulnerability are intricately bound up in everyday life. The poem, perhaps, suggests that since human society is largely defined by

conformity and cruelty, the only way for her to reclaim her agency is to seek refuge in the non-human world, such as, burying her heart in “a deep green hollow” or giving it “to a swallow” (n.pag.). Mew thus invites readers to recognise shared vulnerability across species boundaries, anticipating later ecofeminist and animal-studies arguments.

The Farmer’s Bride: Patriarchy, Land, and Silenced Bodies

The poem is often read as a testament of gender oppression. It is also a powerful indictment of the relation between patriarchy and Nature. Instead of recreating the traditional pastoral vision of countryside, Mew depicts it as a place of fear, control and emotional isolation. The farmer’s wife is described in diverse animal imagery as fearful, instinctive and hard to manage, while the husband is the personification of authority, ownership and patriarchal power. Her fearfulness is like that of hunted animals, “More like a little frightened fay,” signifying how patriarchal society reduces women into creatures to be controlled and owned (Mew, *Collected Poems and Prose* 51).

The poem, read through the ecofeminist lens, equates the domination of women with that of Nature. Mew connects the bride to the natural world to reveal how patriarchal systems often objectify women and Nature.

It can, therefore, be said that the poem critiques the “naturalizing” of female subordination (Plumwood 41). The bride’s silence, her fear and withdrawal— reveal the emotional violence that lurks within rural domesticity. The farm confines and watches over her. The atmosphere is rendered more oppressive by the everyday agricultural routine and seasonal cycles, showing how the repetitive structure of rural life can reinforce patriarchal authority.

Mew offers a quiet resistance in the form of the bride’s new-found closeness to animals and Nature which keeps her outside the rigid structures of masculine control. Though the farmer wants to own her, she remains emotionally distant and beyond his mastery. Thus, the woman and the natural world are resistant to total control or domination.

The poem’s jarring rhythms and emotionally ambiguous voice heighten this tension. Even though the farmer speaks with seeming authority, his voice gradually betrays frustration, insecurity and helplessness, as in, “Sweet as the first wild violets, she, /To her wild self. But what for me?” (Mew, *Collected Poems and Prose* 51).

Ultimately, the poem becomes a challenge to anthropocentric and possessive attitudes towards Nature and woman, as well as a critique of patriarchy.

Ken: Trauma, Isolation, and Nonhuman Affiliation

“Ken” explores the profound connection between an intellectually challenged man and Nature— particularly, how he, in an anguished state turns to Nature to seek refuge and therapy. Isolation is not only social loneliness but a condition that changes the sufferer’s relationship to the world around him. Ken came to visit the little child and the deer in the park everyday with a tormented soul because he was rejected by the people of the town. He scarcely spoke, but just looked on with eyes like ‘two red, wounded stars’ reminding one of Christ (Mew, *Ken* n.pag.). Nature becomes intricately bound up with grief and emotional pain, but cannot fully heal or resolve trauma. It seems distant, mysterious and unyielding, mirroring the complexity of human suffering in itself. Herein, Mew differs in her treatment of Nature as compared to Romantic pastoral poetry. Mew stresses the limits of pastoral solace. Nature cannot absorb or redeem man’s suffering completely. This nonconformist approach is crucial because it resists anthropocentric assumptions that Nature only exists for human comfort or meaning.

Mew proposes that, in such times of despair, a fragile link slowly engulfs the human and nonhuman world. The silence around and the emotional stillness of the landscape amplify the

speaker's sense of estrangement, suggesting that grief is absorbed into the environment but not erased by it: "And sometimes, in his evil fits,/ You could not move him from his chair—/ You did not watch him sitting there,/ Biting to bits his rosary" (n.pag.).

This perspective aligns with posthumanist perspectives on relationality and interconnected existence as stated by Donna Haraway. Human identity is not autonomous or self-contained, but is shaped by relations to animals, environments, and material surroundings (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 12). Similarly, "Ken" suggests the formation of subjectivity through encounters with the nonhuman world – the "deer", the "child" trotting beside him, the "lark", the "learned rooks" – than with the human world (n.pag.).

Mew also suggests that marginalised people have stronger connections with the non-human world than with social institutions prescribing exclusion and repression. The speaker's emotional proximity to the environment discloses an alternative ethical relationship of vulnerability, coexistence and interdependence. "Ken" anticipates posthumanist ecological thought in this regard by demolishing rigorous boundaries between the human and nonhuman world.

A biographical reading suggests that "Ken" was inspired by Charlotte Mew's experience of her sister Kendall's institutionalisation, reflecting her feelings of grief, guilt, and helplessness when they took her away to the asylum: "So, when they took/ Ken to that place, I did not look/ .../ His eyes." (Copus 418; Mew, *Ken* n.pag.). From a posthumanist ecocritical perspective, Ken's confinement also symbolises the exclusion of those who fall outside socially accepted norms of rationality and productivity. The poem thus critiques systems that marginalise vulnerable individuals, linking personal trauma to broader questions of otherness, care, and inclusion, much like "Saturday Market".

Discussion: Rethinking Ecological Agency in Mew

Charlotte Mew's writings offer a complex and contemplative ecological vision that challenges conventional understandings of Nature, modernity, and human relations to the nonhuman world. In her works, Nature – trees, animals, weather, and landscapes – is presented as a living presence that actively shapes emotional, social, and ethical experience.

In a stark contrast to traditional ecocritical approaches, Mew refuses to disconnect the urban from the natural world. This is one of her most extraordinary traits. Modern urbanity is intrinsically intertwined with environmental life. Neither does she romanticise nor idyllise the countryside. Her country-poems highlight how village life can be shaped by control, suffering, and patriarchal oppression. Poems like, "The Farmer's Bride" and "Saturday Market," when explored through the ecofeminist lens, establish an uncanny link between the oppression of women, animals, and the environment.

Mew also ascribes a powerful sense of agency to nonhuman life. They are not neutral or ornamental backdrops. She avers that they have emotional and ethical value in their own right. Her poetry, thus, anticipates later posthumanist ideas that challenge the anthropocentric view of the world.

Mew stands apart from the Georgian poets in that she does not present Nature as wholly comforting or harmonious. The ecological experience in her works is often disturbing and emotionally ambivalent. Nature, like the human mind, may be responsive to understanding, but it is also remote and autonomous of human needs. This nuanced vision positions Mew as a strong early voice in contemporary ecological and posthumanist thinking in literature.

Conclusion

Although this essay privileges textual and theoretical analysis, it is important to acknowledge that much influential scholarship on Charlotte Mew has been biographical. Critics such as Penelope Fitzgerald and Valerie Pitt have connected Mew's representations of isolation, vulnerability, and

psychological strain to the circumstances of her life and family history. Rather than rejecting these approaches, the present study enters into dialogue with them by asking how experiences frequently read in biographical terms are also mediated through ecological forms, nonhuman presences, and environmental relationships. Such a perspective broadens existing Mew scholarship by demonstrating that questions of gender, trauma, and marginality are inseparable from the ecological imagination that structures many of her works.

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