

# Edexcel English Literature GCSE

## Poetry: Conflict Collection

The Class Game - *Mary Casey*

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# THE CLASS GAME

Mary Casey

## Brief Summary

'The Class Game' is a poem responding to the differences she's observed between herself, as a member of the working class, and those who identify as from the middle and upper classes. It's a poem which centralises around these differences, culminating in the poet stating that she is proud of who she is and her class, regardless.

## Synopsis

- The poem opens with the speaker questioning the reader, and by extension society, as to how they can assume her class.
- Starts to compare her life and upbringing with that of her classmates or other people around her who belong to the middle or upper class.
- Uses rhetorical questions to continue to compare herself to those from other classes
- Concludes with the speaker stating that she is proud of being working class.

## Context

### Mary Casey

There is very little known about the author of 'The Class Game', Mary Casey, other than that she was a housewife from Liverpool who contributed four poems to a poetry magazine called 'Voices', of which 'The Class Game' was one published in 1979.

### The Class System in the 20st Century

Despite the wartime attitude of 'everyone being in it together', post-war Britain was still intensely divided in terms of class. There was still a large wealth gap between those belonging to the working class, and those belonging to the upper and middle classes.

### The magazine 'Voices'

The magazine exclusively published poets from working class backgrounds who were not professional poets and were without literary reputation. People who wrote for it typically focused on their everyday experiences in life. However, a lot of literary voices were critical of the publication, claiming that the poets and poems featured had no literary merit.



## The Class Game

*Colloquial language used to highlight her point.*

*Implies that difference in diction and colloquialisms means that she feels distanced from the rest of the society she lives in.*

*Challenges the reader to stop playing “the class game” and stop judging people based on how they speak, dress, or their class in general.*

*The poet starts to compare the differences between urban and suburban living.*

*Here, the poet is working to challenge the reader’s immediate stereotypes of her class, highlighting how she has experienced being labelled just because of the way she talks.*

How can you tell what **class** I’m from?

I can talk posh like some

With an **’Olly in me mouth**

Down me nose, wear an ’at not a scarf

With me second-hand clothes.

So why do you always wince when you hear

**Me say ‘Tara’ to me ‘Ma’ instead of ‘Bye Mummy dear’?**

**How can you tell what class I’m from?**

’Cos we live in a **corpy**, not like some

In a pretty little semi, out **Wirral** way

**And commute into Liverpool by train each day?**

Or did I drop my unemployment card

Sitting on your patio (We have a yard)?

How can you tell what class I’m from?

**Have I a label on me head, and another on me bum?**

Or is it because my hands are stained with  
toil?

*Immediately introduces the theme of class as the main topic of the poem, and by opening with a question, the poet is instantly challenging stereotypes and expectations of labelling and class within society. Cyclically relates to the final line “And I’m proud of the class that I come from”.*

*This is a Liverpudlian slang word for a council house.*

*This is a suburb of Liverpool, which has a reputation for being wealthy and ‘posh’.*



Instead of soft lily-white with perfume and oil?

Don't I crook me little finger when I drink me  
tea

Say toilet instead of bog when I want to pee?

### Why do you care what class I'm from?

Does it stick in your gullet like a sour plum?

**Well, mate!** A cleaner is me mother

A docker is me brother

Bread pudding is wet nelly

And me stomach is me belly

**And I'm proud of the class that I come from**

*The poet is very blatant in her frustration and anger that she is repeatedly labelled due her class, despite labelling herself at the end of the poem. This may serve to suggest she is trying to 'reclaim' her label. The exclamative punctuation mark also emphasises the defiant tone which the speaker has maintained for the rest of the poem.*

*The poet concludes on a defiant note stating that she doesn't care about the differences between her class and others, and that she has pride regardless.*

*The poet uses a sarcastic and slightly patronising tone to highlight how angry she is about the subject of class and the restrictions it can have on her life.*



## The title “The Class Game”

Immediately sets a fundamental theme of the poem to be that of class and a commentary on the classist society she lives in.

Suggests that people engaging in the “Game” of Class cause inequality within society.

### The Class Game

Monosyllabic title suggests the poem is going to be direct and straight to the point.

## Perspective

‘The Class Game’ is written from a **first person perspective**. It also addresses the reader using the **direct address pronouns** “*you*” and “*your*” making it a **dramatic monologue**. This **direct address** serves to help the poet get the reader to reconsider their preconceptions of the working class. Supposedly, the reader is set up to be a member of the middle class living in a “*pretty little semi*” whereas the speaker lives “*in a corpy*”.



## Structure

### Monologue

By writing the poem in the format of a **monologue**, the speaker can be seen to be imparting quite emotional, personal, and didactic information and feelings to the reader. It centres the poem on one person's experience of class and labeling, perhaps also to encourage other people to reconsider how they view themselves.



## Rhyming Couplets

There is a section of rhyming couplets used within the middle of the poem:

In a pretty little semi, out Wirral **way**  
And commute into Liverpool by train each **day**?  
Or did I drop my unemployment **card**  
Sitting on your patio (We have a **yard**)?  
How can you tell what class I'm **from**?  
Have I a label on me head, and another on me **bum**?  
Or is it because my hands are stained with **toil**?  
Instead of soft lily-white with perfume and **oil**?

This **simple rhyme scheme** arguably reflects the “**simple**” way of life for those belonging to the working class. **Half rhyme** is sometimes used which could play on the stereotypical view of working classes as being less intelligent or hard-working. The rhyming structure also creates a relatively regular beat, which makes it seem like an argument. It also relates it to the element of “**game**” referenced in the poem’s title, as the rhyme and rhythm of the poem suggests a lightheartedness.

## One Stanza

Though the poem is formatted as **one long stanza**, it can be seen as segmented through the **repetition** of the line “**How can you tell what class I’m from?**”

The effect of structuring it as one stanza is to reflect how the poet is constructing a rant, or argument, about why labelling and living in a classist society isn’t helpful or effective for a progressive society.

## Enjambment

**Enjambment** is used occasionally throughout the poem, for example in the lines:

Or did I drop my **unemployment card**  
**Sitting on your patio** (We have a yard)?

Here you can see how the sentence runs on across the two lines. This has the effect of **mimicking human speech**, which makes the poem sound more **informal** and **conversational** in order to engage the reader more.

**ENJAMBMENT** | Sentence which runs over multiple lines.



## Language

### Slang / Dialect & Colloquial Language

**COLLOQUIALISM** | An informal phrase common at its time of utterance.

Casey used a lot of **Liverpudlian slang** as well as generally writing in an **informal tone** to relate to other people identifying as working class. This also rejects traditional, grammatical English which is usually used in poetry, perhaps as a way to reclaim the artform, and instead reflects a 'real' way of articulating speech. **Colloquialisms** also work to highlight the differences in social class.

### Metaphor / Simile

There is a clear lack of **allusionary language**, because it wouldn't suit nor fit the argumentative tone of the poem. There is one **simile**, "**like a sour plum**", which serves to emphasise a point she makes, and perhaps sarcastically patronise the reader.

### Contrasting Language

The poet uses phrases such as "**not like**" and "**instead**" to contrast two different versions of life and living. This highlights the differences in class that the speaker experiences by comparing it to those of the middle class. She also uses **directly contrasting phrases** such as "**my hands are stained with toil**" rather than "**soft-lily white**" hands belonging to those of 'higher' classes. The poet also contrasts the differences between urban and suburban life.

