

Edexcel English GCSE

Poetry Collection: Conflict

Cousin Kate - *Christina Rossetti*

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COUSIN KATE

Christina Rossetti

Brief Summary

The poem centers around the conflict between the speaker and her cousin, Kate, who have both been romantically and sexually involved with the same nobleman. The speaker expresses her anger that she'd just been left by the Lord in preference to her cousin, but boasts about the fact that she has given birth to the Lord's son, whereas Kate has no children.

Synopsis

- The speaker introduces herself and the situation whereby she met the Lord.
- The speaker explains how the Lord treated her badly and corrupted her innocence.
- She then addressed her cousin, Kate, and mentions how the nobleman saw Kate at her father's house and left the speaker for Kate and married Kate.
- The speaker compares herself to her cousin and argues that her cousin only married for money and status, whereas she actually loved the Lord.
- She ends the poem boasting about the fact that she has the nobleman's child, which is something she has over her cousin, who doesn't have a son.

Context

Christina Rossetti (1830 - 1894)

She is a very well-known British poet who was writing during the Victorian era. Her parents were Italian poets, and she was born in London and her Italian poets. She was subject to depressive periods throughout her life, which arguably affected her creative output a lot. She was also devoutly religious with many of her poems containing religious imagery and messages. During her life she became involved in the Anglo-Catholic movement.

From the 1850s she began to be published in various literary magazines, and was outspoken in her engagement with the themes of gender and sexuality within her work. She never married.



Women & Marriage

During the period in which Rossetti was writing, the Victorian Era, women were expected to be subdued, attentive and chaste [not participating in sex outside of marriage], and were seen generally to be property of their husbands. This **objectification** stemmed from the fact women were afforded barely any rights, such as rights to divorce, especially after taking a husband. Women were viewed to be physically and intellectually inferior to men, but still had an intense amount of moral expectations placed upon them. This is by contrast to men, who were 'allowed' to have sex out of marriage without much social consequence.

'Fallen Women'

In her poem 'Cousin Kate', Rossetti appears to engage with the theme of women who have "fallen" in society, as a result of actions which are deemed socially unacceptable (such as prostitutes and single mothers). This interest may have stemmed from Rossetti's stint of volunteering at the *St Mary Magdalene House of Charity for Fallen Women* between 1859 and 1870.

Cousin Kate

In her poem 'Cousin Kate', Rossetti comments on the **unfair societal expectations of women** when it comes to sex and gender, by comparison to those men were subjected to during the Victorian Era. The speaker becomes an outcast by her friends and neighbours after having an extramarital relationship with a nobleman, who impregnates her before leaving her. However, the speaker appears to be criticising her cousin Kate, who has since married the nobleman, for only marrying for money and status. This is interesting to note because although the poem appears initially feminist, the conflict and the speaker's anger appears to be directed towards her female cousin, rather than the nobleman who appears to have abandoned her.

The conflict which has arisen in the poem is between the two women, the speaker and Kate, as a result of the Lord's actions. The fact that the nobleman is not directly attacked in the poem may be a comment on how status can afford you a position above conflict. The language and **direct address** used throughout the poem demonstrates how open the speaker is about her issues with her cousin, and this may reflect her desperation with the situation.



Cousin Kate

Suggests she is not thinking about men or the prospect of marriage, sets the speaker up as innocent to try and get the reader to sympathise with her and view the nobleman as a predatory character.

Repeats the line to place emphasis on it and suggests how confused she is by the situation.

The verb “lured” suggests ill-intention.

Oxymoronic language mirrors house confused and conflicted she is / was about the situation.

“Glove” has connotations of disguise and secrecy, which reflects the relationship which would have been seen as bad to the eyes of a Victorian reader.

I was a **cottage-maiden**

Hardened by sun and air,

Contented with my cottage-mates,

Not mindful I was fair.

Why did a great lord **find me out**

And praise my flaxen hair?

Why did a great lord find me out

To fill my heart with care?

He **lured** me to his palace-home –

Woe’s me for joy thereof –

To lead a **shameless shameful** life,

His plaything and his love.

He wore me like a golden knot,

He changed me like a **glove**:

So now I moan an unclean thing

Who might have been a **dove**.

The noun “maiden” has connotations of innocence and virginity, which contrasts the end of the second stanza, when she describes herself as “unclean” as the result of the nobleman’s actions.

Suggests that the speaker had no choice but to fall in love with the nobleman and sleep with him, through the passive verbs which narrate her compared to the active verbs used to describe the nobleman’s actions.

These are two conflicting images, as “plaything” suggests an informal and meaningless relationship, whereas “love” suggests a much more serious relationship. This may imply that she thought at the time that she was his love, but now she realises that she didn’t mean all that much to him.

Connotations of innocence and purity, suggests that the nobleman has ruined her by taking her virginity.



Refers to her cousin with the title she is now given now she is married to the nobleman, furthering the suggestion that she has just married purely for status rather than love.

Suggests that Kate was able to ascend the social ladder as a result of her marriage.

Relates back to the Victorian Society's tendency to objectify women and how the institution of marriage allows men to own and control their wives.

Suggests that women are only defined in Victorian society by their status in society.

O **Lady** Kate, **my** Cousin **Kate**,

You grow more fair than I:

He saw you at your father's gate,

Chose you and cast me by.

He watched your steps along the lane,

Your sport among the rye:

He lifted you from mean estate

To sit with him on high.

Because you were so good and **pure**

He bound you with his ring:

The neighbours call you good and pure,

Call me an **outcast** thing.

Even so I sit and howl in dust

You sit in gold and sing:

Now which of us has tenderer heart?

You had the **stronger wing**.

Possessive pronoun, highlights how women can never just 'own' themselves.

This stanza shifts to addressing her cousin Kate instead of the reader.

Relates to the concept of virginity and innocence - the speaker is lamenting that because she had sex when she wasn't married, that she is no longer pure and desirable for men, whereas her cousin is.

The speaker uses the imagery of a bird at this point to suggest that her cousin was able to climb / fly higher socially than the speaker was through her marriage, displaying her jealous emotion.



Comparing herself and her love for the Lord with that of her cousin.

Criticises Kate for choosing to marry the lord despite seeing how he treated the speaker, and says that if she was in Kate's position she would have rejected him.

Considers the "gift" the lord has given her, in the form of her son, which she holds over Kate, as Kate doesn't have a son fathered by the nobleman.

O Cousin Kate, my love was true,

Your love was writ in **sand**:

If he had fooled not **me but you**,

If you stood where I stand,

He had not won me with his love

Nor **bought me with his land**:

I would have spit into his face

And not have taken his hand.

Yet I've a gift you have not got

And seem not like to get:

For all your **clothes and wedding-ring**

I've little doubt you fret.

My fair-haired son, my shame, my pride,

Cling closer, closer yet:

Your sire would give broad lands for one

To wear his coronet.

By using the metaphor of "sand", the speaker is suggesting that Kate has no tangible base for her love the nobleman, again suggesting that she only married for wealth and status.

The speaker is criticizing her cousin for only choosing to marry the nobleman for the associated status which comes with the marriage.

Again suggesting that Kate only married for wealth and material possessions, and that her love isn't true whereas the speaker has true feelings for the nobleman.

Reminds Kate she doesn't have a son and therefore until she does the noble title will not continue in the family.



The title “Cousin Kate”

Plosives in “Cousin Kate” reflect the anger that the speaker feels towards her cousin.

Addressed towards the eponymous Cousin Kate.

Cousin Kate

Familial connotations of the title conflict the content of the poem, which is more accusative and distant.

EPONYMOUS | When the title is named after a person involved in the content of the text.

Perspective

The poem is written from the **perspective of a female speaker** who is angry that she has been cast aside by a man she was in love with, in favour of her cousin. She addresses the poem to this cousin (Kate).



It is written as a **monologue** to **intensify her emotions** and **create an intimate bond between reader, speaker, and the addressee of the poem** (her cousin). It is written in **second person narrative**, with the **pronouns “your” and “you”** frequently used in reference to the speaker’s cousin.



Structure

Iambic Meter

The lines are written in pairs of unstressed then stressed syllables - da-DA - but the lines alternate in syllable count - eight then six then eight then six. This means that the lines alternate between **iambic Tetrameter** (four iambs) and **iambic Trimeter** (three iambs). This can be seen in the following block, with the bold formatting representing the stressed syllables:

Why **did** a **great** lord **find** me **out**
And **praise** my **flaxen** hair?
Why **did** a **great** lord **find** me **out**
To **fill** my **heart** with **care**?

However, this pattern is sometimes broken. This is often to place particular importance on the sentiment on it, for example the line “**And not have taken his hand**”, which is only seven syllables.

Overall, the structured **iambic meter** allows for the poem to maintain a **fast pace** and creates a clear rhythm to **reflect the ballad-like qualities** of the poem.

Rhyming structure

Rossetti structures her stanzas into a **ABCB rhyming scheme**, which maintains a stable pace to the piece. This perhaps mirrors the constant anger the speaker feels towards Kate, the nobleman, and society in general throughout the poem as a result of her situation.

Monologue

By structuring the poem in the format of one long speech, Rossetti may be condensing all the emotions the speaker feels towards her situation into a single text. The outcome of this is a powerful and moving poem, which is also quite fierce and succinctly expresses her anger towards Kate and the Lord, particularly their relationship.

Ballad

BALLAD | A narrative song which is traditionally communicated orally, usually following the form of ABCB rhyming quatrains.

The poem, as discussed above, follows a regular pattern of eight then six then eight then six syllable counts between lines, as well as a stable structure of rhyme (every other line rhymes). This follows the structure of a **traditional ballad**. This may be to disguise the angry and distraught message that the speaker is trying to convey behind a sing-song esque and more jovial format of writing.



Language

Zoomorphism

ZOOMORPHISM | When a writer assigns animalist attributes to humans or other non-animal items such as objects.

The speaker makes **metaphorical references** to different animals to make symbolic points about how she is feeling. This enables her to express to the reader the emotional state she's been placed in after Kate, the nobleman, and society's betrayal.

might have been a dove

Relates to the purity and innocence **connoted** by a "**dove**", and this **metaphor** suggests that if the nobleman hadn't ruined her life then her **innocence and virginity would remain intact now**.



Even so I sit and howl in dust
 You sit in gold and sing:
 Now which of us has tenderer heart?
 You had the stronger wing.



By metaphorically relating her to a wolf or similar animal [**"sit and howl"**], which are usually pack animals, this contrasts the outcast status she now finds herself in society. It also demonstrates how powerless she feels in her situation. There are also connotations of birds used when the speaker **compares** herself to Kate [**"sing"** and **"wing"**]. Whilst the speaker has to **"howl"**, Kate can **"sing"**, but does this imply that she is forced to passively **"sit"** and **"sing"**, like a caged bird? The phrase **"stronger wing"** suggests that Kate was able to climb the social ladder better than the speaker was able, which is why the speaker is jealous of her. The reference to birds could also reference the earlier **"dove"**, suggesting that Kate is symbolically a dove now because she chose not to participate in sex outside of marriage.

Metaphors and Similes

The speaker's liberal use of **metaphors**, **similes** and **allusionary language** throughout the poem may be an attempt to conceal or play down some of the violence and angry thoughts she is trying to express. This may be because women in the Victorian Era were supposed to be mild and subdued, so using gruesome or violent



language may **shock a readership** and lose people's interest in the poem and the conflict.

Verbs

Rossetti uses **passive verbs** to describe the speaker and Cousin Kate in order to comment on the **powerlessness** experienced by Victorian woman. This compares to the **active verbs** used to describe the nobleman's behaviour such as "**He wore me**", "**He saw me**", "**He chose you**" and "**He watched your steps**".

Oxymorons

OXYMORON | Two opposing terms are placed next to each other.

Oxymorons are used to demonstrate the complex situation and how the speaker has a tricky time deciding how to cope with her emotions. For example, the **oxymoronic phrase** "**my shame, my pride**", used to describe her son shows how she finds it hard to decide how she feels about her baby. On one hand, she is ashamed of her situation in society as a 'fallen woman' because she is a single mother, but she is also happy that she bares the nobleman's son whereas Kate cannot.

Another **oxymoron** Rossetti employs is the phrase "**shameless shameful life**", which implies a differing opinion from the speaker on her relationship with the Lord and society's perspective of their relationship. The speaker feels shameless when with the nobleman, but society thinks it is shameful. This conflict is also shown through the line "**plaything and his love**", as are two conflicting images, with "**plaything**" suggesting an informal and meaningless relationship, and "**love**" suggests are much more serious relationship. This may imply that she thought at the time that she was his love, but now she realises that she didn't mean all that much to him.

