Cousin Kate

POEM TEXT

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 silken knot,
He changed me like a glove;
So now I moan, an unclean thing,
Who might have been a dove.

O Lady kate, my cousin Kate,
You grew 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 work 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 neighbors 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.

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'd not have 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 father would give his lands for one
To wear his coronet.

SUMMARY

I was an unmarried young woman who was used to working outside in the elements. I was happy with my simple cottage life and companions, unconcerned with my looks. Why did a high-ranking nobleman have to notice me and compliment my blonde hair? Why did a high-ranking nobleman have to notice me and make me care about him?

The lord tempted me to go to his luxurious house. How foolish of me for having some fun there, for shamelessly entering into a shameful sexual relationship with him. I felt like both a toy for the lord to play with and someone he deeply cared about. He treated me like an accessory, trying me out as a partner as if he were trying on a silk necktie, and changing me out for another woman as if he were taking off a pair of gloves. So now I'm stuck crying and complaining, as someone who has lost her chastity and is no longer a virgin, even though I had the potential to be a perfect model of purity.

Oh Lady Kate, my cousin Kate. You became more beautiful than I was. The lord noticed you standing by the gate in front of your father's house and decided to pursue you romantically, tossing me aside. He watched you walk along the country road and working in the rye fields. He elevated you from your humble, lower-class life to a higher social standing.

Because you were so moral and a virgin, the lord took decided to ask you to marry him. The local townspeople praise you for being virtuous and sexually pure, while they consider me unfit for society. And while I'm stuck in a lowly, working-class home and crying out in grief, you're surrounded by wealth and sing out with joy. Now, which one of us has more compassion? You had more determination, which allowed you to rise above me like a bird with stronger wings.

Oh Kate, my cousin, my love for the lord was genuine and deep, whereas your love was weak and could be easily washed away, like a message written in sand. If the lord had seduced you instead of me, and if you were in my shoes, the lord wouldn't have been able to win me over with his affection or his wealth. Instead, I would have spit in his face and denied his hand in marriage.

However, I have a blessing that you don't have and likely never will. It's even more valuable than all of your fancy new clothes and your wedding ring, and I can tell that this bothers you. I have my blond-haired son, who is a reminder of my shame at my impure actions, but who's also what I'm most proud of. Son, hold onto me tightly, and even more tightly. Your father will probably pass his wealth and status onto you so that he can carry on the family name.

THEMES

GENDER, MORALITY, AND HYPOCRISY

Christina Rossetti published "Cousin Kate" in 1862, during Britain's Victorian era—a period in which when gender biases created starkly different social expectations for men and women. While it was generally acceptable for men to give in to sexual temptations, women were expected to be chaste and uphold the moral fabric of society. At the same time, however, women were taught to be submissive towards the men in their lives. "Cousin Kate" shows how such narrow, gendered expectations thus lead to a sort of catch-22 for women, as the speaker obediently submits herself to the sexual desires of a powerful lord, yet, in doing so, becomes a social outcast. As such, the poem implicitly critiques the gender ideals of the Victorian era, presenting them as conflicting, hypocritical, and essentially burdening women with the impossible charge of both obeying and resisting the much more powerful men in their lives.

The poem clearly establishes how conventional gender roles create a power imbalance that increases the speaker's societal vulnerability. The speaker describes herself as a pure, happy young woman before "a great lord" notices her, compliments her beauty, and seduces her. As a man, the lord is free to do whatever he wants, while the speaker is merely the object of his actions; he treats her like a "plaything" rather than a human being. Yet as a woman (and a lower-class one at that), the speaker is subordinate to the lord and therefore under pressure to bow to his whims—even if doing so represents a supposed moral transgression on the speaker's part.

The speaker then faces severe social consequences for the affair while the lord is not. The speaker's community views her as "unclean" and as "an outcast thing" for failing to uphold her moral duty to remain a virgin. And as a result of her sexual impurity, the speaker is considered unfit for marriage—which was important for Victorian women's survival—and publicly shamed. Unlike the speaker, however, the lord's sexual activities leave his perceived fitness as a husband and social status unaffected. The lord easily takes the speaker's "good and pure" cousin Kate as a wife and the two of them "sit … on high."

The speaker resents her cousin for failing to stick by her female relative's side, demonstrating how such hypocritical gender standards pit women against each other as they compete for the affection of men. The speaker tells Kate that if the circumstances were reversed and the lord "fooled" *Kate* rather than the *speaker*, the speaker would have spit in the lord's face and denied his hand in marriage. Thus although Kate's chastity labels her "good and pure," the speaker indicates that Kate was wrong to overlook the lord's treatment of the speaker. The speaker even emphasizes their relationship when she refers to Kate explicitly as "cousin," suggesting that Kate has betrayed familial loyalty.

At the same time, however, Kate is clearly subject to the same power imbalances that the speaker deals with. The speaker does not claim that these circumstances absolve Kate of wrongdoing and instead holds her to a moral standard that requires more than sexual purity; in doing so, the speaker implicitly *rejects* sexual virtue as the ultimate marker of women's social value.

The speaker seems to imply that women should stick together in the face of such blatant hypocrisy, yet she, too, ultimately aims to one-up her cousin—declaring that having a son by the lord ties her to him just as strongly as any marriage contract, and that knowledge of this makes her cousin "fret," or worry. Such an ending underscores how few options women had within the oppressive gender norms of Victorian society—and how even playing by the supposed rules was no guarantee of success, since the game would always be rigged against them.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-48

LUST, LOVE, AND TEMPTATION

Each of the characters in the poem faces the temptations of love and lust. The lord's lust for the speaker incites her love and, in turn, compromises her purity, while Kate's material desires cause her to betray the speaker. Through their stories, the poem suggests that *both* genuine love and its shallower cousin, lust, can be dangerous. It reads like a cautionary tale about unchecked desire in general, suggesting how this may tempt people to stray from their (societally-imposed) moral principles.

Most obviously, the lord's lustful advances tempt the speaker into acting in a way that society has deemed sinful. The speaker

is "not mindful [she is] fair" before the lord expresses his attraction to her. In other words, she isn't overly concerned with vanity before the lord steps in. Yet once he begins "praising" her hair, things change. His compliments signal that the lord is infatuated with the speaker's looks and that, for him, their relationship is about shallow physical desires rather than deep connection.

His lust is also clearly a selfish emotion, given that he doesn't seem to care that his desires prove so disastrous for the speaker. Indeed, the speaker lives a happy, simple life before the lord "[fills] her heart with care." She claims that if the lord hadn't gone and noticed her, she "might have been a dove," indicating that her struggles to maintain moral purity stem from her feelings for the lord. The speaker knows their affair is "shameful" but it *feels* "shameless." Her intense desires for the lord confuse her sense of decency and ultimately make her "unclean" in her neighbors' eyes. The speaker's inability to uphold her moral duties makes her unfit for society or a husband, leaving her to "sit and howl in dust." Love, then, rather than bringing the speaker joy or connection, leads only to her downfall.

Kate's longing to increase her wealth and social standing, meanwhile, acts as its own form of lust. This ultimately overwhelms her Victorian moral sensibilities, causing her to betray her cousin. The speaker accuses Kate of materialism, implying that Kate disregards her familial obligation to side with the speaker so that Kate can access the lord's money and status. For example, the speaker insinuates that the lord is able to buy Kate's love "with his land." The speaker also calls out some of the fancy belongings, like "clothes and [a] wedding-ring," that Kate has now that the lord has "lifted" her to a higher class.

The speaker, for her part, insists that her feelings for the lord are categorically different from Kate's. The speaker repeatedly compares Kate's love, which was "writ in sand" to her own "true" love for the lord, suggesting that Kate's material lust is a less stable, less honorable foundation for a relationship than the speaker's own feelings. At the same time, of course, the fact that her love was supposedly pure does not change the speaker's status as a fallen woman. Romantic entanglements in general, the poem implies, are a risky business—in that they can lead people to stray from a more virtuous path.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-48

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I was a cottage maiden
Hardened by sun and air
Contented with my cottage mates,
Not mindful I was fair.

The first four lines of the poem set the scene for the reader. The speaker of the poem is a "maiden" (a.k.a. a young, unmarried woman) who lives in a rural town in the countryside (a common setting for Rossetti's poems). She mentions having grown used to being in the "sun and air," suggesting that she works outside in some nearby fields. She also indicates that she has local friends and acquaintances when she references her "cottage mates." (The repetition of the word "cottage," technically an example of diacope, reinforces this image of a quaint, humble environment.)

Notably, she also isn't "mindful [she is] fair." This means she isn't aware of her beauty, or at the least isn't terribly concerned with her looks. It also subtly foreshadows the way that the poem will link desire and lust with danger; before attraction gets involved, the speaker's life is uncomplicated.

For now, though, the speaker is pleased with this simple life; she feels "contented." This word receives quite a lot of emphasis for a few reasons:

- It occurs at the beginning of a line and therefore draws the reader's attention visually.
- It has three syllables, making it the longest word in the poem's opening quatrain. It takes longer to say than any of the surrounding words, attracting further attention.
- It echos nearby sounds via assonance and consonance, namely the /co/ sound that appears twice with "cottage" and the /en/ sound in "maiden" and "hardened."

All that's to say that the speaker's contentment is central to her characterization of her life at this point in time.

The opening lines also set the stage for the abundant consonance that will pervade the rest of the poem. Perhaps most notably, there are many /k/, /t/, /m/, and /f/ sounds:

Contented with my cottage mates,
Not mindful I was fair

This consonance creates a feeling of melody and lyricism, with the hum of the /m/ bouncing off the pop of the /k/ and /t/. The soft /f/ and /l/ of "mindful" and "fair" will also echo throughout the rest of the poem.

While the remainder of the poem sticks closely to common meter, its first two lines are irregular. Common meter has an iambic rhythm, created by an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable in a da-DUM pattern. The lines alternate between four iambs (eight syllables) per line and three iambs (six syllables) per line. Here is a closer look at the meter in the

first two lines:

I was | a cot- | tage mai- | den
Hardened | by sun | and air

As you can see, the first line is missing its final stressed syllable, while the first foot of the second line is inverted into a trochee. That is, it *begins* with a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. Thus, the iamb seems to *stretch* across from line 1 into line 2. The enjambment and asyndeton here contribute to this effect, causing the first line to naturally flow into the second. As such, even though things are a bit irregular metrically, they still *sound* smooth and gentle. The next two lines are then totally regular:

Content- | ed with | my cot- | tage mates,
Not mind- | ful I | was fair.

The rhyme scheme so far follows an ABCB pattern, though the first syllable of "maiden" chimes with "mates" and is also *almost* assonant with the B rhymes ("air" and "fair"). Altogether, then, these first few lines sound smooth and pleasing—perhaps lulling the reader into a false sense of security.

Finally, it's worth noting that this first quatrain is buffeted on either side by the phrase "I was," placing the setting's tranquility firmly in the *past*. Indeed, this idyllic scene will serve as a point of comparison for the rest of the poem.

LINES 5-8

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?

The poem's mood abruptly shifts in the second half of the first stanza (the second quatrain), which is made up of two rhetorical questions beginning with the same phrase: "why did the great lord find me out." The speaker isn't actually seeking answers to the questions she poses. Instead, they function as a sort of lamentation—in the vein of "why did this have to happen to me?"—wherein the speaker grieves her lost purity and happiness. When the speaker repeats the first part of her question (an example of anaphora) she appears persistent, giving her questions increased vehemence and emphasizing her exasperation.

The repetition also sets the lord up as the force that disrupts the speaker's happy life. He appears for the very first time in these questions, which constitute a negative change in mood and suggest that the speaker is suffering. The speaker also establishes that the lord takes interest in her primarily because of her appearance, as he compliments her hair, and, the speaker implies, makes her "mindful" of her looks. The speaker contrasts his superficial concerns with her own deep, genuine care for the lord—a subject that the next stanza describes in greater detail.

In terms of sound, this section consists almost entirely of one-syllable words and every line is end-stopped, creating a choppy rhythm that contributes to its aggressive tone. Still, the soft consonant sounds persist. Note the /f/ and /l/ bounce off of "mindful I was fair" in line 4, popping up along with an occasional breathy /h/ sound in "lord find," "flaxen hair," and "fill my heart." The lines are still lyrical and poetic, which makes the content feel elevated—like an important fable. The sounds, along with the iambic meter, also create a continuity of rhythm with the preceding lines.

LINES 9-12

He lured me to his palace home -
Woe's me for joy thereof-
To lead a shameless shameful life,
His plaything and his love.

The poem's second stanza opens with an image of the lord seducing the speaker. The speaker characterizes his behavior with the word "lured," which is almost a homonym for "lord" and is also strongly associated with temptation and entrapment. In doing so, the speaker immediately gives the lord a reputation as a dangerous predator. *He's* the one with the agency in this scenario, the speaker suggests. And by casting the lord in this light, the speaker suggests that his lust is ultimately responsible for her eventual downfall.

"Woe's me"—or "woe is me"—is an exclamation that basically means "I'm so unlucky/unfortunate." It's a very dramatic (and, nowadays, melodramatic) phrase, and this effect is exaggerated by the irregular meter in line 10:

Woe's me | for joy | thereof-

The first metrical foot is actually a trochee instead of the iamb that the reader has come to expect at the beginning of the poem's lines. This divergence from the established meter places additional emphasis on the speaker's woe and suggests that, after the lord entices her to his home, events transpire there that lead to the speaker's ruin. Again, she links seduction and lust to her despair. The speaker indicates that the cause of her "woe" is a result of the joy derived from said seduction. She does not specify if it is *her* joy or the lord's, but presumably, both of them take pleasure in their illicit relationship, and that pleasure stands in contrast to the suffering it later causes the speaker.

Lines 11 and 12 each contain a paradox. The first is the "shameless shameful life" that the speaker and the lord lead during their affair. (Because this is a short, self-contained paradox, it is also an example of an oxymoron.) The speaker seems to understand that their affair will bring her shame, yet they enter into the affair so naturally that it feels "shameless."

This paradox hints at one of the poem's main themes—the inherent hypocrisy of 19th-century gender roles. As a woman, the speaker is taught to obey men, yet she is outcast for bowing to the lord's sexual desires. Plus, even though the lord instigates the affair, he is not held to the same moral standard that the speaker is. In this way, the paradox holds these conflicting social standards in tension to reveal their hypocrisy.

The second paradox occurs when the speaker refers to herself as both the lord's "plaything and his love." This is a contradictory characterization of the lord's attitude towards the speaker, as he at once appears to treat her like an object he uses to amuse himself *and* like someone to whom he is deeply connected.

In combination, these paradoxes make clear that the speaker is in over her head, so to speak, naive and seemingly unable to distinguish between sexual desire and meaningful romance. Even more tragically, she seems unable to distinguish between right and wrong (at least, the Victorian ideals of right and wrong). This is a sympathetic account of the speaker's story, as she seems confused and overwhelmed by the lord's temptation, which eclipses her Victorian morals.

LINES 13-16

He wore me like a silken knot,
He changed me like a glove;
So now I moan, an unclean thing,
Who might have been a dove.

This quatrain is packed with figurative language and repetition, which color the speaker's description of the lord's behavior towards her as well as the suffering it brings about. Most notably, lines 13 and 14 contain the poem's two similes:

> He wore me like a silken knot,
> He changed me like a glove

Each simile signals that the lord treats the speaker like she is an accessory he can essentially try on and discard as he pleases. This is a straightforward example of objectification, or dehumanization that reduces someone to the same status as an object.

Note that both the "silken knot," or necktie, and the "glove" are associated with intimacy. The "silken knot" recalls love-knot rings that were popular in the Victorian era, the period in which the poem was written. These gold rings with knot details symbolize love and commitment. Gloves are a similarly intimate item; they stretch to perfectly fit the owner's hands and often hold that shape even when taken off. Plus, they are associated with the sense of touch. Both images are also symbols of status, as silk is a luxurious fabric and gloves were usually worn by the upper classes during the Victorian era. Thus, although the speaker is relatively close to the lord, and by extension, his wealth, the lord can take this proximity away just as swiftly as he offers it, as if taking off a tie or pair of gloves. Plus, both symbols reference marriage and materiality, images that will return when the speaker addresses her cousin, naturally drawing comparisons between the two women.

The anaphora of "he," which first appears in line 9, begins to pick up charge in lines 13 and 14. Interestingly, the repetition of "he" always starts off a sentence or phrase and appears at the beginning of lines, so it receives a great deal of emphasis. These phrases also describe the lord's behavior with active verbs, and up to this point, the speaker is always the *object* of his actions. Thus, anaphora and parallel sentence structure reinforce one another, supporting and perpetuating the speaker's earlier characterization of the lord as the driving force behind the poem's events.

In lines 15-16, the speaker then lays out the consequences of her affair with the lord. She describes herself calling out in complaint, using the word "moan" to suggest that she is in (figurative) pain. The assonant long /o/ sound in "so" and "moan" recalls that of "home" and "woe's" from earlier in the stanza. It's almost as if the sound of the speaker's cries as she laments her loss of purity echo throughout the stanza, creating a gloomy atmosphere.

Line 16 makes use of metaphor when the speaker says she "might have been a dove"—a small, white bird, which has long been a symbol of tranquility and purity. The speaker suggests that if she had never met the lord, she could have remained a virgin until marriage and been seen as an example of "cleanness" and morality. This is supported by the repetition of the /uh/ sound in "glove," "dove," and "unclean." In all three instances, the /uh/ sound falls the line's third stress. Altogether, there's a subtle sonic connection between the glove (which evokes the lord), the speaker's "unclean" state, and the "dove" the speaker might have been had none of this ever happened.

LINES 17-20

O Lady kate, my cousin Kate,
You grew more fair than I:
He saw you at your father's gate,
Chose you, and cast me by.

The third stanza opens with a direct address to the speaker's cousin, Kate. This is an example of apostrophe, as Kate never has the opportunity to respond to the speaker's tirade. The speaker no longer appears to be simply reflecting on the circumstances of her own life and instead, her monologue functions now more like a diatribe. When the reader learns that the speaker's complaints and criticisms are aimed at a specific person in her life, the dramatic force behind her words swells.

The speaker refers to Kate first as "Lady," and then as "cousin." She acknowledges Kate's newly attained status (as will soon become clear, Kate is a "Lady" because she married the lord) but immediately undermines it by calling attention to their familial relationship and shared humble beginnings. The long

/ay/ sound in "Kate" mirrors the nearby "gate," "lane," and "estate," as well as "maiden" and "cottage mates" from the first stanza, sonically aligning Kate with the lower-class life she once lived. Plus, the repetition of the hard /k/ sound in the first line plays up the speaker's harsh, forceful tone.

Line 20 introduces the poem's first example of antithesis, which pervades the speaker's retelling of Kate's story. The speaker places an image of the lord "choosing" Kate—that is, deciding to commit to her—next to an image of him tossing the speaker aside. The antithesis draws attention to the chasm between the lord's treatment of the speaker and his behavior towards Kate. The speaker's resentment shines through in this line, as the speaker notes that the lord's marriage to Kate requires him to renounce the speaker, which he willingly does.

LINES 21-24

He watched your steps along the lane,
Your work among the rye;
He lifted you from mean estate
To sit with him on high.

This quatrain is mostly concerned with comparing Kate's life before and after her marriage to the lord. First, the lord watches Kate as she goes about her daily tasks, walking along a rural road and working in rye fields. These first two lines have a nice cadence due to the parallelism of "steps along the" and "work among the," heightened by an identical stress pattern. These lines are both perfectly iambic:

He watched your steps along the lane,
Your work among the rye;

These two lines are full of assonance and consonance that complements this steady, pleasing rhythm. Note the repetition of /w/, /aw/, /uh/, and /l/ sounds:

He watched your steps along the lane,
Your work among the rye;

The stanza's last two lines also have perfect iambic rhythm:

He lifted you from mean estate
To sit with him on high.

They also share more consonance and assonance, this time of short /i/ sounds, as well as /l/, /f/, /t/, /h/, and /s/ sounds:

He lifted you from mean estate
To sit with him on high.

There is a shift in mood here though. The language the speaker uses in the first stanza presents the rural town in which she lives in a peaceful, positive light. However, the speaker now describes her home as a "mean estate." "Mean" is used to describe something that is unkind or unpleasant, and can also signify poverty and squalid conditions, while "estate" can refer to a person's broader "state" in life, or someone's collective money and property. This language is heavily associated with class, suggesting that Kate's new, higher status causes her to look down on her modest former home. Indeed, both "lifted" and "on high" reference Kate's ascension in social status. The stanza's last two lines contrast Kate's new environment with her old environment, in which the speaker still lives.

As a final stylistic note, the long /ah/ sounds in line 21 recall "saw" and "father's" from line 19:

He watched your steps along the lane

Plus, "saw" and "watched," which have nearly identical meanings in this context, both contain /w/ sounds. In combination with the anaphora of "he" and its accompanying parallelism, this pairing of assonance and consonance draws attention to the lord's *observation* of Kate, almost painting him as a voyeur, providing further evidence of the predatory behavior that the speaker points out in the previous stanza.

LINES 25-28

Because you were so good and pure
He bound you with his ring:
The neighbors call you good and pure,
Call me an outcast thing.

In the fourth stanza the speaker insists that Kate receives positive recognition and gets to marry the lord because of her sexual purity. There's then a shift in the final line of this quatrain, which contrasts Kate's praise with the townspeople's judgment that the speaker is unfit for society.

Addressing Kate, the speaker repeats "you" in each of the stanza's first three lines, before pivoting in the fourth line to describe herself, using "me." The repetition of "you" works alongside the repetition of "good and pure" to create a strong image of the public's positive perception of Kate. The strength of this image then magnifies the abrupt shift in language that occurs when the speaker describes her *own* reputation, which is much less favorable. Furthermore, both instances of "pure" appear immediately before line breaks, drawing increased attention and indicating that purity is particularly relevant to how Kate and the speaker are judged.

The parallelism of "call you good and pure" and "call me an outcast thing" naturally creates a comparison of the speaker and Kate as well as a comparison of their social statuses (also creating another example of antithesis). The parallelism also disturbs the poem's iambic rhythm:

The neigh- | bors call | you good | and pure,
Call me | an out- | cast thing.

The first foot of line 28 receives two stresses, making it a spondee rather than an iamb. The increased emphasis on "call me" make it feel all the more abrupt as the speaker shifts into describing her own suffering, playing up the differences between the two cousins.

The use of the word "bound" to represent the lord's marriage suggests restraint. It also receives metrical stress ("He bound you") and its /b/ sound echoes that of "Because." Together, this makes the line stand out strongly and perhaps ominously; even if a woman is "good and pure," the best she can hope for is to be tied to a man.

In line 26, "ring" is a metonym that represents marriage. By claiming that the ring the lord gives Kate is what "binds" her to him, the speaker links their marriage with Kate's materialism (something the speaker she will criticize more directly in the coming stanzas). Additionally, the ring recalls both similes from lines 13-14—the "glove," via its association with hands, and the "silken knot," via its associations with lovers'-knot rings and commitment. While the lord ultimately tosses aside the various accessories associated with speaker, the ring "binds" him to Kate. As such, the metonym resonates with earlier images to contrast the lord's relative devotion to the two cousins.

LINES 29-32

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.

The first half of this quatrain compares the speaker and Kate's relative places in life using vivid metaphors. First, the speaker says that she "[sits] and [howls] in dust." This bleak image might be an allusion to the biblical story of Job—specifically Job 42:6, where he states, "I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Job is an exceptionally devout figure, and although he transgresses by believing that he can understand how God operates, he repents and God forgives him. Thus, the speaker aligns herself with a man who embodies piety, suggesting that she remains devout and close to God in spite of her sins.

The speaker next states that Kate "[sits] in gold and sings." The parallel sentence structure of the first two lines again creates antithesis, contrasting the two women's environments and outlooks. The squalid environment that surrounds the speaker, represented by the "dust," is juxtaposed with Kate's new wealth, or the "gold" in which she now "sits." Similarly, the speaker's howls signify that she cries out in distress, evoking the "moan" she releases in line 15 and again suggesting that she laments her loss of purity. Kate, on the other hand, "sings," indicating that her outlook is positive, giving her words a pleasant melodious quality.

The meter in line 29 disrupts the rhythm of the poem to reflect the speaker's characterization of her cries:

Even | so I **sit** | and **howl** | in **dust**

The line's first foot inverts the expected rhythm by replacing its iamb with a trochee, while there is an additional syllable at the beginning of the second foot ("so I sit"); this might be stressed or unstressed, depending on how you read it. Either way, the extra syllable draws the phrase out to mirror the speaker's howls. The meter does a similar thing in line 31, creating an anapest in the final foot:

Now **which** | of **us** | has **ten-** | derer **heart**?

In the next line, the speaker suggests that she, in fact, is the one who has the "tenderer heart." Therefore, the lines that describe the speaker are given more room to breathe, while those that describe Kate appear terse—heightening the disparity in the language that characterizes the cousins' quality of life.

In line 31, the speaker is essentially asking whether she or Kate cares more about the lord. As mentioned above, the rhetorical question that the speaker poses allows her to imply an answer. When she says that Kate has a "stronger wing," the speaker means that Kate is able to maintain her sexual purity. The speaker employs the extended metaphor first laid out in line 16, in which the speaker says she "might have been a dove" had she not been seduced by the lord; this equates birds with sexual purity. When the speaker compares her care for the lord with Kate's, she suggests that her tenderness weakens her "wing," or makes her more vulnerable to his sexual advances. Thus, although the speaker loses her purity, she suggests that her feelings for the lord run much deeper than Kate's devotion to him, which she will criticize in the next stanza.

Finally, sibilance is particularly prominent in this quatrain (e.g., "even so I sit and howl in dust"), creating a hissing sound that underscores the speaker's disapproval of Kate.

LINES 33-36

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,

The speaker opens the second-to-last stanza with another direct address to Kate, continuing the apostrophe that begins in line 17. Once again, the consonance of the hard /k/ sound in "cousin Kate" adds to the sharpness of the speaker's words as she criticizes Kate's love for the lord. Furthermore, the speaker attaches Kate's name to the familial relationship that bonds them, subtly suggesting Kate's perceived disloyalty to the speaker.

The speaker compares her own "true" love for the lord to Kate's, which she says is "writ in sand." This metaphor suggests that Kate's love is fleeting and can be disrupted by a force as gentle as a wave or a gust of wind. Thus, the speaker insinuates

that *her* "true" devotion is a stronger foundation for a relationship than Kate's fickle love. The parallelism of the phrases "my love was true, / Your love was writ in sand" creates another moment of antithesis, which draws attention to the differences between the speaker's love and Kate's. Additionally, the lack of a conjunction, or asyndeton, here makes the comparison feel even more immediate.

Anaphora occurs in lines 35-36, when the speaker repeats "if" at the beginning of each line. The speaker is reiterating the circumstances of the hypothetical scenario she's building up, and the anaphora helps to create a sense of momentum and anticipation as the reader awaits this scenario's outcome.

Lines 35-36 also contain the poem's only example of chiasmus:

> If he had fooled not me but you,
> If you stood where I stand,

Syntactically, the speaker and Kate literally swap positions from line 35 to 36, mirroring the speaker's description of the scenario she lays out, in which their metaphorical roles are reversed. The use of chiasmus can also be interpreted as a manifestation of the lord's objectification of women, who exchanges the speaker for Kate "like a glove" earlier in the poem (line 16). Thus, the chiasmus reveals just how interchangeable the cousins are to the lord, suggesting that the positions that they *do* land in are a partially result of circumstance and could easily have been reversed. As such, the speaker insinuates that her downfall results, in part, simply from the lord's decision to pursue her first.

LINES 37-40

> *He'd not have won me with his love*
> *Nor bought me with his land;*
> *I would have spit into his face*
> *And not have taken his hand.*

In the second half of this stanza, the speaker emphatically insists that she would have denied the lord's advances were he to have, *hypothetically*, pursued Kate before the speaker. The word "not" appears in both the first and last lines of this quatrain (lines 37 and 40), and it receives metrical stress in both cases. Furthermore, its /n/ and /aught/ sounds appear frequently in lines 37-40, most notably in "nor bought," which begins line 38. This combination of diacope ("not"), assonance (/aw/), and consonance (/n/ and /t/) draws the reader's attention to the instances of "not" that bookend the quatrain. In doing so, the speaker carefully spells out that *she* would not entertain the lord's propositions, drawing a sharp distinction between how she would act and how Kate actually does.

The repeating /aught/ sound also adds emphasis to "bought" in line 38. The lord's "land" in this line is a metonym for his broader wealth and status, playing up its vastness. The speaker does not suggest that the lord *literally* attempts to "buy" Kate; rather, she implies that his fortune entices Kate to marry him. Thus, the increased stress on "bought" subtly promotes the speaker's suggestion that Kate is materialistic. Her lust, as it were, is for money and status.

The speaker contrasts Kate's ability to be "bought" with the moral determination the speaker claims she herself would have exercised. The repetition and parallelism of "not have won me with his" and "nor bought me with his" emphasize the speaker's hypothetical resoluteness. Elsewhere in the poem (lines 8 and 31-33), the speaker suggests that her affection for the lord weakens her to his sexual temptations. However, if he had seduced Kate and then cast Kate aside, the speaker claims that "his love" would *not* have been able to win her over, indicating that her loyalty to Kate *outweighs* her care for the lord. The speaker also says that his wealth could not earn her devotion either. Thus, the speaker sticks by Kate's side in this hypothetical scenario, exhibiting unwavering moral persistence and demonstrating that Kate, too, has her moral weaknesses (in that she betrayed the speaker in the speaker's eyes).

Finally, the stanza's concluding line has an additional syllable, breaking with the poem's established rhythm:

> And not | have ta- | ken his hand.

The additional unstressed syllable lengthens the stanza's final foot, which is an anapest (da da DUM) rather than an iamb (da DUM). The irregular meter draws extra attention to this line, in which the speaker says that she would not have married the lord. The speaker uses "hand" to indicate marriage, which recalls the image of Kate's wedding ring as well as the lord treating the speaker like a "glove," further suggesting that Kate's materialism leads her to overlook the lord's mistreatment of the speaker. The repetition of "not" discussed above and the line's position immediately before a stanza break also accentuate the speaker's claims. Thus, the final line of this stanza draws attention to the fact that Kate places her own social ascent over familial loyalty.

LINES 41-44

> *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.*

From the outset of the poem's final stanza, the speaker taunts Kate, primarily by referencing her inability to give the lord a son. In line 41, the speaker refers to the son she conceives with the lord as "a gift." This language mirrors portrayals of children as gifts from God in the Christian tradition, suggesting that the speaker's son is a blessing from God.

The image also allows the speaker to compare the relative value of this "gift" and the many material items Kate now has. The speaker insinuates that Kate is infertile when she gloats

that Kate is "not [likely] to get" such a son, emphasizing that this gift of a child cannot be bought. The speaker also suggests that her son is far more valuable than any gift the lord can give Kate, including her "clothes and wedding-ring."

This reference to Kate's fancy new belongings recalls the accessories mentioned earlier—the necktie, glove, and ring—and casts them in a new light. In the preceding stanzas, these items emphasize the lord's commitment to Kate and his dispensation with the speaker. However, the value of the speaker's child supersedes all of these items, especially because, as the lord's only son, he will likely inherit all of the wealth that enticed Kate to the lord in the first place.

The /aught/ sound from the preceding stanza bleed into lines 41-42, again drawing attention to the fact that the speaker is *not* like Kate. For example, the sound appears in "a gift you have not got," linking the emphasized "not got" to this "gift"; these words—"gift," "not," and "got"—are also connected by the consonance of the /g/ and /t/ sounds, further emphasizing that Kate is without a son. Whereas comparisons between the speaker and Kate earlier in the poem emphasize the good fortune that Kate's sexual purity brings her, this comparison emphasizes the "gift" the speaker receives as a result of her impurity.

In the previous stanza the speaker implied that Kate has been disloyal to her cousin, and in doing so had called Kate's morality into question. The comparisons between the speaker and Kate shift even further at the poem's conclusion, indicating that the speaker is more capable—more loyal, more fertile, more permanently linked to the lord's wealth—than Kate in certain ways.

However, the suggestion that the speaker is loyal to Kate is tinged with irony due to her resentful tone, sharp criticism, and gloating, which suggest that she is actually pretty vindictive. The speaker's bitterness towards Kate, coupled with the emphasis on materiality that resonates throughout the poem, points to the fact that, in Victorian society, women had very few opportunities for social mobility. Women were unable to own property and were valued as mothers, daughters, and wives, pitting them against one another to vie for associations with powerful men.

The final stanza marks a return of the prevalent soft consonant sounds that help to portray the speaker's former life as peaceful. Although harsh consonant sounds don't go away altogether, the return of /m/, /l/, and /f/ sounds soften the mood. The speaker clearly takes pleasure in finally one-upping Kate, and the softer sounds might reflect the satisfaction, or perhaps a different sort of peace that the speaker feels after unloading her tirade on Kate.

LINES 45-48

My fair-haired son, my shame, my pride,
Cling closer, closer yet:
Your father would give his lands for one
To wear his coronet.

In line 45, the speaker shifts her attention from Kate to address her son, introducing a new example of apostrophe. The speaker seems to turn away from Kate, as if she's done acknowledging her, and lets her message to her son speak for itself.

This is the first time the speaker explicitly refers to the son she conceived with the lord—so, upon first reading, the revelation is a bombshell. The speaker indicates that *her* child will inherit the lord's riches, which Kate seeks to access throughout the poem. The suggestion that the speaker (in at least one way) ultimately wins out over Kate is a "gotcha" of sorts, upending the idea that Kate's quality of life continuously ascends at the speaker's expense.

The poem's final example of paradox occurs in line 45, when the speaker refers to her child as "my son, my shame, my pride." In the Victorian era, during which Rossetti wrote "Cousin Kate," strict gender roles created vastly different social expectations for men and women. As a result, the speaker is shamed for becoming pregnant out of wedlock, while the lord faces no repercussions for impregnating her. In fact, the lord benefits from the pregnancy, as he has a son to carry on his legacy. Thus, the speaker's son is simultaneously a source of shame, as the speaker is condemned for her loss of sexual purity, and a source of pride, as he will receive wealth and with it, prestige. The paradox holds these contradictory messages in tension, heightened by the anaphora of "my," which drives home that the speaker's son is analogous to *both* her shame and her pride.

The poem's sole example of epizeuxis appears in line 45, when the speaker tells her son to "cling closer, closer yet." Because "closer" and "closer" are adjacent to one another—essentially as close as they can get—the poem's form literally reflects the directive that the repetition of "cling closer, closer" expresses. The repeating /kloh/ sound resonates with "clothes" in the preceding line, as well as with the /k/ and /oh/ sounds in "coronet." When the speaker links these words, she emphasizes that her proximity to her son—and by extension the wealth he will inherit, represented by the coronet—has much more value than Kate's clothes, or any other possession.

Similarly, in line 47, "lands" is a metonym for the lord's wealth, mirroring the "land" in line 38, which the speaker implies persuades Kate to marry the lord. The speaker casts this image in a new light as she suggests that the lord would *actually* hand his land, along with the rest of his fortune, over to their son. In the end, since Kate is a woman, she never truly has access to the lord's wealth or any property of her own. She can only receive gifts from him, which pale in comparison to the speaker's "gift" of a son, who presumably *will* have control over the lord's fortune.

Finally, the poem's penultimate line contains irregular meter:

Your fa- | ther would give | his lands | for one

The additional unstressed syllable in this line's second foot replaces the ubiquitous iamb with an anapest ("ther would give"). Thus, the fact that the speaker's son will likely inherit the lord's wealth receives further emphasis because the line that expresses this idea is literally drawn out. Plus, due to the rare instance of enjambment, line 47 appears to flow into line 48, as if they constitute one extra-long line. This draws further attention to the fact that wealth Kate seeks will be passed down to the *speaker's* son, which is the idea that lingers at the poem's conclusion. In this way, the speaker has the "final word"—Kate is never able to respond to her criticisms and the speaker leaves the reader with an image of her own triumph over Kate.

SYMBOLS

BIRDS

The birds in "Cousin Kate" represent female sexual purity. The symbol first appears in line 16, when the speaker says she "might have been a dove." Doves are small birds with white feathers and have long been used to represent purity. The speaker uses this familiar image to suggest that if the lord had not seduced her, she might have maintained her chastity and therefore could have been seen as a representation of female virtue.

The speaker reprises the metaphor in the fourth stanza when she asks whether she or Kate has the "tenderer heart," or more compassion. She then states that Kate "had the stronger wing," meaning that Kate has greater moral *determination*, and has risen above the speaker to achieve greater purity. The speaker contrasts this with her own tenderness towards the lord and implies that her genuine care for him weakens her "wing," or ability to remain chaste.

In the Christian tradition, birds, and especially doves, indicate the presence of the Holy Spirit. As a woman's chastity was seen as evidence of her piety during the Victorian era and Rossetti was deeply religious, this tradition reinforces the association between birds and sexual purity within the poem.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "So now I moan, an unclean thing, / Who might have been a dove."
- **Lines 31-32:** "Now which of us has tenderer heart? / You had the stronger wing."

CLOTHING AND ACCESSORIES

Throughout the poem, various articles of clothing and pieces of jewelry signify the relative strength of different characters' relationships to the lord. For example, the speaker says that the lord "wore [her] like a silken knot" and "changed [her] like a glove." The lord treats the speaker like she is a disposable—an accessory that can be tried on at will and easily taken off. Thus, the accessories that describe the speaker's relationship with the lord represent the impermanence of his attention and affection for her.

Later in the poem, the wedding ring that the lord gives Kate "binds" her to him. In contrast to the accessories that characterize the speaker's short-lived relationship with the lord, this ring symbolizes a lasting bond—the permanence of his marriage to Kate. However, in the final stanza, the speaker gloats that this ring, along with all of the other fancy clothes that the lord gives Kate, cannot tie her to the lord as strongly as giving him a son would. In the end, the coronet that the lord will presumably give to the speaker's son represents the strongest bond of all—the wealth and status a father bestows on his son.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "He wore me like a silken knot, / He changed me like a glove;"
- **Line 26:** "He bound you with his ring:"
- **Line 43:** "For all your clothes and wedding-ring"
- **Lines 47-48:** "Your father would give his lands for one / To wear his coronet."

GIFT

The "gift" the speaker refers to symbolizes her son. This language has resonances with Christian descriptions of children as gifts from God, and especially mirrors Psalm 127:3-5, translated as follows in the New King James Version:

> Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward.
> As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth.
> Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate.

The speaker suggests that her child is a blessing from God, a reward that only God can give. She contrasts this divine gift with Kate's "clothes and wedding-ring," gifts from her husband that, no matter their earthly value, cannot be traded for a child. As such, the speaker gloats that although Kate has wealth, status, and the respect of the local townspeople, the speaker has still outdone her in at least one respect, as she is blessed

with a "gift" that Kate can never have. Line 45 can be interpreted as a continuation of this biblical allusion; although the speaker is shamed for being an unmarried mother, her son is a most special and valuable "gift," so she takes pride in him.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 41-42:** "Yet I've a gift you have not got, / And seem not like to get:"

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

Rossetti uses anaphora throughout "Cousin Kate," but the most prominent example is the repetition of "he" in the second and third stanzas. This happens as the speaker describes the lord seducing her and courting Kate. The repetitive "he" emphasizes the lord's role in the poem's events, positioning him as an active, driving force behind the speaker's downfall. "He" appears not only at the beginning of many sentences and phrases but also at the beginning of lines, drawing further attention to the lord's pivotal role in the poem and in the speaker's life. Similarly, in the first stanza, the speaker repeats "Why did a great lord find me out?" Again, through repetition, the speaker establishes that the lord instigates the chain of events that follows. By repeatedly suggesting that *he* provokes *her* transgressive behavior, the speaker shifts some culpability for her loss of purity from herself onto the lord.

In the fifth stanza, the speaker introduces a hypothetical scenario in which her role and Kate's are reversed:

> **If** he had fooled not me but you,
> **If** you stood where I stand.

By reiterating these hypothetical circumstances before revealing their outcome, the speaker builds anticipation, increasing the sense of tension as she criticizes Kate.

Finally, in line 45, the speaker refers to the child she conceived with the lord:

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

The repetition of "my" equates the words that follow each "my" with one another and with the speaker herself. This effect works alongside paradox to emphasize the speaker's ambivalence about her son, who is simultaneously a great source of pride for the speaker *and* the reason society shames her. It also foregrounds the conflicting messages that the speaker receives about morality, as she is shamed for getting pregnant out of wedlock, but the child she had stands to inherit great wealth and status.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Why did a great lord find me out"
- **Line 7:** "Why did a great lord find me out"
- **Line 9:** "He"
- **Line 13:** "He"
- **Line 14:** "He"
- **Line 19:** "He"
- **Line 21:** "He"
- **Line 23:** "He"
- **Line 35:** "If"
- **Line 36:** "If"
- **Line 45:** "My," "my," "my"

ANTITHESIS

Starting in line 20, Rossetti uses antithesis to intersperse Kate's story with comparisons between the speaker and Kate. First, she says that the lord "Chose you, and cast me by." The juxtaposition of his commitment to Kate with an image of the lord discarding the speaker makes his attitude towards one cousin appear completely opposite from his attitude towards the other. Next, the speaker mentions that the local townspeople praise Kate, while they chastise the speaker and outcast her from society. Thus, the speaker "[sits] and [howls] in dust," while Kate "[sits] in gold and [sings]." In other words, the speaker, outcast and unmarried, is left to complain in her lowly cottage, while Kate, newly wealthy through marriage and celebrated for her purity, cries out joyously from her luxurious new home. Again, the use of antithesis makes the differences between the two women's places in life appear much more pronounced.

Finally, the speaker calls attention to Kate's self-interest when she claims that Kate's love for the lord is "writ in sand." The speaker contrasts this image of fleeting care with her own "true" love for the lord, suggesting that a deep connection is a more commendable foundation for a relationship than Kate's materialism.

In conjunction with parallelism (and especially asyndeton), the antithesis in "Cousin Kate" functions to hold the speaker's reality and Kate's in tension, exaggerating their differences. Plus, because the instances of antithesis occur so closely together, they build on one another, driving home the impression that although they are cousins, the two women's lives are vastly different.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Line 20:** "Chose you, and cast me by"
- **Lines 27-28:** "call you good and pure, / Call me an outcast thing"
- **Lines 29-30:** "I sit and howl in dust, / You sit in gold and sing"

- **Lines 33-34:** “my love was true, / Your love was writ in sand”

APOSTROPHE

Beginning in line 17, the speaker directly addresses her cousin, Kate, who is not present and does not respond. This apostrophe serves many functions in "Cousin Kate." In general, it increases the stakes of the poem, as there is an (imaginary) person on the receiving end of the speaker's tirade, creating a sense of drama and tension. Furthermore, rather than pondering her emotions in the abstract, the speaker directs them at their source, allowing her to convey the full extent of her intense feelings. This allows the reader to see character flaws and other nuances of the speaker's personality, which she naturally—but not knowingly—reveals through her impassioned speech. For example, the speaker comes across as hypocritical when she criticizes Kate's lack of loyalty, then gloats about Kate's inability to bear a son.

The speaker also uses apostrophe to plead with Kate, urging her to see the error of her ways. When she repeatedly refers to Kate as "cousin," the speaker emphasizes their familial bond, bolstering the suggestion that Kate should have been more loyal to her and rejected the lord.

In the final stanza, the speaker shifts to address her son, directing him to cling more and more closely to her as she explains in delight that he will inherit his father's wealth. There is also a shift in tone here that shows the reader a different side of the speaker; her tenderness towards her son makes the vitriol with which she addresses Kate even more apparent.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 17-48

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears a couple times in "Cousin Kate," where it primarily helps set the mood for the speaker's story. For example, the long /o/ sound repeats in lines 9-10 as the speaker describes the distress she feels for enjoying the lord's seduction:

> He lured me to his palace home -
> Woe's me for joy thereof-

The sound is picked up again in line 15, later in the same stanza:

> So now I moan, an unclean thing,

The long vowel sound mimics the speaker's moans; her wails seem to echo throughout the stanza, contributing to a sorrowful mood as she mourns her loss of purity.

The short /i/ sound appears often throughout the poem, usually in one-syllable words like "sit" and "in" from lines 29-31:

> Even so I sit and howl in dust
> You sit in gold and sing:
> Now which of us has tenderer heart?

The short /i/ sound, especially used in such short words, creates a choppy effect, almost as if it is punctuating the speaker's address. Its short, emphatic sound interrupts the smooth flow of the speaker's words, creating a harsh, chaotic mood that mirrors her blunt language.

In the third stanza, the long /a/ assonance in "Lady kate, my cousin Kate" is picked up in the nearby end rhymes of "gate," "lane," and "estate," as well as "cottage mates" from the first stanza. It's as if Kate's name echoes throughout the stanza, infusing it with her presence. Interestingly, all of these terms also reference the rural, working-class environment that both cousins are born into. Through shared sound (though not *true* assonance), the speaker ties these words to Kate, taunting her by drawing attention to her humble beginnings.

Near the poem's conclusion, a long /aw/ sound recurs quite frequently, beginning with "not" in line 37 and concluding with "not" again in line 42:

> He'd not have 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:

Again, this is arguably not true or strong assonance given the space between the words. That said, the repetition of "not," heightened by the frequency of sonically similar words, still makes the speaker's criticism of Kate more cutting. It helps the speaker emphasize everything she is—loyal, fertile—that Kate is not.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** “o”
- **Line 10:** “oe”
- **Line 11:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 12:** “ay”
- **Line 15:** “o,” “oa”
- **Line 17:** “a,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 18:** “ou,” “ew”
- **Line 24:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 25:** “e,” “u”
- **Line 26:** “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 29:** “i,” “i”

- **Line 30:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 31:** "i"
- **Line 33:** "ou," "o," "a"
- **Line 34:** "o," "i," "i"
- **Line 35:** "oo," "ou"
- **Line 36:** "ou"
- **Line 37:** "o," "o," "i," "i," "o"
- **Line 38:** "ou," "i," "i"
- **Line 39:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 41:** "o," "o"
- **Line 42:** "o"
- **Line 43:** "i," "i"
- **Line 44:** "i"
- **Line 45:** "ai," "ai"
- **Line 46:** "o," "o"
- **Line 47:** "i," "i"

CHIASMUS

The poem's single use of chiasmus appears in lines 35-36:

> If he had fooled not me but you,
> If you stood where I stand,

The speaker presents a hypothetical alternate storyline in which her and Kate's roles are reversed—the lord seduces *Kate*, they have an affair, and then he tosses her aside to pursue the *speaker*. Through chiasmus, the cousins' positions are literally flipped from one line to the next. The inverted order in which the speaker and Kate appear mirrors their positions in this hypothetical scenario.

The speaker suggests that this reversal could easily have been the reality and *she* would have been "a dove" while *Kate* would have been chastised. Through word order, the speaker demonstrates just how interchangeable these two women are to the lord. This suggests that the positions in which the cousins actually land are somewhat arbitrary. In doing so, the speaker suggests that her loss of purity stems from the lord's decision to go after her first, and therefore implies that his whims determine where the women ultimately end up.

Where Chiasmus appears in the poem:

- **Lines 35-36:** "If he had fooled not me but you, / If you stood where I stand"

CONSONANCE

Rossetti makes abundant use of consonance throughout the poem, creating contrasting moods to match her feelings about various aspects of the story she tells. Soft /m/, /f/, and /l/ sounds dominate the first two stanzas. Take, for example, lines 4-6:

> Not mindful I was fair.
> Why did a great lord find me out,
> And praise my flaxen hair?

And later lines 9-10:

> He lured me to his palace home -
> Woe's me for joy thereof-

At the poem's outset, the speaker is an innocent young woman who is happy with her simple life until a rich, powerful man seduces her and she becomes "unclean." The /m/, /f/, and /l/ sounds are gentle and help establish a smooth-flowing lyrical rhythm. However, they become scarcer in the stanzas that follow, as the speaker addresses Kate and tells her story. In stanzas 3-4, hard /k/ and /t/ sounds are much more prevalent, such as in line 17, when the speaker first addresses Kate:

> O Lady Kate, my cousin Kate

These sounds are harsh and abrupt, adding force behind the speaker's highly critical message to Kate. These consonants are also aspirated, meaning that they produce a lot of breath when spoken, giving the effect that the speaker is almost spitting her words at Kate. The repeating /k/ sound also puts additional stress on the word "cousin," which plays up their familial relationship.

Furthermore, the speaker's address to Kate makes ample use of sibilance, especially in stanzas 4 and 5. Take lines 28-30, which balance the /s/ sound with the hard /k/ and spitting /t/:

> Call me an outcast thing.
> Even so I sit and howl in dust,
> You sit in gold and sing:

The hissing /s/ sound reappears in lines 39-40, for example, here further emphasized by the many breathy /h/ sounds in this stanza:

> I would have spit into his face
> And not have taken his hand.

Hissing is often used to express disproval, and that is exactly how it functions in the speaker's address as she condemns Kate's behavior and bitterly contrasts Kate's status with her own.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "c," "m"
- **Line 3:** "C," "t," "t," "m," "c," "tt," "m," "t"
- **Line 4:** "m," "f," "l," "f"

- **Line 5:** “l,” “f,” “m”
- **Line 6:** “m,” “f,” “l”
- **Line 7:** “l,” “f,” “m”
- **Line 8:** “f,” “ll,” “m”
- **Line 9:** “l,” “m,” “l,” “m”
- **Line 10:** “m”
- **Line 11:** “l,” “sh,” “m,” “l,” “sh,” “m,” “f,” “l,” “l,” “f”
- **Line 12:** “l,” “l”
- **Line 13:** “m,” “l,” “k,” “l,” “k”
- **Line 14:** “m,” “l,” “k,” “l”
- **Line 15:** “n,” “m,” “n,” “n,” “n,” “l,” “n”
- **Line 16:** “m”
- **Line 17:** “k,” “t,” “c,” “K,” “t”
- **Line 19:** “y,” “y”
- **Line 20:** “y”
- **Line 21:** “l,” “l”
- **Line 23:** “s,” “t,” “t”
- **Line 24:** “T,” “s,” “t,” “h,” “h”
- **Line 25:** “B,” “r,” “r”
- **Line 26:** “b,” “r”
- **Line 27:** “c”
- **Line 28:** “C,” “t,” “c,” “s,” “t”
- **Line 29:** “s,” “s,” “t,” “s,” “t”
- **Line 30:** “s,” “t,” “s”
- **Line 31:** “h,” “t,” “r,” “r,” “h,” “r,” “t”
- **Line 32:** “h,” “t,” “r,” “r”
- **Line 33:** “c,” “K”
- **Line 35:** “h,” “h,” “y”
- **Line 36:** “y,” “s,” “t,” “s,” “t”
- **Line 37:** “H,” “h,” “w,” “w,” “h”
- **Line 38:** “h”
- **Line 39:** “h,” “s,” “t,” “t,” “h,” “c”
- **Line 40:** “t,” “h,” “t,” “h,” “h”
- **Line 41:** “g,” “t,” “t,” “g,” “t”
- **Line 42:** “m,” “t,” “l,” “g,” “t”
- **Line 43:** “ll,” “l”
- **Line 44:** “l,” “tt,” “l,” “t,” “f,” “t”
- **Line 45:** “M,” “f,” “r,” “r,” “m,” “m,” “m”
- **Line 46:** “C,” “l,” “c,” “l,” “c,” “l”
- **Line 47:** “w,” “o”
- **Line 48:** “w”

METAPHOR

There are several metaphors woven throughout "Cousin Kate." Although each calls distinct associations and meanings to mind, as a whole, the poem's metaphors serve to contrast the speaker and Kate. For example, the speaker repeatedly invokes a metaphor that compares the speaker and Kate to birds. This begins in line 16, when the speaker says that she "might have been a dove," or a symbol of purity, if the lord hadn't seduced her. Later, the speaker says that Kate has "the stronger wing," suggesting that Kate's ability to maintain her sexual purity is greater than that of the speaker.

In line 29, the speaker uses metaphor to describe her place in life, and then compares this side by side with Kate's in line 30:

> Even so I sit and howl in dust,
> You sit in gold and sing:

The speaker contrasts the cousins' social statuses by describing where they each metaphorically "sit." Kate lives in a "palace" surrounded by luxury, represented by "gold." The "dust" represents the lowly working-class environment the speaker is destined to remain in, as her impurity has shattered any hope of social mobility. Similarly, the speaker contrasts the women's outlooks by describing their metaphorical "voices." The speaker's "howl" is an expression of suffering, while Kate's "singing" indicates joy.

The sand the speaker uses as a metaphor for Kate's love also serves to differentiate the speaker from Kate:

> O cousin Kate, my love was true,
> Your love was writ in sand:

This description suggests that the slightest disturbance can distort or destroy Kate's love, like a message written in sand wiped away by a wave or gust of wind. This description emphasizes the transience of Kate's love for the lord and stands in direct contrast to the speaker's "true" love for him.

In the final stanza, the speaker refers to her child as a "gift," gloating that he is much more valuable than all of the fancy material items Kate now has. She reminds Kate that she is unable to give the lord a son, so all of the lord's wealth and status will ultimately lie with the speaker's child. Thus, this metaphor compares the women by measuring the value of the "gifts" that their relationships with the lord have brought them.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** “So now I moan, an unclean thing, / Who might have been a / .”
- **Line 16:** “dove”
- **Lines 29-32:** “Even so I / , / You / : / Now which of us has / ? / You had the stronger wing.”
- **Line 29:** “sit and howl in dust”
- **Line 30:** “sit in gold and sing”
- **Line 31:** “tenderer heart”
- **Line 34:** “Your love was ,” “writ in sand”
- **Lines 41-41:** “Yet I've a / you have not got,”
- **Line 41:** “gift”

METONYMY

This poem contains four examples of metonymy. In two instances, the lord's "land" acts as a stand-in for his wealth

more broadly. In line 38, the speaker says that the lord could not have "bought me with his land." The speaker is not suggesting that the lord would literally give up his property in order to marry her. Rather, she suggests that the lord used his wealth to buy Kate's love. In line 47, the speaker actually does suggest that the lord would hand over his property to his son:

> Your father would give his lands for one
> To wear his coronet.

However, as this would serve to carry on the lord's legacy, the son would also receive money, personal effects, prestige, and so on. So, once again, the lord's lands represent his broader wealth, emphasizing its vastness, like that of a sprawling landscape.

In line 26, the "ring" the lord gives Kate is a metonym for their marriage. By representing their union with a material object, the speaker again implies that the lord's wealth entices Kate to settle down with him. Later, in line 40, the speaker references Kate taking the lord's "hand," simply meaning that she marries him. This association between "hand" and "marriage" of course conjures the image of the wedding ring, referencing the earlier metonym, with its connotations of materialism. The speaker uses these examples of metonymy throughout the poem to subtly support her claim that Kate is overly concerned with wealth. This makes the speaker's statements in the final stanza all the more cutting when she gloats that *her* son, not Kate, will ultimately receive the lord's fortune.

Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Line 26:** "ring"
- **Line 38:** "land"
- **Line 40:** "hand"
- **Line 47:** "lands"

PARADOX

There are three instances of paradox in the poem. In each case, the contradictory statements signal confusion and reflect the conflicting messages the speaker is sent about the moral implications of her affair with the lord.

The first example of paradox occurs in line 11, when the speaker describes living "a shameless shameful life" with the lord. This paradox is more specifically an oxymoron, as it is contained to a short noun phrase. The speaker logically understands that her affair with the lord is "shameful," but, confusingly, it *feels* "shameless." Up until this point, the speaker presents herself as an innocent young woman, and this paradox makes clear that she is inexperienced with romantic and sexual relationships. The lord's seduction appears to confuse her (very Victorian) sense of right and wrong, presenting him as a corrupting force.

Similarly, in the following line, the speaker refers to herself as the lord's "plaything and his love." By calling herself his "plaything," the speaker indicates that the lord treats her like an object, using her for his own amusement. This contrasts sharply with the subsequent characterization of the speaker as his "love," which suggests deep care and devotion. This paradox serves as further proof that the speaker is naive to love and lust, as she seems unable to distinguish the two, mistaking the pleasure the lord derives from their relationship for love. In this way, the speaker comes across as relatively innocent, while the lord appears much more worldly and exploitative.

In the final stanza, the speaker refers to the son she conceived with the lord as "my shame, my pride." Though the speaker is proud of her son, her unplanned pregnancy leads to her social downfall. Thus, as a manifestation of the speaker's loss of purity, her son brings her shame. At the same time, the speaker views her child as a "gift," suggesting that he is a valuable blessing. Indeed, as the lord's only son, he is the heir to his father's legacy and will likely inherit the lord's great fortune and status.

The above paradoxes result, in part, from gendered moral expectations of the Victorian era, which required women to obey men but scorned them for failing to reject men's sexual advances. Furthermore, women were outcast for engaging in extramarital affairs while men generally were not. Thus, the paradoxes in "Cousin Kate" are reflections of the hypocrisy of gendered moral standards, as the speaker is unable to clearly characterize her affair as wholly right or wrong and instead holds both in tension.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "a shameless shameful life"
- **Line 12:** "His plaything and his love"
- **Line 45:** "my shame, my pride"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism is active throughout "Cousin Kate" and serves multiple functions. First, it helps to establish a rhythm, heightening the dramatic atmosphere of the poem by building momentum and creating anticipation. This is achieved largely through its pairing with asyndeton, which omits words like "and" and "but" that would typically link the phrases in "Cousin Kate." With sparing punctuation, this can give the effect of lines running into one another, as in the poem's opening lines:

> I was a cottage maiden
> Hardened by sun and air
> Contented with my cottage mates,
> Not mindful I was fair.

Because there is no punctuation at the end of the lines 1 and 2,

the first few phrases flow into one another smoothly. This feeling is aided by the clauses' clear parallel structure, again created by this lack of conjunctions. The speaker quickly lists off the way she was before her encounter with the lord, starting three lines in a row with an adjective phrase.

However the parallel asyndeton can also have the opposite impact, making phrases appear distinct and abrupt, creating a choppy effect. This occurs, for example, in lines 27-30:

> The neighbors call you good and pure,
> Call me an outcast thing.
> Even so I sit and howl in dust,
> You sit in gold and sing:

Because each line is end-stopped, the phrases appear discrete. The resulting choppiness combined with parallel sentence structure heightens the antithesis at work, providing a more distinct and direct comparison between the two women. Plus, the succession of many brief phrases emphasizes the terseness of the speaker's address to her cousin and contributes to its tempestuous mood.

Elsewhere in the poem, parallelism works alongside anaphora to draw attention to the lord's crucial role in the poem's events. The repetition of "Why did a great lord find me out" in lines 5 and 7 is one such example; it introduces the lord for the first time as someone who acts upon the speaker, "[finding her] out." With her parallel rhetorical questions, the speaker seems to lament that the lord ever entered her life, immediately placing some of the responsibility for her impending downfall squarely upon the lord's shoulders.

Anaphora and parallelism work in tandem to similar effect in lines 9-26, where there is a repeating subject-verb-object sentence structure: The subject of the sentence is always "He," meaning the lord, followed by a strong, active verb, and then either the speaker or Kate, who are always the *objects* of his actions. For example: "He lured me ... He wore me ... He changed me ..." And later: "He saw you ... He watched your steps ... He lifted you ..."

Thus, parallelism gives the impression that the lord is the one driving the action of the poem, and the intent with which he pursues the women makes him appear calculating and manipulative. Again, this shifts a degree of blame from the speaker (and Kate) onto the lord. It also aids the speaker's implicit argument that Victorian gender roles are hypocritical because *she* is punished for obeying a powerful man's wishes, as she has been taught to do. Plus, by stressing the lord's role, the parallelism at work makes the reader more keenly aware that the lord faces no repercussions for his actions, implying injustice.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "I was a cottage maiden / Hardened by sun and air / Contented with my cottage mates, / Not mindful I was fair."
- **Line 5:** "Why did a great lord find me out"
- **Line 7:** "Why did a great lord find me out"
- **Line 9:** "He lured me"
- **Lines 11-12:** "To lead a shameless shameful life, / His plaything and his love."
- **Line 13:** "He wore me like a silken knot,"
- **Line 14:** "He changed me," " like a glove;"
- **Line 19:** "He saw you"
- **Line 20:** "Chose you," "cast me by"
- **Line 21:** "He watched your steps"
- **Line 22:** "Your work"
- **Line 23:** "He lifted you"
- **Line 25:** "good and pure"
- **Line 26:** "He bound you"
- **Lines 27-28:** "call you good and pure, / Call me an outcast thing"
- **Lines 29-30:** "I sit and howl in dust, / You sit in gold and sing"
- **Lines 33-34:** "my love was true, / Your love was writ in sand"
- **Line 37:** "won me with his love"
- **Line 38:** "bought me with his land"
- **Line 41:** "not got"
- **Line 42:** "not like to get"
- **Line 45:** "My fair-haired son, my shame, my pride"

REPETITION

The poem contains many examples of repetition. Although it performs various functions throughout, in general, repetition emphasizes thematically important words and phrases. Most frequently, repetition serves to contrast the speaker and Kate. This can be seen in stanza 3, where the speaker emphasizes that Kate is "good and pure" before pivoting to describe herself as an "outcast thing." Similarly, in lines 33-34 the diacope of "love" juxtaposes the speaker's "true" care for the lord with Kate's weak and fleeting love, which is figuratively "writ in sand."

> O cousin Kate, my love was true,
> Your love was writ in sand:

The most compelling example of comparison via repetition occurs in lines 37-42:

> He'd not have 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:

Throughout this section, the speaker criticizes Kate for overlooking the lord's mistreatment of the speaker; the speaker accuses her cousin of disloyalty. In the final stanza, the speaker then brags that *she* has given the lord a son, taunting Kate for her infertility. The repetition of the word "not" makes clear that the two women are starkly different—by the speaker's telling, *she* is loyal and fertile while Kate is *not*.

In her address to Kate, the speaker also takes care to repeat Kate's name and twice refers to her as "cousin Kate," tying her identity to their familial relationship. Plus, the use of consonance in the repeating /k/ sounds adds additional stress to the word "cousin." Repetition calls attention to their family ties, helping the speaker bring Kate's disloyalty to light and add force and substance to her criticisms. In combination with the harsh /k/ sounds, this effect increases the poem's drama and tumultuous atmosphere. As laid out in this guide's discussion of anaphora, the repetition "if" in lines 35-36 has a similar impact: it underscores the circumstances of the speaker's hypothetical scenario to build momentum and create anticipation.

In line 46, the epizeuxis of "closer, closer" creates stylistic interest by reflecting the poem's ideas spatially on the page. Here, one instance of "closer" is adjacent to another; they are physically close together, mirroring the speaker's wish that her son might "cling" more closely to her.

Finally, as discussed in this guide's entries on anaphora and parallelism, the repetition of "Why did the great lord find me out" and the frequently repeating "he" throughout the poem focus the reader's attention on the *lord's* behavior. In this way, repetition also serves to scrutinize the lord by implying that he incites and personally orchestrates many of the poem's events.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Why did a great lord find me out"
- **Line 7:** "Why did a great lord find me out"
- **Line 9:** "He lured me"
- **Line 13:** "He wore me"
- **Line 14:** "He changed me"
- **Line 17:** "O Lady kate, my cousin Kate"
- **Line 19:** "He saw you"
- **Line 20:** "Chose you"
- **Line 21:** "He watched your steps"
- **Line 23:** "He lifted you"
- **Line 25:** "good and pure"
- **Line 26:** "He bound you"
- **Line 27:** "good and pure"
- **Line 33:** "O cousin Kate," "love"
- **Line 34:** "love"
- **Line 35:** "If"
- **Line 36:** "If"
- **Line 37:** "me with his"
- **Line 38:** "me with his"
- **Line 40:** "not"
- **Line 41:** "not"
- **Line 42:** "not"
- **Line 45:** "My," "my," "my"
- **Line 46:** "closer, closer"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

There are three rhetorical questions in the poem. The first two occur in succession, beginning in line 5:

> 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?

The speaker isn't particularly interested in finding the precise *answer* to her questions. Rather, they can be summarized as a "why me" statement of self-pity that the speaker uses to express her grief and frustration. Shortly after she poses these questions, the reader learns that the lord's interest in the speaker ultimately leads to her downfall, as she loses her sexual purity and becomes "unclean" when she gives in to his temptations. These revelations cast her first two rhetorical questions as lamentations, especially as she "moans," mourning her loss of purity.

These rhetorical questions also present a change in tone, as the speaker shifts from describing peaceful images from her past life before meeting the lord. Plus, because the speaker seems to address the reader, the questions come across as somewhat confrontational. Thus, they shatter the tranquility established at the poem's outset and set the reader up for the speaker's much more direct and forceful address to Kate.

The final rhetorical question appears in line 31:

> Now which of us has tenderer heart?

Here, the speaker is asking Kate which of the two of them has more compassion and love for the lord, represented by the metaphorical "tenderer heart." In contrast to the preceding questions, the speaker immediately suggests an answer in the following line:

> You had the stronger wing.

The speaker answers her question with another metaphor, building on a metaphor set up in line 16, in which birds represent the cousins' relative sexual purity. By claiming that Kate has "the stronger wing," the speaker indicates that Kate has the greater ability to hold onto her sexual purity. The

speaker, on the other hand, loses her purity when she sleeps with the lord, who "[fills her] heart with care." Thus, the speaker suggests that her deep, genuine feelings for the lord make her more vulnerable to his advances, or "weaken her wing." Therefore, the speaker suggests that she has the "tenderer heart." In this case, the rhetorical question sets up a comparison between the two women and allows the speaker to imply an answer that casts her in a favorable light.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "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?"
- **Line 31:** "Now which of us has tenderer heart?"

SIMILE

The poem contains two similes, which occur in sequence in lines 13-14:

> He wore me like a silken knot,
> He changed me like a glove;

The speaker compares the lord's treatment of her to how one might handle an accessory. In combination with the speaker's reference to herself as "his plaything" in the preceding line, these similes make the lord appear selfish and cruel. The comparisons amount to objectification—the dehumanization of a person to the extent that they are treated as an object. Thus, the lord comes across as inconsiderate, using the speaker for his amusement without regard for her best interest.

Each of the accessories that the speaker references also has secondary meanings. A "silken knot" is a fancy way of saying "necktie." Silk is a delicate, expensive material that has long been associated with wealth and luxury. As such, the "silken knot" is a nod to the lord's status and resonates with the other images of wealth and materiality throughout the poem. During the Victorian era, when the poem was written, lovers' knot rings (simply gold rings with an intricate knotting effect) were commonly used to symbolize commitment, sometimes serving as wedding bands or betrothal rings. This image recalls Kate's wedding band, which appears later in the poem, and provides a sharp contrast to the lord's treatment of the speaker, whom he simply "unties" and tosses aside.

Gloves were a status symbol during (and beyond) the 19th century. The speaker, who presumably does agricultural work and lives in the countryside, would not have worn gloves. The lord, however, is a wealthy man who has servants to perform any necessary manual labor. Like his necktie, the lord's gloves play off of other symbols in the poem to draw attention to materiality. In particular, the lord's gloves call to mind the "ring" that appears twice, as well as the reference to Kate taking the lord's "hand," all of which symbolize marriage. Furthermore, as gloves keep the hands clean, they connote cleanliness. The speaker plays up this association by rhyming "glove" with "dove," another symbol of purity that is tainted by their relationship.

During the Victorian era, gloves were commonly made of materials such as leather that stretch to fit their wearer's hand. The reference to such an intimate, highly personal item has sexual overtones; the lord's hand enters the glove, which conforms to his shape, then exits the glove so he can "wear" another—that is, pursue another woman. Furthermore, because gloves are closely associated with hands, they connote the sense of touch, contributing to the sexual implications of the simile.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "He wore me like a silken knot"
- **Line 14:** "He changed me like a glove"

VOCABULARY

Maiden (Line 1) - A young woman, especially one who is unmarried. "Maiden" is often used interchangeably with "virgin." When the speaker uses "maiden" to describe herself before she met the lord, she indicates that she was sexually pure before their relationship.

Hardened (Line 2) - So accustomed to doing something—in this case, working outside in the elements—that it is no longer daunting.

Fair (Line 4, Line 18) - Beautiful.

Flaxen (Line 6) - Light yellow, like the crop flax. When describing hair, "flaxen" simply means blonde.

Silken knot (Line 13) - A necktie made of silk or a similarly soft, shiny fabric.

Moan (Line 15) - Complain or cry out in grief. The speaker's moans are an expression of the distress and regret she feels as a result of her impurity.

Dove (Line 16) - A small, white bird, often used as a symbol of peace, innocence, and purity. The speaker believes that if she never became involved with the lord, she might have remained chaste and been seen as such a symbol.

Cast me by (Line 20) - To "cast something by" means to carelessly toss it aside. The speaker suggests that the lord treats her like a disposable object, throwing her out and replacing her when a more attractive model comes along.

Rye (Line 22) - A grain similar to wheat, commonly grown as a crop.

Mean estate (Line 23) - A shabby, lower-class way of life. While

"mean" is an adjective used to describe something lowly, "estate" can refer to the totality of a person's money and property and also to someone's broader state, or condition, in life. Here, both meanings are relevant and work together to suggest humble, working-class living conditions.

On high (Line 24) - In a place of high social stature. "On high" sometimes refers to a place near the heavens, or close to God. Both meanings are applicable to the lord and Kate, who have wealth and status as well as a godly marriage—a consecrated lifelong union between one husband and one chaste wife.

Wing (Line 32) - In this context, "wing" refers to the ability to overcome challenging conditions. Taken literally, a wing enables an animal to prevail over opposing forces and take flight. The speaker says that Kate's wing is "stronger," meaning that she has a greater ability to overcome sexual temptation, in turn rising above the speaker.

Writ (Line 34) - Archaic form of "written."

Like (Line 42) - Likely.

Fret (Line 44) - Worry anxiously (about something).

Fair-haired (Line 45) - Blond.

Coronet (Line 48) - A small, simple crown worn by nobility and royalty. As the lord's only male child, the speaker's son stands to inherit his wealth and status, represented by the coronet.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Cousin Kate" is a ballad. Every ballad has a bouncy rhyme scheme and tells a story, but beyond that this form of poetry has many variations. Traditional ballads are made up of quatrains, or 4-line stanzas, consisting of alternating 8-syllable and 6-syllable lines. Each of the 6 octaves, or 8-line stanzas, in "Cousin Kate" is indeed made up of two traditional four-line quatrains.

Many ballads also have a refrain, or a line that repeats throughout the poem to draw attention to its key themes. While this poem doesn't have a conventional refrain, it makes ample use of repetition. Ballads often focus on love and many contain allegories that teach moral lessons. Rossetti draws from these traditions as she weaves romance, desire, and ruin into the story of "Cousin Kate," warning its readers about the dangers of giving in to temptation.

Ballads were also often originally set to music because their use of repetition, simple rhymes, and bouncy rhythm makes them easy to remember. Rossetti is known for using straightforward forms, like the ballad, to ensure a wide audience is able to follow her stories and tease out their meanings. In "Cousin Kate," Rossetti sticks closely to common meter, which is conventional for ballads, and uses familiar language, keeping her poems accessible to a broad readership. "Cousin Kate" is also easy to follow structurally, as the narrative generally moves forward in time from one stanza to the next.

METER

Like most of Rossetti's poems, "Cousin Kate" follows a strict metrical pattern. In this case, the poem employs common meter, which is traditional for ballads. The building block for common meter is the iamb, a da-DUM pattern, created by an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Common meter consists of alternating lines of four iambs (iambic tetrameter) and three iambs (iambic trimeter). For example, line 15 is written in iambic tetrameter, while line 16 is written in iambic trimeter:

> So now | I moan | an un- | clean thing,
> Who might | have been | a dove.

For the most part, the meter throughout "Cousin Kate" is very steady and predictable. Rossetti's rare deviations from this pattern accent individual words, emphasizing their meaning within the poem. For example, the first line of the poem is missing its final stress and the first foot of the second line is inverted, so that the first syllable is a trochee (stressed-unstressed) rather than an iamb:

> I was | a cot- | tage maiden
> Hardened | by sun | and air

Notice how the da-DUM pattern here actually stretches over the line break, the unstressed "den" of "maiden" combining with the first stressed beat of "Hardened" to basically create an iamb (den / Har). This works in conjunction with the enjambment here that causes the first line to spill over into the second. Together, this creates rhythmic momentum and a dramatic sense of urgency at the poem's outset. Plus, the additional stress on "hardened" lends it an increased harshness that seems to reflect the word's meaning.

Rossetti replaces initial iambs with trochees in a few other places within the poem. In some cases, the additional emphasis on the first syllable heightens the effect of antithesis, underscoring the differences between the speaker and Kate. Take a look at the meter in line 20, which again opens with a trochee:

> Chose you, | and cast | me by

In this example, the use of caesura makes the divergence from the meter even more dramatic. Both "Chose" and "cast" are stressed, allowing both to stand out to the ear and underscore the gulf between the speaker and Kate. Overall, though, Rossetti's deviation from common meter is minimal; the poem flows almost seamlessly, drawing further attention to the few

moments where she plays with rhythm to enhance the poem's tone and echo its images.

RHYME SCHEME

Traditional ballads consist of quatrains that have an ABCB rhyme scheme. The stanzas in "Cousin Kate" consist of two quatrains (creating an octave) and the pattern they follow is a continuation of the traditional ballad rhyme scheme:

ABCBDBEB

Rossetti uses the above pattern as a template, which she follows exactly in the second stanza. But in many of the other stanzas, she adds many additional repeating end rhymes. For example, the third stanza has the following rhyme scheme:

ABABCBAB

For instance, in that third stanza Rossetti links "Kate" to her "father's gate" and to the "mean estate" from which she is lifted. The long /a/ at the end of line 21 associates "the lane" with this grouping via assonance (i.e., there's also a long /a/ sound in all these rhymes); this might even be classified as a slant rhyme. She also weaves these end rhymes *between* stanzas: all these rhymes in stanza three connect to the "cottage mates" mentioned way back line 13 of the first stanza. All of the words and phrases that Rossetti ties to "Kate" through rhyme have to do with her humble beginnings, emphasizing Kate's closeness to the lower-class way of life that she now looks down upon.

There are also moments when the repeated B rhyme of one stanza appears at the end of a line in another stanza. For instance, the sounds that end line 15 and line 43—"unclean thing" and "wedding-ring," respectively—rhyme perfectly with the end rhymes of the 6-syllable lines in stanza 4—"ring," "thing," "sing," and "wing." A similar effect links "love," at the end of line 37, with the end rhymes of stanza 2.

Rossetti's use of rhyme creates chains of sonically linked words and weaves them throughout the poem to create a complex web of associations. This web mirrors the complicated love triangle and intertwined family trees that the speaker, the lord, and Kate find themselves in.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Cousin Kate" is a woman who remains nameless but shares many aspects of her personal life. Over the course of the poem, a powerful man seduces and impregnates her, then casts her aside to marry her sexually pure cousin, Kate. The speaker presents herself sympathetically by describing her own misfortunes and highlighting other characters' misdeeds. The speaker reprimands Kate most forcefully and directly. Beginning in line 17, the speaker addresses Kate, accusing her of betraying family loyalty by marrying the lord even after he mistreats the speaker.

The speaker's tone shifts in the final stanza, when she stops pleading with her cousin to see the error of her ways and instead tries to one-up Kate. The speaker brags that her son will inherit the lord's wealth since Kate is unable to give the lord a son. By the poem's end, the speaker no longer appears to be a naive, sympathetic young girl who is misled and mistreated.

Rossetti was extremely devout and turned down multiple suitors for religious reasons. Therefore, the speaker's decision to compromise her purity for love distances her from the poet. However, Rossetti also volunteered at a house for "fallen women" (woman who'd had sex outside of wedlock) during the time she wrote "Cousin Kate," so their stories probably incited Rossetti's sympathy and inspired the speaker's tone and experiences.

SETTING

"Cousin Kate" takes place in a small, rural town, complete with cottages, rustic roads, and fields of grain. Although the setting does not change over the course of the poem, the speaker's attitude towards it does. At first, the speaker is happy with her humble surroundings, but a powerful lord exposes her to luxury, shattering her contentment with working-class life. Later, the speaker complains about the setting, which she now finds shabby and indecent.

While the poem does not disclose exactly when and where its events take place, it is reasonable to infer that "Cousin Kate" is set in 19th-century Great Britain, where Rossetti wrote and published her poems. Indeed, the strict social expectations that the speaker describes are characteristic of Britain's Victorian era (1837-1901).

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Christina Rossetti is one of the most well-known poets of the Victorian era. She is often praised for her natural lyrical gift—a strong command of form, meter, rhyme, and straightforward language. Rossetti's mastery of verse gives her poems an air of simplicity on the surface, while its secondary meanings are subtle and implicit.

Rossetti admired fellow 19th-century poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to whom she is often compared. *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, Rossetti's first book, was published in 1862, the year after Barrett Browning died. Rossetti was seen as Barrett Browning's natural successor, the next great woman poet of the time. However, Rossetti's work was less overtly political, more concerned with the actions of individuals rather than

broad social reform. While both poets often explored religious themes, Rossetti's work is much more straightforward in its ideas and language.

Rossetti grew up in an artistically gifted family of writers, painters, and scholars. Her most accomplished family member was her older brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who co-founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, an artistic group focused on imitating nature and painting realistically with vivid color and detailed imagery. While Christina Rossetti was never an official member, she had close relationships with group members and published poems in their periodical.

The group's influence is reflected in Rossetti's minute attention to detail, pastoral settings, use of symbolism, and medieval inspiration (such as the ballad form). Dante Gabriel was also instrumental to Rossetti's poetic output in other ways: he encouraged her to submit her poems to publications, created art for her books, negotiated with publishers, and corresponded with Rossetti extensively to provide feedback on her work.

"Cousin Kate" is an example of a dramatic monologue, a form in which the speaker is a specific character who addresses someone—the reader, the poet, or another character—who remains silent. The dramatic monologue was emerging as a new form around the time Rossetti wrote "Cousin Kate." It was popularized by Alfred, Lord Tennyson ("Ulysses") and Robert Browning ("My Last Duchess"), among other contemporary poets, including Rossetti herself.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Rossetti wrote "Cousin Kate" during Britain's Victorian era, the period from 1837 to 1901 during which Queen Victoria of England ruled. Victorian gender roles were incredibly strict and narrow, and as a result men and women were held to vastly different social standards.

Women were seen as the property of men and were taught to obey men's wishes. It was common for men to have extramarital affairs without consequence, while women—who were expected to be sexually pure—were ostracized for the same behavior. Thus, women had to both obey men's wishes and deny their sexual advances. Furthermore, since women had little opportunity to rise in social class, worsened by the extreme wealth gaps of the Victorian era, they had to compete with one another to win over possible husbands.

Additionally, the Rossetti family was swept up in the Oxford Movement, a mid-19th-century revival of Catholicism in Britain that sought to restore older Christian traditions. Many of its prominent practitioners, known as Tractarians, were poets, such as John Henry Newman and John Keble. Rossetti was deeply religious and her faith was essential to her poetic output. Tractarian influence can be observed in Rossetti's interest in moral allegory and medieval verse forms, as well as her broader use of poetry to express religious concerns.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Gender and Sexuality in the 19th Century — A collection of articles on gender and sexuality in the Victorian era, written by a biographer of Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. (http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/g/gender-and-sexuality-in-the-19th-century/)
- In Our Time: Christina Rossetti — A 45-minute podcast episode in which literary scholars discuss Rossetti's life and work for BBC Radio 4. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b017mvwy)
- The Oxford Movement — The Wikipedia page for the Oxford Movement, including a list of associated figures. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxford_Movement)
- Rossetti's Biography — An in-depth account of of Rossetti's life, including a detailed discussion of her writings and links to many of her poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/christina-rossetti)
- A Reading — A reading of "Cousin Kate" on YouTube. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnj-dfftXvI)
- Art Term: Pre-Raphaelites — A brief, straightforward overview of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood from the Tate Museum. (https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/pre-raphaelite)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CHRISTINA ROSSETTI POEMS

- No, Thank You, John

HOW TO CITE

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