

AQA A Level English Language and Literature

Activities and Exam Practice

Rossetti – Poems

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(sample pages)



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Detailed study 1: 'Cousin Kate'

Found in:

➤ *Selected Poems: Christina Rossetti*, page 103

Reading the poem

First explore the poem by reading it through several times. Read it aloud at least once – poetry is a form of music so you need to hear its sounds. You may be surprised how different the poem feels when you read it aloud.

You may also find it helpful to work with a partner and to take turns reading 'Cousin Kate' to each other. This is a useful starting technique for the study of any poem.

Glossary

flaxen (verse 1): fair-haired
mean (verse 3): humble, poor
estate (verse 3): situation
coronet (verse 6): small crown a member of the House of Lords is entitled to wear

A first-person narrative

The poem is told from the viewpoint of an unnamed narrator: it is a **first-person narrative**. This poem's 'story' is that the pretty blonde narrator, who is from a humble working family (a 'cottage-maiden') is seduced by a 'great lord'. When he tires of her he abandons her 'like a glove', partly because he has spotted another attractive girl of 'mean estate', the narrator's cousin, Kate.

Because Kate remains 'good and pure', and won't allow herself to be seduced, the lord marries her. The bitter (jealous?) narrator, 'an outcast thing' in her community, believes (pretends?), that she has the greater happiness because she has the lord's child whereas Kate is childless.

The moral tone

The moral tone of this poem is strange. Is Rossetti really suggesting, against the grain of conventional Victorian thinking and the belief of

her own church, that the narrator is better off than Kate? Marriage was supposed to be at the heart of Victorian life and what every girl wanted. Think carefully about this and look closely at the poem for evidence.

Because there is considerable moral ambivalence in this poem Rossetti gives the narrator several **oxymorons** (two apparently contradictory words used together) Consider the effect of:

shameless shameful

and

my shame, my pride

Consider the sexual significance of:

He wore me like a golden knot
He changed me like a glove.

Rossetti was quite unable to be sexually explicit, but does she make her meaning clear? If so how? Do you find it repugnant? Are you meant to?

Notice Rossetti's use of **strong verbs** in 'Cousin Kate'. Most are single-syllable words derived from Old English rather than from Latin or French, such as 'lured' 'chose', 'cast' and 'howled.' Do you think such lexical choices contribute to the poem's bitter tone because they are direct and unequivocal?

Rhyme and rhythm

Study Rossetti's rhyme and rhythm and work out why 'Cousin Kate' is effective as poetry. She could – in theory – have used the same subject matter as the basis of a short story.

What do you think about the six-verse/eight-line structure and the fluid rhyme pattern which become more fixed as the poem progresses and the narrator becomes more assertive? You will probably need to comment on this in an examination essay.

Discussion

Read or reread 'The Convent Threshold' (*Selected Poems: Christina Rossetti*, page 14). How does it compare with 'Cousin Kate' in terms of –

- style?
- tone?
- subject?

The following discussion points will help you to understand 'Cousin Kate' better. Work through them with a partner. Make full notes and use your notes to help you with the essay suggestion which follows.

- 1 What is the significance of the word 'dove' (a symbol is something standing for something else such as the Union flag representing Britain or a wedding ring as a sign of marriage)
- 2 What do you notice about the sound pattern in 'So now I moan like an unclean thing'? Look at the vowel sounds. Make sure you know what onomatopoeia is (and that you can spell it!)
- 3 Whom does the narrator blame for her predicament? How does Rossetti convey this?
- 4 Victorian poets often resorted to archaic language and word forms. Are there any examples here and if so why are they used and to what effect?
- 5 The narrator is unnamed. What is the effect of this and how does it affect the reader's response to her? By contrast Kate is named three times in the poem and once in the title.

Writing practice

Write an essay about 'Cousin Kate' commenting in detail on aspects of Rossetti's use of language and poetic technique which interest you. Aim for about 750 words.