



### The poet (contextual information about the poet relevant to the poem) (AO3)

- Christina Rossetti (1830–1894) is sometimes called the ‘greatest Victorian woman poet’.
- She began writing poetry when she was very young and had written over 50 poems by the age of 16.
- She suffered from times of depression throughout her life and never married.

### The poem (content and context)

#### What is the poem about? (AO1)

The poem is about an innocent young girl who is taken advantage of by a wealthy lord. She becomes pregnant but he abandons her, and she is cast out and shunned by her neighbours. Society considers her ‘shameful’ and impure because she had sex outside of marriage. The lord then marries her cousin, Kate. Kate held on to her purity by not having sex with the lord until they were married. However, the narrator is smug and triumphant at the end as Kate cannot have children and so the lord will not have a legitimate heir for his lands and titles.

### Structure and form (AO2)

- It is a narrative poem, written from the viewpoint of the ‘cottage maiden’.
- It has many features of traditional ballads which were often about the theme of love and meant to teach a moral lesson.
- It is written in six stanzas.
- Each stanza has 8 lines and every other line rhymes.
- This regular rhyme scheme is one of the features of a traditional ballad.
- It is told in the first person and directed to the narrator’s cousin, Kate.
- Stanzas one to five are in the past tense to show what has happened to the narrator.
- Stanza six is in the present tense to describe the narrator’s current situation and how she finally triumphs with a fitting retribution for Kate.
- The poem has been carefully structured to tell the story of the narrator’s downfall, but each stanza also refers to her current feelings of sadness, bitterness and anger towards Kate and the lord.

### Deeper meaning (AO1)

The poem explores the nature of love and lust. It highlights the inequality of the unnamed narrator and the Lord. It explores themes of gender, morality and hypocrisy as women were expected to be chaste and submissive.

### Context of the poem (AO3)

The poem highlights the double standards of the period as no blame is attached to the lord for his behaviour. Rossetti wrote *Cousin Kate* in 1862 during the Victorian period, when women were thought to be inferior to men and were subject to stricter moral expectations than men. The poem looks at society’s expectations of women and the injustice of gender inequality. It highlights the patriarchal nature of Victorian society. The need for a male heir is evidence of this. It also portrays women as property or things to be owned which was typical of the time.

### Language and Imagery (AO2)

- The simile ‘He wore me like a silken knot’ suggests that the lord considered the narrator to be just an attractive accessory to flaunt. Fashion accessories change with the season implying that the relationship with the narrator will be fleeting and not permanent. A ‘silken knot’ can easily be undone – like their relationship.
- The alliteration of ‘howl’ suggests that the narrator’s despair is animalistic in its nature.
- The interrogative ‘why did a great lord find me out To fill my heart with care’ suggests that the narrator regrets everything that has happened and would change things if she could.
- The oxymoron of ‘lead a shameless shameful life’ shows that the narrator enjoyed her affair with the lord even though it was wrong by Victorian standards.



### 12 key questions to ask about the poem

1. Who do you think the poem is addressed to and why? (AO1)
2. Why is the first line 'I was a cottage maiden' written in the past tense? (AO1)
3. What is the effect of the two rhetorical questions in stanza one? (AO2)
4. What is the effect of the image 'He lured me to his palace home'? (AO2)
5. What is the effect of the image 'an unclean thing'? (AO2)
6. What do you think the symbolism of the 'dove' is in the poem? (AO1)
7. What is the effect of the metaphor 'Even so I sit and howl in dust'? (AO2)
8. Why has the poet included so many examples of contrasts across the poem? (AO1)
9. What is the effect of the metaphor 'gift' in the final stanza? (AO2)
10. Why do you think there is a difference in tone between the first and last stanzas? (AO2)
11. Why do you think it would have been important at the time for the lord to have a child 'To wear' his 'coronet'? (AO3)
12. Why do you think society approved of Kate and not the narrator? (AO3)

### Key quotations (AO1)

- 'I was a cottage maiden'
- 'He lured me to his palace home'
- 'His plaything and his love'
- 'He changed me like a glove'
- 'Chose you, and cast me by'
- 'Even so I sit and howl in dust'
- 'Your love was writ in sand'
- 'Yet I've a gift you have not got'
- 'Cling closer, closer yet'
- 'Why did a great lord find me out'
- 'To lead a shameless shameful life'
- 'He wore me like a silken knot'
- 'So now I moan, an unclean thing'
- 'Call me an outcast thing'
- 'You sit in gold and sing'
- 'I would have spit into his face'
- 'My fair-haired son, my shame, my pride'

“ ”

### Connections and contrasts (AO3)

*This is not an exhaustive list and other comparisons may be valid.*

#### **Sonnet 29 by Elizabeth Barrett Browning**

Both poems explore themes of love and relationships as well as resilience and strength.

#### **Catrin by Gillian Clarke**

Both poems explore themes of love and family relationships, motherhood, conflict and strength.

#### **Kamikaze by Beatrice Garland**

Both poems explore love and family relationships, shame, honour, breaking of society's expectations and individual strength.

#### **Dusting the Phone by Jackie Kay**

Both poems explore themes of love and relationships.

### Links for further research

- [A blog about Christina Rossetti](#)
- [Christina Rossetti podcast with Melvyn Bragg](#)
- [Christina Rossetti: Vision and Verse](#)

