

'Cousin Kate' (1860), by Christina Rossetti

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, 5
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- 10
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, 15
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. 20
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 25
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: 30
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, 35
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. 40

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, 45
Cling closer, closer yet:
Your father would give lands for one
To wear his coronet.

1. Reading

We'll read the poem aloud

ALWAYS read poetry aloud where possible. This is a dramatic monologue, so pretend you are on stage!
You are the actress playing the 'cottage maiden'.

What do we know about the speaker's character? How does her voice sound? Who is she speaking to at various points in the poem?

*Tip for reading aloud: Pause where the punctuation falls (read with sentences in mind not individual lines) → read with the **rhythm**, not the **metre***

TO DO: Practice in pairs by reading the first two stanzas



The Enchanted Interior

“*The Enchanted Interior* explores the sinister implications of a popular theme in nineteenth-century painting: the depiction of the interior as a ‘gilded cage’ in which women are pictured as ornamental objects. Iconic Pre-Raphaelite paintings by artists such as Edward Burne-Jones and William Holman Hunt will be shown alongside works by their female peers such as Emma Sandys and Evelyn De Morgan, who challenge and subvert the idealisation of women as captive damsels or passive beauties. Meanwhile, installation and moving image work by contemporary artists such as Mona Hatoum and Fiona Tan highlight the duality inherent in the interior, as a site that can be a sanctuary or a threat.” (<https://laingartgallery.org.uk/whats-on/the-enchanted-interior>)

Note: The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) was founded by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Christina’s brother), William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais in 1848.

[Rossetti’s poem reflects many of the same ideas as this exhibition](#)

CONSIDER: Who occupies the ‘enchanted interior’ in Rossetti’s poem? Is it a ‘gilded cage’?

2. Art as challenge and social critique

The exhibition traces how artworks “challenge and subvert the idealisation of women as captive damsels or passive beauties”.

In what way is Rossetti’s poem a challenge? What ideas does it challenge or seek to subvert?

Look at the artworks to find connections with Rossetti’s poem that help you to understand it further:

TO DO (in pairs)

Can you find paintings that remind you of the poem in some way?

Write down how ideas you find in the paintings connect to specific lines, images and ideas in the poem.

Tip: If you get stuck you might want to reflect on the following themes:

Beauty; sexuality and desire; innocence; nature vs. artifice/ornament/decoration; wealth vs. poverty; the home (domestic spaces); interiors vs. exteriors; wives vs. mistresses; passive vs. active; objectification.



3. Separate spheres and double standards

Where are the men in the paintings in the exhibition? See if you can find any!

TO DO: In pairs, find men in the artworks in the exhibition.

In these examples, how are the men presented? What is their role in the image?

Think carefully:

Why do you think these portraits focus so much on women? Are they giving women a voice (and a space in art) or turning them into objects?

What types of women are represented in these paintings?

What type of woman is represented in 'Cousin Kate'? Is she given a voice (and a space in literature) or turned into an object?

How might ideas of '**separate spheres**' for men and women, or a '**double standard**' apply here? If the paintings depicted men, in what ways would they be different?

CONCLUSIONS: What is 'Cousin Kate' about overall? So *what* does Rossetti show us, and *why* does she choose to do it in this particular way?

