**'Cousin Kate' - Language, tone and structure**

**Language and tone**

**An implied audience**

The speaker addresses her questions, laments and moans to Kate. She begins the third verse, ‘O Lady Kate, my cousin Kate' and the fifth, ‘O cousin Kate'. Throughout, she employs a tone of accusation, repeatedly using the word ‘you' as she compares Kate to herself. In the last four lines, the speaker draws her attention away from her bitterness at Kate and addresses her son. She calls him ‘my shame, my pride' (line 45).

**Anger and anxiety**

The speaker's questions in the first stanza express her anger and confusion at the experiences she has had to endure:

Why did a great lord find me out,  
And praise my flaxen hair?  
Why did a great lord find me out  
And fill my heart with care? (lines 5-8)

She suggests that before the arrival of the ‘great lord', she was happy and ‘contented' (line 3). She was not looking for a new situation in life. It came unexpectedly. The idea that the lord filled her heart with care suggests that she had less to worry about previously. She is angry that he made her anxious instead of happy and took her away from her friends, her ‘cottage mates' (line 3).

The speaker later expresses her anger when she declares that, if she had been in her cousin's place as the marriage choice of the lord, she would ‘have spit into his face / And not have taken his hand' (lines 39-40). Her emotions are incredibly strong and the violence of her anger is expressed through her imagination.

**Active and passive verbs**

Rossetti emphasises the powerlessness of women in Victorian society by associating the lord with a series of actions which take the initiative. He:

* ‘f[ound]' the speaker ‘out' / ‘praise[d]' her / ‘lured' her / ‘wore' her / ‘changed' her / ‘cast' her ‘by' / ‘fooled' her.

These are harsh actions, which become more ominous with regard to Kate. Like a stalker, the lord:

* ‘saw' her / ‘chose' her' / ‘watched' her / ‘lifted' her ‘To sit with him' / ‘bound' her / ‘won' her / ‘bought' her.

The women are even confined by the labels they are given by society (called ‘good and pure' or ‘outcast').

By contrast, until [stanza](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/stanza) 5 the women are the passive recipients of these actions and are associated with verbs of being or response, rather than of action:

* In the early stanzas the speaker ‘was … contented' and ‘Not mindful'. She simply laments her lot (‘moan', ‘howl'). Even at the end she refers to herself as ‘hav[ing] a gift' of a child, rather than actively creating him
* Similarly Kate ‘sit[s] … on high' / ‘w[as] … good and pure'. In response to her changed life, she merely ‘sing[s]' and ‘fret[s]'
* Even though the speaker seems to gain momentum in stanza 5, claiming that she ‘would have spit' and ‘[would] not have taken' the lord, the fact that this is in the future conditional tense indicates that the reality of the situation is very different from this wish fulfilment.

**Investigating language and tone**

* Where do you think that the speaker's anger really lies?  
  + Do you think the accusations she throws at her cousin are justified?
  + Do they create a sense of sympathy for the speaker?
  + Why do you think that the poem is not addressed to the lord himself?

**Structure and versification**

**Alliteration**

[Alliteration](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Alliteration) is used throughout the poem:

* The soft innocence of the speaker before her life changed is conveyed by the soft M of ‘maiden', ‘mates' and ‘mindful' in stanza 1
* When the speaker claims that she was led to the lord's house to lead a ‘shameless shameful life', the [sibilance](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sibilance) in this line reinforces the joining together of [oxymoron](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/oxymoron)s that these words perform. It also reflects the hushed manner in which the speaker was ensnared by the lord, taken in, then later cast aside
* The speaker's anger shines through the harsh consonants of ‘Lady Kate, my cousin Kate'
* In the final stanza, the speaker emphasises the close bond she shares with her son when she asks that he ‘Cling closer, closer yet' (line 46). The emphasis here highlights her fear and together with the repetition of the word ‘closer', suggests that it is for her own comfort, as well as her son's, that they remain together.

**Repetition and contrast**

The repetition of: ‘Why did a great lord find me out', conveys the anger and bewilderment of the speaker at her change of circumstances, whilst the phrase: ‘good and pure' has a hollow ring by its second occurrence.

Thereafter, repeated phrases are altered to highlight the contrasting situations of Kate and the speaker:

* The community ‘call' Kate ‘good and pure', but ‘call' the speaker ‘an outcast thing'
* Kate ‘sit[s] in gold', the speaker ‘sit[s] … in dust'
* Kate's fate is to ‘sit … and sing', the speaker's to ‘sit and howl'
* However, the speaker believes her ‘love was true', while Kate's ‘love was writ in sand'
* The echoed structure in the final stanza – that Kate has ‘not got' and is ‘not like to get' the gift of a child – emphasises the speaker's sense of triumph.

**Rhyme**

The entire poem is written within an unrelenting rhyme scheme. Within each verse, the final word of even lines all rhyme with one another. Around this rhyme scheme, other rhymes are introduced.

In the final verse, the rhyme scheme runs abcbdbeb. Whereas most stanzas have some odd lines rhyming, none of them do in here, making the individualised words stand out more. ‘Ring' and ‘one' (lines 43, 47) are both words which usually signify unity, but the situation the speaker describes does not have a unified happy ending and the wedding-ring she speaks of does not symbolise the union it traditionally stands for.

**Metre**

*Cousin Kate* is written in the form of 3 and 4 [foot](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/foot) [iambic](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/iambic) [trimeter](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/trimeter)s and [tetrameter](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/tetrameter)s. This allows the poem to be read at speed and enables a more pronounced rhythm to develop that would be impossible in a poem consisting of longer lines.

The [ballad](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/ballad)-like qualities of the rhythm reflect the morals or ideas that her speaker wishes her tale to convey.

**Investigating structure and versification**

* Note down the rhyme scheme for the entire poem. Do you notice anything interesting about it?
  + How, if at all, does it change as the poem develops?
* Look more closely at the rhyme scheme in the second verse. What is the effect of rhyming the words ‘love', ‘glove' and ‘dove?'
  + How does linking these words together contribute to the message the speaker is giving?
* Read the fourth verse aloud and look closely at the rhythm it creates. Which words are more pronounced than others?
  + Do you notice anything unusual?
* Read the fourth line again. How, if at all, does the rhythm of this line reflect the mood of the speaker?