

# A comparison between the poems 'cousin kate' and 'ballad' essay



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' Ballad' is a poem, which tells a story.

Ballads are usually written to be sung. It is a poem that has been passed down orally from generation to generation. It is a very much a poem that suits the times as a very popular theme of ballads was and still is, the dishonest lover. ' Ballad' is a poet less poem because it has been carried through generations through word of mouth, the author has been lost and is unknown.

At first glance at the poem ' Cousin Kate', we do not see the significance of the title, as the protagonist does not mention her own name. Only when we realise the afore mentioned ' Kate' is the focus of the protagonists hatred do we understand the titles relevance. Christina Rossetti who was born on December 5th 1830 wrote ' Cousin Kate'. She was the sister of the famous poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Both brother and sister belonged to the Mid-Victorian movement called the ' Pre Raphelites'.

The aim of the movement was to recreate poetry and literature in art using the simplicity, colour and symbolism of the medieval age. Throughout this poem we can see Rossetti's use of colour and symbolism getting across to her readers a clear picture of the protagonist and her deceitful lover.

Rossetti's poems tend to be philosophical, dealing with death, religion, love and its most tragic aspects. In ' Cousin Kate' Rossetti expresses her thoughts about the fraudulent side of love.

' Ballad' tells the story of a young maid who is courted by a shepherd who woos her into having a relationship with him then leaves her alone when she finds she is pregnant with his child who is conceived out of wedlock. The

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poem is very sombre, it tells a sad, serious tale. It is a dark, suicidal poem. In line 6, the author has used the words 'frost and snow', which makes us feel as though the protagonist has been placed in a cold, harsh scene.

This connotation also helps us understand the cold, icy hostility that she must have been receiving from the people who surround her. The mood of this poem makes us feel as though the protagonist is trapped and forced to deal with her dire situation alone. The Line: 'When winter nights did darkly prove' (Line 11) sets a trapped, dark, lonely mood to the ballad. In line forty-two, the writer has used the word 'thorn' to make us feel the mood of the poem is a painful one. Similarly, the mood of 'Cousin Kate' is a woeful one.

The protagonist talks of how she regrets her actions 'He lured me to his palace home Woe's me to joy thereof' (Lines 9 and 10) As the poem goes on, the protagonist talks of her antagonist. The mood turns from a regretful one to one of hostility and enmity. The poem expresses the protagonist's feelings of betrayal and continues to suggest that the protagonist is somewhat jealous of Kate (the antagonist). The further we go back in time, the more we see England as truly Christian country. As ballad has been passed down from generation to generation without a trace as to the author or the year in which it was written we can assume that it was written in a time in which people tend to refer to the Bible more than they do today. In the very first line of 'Ballad', the dishonest lover is referred to as a 'faithless shepherd'.

This biblical reference casts a negative light over the man in this relationship. The religious connotation suggests no belief in God, Christ or honesty. Throughout the poem, the protagonist begs for forgiveness, she

wants to be with God rather than live an intimidated life on earth or be placed in hell for her sins.' My soul with God, my body clay'(Line 20)This line is a metaphor that shows us that the protagonist in the poem simply wants to die.

The protagonist sees what has gone wrong, she knows her mistake, is remorseful and sees death and returning to her Lord as being the only solution to her problems. The author intention is to portray the sheer misery of a ruined woman. She has nothing to be happy for. All she wants is whatever peace may come with death.

In ' Cousin Kate' the lines'The neighbours call you good and pureCall me an outcast thing'(Lines 27 and 28)are considered to contain religious connotation. The words ' good and pure' suggest cleanliness. The protagonist is explaining how the society in which she lives sees Kate as a shrewd, proper person whereas they see her as and ' outcast thing'. The word outcast may also be considered religious connotation as during the time of Christ, lepers and prostitutes were considered outcasts. The protagonist has committed the sin of fornication so is considered an outcast in her society. She fears she is not pure in the eyes of God, yet seems to care more about how she is perceived in the eyes of here peers.

The Lack of biblical references suggests a lack of guilt or remorse. The protagonist focuses more on her particular feelings of dislike for Kate for her betrayal, which is not Christian practice. The Christian thought is to turn the other cheek or forgive and forget. Without having studied ' Ballad' it is clear

that the poem portrays the protagonist's grievances plainly. She is regretful and remorseful and it is obvious.

In line thirty-three the author talks of how she ' weeps the past' and ' dreads the gloom'. In line 14 she says how she wishes she was ' a maid again'. She knows she has done wrong and wishes she could take it all back. She now grieves over the birth of her baby whereas more often than not this is a joyous occasion. She also grieves over how the effects of having a baby out of wedlock will affect her life. The antagonist is the shepherd whom she lost her virginity to.

In ' Ballad' he is not a main focus. The main focus is, her depression at being left destitute by him, his actions and the baby he has left her with. Contrary to ' Ballad', the protagonist in ' Cousin Kate' does not grieve over her actions with the man she has slept with. He is a wealthy man of power and status. In his society he is a Lord, she is inferior to him not just because of her gender but also because of her status. Having impregnated the protagonist in ' Cousin Kate', the Lord marries her cousin who is baron.

He has an heir by the woman he fornicated with but the woman he married cannot bear him children. The protagonist cannot grieve over her behaviour with the Lord too much because if she has not had intercourse with him, she would not have her son who acts as her only consolation to the anger, betrayal and jealousy she feels when she sees her cousin.'Your father would give lands for oneTo wear his coronet'(Lines 47 and 48)In these lines, the protagonist is talking to her son. She tells him how his genetic father would give anything for his wife to bear a son that may be his heir and wear his

crown and yet he has already had a son with her whom he treated unjustly. The images that the words in 'Ballad' conjure tend to be pessimistic.

I have already mentioned line six in which the author uses the words 'frost and snow' to summon harsh, unloving images in the mind of the reader. Line eleven 'When winter nights did darkly prove' talks of the advanced stages of pregnancy. Pregnancy described as 'dark' is a sinister take on the traditional joyous event of childbirth and what precedes it. There are various references to death and the final grave in this poem, such as line sixteen 'O when will green grass cover me?' These images are frequent. Line twenty-four says 'Left me to want a bed of clay'. This line also calls up images of the cold grave.

'When thou without a friend shalt be weeping on a stranger's knee' (Lines 35 and 36) The words in these lines invoke images of loneliness. The protagonist is thinking about the effects of her suicide on her baby. She sees his life as a lonely one, having to depend on a few kind strangers who take pity on him. She also talks about how her baby's life will be hard from the start because of the fateful situation in which he was born in line forty-two. 'I've made thy pillow on a thorn'. There are positive images in 'Ballad'.

'When summer brought no fears to fright,' (Line 9) Pictures of a warm happy summer spent in the company of her lover are conjured in the mind of the reader. The shepherd that fathered her baby had promised the protagonist riches and finery as she says in line twenty 'He promised beds as fine as silk'. Nevertheless, 'Cousin Kate' conjures images, which show the apparent contrast between the protagonist in the poem and the antagonist in the

poem.' Even so I sit and howl in dustYou sit in gold and sing'(Lines 29 and 30)The disparity between the two is palpable. The author wishes to portray images that show the protagonist as having been treated harshly and consequently is damned to a life of work and poverty.

And yet Kate, who did things customarily, has her life full of treasures enabling her to do things in a far more signified manner. The main character in the poem had to work on a farm all her life and images of her farm work are depicted in 'Cousin Kate' in the first few lines of the first verse. The author talks of how the protagonist has been 'hardened by the sun and air' and how she is contented with her 'cottage mates'. This language draws rural pictures in the mind of the person who reads it.

These images are a sharp disparity to the images in line nine. This line talks of riches and the lustfulness of the protagonist and her lover.'He lured me to his palace home'The word 'lured' makes us think of the lust and greed in the relationship as well as the deceit of the Lord. The word 'palace' shows us in words, his immense wealth and power. A lot of the images in 'Cousin Kate' are remembrances of pleasurable times.

'Ballad' is made up of eleven quatrains. Each quatrain contains two rhyming couplets. In my opinion, the rhyming in 'Ballad' lessens the element of grief and despair in the poem. Each line in 'Ballad' has eight syllables, which keeps the rhythm steady. It is easy to imagine this poem being sung, in the true style of a ballad. After studying 'Cousin Kate', we see that it consists of six stanzas; there are two quatrains in every one stanza.

Every other line rhymes. The rhyming helps to capture the carefree, content, child like self of the protagonist. The first line in 'Cousin Kate' is seven syllables. After the first line, the lines have an alternate pattern of eight then six syllables. In some ways, the rhythm of the poem helps the reader to have a better understanding of the pattern of the protagonist's thoughts.

The man in 'Ballad' is the antagonist though he is not a focus of the poem. He is described as 'faithless'. As I have mentioned before, this connotation shines a negative light on him. It tells us, the readers, that he is not to be trusted or relied upon.

Line fourteen suggests that she is unhappier with herself than she is with him. 'I wish I was a maid again' He is of a higher status than she. He is a shepherd and she is a maid, he is more affluent and powerful. He has more liberties than she, which makes it easier for him to desert her and the baby.

To her, he was selfish and not god fearing. In verse one he is described as having stolen her heart. She feels as though he has taken it without permission or fooled her into giving it away. 'When my poor heart was strange to men He came and smiled and stole it then' (Lines 3 and 4) As with 'Ballad', the man in 'Cousin Kate' is not a main focus in the poem. However, in contrast with 'Ballad' the man does not appear to be the antagonist. He lured and fooled the persona into giving in to him.

He did not desert her as in 'Ballad' but betrayed her by marrying her cousin, a virgin. Even still, the persona's cousin, Kate becomes the antagonist not the man who impregnated her. In the eyes of the persons, the man who left her pregnant lost the one thing he wanted most, a son for an heir. The fact <https://assignbuster.com/a-comparison-between-the-poems-cousin-kate-and-ballad-essay/>



that she has his son is her one consolation for the treacherous acts of Kate. Kate married the man who had treated her so callously. Similarly to 'Ballad' the man is rich, powerful and influential in society.

He too has more liberties than she and so is able to get away with his pitiless behaviour. Much of the grief in 'Ballad' is over the birth of the protagonist's baby. The author has used repetition to emphasise just how much she wishes she could undo all that has been done.' I wish, I wish- but it's in vain-I wish I was a maid again;'(Lines 13 and 14)The person wishes her 'babe had ne'er born' in line seventeen.

She goes on to say how the baby's life will be difficult from the start because of her own actions. She loves her baby and fears that it will be forced to live in a society that will be hostile towards him. She sees the only way out for herself as death. If she does not want her baby's life to be as hard as she has made it for him then he will have to die too but she can only wish their lives away.

'I wish our sorrows both away, Our souls with God, our bodies clay.'(Lines 43 and 44)The baby of the persona in 'Cousin Kate' is definitely a boy. He is a consolation to his mother for being betrayed by her cousin. Kate cannot have children and so cannot provide the Lord with an heir to his riches and finery. Yet, he has an heir to his chattels with the persona, whom he cheated. The feelings of both women are of regret and displeasure.

The persona in 'Ballad' because her society treats her and her baby harshly and insensitively and her lover abandoned her. The protagonist in 'Cousin

Kate' because her cousin betrayed her and she has lost what respect people  
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within her rural community had for her. Both poems have been written by the first person, which makes it easy for us to see how ruined women feel. Both 'Cousin Kate' and 'Ballad' have the focal theme of love.

Men with power have rejected both female protagonists, wealth and status, both have experienced severe losses of innocence and trust, and both expected marriage and were left without. Both poems use the word 'maid' to depict their innocence and purity. Both 'Ballad' and 'Cousin Kate' talk of betrayal and abandonment by lovers or family. Each protagonist is of working class status living among country folk and have been cheated by men of a higher status and consequently suffer hurt, pain and heartache. However, notwithstanding their similar themes of love and ruined women, they have many differences. For example the protagonist in 'Cousin Kate' briefly thinks about death whereas the persona in 'Ballad' seriously considers it as a solution to her dire situation.

In 'Cousin Kate', the Lord remains within society and marries Kate but in 'Ballad' the shepherd disappears without a trace. 'When it puckered up with shame And I sought him, he never came' (Lines 7 and 8) For the persona in 'Cousin Kate' her baby is her 'pride' and joy and yet for the protagonist in 'Ballad' her baby is a shame and a humiliation. Each poem looks at ruined relationships with men and the birth of illegitimate children, comparing the two poems has brought to light the different ways in which women deal with them.