



GCSE

# English Literature

## 'Dusting the Phone' (Jackie Kay)

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

- **Jackie Kay** (b. 1961) is a contemporary Scottish poet, playwright, and novelist.
- Kay's work often explores themes of identity, relationships, love, and longing.
- She identifies as a lesbian, and her work frequently draws on her experiences of love and heartbreak.
- 'Dusting the Phone' reflects Kay's ability to capture the nuances of human emotions in everyday situations, particularly the tension between hope and despair in love.

### The poem (structure and form) (AO2)

#### Structure:

- The poem is written in free verse, reflecting the chaotic, unstructured nature of the speaker's thoughts.
- Short, fragmented lines mimic the speaker's anxiety and the disjointed nature of waiting.
- The free verse enhances the flow of the speaker's obsessive thoughts.

#### Form:

- Modern lyrical poem: Expresses the speaker's intimate emotional state.
- Conversational tone makes the emotions seem personal and relatable.
- Repetition mirrors the cyclical nature of obsessive thinking.

### The poem (content and context) (AO1, AO3)

#### What is the poem about?

The speaker describes the anxiety and emotional turmoil of waiting for a phone call from a lover. The act of dusting the phone becomes symbolic of their obsessive longing, frustration, and the desire for connection. The speaker's fixation on the phone symbolises their emotional vulnerability and unfulfilled desires.

#### Deeper meaning:

The poem examines the complexities of unrequited love and the self-doubt it creates. It explores themes of emotional longing, dependency, and the way modern technology intensifies feelings of connection and disconnection. Kay describes how love can be both consuming and isolating.

#### Context of the poem:

Kay explores modern relationships and the way contemporary forms of communication, like phones, reflect emotional experiences.

The universal themes of love and obsession are depicted in a modern context, highlighting complex and fragile human emotions.

### Language (AO2)

- The metaphor of 'dusting the phone' reflects the speaker's obsessive anticipation and frustration. The act also highlights the futile and repetitive nature of their waiting.
- The personification of the phone as something that has 'trapped' the speaker suggests the phone has control over their mental state.
- The list of metaphors describing the future as 'a long gloved hand. An empty cup. A marriage. A full house.' convey the uncertainty, possibilities, or emptiness of the future.
- The phone is a symbol of bad news or danger. 'The phone rings heralding some disaster. Sirens.' The metaphorical sirens signal alarm, a warning or an emergency.
- Rhetorical questions 'Who would ring me to tell?' and 'Or else. What?' reveal the speaker's self-doubt and desperation.



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#### Key questions to ask (10 key questions)

1. What is the effect of the verb 'heralding' in the phrase 'The phone rings heralding some disaster'? (AO2)
2. What is the effect of the repetition of 'Sirens'? (AO2)
3. What is the effect of the short sentence 'Nobody knows'? (AO2)
4. What is the effect of the verb 'assault' in the line 'I assault the postman for a letter'? (AO2)
5. What is the effect of each of the metaphors listed to describe the future as 'a long gloved hand.', 'An 'empty cup.', 'A marriage.', 'A full house.'? (AO2)
6. What is the effect of 'I am waiting on the phone. Silver service'? (AO2)
7. What is the effect of the personification of the phone which 'sends me hoaxes'? (AO2)
8. What is the effect of the personification of 'my lonely cotton sheets'? (AO2)
9. What is the effect of the two short sentences in the final stanza 'I want you. All the time.'? (AO2)
10. What is the effect of the line 'Come on, damn you, ring me.'? (AO2)

#### Links for further research:

- [In My Own Words – a programme about Jackie Kay](#)
- [Jackie Kay - Scottish Women Poets](#)
- [Read An Interview with Jackie Kay \(2024\) from writers make worlds](#)
- [Read about Jackie Kay according to the Scottish Poetry Library](#)

#### Connections and contrasts (AO3)

\*This list is not exhaustive and other comparisons are valid.

- **'The Schoolboy' by William Blake:** Both poems explore emotional experiences but in contrasting ways. While Blake laments the loss of joy due to structured routines, Kay examines the mental anguish caused by unfulfilled longing.
- **'Cousin Kate' by Christina Rossetti:** Both reflect on relationships and the power in those relationships—Rossetti's focus is on painful regret, whereas Kay's is on the obsessive torment of waiting.
- **'Sonnet 29' by Elizabeth Barrett Browning:** Both explore love and emotional longing. Browning finds joy in her love's presence, while Kay expresses anguish in its absence.
- **'Decomposition' by Zulfikar Ghose:** Both poems explore ideas about power and powerlessness.
- **'Kamikaze' by Beatrice Garland:** Memory plays a central role in both poems. Garland's is bittersweet and tied to loss, whereas Kay's memory is tied to longing and dissatisfaction.
- **'Disabled' by Wilfred Owen:** Both reflect on conflicts. Owen's poem is filled with regret and loss arising from the external and internal conflict, while Kay's poem explores the conflict of being in love and the conflict of longing.
- **'I Shall Return' by Claude McKay:** Both long for emotional peace. McKay dreams of healing through nature, while Kay finds herself trapped in obsessive waiting.