

Edexcel English Literature GCSE

Poetry Collection: Relationships

Love's Dog - Jen Hadfield

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LOVE'S DOG

Jen Hadfield

Brief Summary

The poem has only one character, the **speaker**. The speaker weighs up the **advantages and disadvantages** of being in love and suggests they have a 'love/hate' relationship with the emotion itself. The speaker's feelings towards love are conveyed using **metaphor** and **abstract language**, with both some grotesque or macabre (linked to death) imagery and some whimsical (fanciful) or quaint imagery.

Synopsis

- The speaker seems to be telling someone - the reader - the reasons why they both love and hate being in love
- The poem seems to be a fairly balanced debate, with each **"love"** statement accompanied with a **"hate"** statement, and vice versa
- The speaker compares love to the following things, in this order:
 - a medically diagnosed disease
 - a narcissist
 - something from Alice in Wonderland
 - a petting zoo
 - a potion
 - a bird
 - a washing machine
 - burnt toast, animal bones, and the waste from a slaughterhouse
 - a smoker
 - a pirate
- The poem ends as it starts. The speaker is no closer to understanding or deciding how they feel about romance.

Context

Jen Hadfield (1978 - present)

Jen Hadfield was born in 1978 in Cheshire, in the Northwest of England, to a Canadian mother and British father. At the University of Edinburgh, she studied English Literature and Language, earning



<https://www.rct.uk/event/performances-poet-jen-hadfield-microcosmic-05-2016>



a BA. She then went on to obtain a higher-level degree, an MLitt with distinction, from the University of Glasgow and Strathclyde. She now lives on the Shetland Islands. Her work has won numerous awards, including the *Eric Gregory Award* and *TS Eliot Prize* for poetry. She was the youngest person to win the *TS Eliot Prize*. Hadfield is also a visual artist. Previous art pieces of hers include works dedicated to Mexican folk art and the history of Shetland. Her art is said to reflect her poetry.

Hadfield's upbringing in the Northwest, her family ties to Canada, and her love for Shetland all hold large influences on her work. In addition, her work focuses on dialect, language, nature, and belonging.

Quotes About Hadfield's Work

- ***"A quick mind abroad alone in the ever-changing natural landscape. The language country-rooted, specific, of clear observation: a sophisticated, refreshing country brew."* - Tom Leonard**
- ***"An atmosphere of being told by campfire in a field overhung with living stars."* - Katy Evans Bush**

From the collection 'Nigh-No-Place' (2008)

The poem was inspired by Edwin Morgan's poem, ***A View of Things***, which contains the line ***"what I hate about love is its dog"***. Hadfield explains her reference to his work: ***"That phrase of Edwin Morgan's...stayed with me for a long time, it speaks to me of the effort and deliberation of love"***.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a **literary movement** that emerged in the late twentieth century. Postmodern works are typically identified by the ways in which they **challenge and subvert tradition and convention**. Furthermore, postmodern works are usually **cynical and bitter**. This is because postmodern works are written in a **post-war, existential** world. Globally significant events such as the Cold War, 9/11, and the recession can all be seen to have impacted the direction of literature in the twentieth and twenty first centuries.



horacek
https://www.reddit.com/r/zizek/comments/dh7twa/modern_vs_postmodern_artist/

Reading *Love's Dog*, you can see the postmodern influences alongside Hadfield's distinctive voice. The speaker uses unusual, **unexpected comparisons**, and their **critical view of love** fits with the long-suffering, weary perspective of postmodern characters.



The Great Recession

The late 2000s and early 2010s were marked by a period of **austerity** (reduced government spending) and **decline in economic growth globally**. The recession was started by the financial crisis and 'credit crunch' in 2007, when large banks collapsed and people lost their savings and livelihoods. Many European countries required bailouts from the EU to help pay their national debt. Austerity measures implemented by governments at this time meant there was less money in social benefit programs, such as the NHS or unemployment benefits. Unemployment rose, the poverty rate increased, as did the number of people homeless or living on the streets.

Hadfield wrote '*Love's Dog*' during this financial crisis. Though the poem is about love, you can see themes such as exploitation, distrust of authority, and pessimism - all things that were common topics during the recession.

Third Wave Feminism

The Third Wave of the Feminist Movement refers to feminism from the 1990s onwards. As the world changes, the goals of the Feminist Movement adapt: for example, when women were finally granted the right to vote, the attention of feminists moved to workplace rights.

The Third Wave is concerned with seeing women in more and more positions of power, as well as bringing attention to the **various stereotypes and stigmas** that bar women from respect and authority. This includes violence against women, including sexual violence; sexual harassment; reproductive rights; and sexual liberation. **Sexual liberation** is about allowing a woman **possession of her own sexuality**, identifying how her sexual and gender identity has been controlled by her society, and being allowed to **pursue her own interests without being shamed for them**, all in the aims of returning power to women.



<https://medium.com/@mjoym/is-third-wave-feminism-truly-intersectional-a-study-of-trans-exclusionary-radical-feminism-d7eb72209c21>

The trials and successes of feminism have had a great impact on love poetry, particularly by female poets. In '*Love's Dog*', we see Hadfield's speaker - likely a woman - voicing her own views on love. She asserts her own independence. The poem as a whole can be seen as a **feminist statement**.





Love's Dog

The lines in the first couplet mirror each other almost exactly, implying that love and hatred within a relationship are closely aligned.

This triplet exposes the selfish tendencies caused by love.

This comparison highlights the controlling nature of love and portrays passion as a wild, foreign animal.

The speaker suggests love has a magical ability to manipulate reality and compel people to be honest.

This image is macabre (disturbing) but has connotations of fragile things. The speaker sees love as a bird, and loves what makes it so - its 'bones', the things we cannot see but make it whole.

Hadfield's use of wordplay here emphasises the intensity of the speaker's emotions as the line gets more confusing.

This closing image foreshadows pain and suffering for the speaker.

What I love about love is its diagnosis
What I hate about love is its prognosis

What I hate about love is its me me me
What I love about love is its Eat-me/Drink-me

What I love about love is its petting zoo
What I love about love is its zookeeper – you

What I love about love is its truth serum
What I hate about love is its shrinking potion

What I love about love is its doubloons
What I love about love is its bird-bones

What I hate about love is its boil-wash
What I love about love is its spin-cycle

What I loathe about love is its burnt toast and bonemeal
What I hate about love is its bent cigarette

What I love about love is its pirate
What I hate about love is its sick parrot

Love is used both as a verb and a noun, making the line confusing and hard to follow. This mimics the conflict the speaker feels.

This is an allusion to Alice in Wonderland, where the protagonist is tricked into taking things that change her physical appearance.

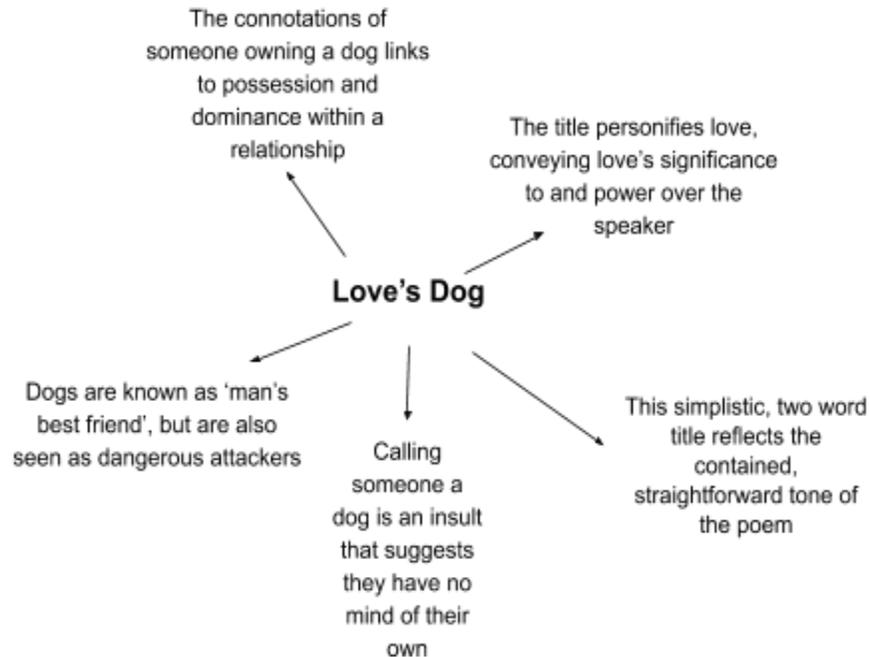
Doubloons are an old form of Spanish money. They hold connotations with treasure and pirates.

Comparing love to a washing machine suggests it has the ability to wash away mistakes, but that the process is painful.

Bone Meal is made of ground animal bones and is used as a fertiliser.



The title “Love’s Dog”



Perspective

The poem presents a **first person speaker** who is reasoning through their views on love. At first it seems they are talking to no one, trying to come to a decision in their own mind, or, alternatively, that they know they are talking to an audience, making the poem read like a debate or presentation.

- However, there is one use of a **second person pronoun** in the line ***“What I love about love is its zookeeper – you”***, which suggests the speaker either has someone in mind as they talk, or they are **addressing their lover directly**.

The reflective, **insightful tone** of the poem implies the speaker has considerable experience of life. The speaker is imparting (sharing) their wisdom. Moreover, the speaker uses **simplistic language** and a **direct, straightforward tone**. This conflicts with the complicated topics they are discussing.

- The contrast between the tone and the poem’s subject could imply the speaker is unwilling to fully accept their internal conflict.
- Each line is delivered as a statement, with certainty and no elaboration or room to disagree. This suggests the speaker doesn’t want to debate the matter any further.
- Alternatively, their certainty could suggest they are **trivialising** (downplaying) the issue, or that they are just stating facts of life, and are untroubled by the conflict.



The uncomplicated delivery of the poem makes the reader feel as if we are hearing the concluding statements of the speaker's inner battle, rather than witnessing the whole, messy debate.

The poem is overwhelmingly constructed with **first person pronouns**, with **"I"** and **"me"** repeated throughout. This shows the speaker's focus on how love is affecting them. They aren't really concerned about what love is to anyone else, they only care about how love makes them feel and act.

Furthermore, the speaker doesn't shy away from their feelings. They don't use layered imagery or vague descriptions to express themselves. Instead, the **verbs "love", "hate", and "loathe"** are all used to make their thoughts clear. These verbs are **extreme**, implying the speaker exercises little restraint when writing. Hadfield allows her speaker to have full ownership of their thoughts.

EXAM TIP

You could explore how the characteristics of Hadfield's speaker link to the Feminist Movement in literature.

Structure

The speaker has only one goal: to express their views on love. This is supported by Hadfield's **anaphora**: the **repetition** of **"What I love about love"** and **"What I hate about love"** emphasises the speaker's fixation on the topic. Furthermore, as each new line begins with a new **"What I love/hate[...]"**, it comes across as if the speaker cuts themselves off before they can take an individual thought any further. Normally in conversation or debate, a person wouldn't list off multiple **"What I love/hate[...]"**. The speaker conceals the second half of each apparent sentence, so the reader is left with the *what* but not the *why*.

Cyclical

The poem shows no progression or change. It opens as it ends, with a **couplet opening "What I love about love is [...] What I hate about love is [...]"**. The one small deviation from the uniform structure is the use of **"loathe"** rather than **"hate"**, and this doesn't change the meaning of the line.

- The mutation could show the speaker's growing confusion or bitterness, as the phonetics of **"loathe"** make it sound very similar to **"love"**. This implies the speaker is unable to decide if this quality of love is good or bad.
- There is some growing frustration, but the speaker comes no closer to deciding if love is good or bad as a whole.
- It may be that the purpose of the poem isn't to come to that decision, but to show that love is a mixture of the two.

Hadfield may be intending to show that love isn't a clear, binary emotion, but something harder to decipher, and expresses this by the lack of resolution in the poem.



Uniform structure

The overall structure of the poem is very **uniform**. It is made up of **couplets**. These couplets have a uniform structure of their own, as each line has to follow the sentence opener “**What I[...]**”. This uniformity and strict control could reveal how the speaker wants to find structure and clarity amongst their own confusion and conflict. If they cannot reach a decisive answer, then their controlled structure brings some comfort. Moreover, Hadfield uses the **contained structure** to remove the passion and irrationality typically seen in love poems. The **language is emotional**, but its delivery is not: the poem reads like a scientific report, debate, or pros and cons list.

RHYMING

COUPLETS

‘A rhyming pair of successive lines of verse, typically of the same length.’

<https://www.alistairredding.com/rhymingcouplets>

Couplets

The poem is in the form of couplets, some rhyming, some not. This **unconventional style** creates unease in the listener and creates disruption. The couplets could be seen to represent two people within a relationship or, alternatively, the **antithesis between love and hatred** that the speaker sees to be present in love. Furthermore, the **pairing of metaphors** shows how good and bad things come hand in hand. There is always a catch or counterargument.

Each couplet seems to have a specific focus, for example, the first is sickness and the second is selfishness. This, along with the way each line seems to be missing something, creates the impression of the poem being a **stream of consciousness**. The speaker is reaching for as many different ways as possible to make sense of their feelings. Each **metaphor** or **comparison** on its own is not enough, so they quickly move onto the next.

Other than the one use of “**you**”, which suggests the poem could be a lyric poem or dramatic monologue, the poem has no clear form. It isn’t your typical love poem. Hadfield doesn’t use punctuation, so the poem is full of **enjambment**. Grammatically, the poem doesn’t make sense because of this lack of punctuation. This links to the poem’s postmodern era.

Language (line by line analysis)

Each line in this poem contains an **individual metaphor** which contributes to the **overall tone** of the poem and reveals more about how the speaker views love.

“What I love about love is its diagnosis”

- The poem opens with a **paradox**. The speaker is talking about “**love**”, but uses the



word **“love”** to describe how they feel about it. This is like trying to define a word but using that very word in your definition. The paradox **mimics the speaker’s conflict**. Alternatively, it could show how love is so significant in how we view the world.

- A diagnosis is when a disease or illness is identified after looking at the symptoms. This suggests the speaker **“loves”** the label of being in love; for example, realising you are in love, or having a relationship become official. This suggests there is joy and comfort to be found in confirming a love exists, as it provides explanation for the ‘symptoms’ - the way you behave because you are in love. This presents love as something that has a great impact on the way our bodies work.
- However, the **noun “diagnosis”** has **connotations** of medicine and disease. This could mean the speaker finds relief in having love identified, as it means it can be treated. Alternatively, the **metaphor** presents love as a physical, anatomical (of the body) thing that can be tested for, rather than an intangible emotion. From this, Hadfield suggests love is a **natural** part of us that manifests in our body.
- The way the line is phrased could be interpreted to mean love is the one providing the diagnosis, suggesting love brings clarity or healing, like a doctor does.



<https://themighty.com/2016/12/defining-love-after-chronic-illness-diagnosis/>

“What I hate about love is its prognosis”

- A prognosis is the likely outcome of a medical condition, or, more generally, the likely outcome of a situation.
- The **noun** alludes to the **possibility of recovery**. The speaker could **“hate”** that people ‘recover’ from love, meaning they fall out of love with their partner. Alternatively, the speaker may **“hate”** that love, in their opinion, always ends in pain and heartbreak. The idea that relationships are destined to fail and end in unhappiness is a pessimistic, cynical view of love.
- **“Prognosis”** suggests that love always has an ending or outcome, which in itself is a revealing insight into how the speaker - and Hadfield - views love.
- Love’s **“prognosis”** is **contrasted** with its **“diagnosis”** by the speaker. Therefore, the speaker loves the way relationships begin, but hates the way they end. Because love begins, it must end. The use of the **couplets mimics this conundrum** as Hadfield shows you cannot have one without the other.

“What I hate about love is its me me me”

- The **repetition** in **“me me me”** is informal and familiar, **personifying love as a talkative narcissist**. The speaker is **mocking love** for its selfishness, suggesting love narrows your worldview. People in love are incapable of thinking about anyone but



themselves. The speaker implies people in relationships only do things for their own happiness, not their partner's. Hadfield implies there is no selfless motivation behind love.

- Alternatively, Hadfield could be hinting at how love makes you **self-conscious**. Being in a relationship requires self-awareness and self-restraint.
- Another interpretation could be about the **emotion** of love itself, rather than a person in love. The speaker suggests **love is needy and attention-seeking**. This could refer to how people in love are completely **consumed by their passion**. Hadfield portrays love as something distracting and draining.
- **“Me me me”** might imitate the way children speak. In this case, Hadfield portrays love as a young child. This suggests love is a naive, delicate emotion. Love needs to mature and develop for it to be successful.

“What I love about love is its Eat-me/Drink-me”

- Love is again shown to demand attention, but this time the speaker welcomes it. However, the **repetition** of **“me”** links the two lines in the couplet. These close similarities show how close love and hate are, and how hard it is to tell if love is healthy or toxic.
- **“Eat-me/Drink-me”** is an **allusion** to ‘Alice in Wonderland’. Alice consumes various different foods and drinks labelled with the commands **“eat me”** or **“drink me”**, which turn out to make her abnormally large or abnormally small. Therefore, the speaker suggests love has the ability to change you fundamentally as a person. The allusion to ‘Alice’ evokes a sense of fantasy and magic.
- The **metaphor** presents love as **enticing and appealing**. It lures you in. The speaker seems to like its **allure** (attraction and fascination), finding excitement and temptation in it.



https://www.artfire.com/ext/shop/product_view/yellercraka/2358362/alice-in-wonderland-drink-me-and-eat-me-earrings-sterling-silver-handmade-jewelry/earrings/glass

“What I love about love is its petting zoo”

- This has affectionate, **childlike connotations**. The speaker is excited by all the possibilities and opportunities that love brings in the same way a child is excited to see the different animals at a zoo.
- **“Petting”** could **allude to physical intimacy**. The speaker is thrilled at all the different ways they can be physically close to their partner.
- Alternatively, a **“petting zoo”** could represent exploitation or **objectification**. The animals are kept in cages so that children can handle them, but ultimately the children leave and the animals are left alone.



“What I love about love is its zookeeper – you”

- The use of **“love”** shows the term **“zookeeper”** is affectionate or thankful. Therefore, a **“zookeeper”** evokes feelings of trust and safety. Their partner is someone who protects them and helps them live comfortably.
- At the same time, the use of **“zookeeper”** in the singular shows a clear **power dynamic** within relationships. One person is in charge, and their partner is dependent on them for everything.
- The **modifier “- you”** uses **direct address** to make it clear that the poem is aimed at somebody, creating a loving tone.

“What I love about love is its truth serum”



<https://modloungepapercompany.com/products/bottled-up-decanter-truth-serum>

- The speaker appreciates honesty in a relationship. They believe **“love”** makes it possible to be completely truthful with your partner, perhaps because it removes any feelings of shame or deceit, or because love nurtures trust.
 - A **“truth serum”** **alludes to magic**, suggesting love is very powerful.

“What I hate about love is its shrinking potion”

- The **semantic field of sorcery** and alchemy is continued in this line.
- The **adjective** for the potion, **“shrinking”**, is an example of how reality is manipulated. The speaker suggests love changes the way things appear and can twist a lover’s perspective.

“What I love about love is its doubloons”

- A doubloon is an old Spanish gold coin. It is often associated with shipwrecks and hidden treasure, particularly in works of fiction. The speaker suggests love is a precious, priceless thing to find.
- Furthermore, the **image** could suggest the speaker loves the unexpected ways happiness or value come into their life because of love. A doubloon is no longer a valid type of currency but still has value. In this way, the speaker could be saying that love allows value to be found in things that otherwise would seem defunct or useless.
- The reference to history and hidden treasure suggests love is something from the old world. It is an antique because it’s been experienced by humanity for centuries.

“What I love about love is its bird-bones”

- The speaker turns inwards, drawing the reader’s attention to what lies ‘inside’ love. They suggest the foundation or scaffolding of love is the same as **“bird-bones”**.
- Birds are symbols of life, peace, and freedom. This suggests love brings all these things to those that experience it. Bird-bones appear fragile, but are able to withstand large amounts of power. They allow a bird to fly. The speaker suggests love allows people to



'fly' in the same way.

- Furthermore, the speaker suggests **love is able to withstand hardship and struggle**, just like its **"bird-bones"**.
- By using **macabre imagery** that discusses a body's insides, Hadfield suggests that love is pure throughout. The different motivations, feelings, and thoughts that make up love - its 'bones' - are as important as what the outside world sees. The **"bird-bones"** could be a symbol for the inner workings of a healthy relationship.

"What I hate about love is its boil-wash"

- Using a washing machine for a **metaphor** suggests love purifies people. The image is an unpleasant one that evokes discomfort, connoting a purge or deep-cleanse. The imagery could almost be interpreted to be religious or spiritual. Love makes people better and takes away their flaws, but the process is painful.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70v0m-0u0j0>

- A **"boil-wash"** is the hottest wash a machine can do, required to get rid of the worst stains. Hadfield alludes to the moment in a relationship where the worst secrets and flaws come to light. Great heat has to be endured to come out the other side.

"What I love about love is its spin-cycle"

- At the same time, the speaker is grateful for the way love purges and cleanses. This addition suggests someone can resent something despite knowing it will benefit them in the long run. The **optimism** suggests **happiness can be found after pain**.

"What I loathe about love is its burnt toast and bonemeal"

- **"Burnt toast"** and **"bonemeal"** are **images that denote decay, death, and pain**. The imagery suggests there are parts of love that are unwanted or repulsive.
- **"Burnt toast"** could **symbolise** what happens when love overstays its welcome or gets too passionate. It shows how love can hurt people because of its fickle, unpredictable nature.
- **"Bonemeal"** is made of ground animal bones and other waste products from a slaughterhouse. If love has **"bonemeal"**, this suggests there are consequences of love that are unwanted. For example, the painful processes of its **"boil-wash"** or **"shrinking potion"** produce feelings or memories that the speaker wants to forget. Hadfield links love to death.
- However, **"bonemeal"** is used for fertiliser. This suggests there is still hope. The pain of love can be used to start new life.

"What I hate about love is its bent cigarette"

- This **comical image** mocks love for being untidy and uncared for. At the same time as the **lighthearted tone**, the image of a **"cigarette"** connotes dirt and cancer. Having a **"bent cigarette"** suggests love is a character who can't be trusted.



“What I love about love is its pirate”

- This **metaphor** suggests love is adventurous and rebellious. The speaker appreciates the way love defies rules. Pirates are folk heroes. To the speaker, they **symbolise freedom and exploration**.



<https://www.zimble.com/The+Greatest+Halloween+Couples%27+Costumes+on+Television/articles/4AXMpGDCYIN/Pirate+and+Parrot>

What I hate about love is its sick parrot”

- Typically, a parrot is the sidekick of a pirate. Parrots are known for copying the words spoken by their keeper. Therefore, the speaker is suggesting love comes from dependency and inequality.
- The **adjective “sick”** is foreboding. It predicts the suffering to come from love. The speaker suggests they know their current relationship can’t last forever.

