

Edexcel English Literature GCSE

Poetry Collection: Relationships

Valentine - Carol Ann Duffy

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VALENTINE

Carol Ann Duffy

Brief Summary

Duffy's poem 'Valentine' tackles both the consumerist, modern day view of Valentine's Day, and the traditional preconceptions of love and relationships. She uses a range of metaphors to express her unconventional love and relationship, including that of an onion.

Synopsis

- The speaker gives her romantic partner an onion, instead of a more traditional or consumerist gift like a "rose" or "satin heart".
- She begins to explain why, saying that onions can hurt just like relationships can.
- Also mentions how an onion is intense, like she hopes their relationship will be.

Context

Carol Ann Duffy (1955 -)

Duffy is a very popular Scottish playwright and poet, who served as the Poet Laureate. Her work often **subverts traditional structures** and tackles themes such as love, loss and death with an unconventional twist. She is gay and was with the poet Jackie Kay for 15 years, and had a child with her.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a literary movement which follows modernism, characterised by a deconstruction of ideas and an interrogation of themes that are often perpetuated as universal, as well as non-traditional structure and theme. Typically, postmodern texts contain a lot of irony and hyperreality, and are influenced by the second world war.



Valentine

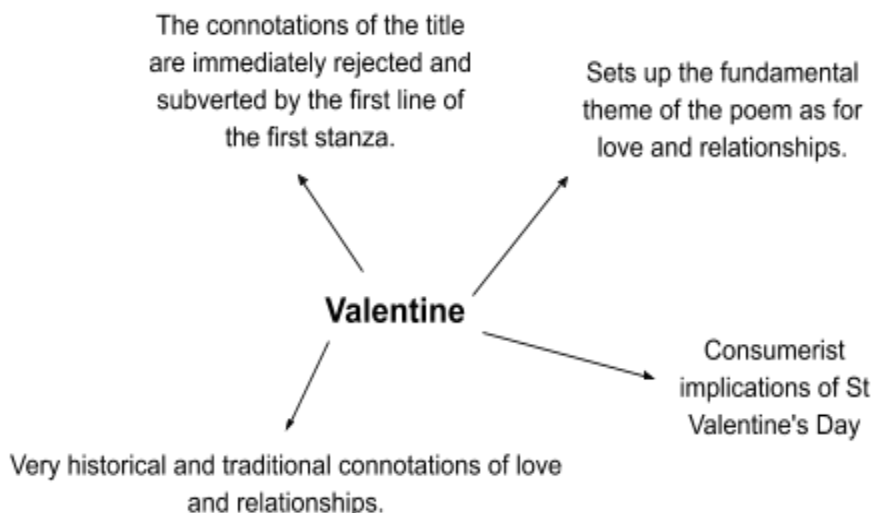
"I am trying to be truthful..." is the line that perfectly encapsulates the essence of the poem. Duffy's love poem attempts to convey the truths of being in love, or being in a relationship.



Unlike the prim and **traditional symbols** of romance, such as the **“rose rose”** or a **“satin heart”**, Duffy is claiming that romance is like an **“onion”** - it is layered and does not adhere to conditioned expectations.

The poem also battles with the presence of transience. There are many allusions to the temporary nature of relationships, in lines such as **“for as long as we are”**. However, readers can effectively detect this idea in how the characteristics of the onion remain - **“Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips.../Its scent will cling to your finger/ cling to your knife”**. These images function as a way of making this love immortal or permanent. Yet, it could allude to the idea of relationships exerting a change in a person or even more so, the idea that the traces of a relationship always remain.

The title “Valentine”



Valentine

The alliterative “red rose” is a synecdoche used to refer to Valentine’s day. Both concrete nouns “red rose”, and “satin heart” are semantically linked to romantic materialism. Duffy uses adjectives to decorate the “rose” and the “heart”. This reflects how romance is reduced to ornate, attractive gifts. Here, Duffy negates symbols of superficial love - Stereotypical objects used during Valentine’s to express emotions of love.

Duffy’s use of the first person and the second person to establish the number of individuals involved in this relationship.

The endstop emphasises the resounding action. This is a strange but banal action, suggesting that sincere expressions of love are not grand gestures, but are distinct and unusual.

The “onion” is a conceit in this poem - an extended metaphor for the speaker’s love. This is underlined by the line “blind you with tears”, playing on two meanings; onions make people cry, but also so does the speaker’s expression of love..

“Tears” and “Lover”, are half-rhymes; the similar sound draws attention to the two concrete nouns. This indicates that the “lover” is a source of pain, and sorrow. The relationship portrayed in the poem is one of pain.

Not a **red rose** or a **satin heart**.

I give **you** an **onion**.

It is a moon wrapped in brown paper.

It promises light

like the **careful undressing of love**.

Here.

It will **blind you with tears**

like a **lover**.

It will make **your** reflection

a **wobbling photo of grief**.

The “onion”, acts a metaphor for the speaker’s love. It suggests a love more complex and layered than the shallow romance advertised by modern society. The “onion”, in echoes the natural nouns of stanza one. However, in this instance, there is no preceding adjective, because this gesture is significant and real.

“Here.” The use of the single word line reinforces a level of authority and assertion. There is an immediacy readers are told not to ignore, as the “you” is the significant other, the writer’s poetic self, or the readers themselves.

The use of the second person in this irregular, longer stanza is ambiguous. Readers cannot determine whether the speaker is addressing somebody else or themselves. The image of “reflection”, suggests self-reflection. This means the “wobbling photo of grief”, is a picture of the speaker.





Plosive “trying” and “truthful”, emphasises these words. Both are non-monosyllabic in the sentence. The poem brings focus on the assertive “I”. The use of the present tense means that the speaker is never fully “truthful” being trapped in a constant state of “trying”.

“I give you an onion”, almost functions as a refrain. It returns this unique image, personal to the poet is portrayed as being at the crux of the poem.

“...for as long as we are...” highlights the temporary nature of relationships. Duffy does not use the conditional tense, which does not open this particular relationship to speculations - no “if” or “when.”

“Take it”. Imperative verb showing the speaker being more demanding, shows how the speaker takes action in this instance. This command emphasises how the other person involved in the relationship needs to accept, “Take”, the token of love.

“Scent will cling to your fingers...” Duffy creates a sensuality with the use of a primary sense - the “scent”, which “will” definitively remain on the lover’s “fingers”. Allegorical portrayal of how traces of relationships remain - they bring something new, shape a person’s identity, and will “stay” with you.

I am **trying** to be **truthful**.

Not a **cute card** or a kissogram.

I give you an onion.

Its **fierce kiss** will **stay** on your **lips**,

possessive and **faithful**

as we are,

for as long as we are.

Take it.

Its **platinum loops** shrink to a wedding ring,

if you like.

Lethal.

Its **scent** will **cling** to your **fingers**,

cling to your **knife.**

“Not a cute card...” returns to the beginning- this cyclical structure indicates the speaker’s inability to move forward forward - to move on. It also reiterates the main point of the poem- true love cannot be found in romantic materialism.

Sibilant “kiss”, “stay”, “lips”, “possessive”, and fricatives “fierce”, and “faithful”, makes this part visceral and sensual. This description is physical and sexual, and the use of sounds effectively evoke these feelings.

“Loops”, the “o”, elongating the word becomes a visible image for the “wedding ring”. Brings the image of the onion and the ring together- this has the possibility to be a committed relationship.

“Lethal”, singular adjective encapsulates the main ideas associated with love and romance - the idea that love and violence (emotional or physical) are inextricably linked to one another.

The “knife” is a symbol for violence, but it could also represent the sexuality of the poem. It could be interpreted as the “phallus”.



Perspective

The poem is from the perspective of a woman addressing someone she is romantically involved with. Duffy uses **second-person narration** in order to involve the reader. This is shown through the use of the **direct address** “*you*” and “*your*” which may suggest a sense of universality to this rejection of traditional and consumerist romance.

The Opening

“Not a red rose or a satin heart.”

Duffy starts the poem with the **traditional symbols of romance**, a “*rose rose*” and “*satin heart*” yet negates these objects with the use of the **anaphoric line** “*Not a...*”. The title sets the poem up as a traditional love poem which is then negated by the opening lines rejection of valentine traditions.

- The single line and end stop forces the reader to stop and dwell on this point, adding to its importance within the poem.

The Ending

***“Take it.
Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring,
if you like.
Lethal.
Its scent will cling to your fingers,
cling to your knife.”***

The ending of the poem is similar to the start in that Duffy **subverts** traditional symbols of love and commitment. Here, an onion ring shrinks to become a metaphorical wedding ring.

The **imperative verb** “*Take it*” shows the speaker becoming more demanding. This command emphasises how the other person involved in the relationship needs to accept or “*take*” the token of love. Here, the onion ring is meant to cement the seriousness of their love.

However, the **singular adjective** “*lethal*” breaks the romance and reminds the reader that love and pain (emotional or physical) are inextricably linked to one another. This morbid turn continues in the final two lines as the “*Scent (from the onions) will cling to your fingers...*”. This serves to be an **allegorical portrayal** of how traces of relationships remain - they bring something new, shape a person’s identity, and will “*cling*” to you.



<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/472033604694360501/>



Structure

Free Verse

Duffy's poem has no traditional form, so there is **no regular rhyme scheme / poetic meter / stanza length**. This reflects the main ethos of the poem; this is a **non-conventional relationship**. The relationship presented in the poem does not adhere to traditional social pressures of love.

As the **free verse** suggests, the **speaker is liberated** to converse with their love in the poem, and the poem displays a physical and emotional freedom.

- Free verse may be read as postmodernist as the poem is a deconstruction of purported universal ideas of love and the irregular form acts as a physical cursor of this breakdown.

An important feature of poetry is its ability to reflect a literary context; Duffy was writing at the end of the 20th Century, during which **traditional forms were out of fashion**. They were viewed as antiquated and inept at conveying modern relationships. Duffy's decision to write in free verse expresses how her context has shaped her poetry. The speaker, in the same way, is affected by their context to explore concerns over commercialised, packaged love.

Stanza

The stanza lengths in 'Valentine' are extremely varied; there is a loose pattern of single lined stanzas followed by a block stanza.

The inconsistency of structure could be mirroring the inconstancy of love within this particular relationship. There is **no harmonious equilibrium**.

This stanza format captures how the speaker in particular expresses their feelings for their loved ones.

- The **single sentence stanzas** connotes a straightforward honesty when it comes to their feelings. It also perhaps signifies a constraint on how they want to express their feelings
- Then there is a torrent of passion and an outpouring of emotion signified by the longer stanzas.

As a whole, this stanza pattern choice indicates a more natural realistic complexity of romance, than idealised fantasies perpetuated by meaningless gifts.



Meter

Traditional love poems such as ballads or sonnets usually use a meter. However, Duffy's poem goes against the norm.

- The **lack of meter** makes the poem more open to its **vernacular** - meaning audiences can hear the normal everyday language of romance.
- There is no false sense of security often constructed through a regular rhythm; this is a very honest and open relationship.

Postmodernism

The poem can be read as **postmodernist**, as it advertises a **deconstruction of ideas and an interrogation of themes that are often perpetuated as universal**. Duffy's use of form is a direct reflection of this, as the poem appears to undergo a collapse. This is visible to the readers, through the **irregular** form - the lack of set stanzas, the omission of a rhyme scheme. This alludes to the **non-conventional love** that Duffy is trying to portray and highlights that relationships each have their unique architecture, rather than a prototype, which can be used for all relationships.

Line Breaks

The **line breaks** are strange and distinct. They are unpredictable and never really break where one would expect for the beginning of a new stanza. This indicates that this relationship is unpredictable - there is an excitement and thrill that is suggested by the breaks, which seem to disregard all the rules of a poem.

Additionally, the line breaks create white space on the page, establishing natural breaks and pauses. The white space is important as it is the poet's way of signalling readers to think. Like how the line breaks allow the white space, this relationship has its own breaks and pauses



**Valentine's
Day**

[www.primarygames.com/holidays/valentines/history.p
hp](http://www.primarygames.com/holidays/valentines/history.php)



Language

Semantic Field

SEMANTIC FIELD | A writer uses words which are linked by a theme or topic throughout a text or passage.

“red rose... satin heart...cute card...kissogram”

These **concrete nouns** are **thematically linked to modern ideas of romance**. They are all typical Valentines day gifts and Duffy uses them to expose how superficial and materialistic modern love has become.

- These images show the reader Duffy’s sceptical views on Valentines day as the poem pokes fun at these meaningless gestures.
- The poet makes sure to negate these objects using the repeated **anaphoric line**, *“Not a...”*. Thus readers are told to understand how true love is reduced by modern conventions to meaningless effects. Objects that in the long term contain no real thoughts or sincere feelings.



<https://silkflowersdecoflora.co.uk/pink-silk-satin-and-glitter-artificial-roses>

“...it will blind you with tears.../its fierce kiss will stay on your lips.../its scent will cling...”

These images are semantically linked to the senses - sight, taste, and smell. The use of **sensory language** makes the experience of reading this poem more **visceral**, and at the same time connotes the poem’s **sensuality**.

- Primary senses indicate action and experience rather than gesture. Romance is a physical act that cannot be reduced to mere presents or gifts.
- **Semantically** there is also the theme of passion conveyed in these images; this highlights how the speaker’s love, embodied by the rose, demands a more powerful and potent romantic experience.

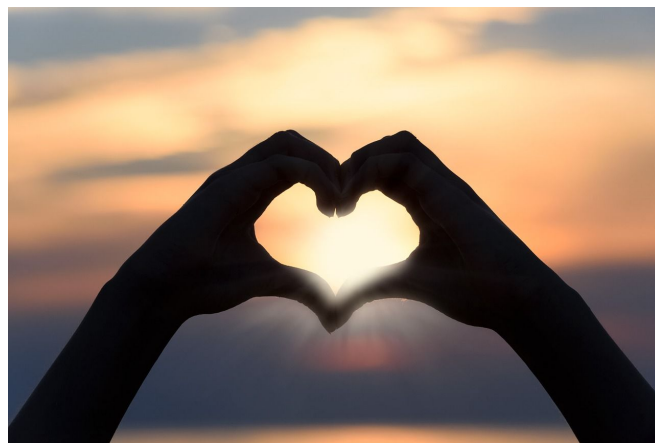


1st Person/ 2nd Person/ 3rd Person

Duffy flits between **different tenses** in order to highlight how there are multiple people involved in both the poem and the relationship.

In the lines: ***“I give you an onion/ it is the moon wrapped in brown paper.”***, the **“I”**, **“You”**, and **“it”** represents the three different people involved. The **“I”** is the speaker (arguably Duffy’s poetic self) who is the prevailing narrative voice of the piece.

- This use of **first person**, in conjunction with **active verbs** such as ***“I give...”*** emphasises the speaker’s **self-autonomy** and sense of sense.
- Duffy establishes the object of the speaker’s affection with the use of the **second pronoun** in the phrasing: ***“I give you.../your reflection.../your lips.../....your fingers”***.
- The use of the **possessive “your”**, suggests a separation- the speaker draws a line.



Despite the poem being about a relationship, Duffy doesn’t use **“our”**. This implies their relationship is not united. Furthermore, Duffy never gives the **“you”**, a full picture; it **metaphorically** dismembered ***“your lips...”*** ***“your fingers...”***, which shows a fear in

understanding the lover. This is a form of alienation - although the poem discusses the importance of a real love, the speaker herself is keeping away, a close distance to their lover.

- The **“you”** is also in question, whether is a self-referential **“you”**, or a lover or the readers themselves. Duffy is telling the readers how love will affect them through synthetic personalisation.

Also in the phrasing ***“It will blind.../It will make your.../Its scent...”***, Duffy transitions between the **“I”**, **“you”**, and the **“it”**, which is responsible for a lot of the action within the poem. The **“it”** is on a literal level the **“onion”**, which is a **metaphor for love**. Thus, Duffy establishes love as force itself in a relationship that affects the individual involved.

- This can be seen in how ***“it will...”*** definitely ***“blind...make...cling”***. Readers can question why the speaker’s love is externalised - for what reason is her love referred to a separate entity?
- It could be to underline the number of factors involved in a relationship - the two people in relationships, and the love itself.
- Or it could poetically represent the speaker, the lover, and the poet, who is injecting herself in this narrative. She does not disturb but rather outlines her power.



Metaphor

Duffy utilises a variety of **metaphors** in her poem 'Valentine' in order to help the reader relate to the love and situations described. These metaphors provide the reader with a reference point. The use of metaphor also helps the poet to convey a variety of meanings, to allow the reader to interpret their own personalised message from the poem. Metaphors used include:

- ***"I give you an onion..."***

- The action of giving the lover ***"an onion,"*** is a metaphor for giving the lover a real and sincere love. The ***"onion"*** is a **natural object**, which suggests that love is the **natural** product of a relationship. It also represents a layered complicated relationship.
- The gift of ***"an onion,"*** presumably for Valentine's Day contrasts to traditional gifts and presents used to express or show love. Here, Duffy is **subverting romantic materialism**.
- The violent actions ***"blind[ing] you with tears"*** and the image of the ***"onion"*** being chopped, suggests the real pain that comes with being in a relationship. As Duffy simply describes, relationships have the possibility of becoming ***"lethal"***.



www.pinterest.fr/pin/241153755019569763/

- ***"It is the moon wrapped in brown paper..."***

- The ***"onion"*** is being described as the moon, due to their similar shape. However, Duffy is attempting to present the ***"onion"***, as more than just a vegetable - it is a moon, because ***"it promises light"***, and that it is beautiful. The ***"moon"*** suggests the idea of orbiting around a bigger object - that love orbits, and thus is ever present around the couple.

- ***"It will make your reflection/ a wobbling photo of grief."***

- ***"The wobbling photo..."*** is an object that comes from the speaker's direct memory or experience. The ***"wobbling"***, suggests that the speaker is crying whilst viewing their own ***"reflection"***, as the clear image is **disrupted and distorted**.
- A ***"photo"***, is the product of light reflecting back into a camera, but this is made into a permanent product. Their relationship has a permanent state of pain. The abstract noun ***"grief"*** is made into a wobbling photo- this underlines how such emotions and feelings take on a physical, tangible form.



Symbolism

Rose & Heart

The images of “**red rose... satin heart**” are used in the poem to symbolise passion, sex, love and are classic gifts given to loved ones on Valentine’s day. In this poem it functions to outline the cliches of romance - how it is expressed and shown.



Onion

Symbolises a complicated, natural love. It can both create pain, but is also good for health, reflecting how relationships can be negative or positive. It is a layered object, which you need to peel back - highlights how love is not an instantly open experience.



Moon

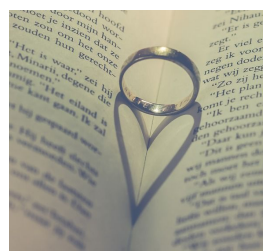
Represents the idea that there needs to be a greater source of light for it to shine; in a relationship one person can allow the other to illuminate. The moon orbits around a larger object; allegorical **allusion** to how the speaker’s life may revolve around their lover.

It can also be associated with **female sexuality** - the moon is commonly used to allude to femininity, due to the moon cycle.

Antithetical to the sun, which can be used to understand male energy, the moon in the poem alludes to the female experience of love. It complements the sensual nature of the poem.

Photo

This a captured moment or a memory. Duffy uses this symbol to introduce the permanence of experiences - especially the ones made with a lover. In this instance the photo is a physical recreation of the speaker’s “**grief**” - this means that the pain in this relationship will never leave.



Metal

Metals are referenced both through “**Platinum**”, which symbolises purity, rarity and true eternal love, as well as “**wedding ring**”. Most wedding rings, and engagement rings are made out of platinum, as they represent everlasting love. A “**wedding ring**” represents social rites and traditional love, that contradicts the main point of the poem, Duffy uses this to allude to social expectations of love, exposing the ways society conditions couples to aim for this idealised vision of love. Duffy exposes marriage as an optional formality in the poem.



Comparisons

Sonnet 43 & Valentine

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Both poems are addressed to a partner• Both poets use repetition to emphasise the amount of love they have for the addressee of the poem - “I give you an onion” for Valentine and “I love” for Sonnet 43.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• They are set and written in very different times and contexts - whereas Sonnet 43 is written during the Victorian period, Valentine is a modern poem.• Sonnet 43 has a much more narrow focus solely on love, whereas Valentine also incorporates the themes of passion, danger and potential pain.

