

Valentine by carol
ann duffy



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The poem, 'Valentine', is a monologue by Carol Ann Duffy addressed to her lover. It is part of the set 'Mean Time' published in 1993.

It explores an unorthodox and frank side of love and compares it to the frivolities of Valentines day. The poem is written in free verse and has no rhyme scheme. This emulates a conversation and also represents the disorder and unpredictability of love. It is loosely structured into six stanzas, each focusing on a different aspect of love. Similar to the peeling of an onion, the first few stanzas focus on the more pleasant parts of love and become progressively abhorrent. Duffy makes certain lines emphatic by isolating them from stanzas.

The sentence 'I am trying to be truthful' is an instance of this. Isolated from the second and third stanzas, this line is emphasized since it is one of the main purposes of the poem – to give her lover a veracious description of their love. She also uses enjambment to continue some ideas and create suspense. For instance, the sentence in stanza two begins 'It will blind you with tears' and continues to the next line in the same sentence 'like a lover'. The use of enjambment builds up a sense of expectation and uncertainty in the reader before delivering the surprising confession that love has a painful side.

The language of the poem is quite straightforward and unequivocal but also expresses profound meaning. The title 'Valentine' has connotations of love and joy. It is associated with the customary traditions of mawkish gifts given to one's significant other. The focus of the poem is belittling these gestures and instead revealing the truth about love. It shows Duffy's defiance of the

mundane representation of love. Duffy uses anaphora in her repetition of 'Not a' in the lines 'Not a red rose or a satin heart' and 'Not a cute card or a kissogram'.

This emphasizes Duffy's dislike of empty and stereotypical gestures of love. After the first line, there is the anticlimactic statement, 'I give you onion'. This humorously pitiful statement employs bathos and thereby illustrates the disparity between the surface appearance of love and the true depth of it. The onion is a symbol for their love. It is described using a metaphor as a 'moon wrapped in brown paper', which could also imply that real love does not always have a pleasant appearance but is effulgent in its essence. The words 'blind' and 'wobbling' suggests the uncertainty of their relationship.

In stanza four she uses an epanalepsis by repeating the words at the end of the line, 'as we are'. This hints the possibility of either of them being unfaithful to the other. The epanalepsis changes the meaning of the sentence from the extent of the couple's loyalty to the possibility of future unfaithfulness. In the fifth stanza, Duffy introduces the idea of marriage but portrays it as constraining as implied by the word 'shrinks'. The phrase 'Take it.

' and its brief abruptness contrasts with the demure and servile phrase 'if you like'. This shows the versatility of love. The sixth stanza shows the danger and cruelty in love. The word 'Lethal.' is a one-word sentence and shows Duffy's absolute certainty of the dark side of love. The word lethal has connotations of danger, death and fear, none of which are typically associated with love.

This addresses the misconception that love is purely joy and happiness. The last line, 'cling to your knife' shows the enmity in love, especially the animosity that forms between a couple after marriage. The knife is a symbol of their malice towards each other. The fact that the smell of the onion still clings to the knife is symbolic of the unforgettable nature of love.

Duffy draws a comparison between the harmless act of peeling and cutting an onion and being cruel to a loved one. The predominant theme of the poem is the multifaceted nature of love. Duffy presents the various, contrasting views of love in different stanzas ranging from the warmth and affection, to the pain and grief, to the entrapment and finally the danger and ferocity. The onion is used to represent these various emotions.

It is compared with a 'moon' to show love's brightness, its quality of inducing tears to show the melancholy of love, its circular shape to reference the inevitable restraint brought on by it and its everlasting scent to show love's indelible impression on a person. Duffy's tone is direct and unambiguous. It is also commanding. The poem is addressed to her lover and is in the form of her dialogue to her lover that remains unanswered. This implies that she is dictating the state and terms of their relationship.

She uses many imperatives which show her emphatic, forceful tone. In the beginning of the poem, she describes the positive aspects of love using words like 'light' and 'love' which hint her optimistic and blissful tone. This engenders a tone of contentment. As the poem progresses, the words she uses become harsher. The words 'blind' and 'wobbling' imply an unsteadiness or loss of happiness. This marks a slight pain in the tone.

This evokes sympathy for Duffy and her lover. Duffy then uses the word ‘shrinks’ which implies entrapment. This could create a mood of panic at the thought of marriage. Finally, she uses deadly words like ‘lethal’ and ‘knife’. This shows her vicious tone that creates a mood of fear and agitation from the reader.

These are so completely incongruous with typical ideas of love The contrast between the beginning where love is ‘light’ and end where it is ‘lethal’ is particularly striking. This marked variety in the emotions love produces is the main purpose of the poem. Duffy hence accurately portrays the various dimensions of love through her adept use of structure, language and literary devices to surprise the reader with her unorthodox view of it.