

how are relationships  
presented in the  
poems you have  
studied?

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



In 'Havisham', 'Quickdraw', 'Salome' - all by Carol Ann Duffy, the current poet laureate of Britain - and 'The Farmer's Bride' by Charlotte Mew, relationships are presented as being constant power struggles between the two parties involved. These poems do not conform to traditional romantic poetry, but instead take a candid approach to the aspects of relationships that aren't conventionally explored. All four of the poems I studied are dramatic monologues, giving the reader a first person perspective of what happened in the build up to, or during the poem itself.

Although a comprehensive psychological insight into the character is available to us, allowing us to make our own judgements about the personas adopted by the poets, we are nonetheless given a biased account of the occurrences and hence it is difficult to conclude whether or not their portrayal of what happened is trustworthy. The titles of the poems serve to objectify the person they are referring to: the lack of honorific title in 'Havisham' takes away the reader's ability to judge the gender of the persona, which, in turn expresses the character's loss of status.

Those who have read 'Great Expectations' by Charles Dickens would be aware that 'Havisham' refers to Miss Havisham in the book. The lack of an honorific title symbolises her embarrassment and denial about her rejection in love and moreover puts her on par with characters like Hamlet and Othello, who weren't at any point called 'Prince Hamlet' or 'General Othello'. This technique used by Duffy portrays the persona as being of great importance; however, to anyone who hasn't read the book, the question remains: who, or what is 'Havisham'?

Both the title and the first line of the poem 'Salome', also by Duffy, is a single word: Salome. Igniting our curiosity, we wonder: what's Salome? It could be a person, a place or a thing. This uncertainty is what encourages the reader to continue reading. Lastly, 'The Farmer's Bride' is a perfect example of objectification. This suggests to the reader that the wife is the property of the farmer, which is further emphasised by the lack of a name for her throughout the poem.

According to the context of the poem, this was customary of the time: in the 19th Century, many farmers would choose wives who had a useful skill set for life on a farm. The institution of marriage gave total legal authority to the man and a wife could not legally refuse the sexual demands of her husband. This borderline misogyny expresses the position of women in the community. The title portrays the wife as nothing but a mere object that can be used to aid its owner either through manual labour or sex. The incongruous poem, with regards to objectification, is 'Quickdraw'. Duffy instead plays on Wild West iconography, suggesting that the relationship the poem describes is a battlefield.

Immediately, we can guess what this poem will be about - dissimilar to 'Havisham' and 'Salome' - even if is in a metaphorical sense. A "quickdraw" is a tense gunfight at the end of which only one person is left standing - further proof that the title is a metaphor for this all-consuming relationship. Plosive consonants are used by Duffy to show the emotional callousness of the characters she adopts: in 'Havisham' the character shows the reader

that love doesn't just affect us emotionally, but is felt in our entire beings, when she says that it isn't just the heart that "b-b-b-breaks".

This could suggest that her speech is just as broken as her withering body and life; however, it also shows the violent side to the persona, making us question her sanity. From very early on in the poem, the reader doesn't question that the character of Salome is unhinged due to her flippant attitude to her actions, but the use of the onomatopoeic words - which happen to contain plosive consonants - "clatter... clutter" adds not only to the fast rhythm of the poem, but also to the coldness and devilry of the persona.

In 'Quickdraw', the character adopted by Duffy is portrayed as being the inferior person in the relationship; however, after being stoic and obsequious for so long, she attempts to retaliate, ultimately failing: "squeeze the trigger of my tongue, wide of the mark". The Western imagery, "wide of the mark" adds to the heartlessness of the character, as in Wild West cinematography, people didn't often show mercy. The "trigger of [her] tongue" may have been her only weapon left in the destructive relationship she found herself in and furthermore, this parody could perfectly describe an argument: the inevitable truth is that words do hurt.

Additionally, the alliteration of the 't' sounds is comical, juxtaposed with the subject matter. The use of irony in both 'Havisham' and 'Salome' seems to emphasise the mental instability of the characters, which in turn symbolises their superiority, as they refuse to take responsibility even when the truth is obvious to us. The character of Havisham asks herself, "Who did this to me?"

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She made a conscious choice to be self-pitying and not move on with her life. However, due to the context, we know that it would have been difficult. The persona labels herself a " spinster". She, evidently showing how condemned she feels, spat this Victorian label out in distaste, as if she was worthless without a husband. The character of Salome said that her last lover had " come like a lamb to the slaughter to Salome's bed". Here, the persona refers to herself as Salome, who according to Christian mythology was the stepdaughter of King Herod.

After dancing for him, he said he would grant any of her wishes, so, prompted by her mother, she asked for the head of John the Baptist. He had said that her mother, Herodias' marriage to King Herod was unlawful and incestuous. Herod sent an executioner to the prison where John was being kept and his head was brought to Salome in a dish. By comparing herself to this Biblical character, she is portrayed as being able to use the powers of seduction and lust to defeat her feeble and naive prey, making us view her as a conniving character.

The irony lies in the fact that she had, in fact, murdered him the night before and seems proud of it: " I flung back the sticky red sheets", which insinuates that, firstly, the blood was clotted and thus relatively old, and that she was delighted to present what she had created by "[flinging] back" the sheets. The structures of ' Havisham' and ' Quickdraw' are organised into four

quatrains each, directly juxtaposing the personalities of the characters and relationships portrayed in them.

The persona of Havisham lacks stability and the relationship in 'Quickdraw' is whimsical and fast-paced, emphasised by the two lines: "you ring, quickdraw, your voice a pellet in my ear, and hear me groan". These erratic verses are followed by the crux of the poem, cleverly disguised by Duffy through the use of enjambment. If lines 5 and 9 are put together, they read "you've wounded me through the heart". This ingenious manipulation of structure intensifies the meaning of the poem and makes us sympathise with the speaker about her failed relationship.

On the other hand, it is the chaotic structure and rhyme scheme in 'The Farmer's Bride' that reflects the wife's apparently unpredictable personality. At first, the wife is described by Mew as not being a woman, but more like "a little frightened fay". On the surface, this simile would suggest that she was a demure, lithe character who is afraid of human contact; nevertheless, according to Elizabethan folklore, fays - also called fairies or faeries - were wicked creatures that would happily unleash their wrath on those who didn't cajole them and comply with their every demand.

This paints a much more alarming picture of her persona, which could somewhat reflect Charlotte Mew's own mental state, as she had a thorough insight into mental illnesses. Similarly, the speaker in 'Salome', by means of the tumultuous structure and rhyme scheme, paints an ominous picture of the insane character. The chilling aspect being that throughout the poem, the persona is calm and collected, adding to her menacing satisfaction by

using throwaway remarks such as “ there, like I said... was his head on a platter”.

Both of the poets I have studied are female and homosexual, thus it can be said that they may have taken a slightly biased approach to talking about the idea of power struggles in relationships. In all but one of the poems - namely ‘ Salome’, in which the female acts as a despot - the female is the sycophantic character, clinging onto the idea that she would be nothing without a man by her side.

In all of the poems however, there is an element of trying to make their lives better, regardless of if the relationship continues or not: the character of Havisham says that she “ stabbed at a wedding cake”. This is a metaphorical way of saying that she ‘ gave it a stab’ but the cake symbolises her failure to make it work. In ‘ Quickdraw’, the use of “ Last Chance saloon”, a piece of cliched Wild West iconography shows that she tried to fix their relationship, but the “ silver bullets” of her partner’s kisses eventually drained the life out of her.

The character of ‘ Salome’ declares “ Never again! ”, although it was short-lived, the addition of an exclamation mark shows us that she was determined to change her ways. The farmer in Mew’s poem describes the ground as being “ spread white with rime”. This symbolises the inevitability of the disintegration of their relationship. This unconventional take on relationships is more realistic than idealistic and provides a cynical viewpoint on what is usually heavily romanticised literature.