

Comparing presentations of love in "havisham" and "valentine"



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Carol Ann Duffy's love poems are often riddled with oxymoronic statements, which affirm the changing nature of love and how it is perceived in different relationships and in different periods of time and life. "Valentine" and "Havisham" are two poems which share similar proposals of love, albeit through very different presentations. Overall, in these two poems love is shown to have negative effects, with Duffy using enjambment and structure, powerful imagery, and oxymorons to demonstrate this stance.

The most notable similarity is perhaps the titles of the two poems. Both ensure the reader begin the poems with preconceptions, "Valentine" alluding immediately to love, expressions of love and commercialism, while "Havisham" highlights the famous Charles Dickens' character Miss Havisham from *Great Expectations*. Thus the reader begins "Valentine" with conventions in mind, the expectations of sweet love and couples aiding Duffy in the juxtaposing nature of the poem. The first line, "Not a red rose or a satin heart," is a declarative, short and sharp to emphasise the absence implied in "Not" and to completely juxtapose itself against the title. "Valentine" by its topic implies presents, a "red rose, as well as love and here is where the opening line serves even more heavily to juxtapose against the title. After all, Valentine's Day is famous for its consumerist tone, everything exaggerated and overused to provide expectations that couples need to fulfill. "A satin heart" is a common gift, something purchased, in fitting with "Valentine"; by declaring "Not," Duffy steps away from the negative side of "Valentine" without delivering a message of love instead; rather she successfully uses the title to create ideas and then discards all of them, arriving not at love instead of consumerism or at consumerism instead of

love but at somewhere outside both of these boundaries. Hence, the reader is left with a sense of unfulfillment and with no notion as to what the narrative voice's view on love really is.

On the other hand, in "Havisham," Duffy uses the title to create ideas which she then extends through the opening lines. However, the singular word title still achieves the same effect as Valentine with the reader. Miss Havisham, the eponymous character from Great Expectations is abandoned at the altar and for the rest of her life voluntarily stays in her wedding dress, never leaves her residence and keeps the breakfast on the table, leaving herself and the food to decay throughout the book. Hence the reader has an understanding that in this poem, love is a negative thing, still craved by Havisham, yet a concept misunderstood and hated because she came so close to having it but never fully grasped it. Readers consider Miss Havisham to be a "Spinster" and the absence of requited love in her life is clarified in the opening line with the oxymoronic accusation of "Beloved sweetheart bastard." and, again, use of the word "Not." "Havisham" also creates a sense of identity. By removing the pronoun, Miss Havisham is reduced to her last name. This leaves the "Miss" implied, also implying Havisham's relationship status of unmarried and single. Furthermore though it is a reminder, to the reader and Miss Havisham herself, that she was abandoned. It is her maiden name and she will never take someone else's surname, as she would have if she hadn't been conned. Duffy uses "Havisham" to reinforce the idea of abandonment and show the reader that Miss Havisham is consumed by this event and the feelings she felt before and after it, reduced from the respectability of 'Miss' to merely a maiden surname. The

titles of both “ Valentine” and “ Havisham” create preconceptions of love, the former as positive and the latter as negative, Duffy then utilizing these conceptions to give her poems more impact.

In both poems, Duffy presents love as destructive. While this stance is more recognisable in “ Havisham,” the narrative voice of “ Valentine” also impresses upon the reader that love can be detrimental to health, both physically and mentally. The narrative voice in “ Valentine” can “ blind”, the “ onion” representing their love causing “ tears.” Sight being taken away by the pain of love is parallel to Miss Havisham’s “ dark green pebbles for eyes,” the difference being that in “ Valentine” love takes away all sight but in “ Havisham” she merely sees the world with cynicism, through jealousy, the latter implied through Duffy’s use of the colour “ green” rather than being completely blinded. Still, love destroys a fundamental part of her, reinforced in the closing line of the poem. The use of the adverb “ only” emphasising that love is destructive and that “ it’s not only the heart that b-b-b-breaks”, hinting at the idea that the mind is affected as well. Thus Duffy presents love as destructive to both parties involved; in “ Valentine” it is the recipient of the love, while in “ Havisham” it is the ‘ giver’ of love.

Within these ironic depictions of love, Duffy exaggerates the idea of weddings and the imagery of weddings within both poems to demonstrate a specific kind of love desired. In “ Havisham” a “ long slow honeymoon,” is wanted the time of the “ honeymoon” extended by the assonance of “ long slow”. Miss Havisham wants permanence, suggested by the repetition of time frames in the poem, beginning with “ Not a day since” and the decaying, “ yellowing” of her wedding dress. The “ wedding-cake” in the final

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stanza is representative of everything she couldn't have, the "white veil" contrasting to the image of "the dress / yellowing" and portraying both how long it has been since the 'wedding' and how Miss Havisham now has lost everything. Her wedding was the pivotal moment in her life, which then defined the rest of her time alive and the repetitive nature of the imagery, starting with "the dress" in the second stanza and ending with the "honeymoon," exemplifies this, Miss Havisham unable to not "remember."

However, in Valentine, marriage is not all consuming and is actually a suggestion, "Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring", but only "if you like". The permanence of this relationship is unsure and doesn't necessarily need to be justified, whereas in Havisham it is necessary for living with fulfillment. Love in both poems has negative effects and can be perceived as harmful rather than fulfilling, but in Havisham it is needed whilst in Valentine it is layered and not required.