

Valentine

Overview: In 'Valentine', Duffy chooses to challenge the conventional symbols of love, namely the 'red rose' and the 'satin heart'. Instead Duffy introduces the reader to her own symbol of love, the onion, which is unusual because the onion is a very ordinary, smelly, acidic and unromantic object. The multi-layered complexity of the onion represents a real relationship and is used as an extended metaphor throughout. Duffy spends the rest of the poem proving to us how the onion is more faithful and reflects the true nature of love.

Context: Carol Ann Duffy is the Poet Laureate. Valentine is from a collection of poems entitled Mean Time (1993), and expresses love and affection in the form of a conceit whereby the symbol of love being offered by the speaker is an unconventional onion. This is reminiscent of metaphysical poets such as John Donne, who approached ordinary objects in original and surprising ways. The poem challenges the stereotypical view of a Valentine's gift with the onion and perhaps criticises implicitly those of us who give these clichéd gifts such as roses, cards and hearts. There is an attitude in the poem that normal Valentines are not as honest as this one.

Structure: The poem is written in free verse using irregular stanzas to support its content and purpose, which is to reject traditional restrictive conventions such as marriage and other notions of love and to warn lovers that being overly possessive can have undesirable consequences. Each stanza is very short, and several are only one line long. This form echoes the form of an onion itself, and the layers that go to make it up. The poem is in first person, in the form of a direct address to "you". We don't know who the "you" is and the relationship is therefore gender neutral. The poem itself is an extended metaphor about how the unromantic properties of the onion fits the notion of love. Each stanza also shows the different phases of love, how it begins with all the best intentions yet possibly gradually deteriorates into misunderstandings and violence.

Key Images: Some of the metaphors work very well such as 'it is a moon wrapped in brown paper': not only does the skin of an onion visually and texturally resemble brown paper but the sense of romance (moon) and excitement and anticipation at the start of a relationship and on receipt of a present is conveyed. Yet there is a strong sense of danger in the imagery of the poem. The onion will "blind you with tears", which is a comparison to what a lover will do, and even in affection there is a sense of danger in its "fierce kiss". This culminates in the single word sentence in the middle of the final stanza: "Lethal". This is emphasised by the fact that the final word of the poem is "knife". There is a sense that love can be dangerous, perhaps in its possessiveness. The tone can be seen as commanding 'Here', 'Take it', yet in the repeat offering of the onion is the implication that it has been rejected, suggesting an interesting power-play. The same goes with the proposal, 'if you like' – is this off-hand and casual or tentative?

Potential Comparisons:

Romance / Love:

I Wanna Be Yours

Sonnet 43 / 1st Date



Danger / violence: My Last Duchess / Nettles

Metaphor: I Wanna be Yours / Nettles / The Manhunt

Mixed emotions: Love's Dog, La Belle Dame Sans Merci