Valentine

SUMMARY

The speaker rejects traditional Valentine's Day gifts like a red rose or something heart-shaped and made of satin.

Instead, the speaker presents their lover with an onion. The onion is like a shining moon veiled in plain brown paper. Its light will beam forth as it is unwrapped, mimicking the process of a lover thoughtfully shedding barriers to intimacy.

The speaker urges their lover to take the onion. The speaker warns that it will make the recipient tear up so dramatically that it will be impossible to see, much like a lover might do. The onion will also cause the recipient to see themselves as unsteady and distressed.

The speaker is trying to tell the truth about the effects of love.

As a result, the speaker renounces cutesy gifts like a greeting card or a kissogram (a humorous telegram in which the messenger kisses the recipient).

The speaker reiterates that they are giving their lover an onion. According to the speaker, its sharp smell and taste will linger on their lover's lips, matching the intensity of their all-consuming devotion to one another—for as long as that devotion lasts.

Again, the speaker urges their lover to take the onion. The speaker claims that its rings will grow smaller and smaller until it fits the lover's finger, acting as a wedding ring—if the lover would like it to, that is.

The onion is deadly. Its potent, persistent scent will grip the recipient's fingers and knife.

THEMES

THE NATURE OF LOVE

The speaker of the poem forgoes traditional Valentine's Day gifts like a box of chocolates or a dozen roses and instead presents their lover with an onion. Over the course of "Valentine," the speaker justifies this decision by describing aspects of the onion that reflect the true nature of love. The speaker explicitly rejects shallow, glossy representations of love and takes care to reveal the shortcomings of societal expectations for romantic and sexual relationships. In doing so, the speaker argues that mainstream portrayals of love are dishonest, and then attempts to correct them.

The speaker repeatedly calls out common symbols of love and deems them inaccurate. The poem opens with "Not a red rose or a satin heart," in reference to the most iconic gifts associated with Valentine's Day. By opening with this negative statement, the speaker immediately establishes that the valentine of the poem's title is not a traditional, sugarcoated gift.

Similarly, line 12 reads, "Not a cute card or kissogram." Thus, the speaker lists several cutesy and romantic items typically associated with love and bluntly rejects them as inappropriate symbols for their own love. Twice, the speaker plainly states, "I give you an onion." In a refusal of conventional wisdom, the speaker chooses a banal vegetable over a mass-manufactured product or cheesy gesture. The speaker claims that the onion is an attempt "to be truthful," indicating that customary, commercial gifts would falsely represent their love.

Through the detailed discussion of the onion's attributes, the speaker also suggests that social norms for romantic relationships are misleading in a more general sense. For example, while the onion "promises light," presumably due to its pale color, that light will ultimately "blind [the lover] with tears," in the same way that the smell of onions makes people tear up. Plus, the reflection that it casts back will be distorted or "wobbly."

While the reference to light initially associates the speaker's romantic relationship with truth and clarity, its positive connotations sour as it is revealed to be a disorienting and destabilizing force within the poem. Later, references to marriage begin promising as well, with descriptors like "faithful" and "platinum." But there is a rapid shift to language that denotes restriction and violence, such as the image of "shrinking" rings and that of a knife, as well as the forceful declaration, "Lethal."

By recasting positive imagery around marriage in a negative light, the speaker illustrates that while conventional relationship dynamics might appear attractive on the surface, they are often challenging to live with. Furthermore, this violent language, in addition to forceful terms like "fierce," calls into question the tenderness suggested earlier by "the careful undressing of love." Similarly, the speaker characterizes their bond as lasting with words like "stay" and "cling." However, the speaker introduces uncertainty with the phrases "for as long as we are" and "if you like." Again, the speaker calls attention to the ever-changing, enigmatic nature of love, which will always contain both positive and negative attributes.

Therefore, the speaker explicitly rebukes oversimplified commercial representations of love and subtly reveals the failings of conventional formulas for romantic and sexual relationships. In doing so, the speaker resists the idealization and whitewashing of love, advocating for an alternative model that provides a more honest and complete account of love's complexities.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-23

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Not a red ...
... you an onion.

"Valentine" opens with the speaker's explicit rejection of typical Valentine's Day fodder. The speaker chooses to call out hearts and roses, drawing from a pool of the most iconic, universal symbols of love. As a result, other symbols and related images begin to form in the reader's head—candles, chocolates, wedding vows, *The Bachelor* franchise, and so on. As the speaker refutes them throughout the poem, these images will come to represent overly romanticized, fraudulent narratives about love. The speaker sets up this symbolism in this initial remark, even as the alliteration of "red rose" is guttural, almost like a growl, and lends the line a harsh tone.

The speaker then juxtaposes this clichéd representation of love with a much less sentimental image:

> I give you an onion.

The stanza break that separates lines 1 and 2 reflects the distance between how love is presented and the speaker's reality. The end-stops that punctuate these opening statements make the speaker come across as direct and confident. The speaker resists the flowery language usually associated with love poems, greeting cards, etc.

And by introducing the onion as an alternative to cheesy representations of love, the speaker sets up the poem's overarching conceit: an onion as the proper symbol for love.

Finally, line 2 introduces apostrophe, as it becomes clear that the speaker is addressing a silent party. This silent party is the speaker's lover. Apostrophe increases the authenticity of the speaker because the speaker is shown interacting with someone important to them. Therefore, it also heightens the poem's emotional stakes.

LINES 3-5

It is a ...
... undressing of love.

The speaker begins to build out the conceit of love as an onion. First, the speaker says that this onion is "a moon wrapped in brown paper." This comparison juxtaposes a celestial body associated with love and beauty with a plain, everyday material. In doing so, it suggests that love is not always as it seems and must be "unwrapped" to be enjoyed.

The simile that follows expands on this idea:

> It promises light
> like the careful undressing of love.

The term "undressing" makes peeling an onion sound unexpectedly sensual. Light is also a common symbol of truth and clarity; this simile thus suggests that barriers to intimacy, whether physical or emotional, must be torn down to achieve "true" love.

The personification of the onion casts it as a well-meaning lover here. Indeed, generally speaking, people tend to make promises with every intention of keeping them at the beginning of relationships—sometimes to love each other and stay together, other times to take things slow and use sound judgment. However, as *promising* relationships develop—like peeling back the outer layer of an onion—they often transform, creating an entirely different dynamic than what was expected. In this way, the two metaphors that comprise this passage illustrate the unpredictable, ever-changing nature of love.

Simple sentences and end-stops allow the speaker to state these metaphors as plain facts. This gives the metaphors force and credibility without the need for minute details or elaborate language—common characteristics among the romanticized depictions of love that the speaker criticizes.

Finally, note the euphony and sibilance the speaker uses when discussing the onion—those gentle /l/, /s/, and long /i/ sounds:

> It promises light
> like the careful undressing of love.

The speaker's language is smooth and pleasant.

LINES 6-10

Here. ...
... photo of grief.

The poem's third stanza opens with a blunt command: "Here." This one-syllable, end-stopped directive might come across as harsh or forceful. Perhaps the speaker's lover is resistant to taking the onion, or perhaps the speaker is simply insisting on the onion's validity as a symbol of romance.

The speaker then turns to a simile, playing on the fact that both onions and love can make people cry—sob, in fact, to the point that one is "blind[ed] with tears." Looking in a mirror in such a state will reveal only "a wobbling photo of grief." In other words, the pain and agony of love (and chopping onions) can distort peoples' visions of their very selves.

The parallelism of these lines creates a steady, building rhythm as the speaker elaborates on the idea that love is like an onion. Notice how the anaphora of "It will" echoes "It is" and "It promises" from the previous section. There's a sense of

steadiness and logic here, even as the speaker talks about tears and heartbreak.

LINES 11-13

I am trying ...
... you an onion.

Line 11 succinctly states the motivation behind the speaker's decision to use the onion as a valentine: "I am trying to be truthful." It's as though the speaker has sensed their lover's resistance and is reiterating why an onion makes a better gift than a "cute card" or a "kissogram." To the speaker, an onion is in fact a much truer representation of love than either of those comparatively shallow gifts. Part of accepting real love, the poem implies, is accepting that it can and will make you cry.

The fact that the speaker separates the lines here and ends each with a firm full stop again creates a steady, controlled, and logical tone.

Also note how the sounds of these lines grab the reader's attention. The crisp alliteration of /t/ sounds in line 11 suggests the speaker being extremely careful and thoughtful with their words:

> I am trying to be truthful.

In the next line, the loud, sharp /k/ sounds of "cute card or a kissogram" suggests the speaker's disdain for these showy yet shallow expressions of love.

Next, the speaker repeats "I give you an onion," reinforcing the juxtaposition between this humble pantry item and the products typically given as valentines.

LINES 14-17

Its fierce kiss ...
... as we are.

The rest of stanza 6 introduces new metaphors, adding further depth to the poem's overarching conceit that an onion is an honest representation of love.

First, the speaker compares the onion's sharp smell and taste to a "fierce kiss" that "will stay on your lips." As with the word "undressing" a few lines back, this metaphor conveys sensuality. Onions are notorious for their pungent scent (and thus many people would avoid eating them before kissing!).

But here, an onion's ability to linger on one's lips is precisely what makes it a good expression of love. The speaker likens the onion's scent to lovers' attachment to each other, calling it "possessive and faithful / as we are." This simile portrays the devotion of lovers in both flattering and unflattering terms. The speaker leads with "possessive," which speaks to the often obsessive, overbearing nature of deep infatuation. This descriptor casts the onion's "kiss" as controlling and jealous—a lover "marking their territory," so to speak.

However, "faithful" has positive associations, evoking loyalty, dedication, and trust. As such, the simile reflects the idea that love can be complicated.

The slant rhymes within this description highlight keywords—namely "kiss," "possessive," and "lips"—drawing attention to the image of the onion and maximizing its force. Because the speaker avoids perfect rhymes, this sonic similarity adds emphasis and suggests a relationship without making the mood too singsong or cute.

This stanza also contains the poem's sole example of epistrophe: "as we are," which appears at the end of lines 16 and 17:

> as we are,
> for as long as we are.

The repetition of this phrase emphasizes the speaker's claim that the onion accurately mirrors the couple's love. At the same time, it introduces uncertainty. The first "as we are" appears to indicate that the speaker and their lover are extraordinarily devoted to one another, while the second suggests that their relationship will come to an end.

LINES 18-20

Take it. ...
... if you like.

The speaker again urges the speaker's lover to accept the onion. The sharp sounds of "Take it" make the phrase seem harsh and insistent; readers might start to wonder how healthy or requited this love is.

The metaphor that follows describes the onion's rings as "platinum loops" that "shrink to a wedding ring." Such a description doesn't seem all that romantic, and the speaker's use of the word "shrink" implies restriction and diminishment. Marriage, here, seems like something that limits a partner's freedoms. And that "if you like" dangling in the next line feels like an afterthought, a mere addendum.

LINES 21-23

Lethal. ...
... to your knife.

The poem's final lines contain its most overtly violent imagery, leaving the reader with graphic representations of love's destructive power.

Line 21 simply reads, "Lethal." Love, in other words, is something deadly. Coming after a stanza about a wedding ring, this is an ominous idea of love indeed. Traditional marriage here doesn't seem all the appealing.

Next, the speaker says that the scent of love/onions will "cling to your fingers, / cling to your knife." Once you slice into an onion or accept the speaker's love, the poem implies, it's

extremely difficult to get rid of either. The mention of a knife is particularly ominous, suggesting that love may turn violent.

The anaphora ("cling to") and asyndeton (the lack of conjunction after "fingers") make these lines land all the more forcefully and linger in the reader's mind. Note how that phrase "cling to" itself seems to "cling" on from one line to the next. And the subtly musical internal rhyme of "cling to your fingers" feels strange and unwelcome in a poem that, so far, has avoided rhyme altogether.

The poem thus ends on a dark, intense note—one suggesting the power, intensity, and, perhaps, the danger of love.

SYMBOLS

CLASSIC VALENTINE'S DAY GIFTS

The traditional Valentine's Day gifts that the speaker lists out represent shallow, commercialized, and, in the speaker's mind, dishonest representations of love. More specifically, glossy and cutesy gifts—like red roses, satin hearts, and kissograms—project an idealized image of love that conceals all its messy, destructive parts.

These objects are "cute" and pretty, nice to look at for a moment. And yet, the speaker insists, they have nothing to do with the reality of love—something that's dark, dangerous, and messy.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "a red rose or a satin heart"
- **Line 12:** "a cute card or a kissogram"

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe is an important part of "Valentine," as the speaker spends the whole poem directly addressing their unseen beloved.

This use of apostrophe makes the poem feel more urgent and intimate, like readers are getting a peek into a private, delicate conversation. Apostrophe also heightens the poem's stakes, creating tension and anticipation. To that end, apostrophe places the reader in the middle of the speaker's relationship—the reader effectively becomes the object of the monologue.

Finally, apostrophe gives rise to remarks that expose the speaker's true temperament. For example, the speaker opens every multi-line stanza by urging their lover to accept the gift of an onion. Stanzas 2 and 6 begin with "I give you an onion," while stanza 3 begins with "Here" (as in, *Here, accept it*). The speaker opens the final stanza with the poem's most assertive command: "Take it."

The directives that the speaker gives the lover cast the poem in a faintly pushy, confrontational light. Consequently, readers might find the speaker aggressive or assume that the speaker is more dominant within this relationship.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Lines 6-10
- Lines 13-20
- Lines 22-23

CONSONANCE

The speaker uses consonance to add music, emphasis, and tension to the poem. In general, harsher /n/, /r/, and /t/ sounds appear within references to conventional Valentine's Day gifts, while softer /s/, /l/, and /f/ sounds appear within descriptions of the onion.

This pattern begins in the poem's first line, where cacophonous sounds are prevalent:

> Not a red rose or a satin heart.

The high concentration of /r/ sounds recalls growling, which works with sharp, percussive /t/ sounds to give the speaker an aggressive tone. Meanwhile, repeating /n/ sounds call attention to the negation and rejection in the statement. These /n/ sounds also permeate the next two lines:

> I give you an onion.
> It is a moon wrapped in brown paper.

This solidifies the speaker's dissent.

A shift occurs in the next several lines, which detail what the onion will do using soft, sibilant /s/ sounds, as well as euphonic /l/ sounds:

> It promises light
> like the careful undressing of love.

This trend continues through the end of the following stanza. However, it is worth noting that lines 6-8 each end with /r/ sounds:

> Here.
> It will blind you with tears
> like a lover.

These lines break on "Here," "tears," and "lover." As a result, the speaker's presentation of the onion ("Here") and the

relationship it represents ("lover") are linked to "tears" both sonically and structurally. Thus, consonance emphasizes the comparison that the speaker draws between the onion and love—i.e. that they both cause tears.

Cacophony reappears in the next two stanzas, each of which contains one line:

> I am trying to be truthful.
> Not a cute card or a kissogram.

This chorus of clashing, grating sounds drives home the speaker's point that "to be truthful"—to express the *true* nature of love—means acknowledging those harsh aspects of love that are hard to swallow. Furthermore, the sonic continuity among these two stanzas illustrates their relationship. That is, the speaker's desire to be truthful leads to a rejection of cutesy gifts.

Once again, the lines that follow—which describe what the onion will do—feature euphony. Here is a closer look at lines 14-15:

> Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,
> possessive and faithful

Meanwhile, the speaker's pattern of using harsher sounds when discussing traditional gifts and softer sounds when discussing the onion breaks down in the final stanza, which contains both cacophony and euphony. In fact, the closing sentence features each of the sounds highlighted throughout the poem:

> Its scent will cling to your fingers,
> cling to your knife.

All of the consonant sounds that have echoed across various sections of the poem coalesce, packing themselves into its final lines and drawing the reader's attention.

Duffy's decision to use the same euphonic and cacophonous sounds throughout the poem plays up their contrast. There seems to be a battle between two definitions of love—the sugarcoated, consumer-driven version represented by traditional gifts, and the intense, devastating version represented by the onion. The fact that their corresponding sounds intermingle in the final stanza should not be taken as a resolution. Rather, it is a testament to the speaker's ambivalence about love, and love's complexity more broadly—it cannot be reduced to good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Not," "red," "rose," "or," "satin," "heart"
- **Line 2:** "an onion"
- **Line 3:** "moon," "wrapped," "brown," "paper"
- **Line 4:** "promises light"
- **Line 5:** "like," "careful," "undressing," "love"
- **Line 6:** "Here"
- **Line 7:** "will blind," "tears"
- **Line 8:** "like," "lover"
- **Line 11:** "trying to," "truthful"
- **Line 12:** "Not," "cute card," "or," "kissogram"
- **Line 13:** "an onion"
- **Line 14:** "Its fierce kiss," "will," "stay," "lips"
- **Line 15:** "possessive," "faithful"
- **Line 19:** "platinum loops"
- **Line 20:** "like"
- **Line 21:** "Lethal"
- **Line 22:** "will cling," "fingers"
- **Line 23:** "cling," "knife"

END-STOPPED LINE

In general, end-stops make the speaker's statements come across as direct and certain, establishing this person's authority. This poem uses very short words, sentences, and lines, creating a terse, erratic cadence. By marking abrupt pauses at the conclusion of nearly every line, end-stops facilitate the choppy rhythm.

This effect can be observed from the poem's first lines:

> Not a red rose or a satin heart.
> I give you an onion.
> It is a moon wrapped in brown paper.

The terseness of the speaker's cadence rebukes the flowery language associated with greeting cards, traditional love poems, and the like—it is as if the end-stops are saying, "this is no Shakespearian sonnet." Instead, they establish a rhythm that is consistent with the tempestuous love that the speaker describes.

Furthermore, the end-stops enable and exaggerate the speaker's use of straightforward syntax, creating the impression that the speaker is relaying on plainly evident facts. This effect is particularly important when it comes to the poem's one-line stanzas. Here, end-stops contain the speaker's statements within neat, individual units. The end-stops give the speaker's rejection of conventional gifts the force and authority to stand on their own. As a result, the reader understands that this poem doesn't simply offer an alternative to traditional representations of love—it also argues *against* them.

End-stops play a slightly different role in lines 2 and 13, which contain the poem's refrain—"I give you an onion"—as well as in lines 6 ("Here") and 18 ("Take it"). In these cases, end-stops give force to the speaker's directives, so that the speaker appears to adamantly press their lover to accept the onion. As a result, the

speaker comes across as pushy and dominant.

Finally, in the poem's last two stanzas, end-stops emphasize end rhymes:

> Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring,
> if you like.
> Lethal.
> Its scent will cling to your fingers,
> cling to your knife.

And because these end rhymes converge in the poem's final line, end-stops also increase the impact of the poem's conclusion.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "heart."
- **Line 2:** "onion."
- **Line 3:** "paper."
- **Line 5:** "love."
- **Line 6:** "Here."
- **Line 8:** "lover."
- **Line 10:** "grief."
- **Line 11:** "truthful."
- **Line 12:** "kissogram."
- **Line 13:** "onion."
- **Line 14:** " lips,"
- **Line 16:** "are,"
- **Line 17:** "are."
- **Line 18:** "it."
- **Line 19:** "ring,"
- **Line 20:** "like."
- **Line 21:** "Lethal."
- **Line 22:** "fingers,"
- **Line 23:** "knife."

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker repeatedly juxtaposes glossy, idealistic representations of love with more somber representations, revealing the chasm between conventional understandings of love and people's real experiences.

Lines 1-2 typify this technique:

> Not a red rose or a satin heart.
> I give you an onion.

First, the speaker calls out specific images and products, drawing from a large pool of sappy gifts that reappear year after year. Thus, the speaker sparks the reader's imagination by tapping into a collective understanding of Valentine's Day and its commercialized gifts. Once visions of teddy bears and candy hearts begin to form in the reader's mind, the speaker puts forth a much different image—a banal, inexpensive onion. The speaker is rejecting conventional symbols of love and advocating for a new one.

This pattern repeats in lines 12-13:

> Not a cute card or a kissogram.
> I give you an onion.

Again, stanza breaks separate the conventional gifts from the speaker's onion. This calls attention to the difference between them.

Sometimes, the speaker introduces a classic image of romance, and then zooms out to reveal a decidedly unromantic aspect of that image. For example, in line 3, the speaker says, "It is a moon wrapped in brown paper." Here, the speaker complicates an ancient symbol of beauty and romance by enveloping it in a dull, rumpled material. Similarly, in lines 19-21, the speaker compares the onion's rings to a wedding band, only to call it "lethal":

> Its platinum loops shrunk to a wedding ring
> if you like.
> Lethal.

Again, the speaker muddies an iconic symbol of love, this time juxtaposing a commitment that is intended to last forever with a word that means termination ("Lethal"). In doing so, the speaker draws a sharp contrast between mainstream, idealistic representations of love and the complicated, painful experiences it provokes.

In general, throughout the poem, juxtaposition makes clear that the speaker's monologue is as much a rejection of conventional wisdom as it is a testimony to a new, more honest understanding of love.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Not a red rose or a satin heart. / I give you an onion."
- **Line 3:** "It is a moon wrapped in brown paper."
- **Lines 12-13:** "Not a cute card or a kissogram. / I give you an onion."
- **Lines 19-21:** "Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring, / if you like. / Lethal."

METAPHOR

This poem is packed with metaphors, which add depth to the overarching conceit of the onion as a representation of genuine, realistic love. From the poem's outset, the reader understands that the onion metaphorically represents the speaker's love for the speaker's partner—or perhaps love more broadly. As a pantry staple, onions already carry a number of

connotations. They are known for being commonplace; having many layers; making people tear up; and having a sharp, lasting scent.

These qualities will jump to the fore of many readers' minds, setting up a basic comparison between the onion and love. From there, the speaker employs a series of metaphors that lay out the more nuanced similarities of this comparison. As a result, the overarching onion metaphor, which spans the entire poem, grows increasingly complex, thus becoming a conceit.

Conceits are very elaborate extended metaphors, and because they relate two seemingly unalike things, they can become strained and overly intellectual. This particular kind of metaphor is an apt choice for "Valentine," because it resists the highly sensual imagery that many love poems tend towards. Moreover, the speaker explains the comparison using plain, everyday language, which prevents the conceit from becoming too flowery. In this way, the conceit is consistent with the speaker's overall approach, which resists romanticization and presents love as a harsh, pungent force.

The metaphors that begin to develop the conceit use light—a longtime symbol of truth and clarity—to compare the onion to the speaker's love. First, the speaker calls the onion "a moon wrapped in brown paper," suggesting that enjoying the beauty of true love requires "unwrapping." This can be interpreted as moving past first impressions of someone, and of doing away with misleading, surface-level understandings of love.

The next metaphor supports this suggestion, claiming that the light will cause a partner's reflection to cast back "a wobbling photo of grief." In other words, true, vulnerable love will cause a partner to see an unsteady, weakened version of themselves.

In stanza 6, the speaker uses metaphors to personify the onion, which is described "kissing" the speaker's lover in a "possessive and faithful" manner. The precise implications of this are discussed in personification entry of this guide, but essentially the speaker compares the onion's pungent scent to a feisty, clingy lover.

Lastly, the speaker refers to the onion's rings as "platinum loops" that "shrink to a wedding ring." The comparison to a costly metal suggests that love is precious and valuable, while the wedding ring imagery conveys how moving further into a relationship can result in long-term commitment. However, the speaker uses the term "shrink," which implies diminishment and restriction, and can therefore be interpreted as a sign that marriage limits one's freedoms, or perhaps that passion fades as people grow more intimately familiar with one another. Whatever an audience's precise reading may be, the various metaphors that the speaker uses add depth and credibility to the overarching conceit of the onion.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "It is a moon wrapped in brown paper. / It promises light"
- **Lines 9-10:** "It will make your reflection / a wobbling photo of grief."
- **Lines 14-15:** "Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips, / possessive and faithful"
- **Line 19:** "Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring,"
- **Lines 21-23:** "Lethal. / Its scent will cling to your fingers, / cling to your knife."

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker gives the onion human characteristics, or personifies it, to metaphorically describe love. That is, the onion's human characteristics in turn say something about the nature of love.

First, the onion "promises light," with no indication as to whether that promise will be kept or broken. Promising light might mean agreeing to treat each other well, stay together, or not move too quickly. The word "promises" also implies that there is something more to come, just as relationships develop over time—eventually shining with "light," revealing their true nature. However, relationships remain uncertain, dependent on a future that two people can hope for, but not necessarily control. Thus, personification here presents love as unpredictable and ever-changing.

Lines 14-15 describe the onion's "fierce kiss," which will linger on the mouth of its recipient:

> Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,
> possessive and faithful
> as we are

In this case, personification imparts sensuality to the onion so that it reflects the physical aspects of love. The onion seems to kiss the lover like a person would. Moreover, this kiss is said to be as "possessive and faithful" as the speaker and their lover. The onion's characterization as "fierce," "possessive," and "faithful" suggests that love is a pungent force—one whose effects linger long after it is gone.

Overall, personification allows the speaker to represent love more fully by comparing it to a person, thus conveying that love has a level of nuance and complexity that is consistent with human behavior.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "It promises light / like the careful undressing of love."
- **Lines 14-16:** "Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips, / possessive and faithful / as we are,"
- **Lines 21-23:** "Lethal. / Its scent will cling to your fingers,

/ cling to your knife."

REPETITION

This poem contains a great deal of repetition, which works with other poetic devices to provide structure and reinforce the speaker's point of view. In lines 1 and 12, the speaker points out that their Valentine is unlike conventional gifts using a parallel "Not a … or a …" structure:

> Not a red rose or a satin heart.

and

> Not a cute card or a kissogram.

The repetition of this negative framing reinforces the speaker's argument that mainstream representations of love should be rejected. It also lumps all of these items together, creating a unified image of conventional Valentine's Day gifts. As a result, the reader understands that the speaker is not disputing the merit of individual gifts, but rather critiquing typical portrayals of love *as a whole*.

Directly after these lines (in lines 2 and 13) the speaker states, "I give you an onion," clarifying that the onion is a favorable alternative to the listed items. Because this statement urges the speaker's lover to accept the onion, its repetition reinforces an image of the speaker as someone who is pushy and insistent. At the same time, it contributes to the speaker's credibility by displaying the speaker's confidence that the onion is the proper gift.

Throughout this monologue, the speaker uses the same opening words (anaphora) and sentence structures (parallelism) to describe what the onion does. As a result, each multi-line stanza contains "It is" and "It will" statements, each of which is very straightforward. Therefore, repetition causes these phrases to come across as increasingly direct and authoritative by creating a sense of consistency.

This poem also contains one example of epistrophe, which appears in lines 16-17:

> as we are,
> for as long as we are.

The repetition of "as we are" at the ends of lines strengthens the speaker's claim that the onion accurately represents the couple's relationship.

The next and final stanza contains diacope:

> Its scent will cling to your fingers,
> cling to your knife.

Here, repetition allows the poem to behave like the image it describes. The phrase "cling to your" lingers into the next line, much like the onion's scent, which lingers on the speaker's lover.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Not a red rose or a satin heart."
- **Line 2:** "I give you an onion."
- **Line 3:** "It"
- **Line 4:** "It"
- **Line 7:** "It will"
- **Line 9:** "It will"
- **Line 12:** "Not a cute card or a kissogram."
- **Line 13:** "I give you an onion."
- **Line 14:** "Its"
- **Lines 16-17:** "as we are, / for as long as we are."
- **Line 19:** "Its"
- **Lines 22-23:** "cling to your fingers, / cling to your knife."

SIMILE

"Valentine" employs two similes. The first simile occurs in the second stanza:

> It promises light
> like the careful undressing of love.

The simile is complicated by the fact that it uses additional metaphorical language. The "careful undressing of love" is a metaphor for how love requires people to become intimate, not only literally undressing but also figuratively becoming more vulnerable. So, this simile compares an onion to the process of becoming more intimate.

Furthermore, in the poem as a whole, the onion represents love. Here it is metaphorically full with the "light" of love. More specifically, peeling an onion ("undressing" it) and loving someone both "promise[] light." In other words, the onion's rough, plain outer layer must be removed to reach its bright center—just as two people have to take down barriers to intimacy in order to really love each other.

The second simile occurs in the next stanza:

> It will blind you with tears
> like a lover.

Here, light imagery takes a more sinister turn. On its most basic level, this simile purports that, like an onion, lovers bring about tears. The speaker does not specify if these are tears brought on by joy, frustration, sadness, or some other emotion. However, the speaker *does* specify that the tears will be "blinding," meaning that they will overwhelm someone. Thus, the speaker implies that love—true, vulnerable love—can impair

a person's ability to function and make sound decisions.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "It promises light / like the careful undressing of love."
- **Lines 7-8:** "It will blind you with tears / like a lover."

VOCABULARY

Satin (Line 1) - A soft, shiny woven fabric, usually made from silk fibers. Satin is a common material for wedding dresses as well as Valentine's Day gifts like boxes, ribbons, and lingerie.

Kissogram (Line 12) - A lighthearted greeting delivered by someone who has been hired to kiss the recipient. The messenger usually wears a costume and sings to the recipient. This practice originated in the United States in the 1970s and was popularized in the UK during the following decade. The term is a fusion of the words "kiss" and "telegram."

Possessive (Line 15) - Requiring someone's full, unwavering attention and affection, usually to an obsessive or overbearing degree. This term also indicates adamant resistance to sharing, resulting from a desire to have total ownership of someone or something.

Lethal (Line 21) - Deadly, or able to cause death.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem does not follow an established poetic form or consistent stanzaic structure. Instead, the number of lines varies from one stanza to the next, following this pattern:

- Monostich (one-line stanza)
- Quatrain (four-line stanza)
- Cinquain (five-line stanza)
- Monostich
- Monostich
- Cinquain
- Tercet (three-line stanza)
- Tercet (three-line stanza)

Although the poem's lines are relatively short overall, they contain anywhere from one to 10 syllables. The dramatic variance in line and stanza length reflect the ever-changing, tempestuous love that the speaker describes. Furthermore, the poem's short lines and stanzas are comprised of similarly brief sentences and words, resulting in a choppy rhythm. The terseness of the speaker's language and cadence is consistent with a broader rejection of overly flowery, romanticized descriptions of love.

The poem's three one-line stanzas visually and structurally stand apart from the surrounding text, drawing the reader's attention. In line 11, the speaker says, "I am trying to be truthful." This line succinctly encapsulates much of the poem's mission—to portray love with radical honesty and accuracy. In the poem's two other one-line stanzas, the speaker denounces conventional, glossy representations of love: "Not a red rose or a satin heart," and "Not a cute card or a kissogram." Thus, the speaker uses these single lines to hammer home the poem's message.

The poem's multi-line stanzas follow their own structure. The speaker opens each by brusquely encouraging the reader to accept the onion. The speaker's plea is then followed by statements that begin with "It" and characterize what the onion is expected to do. The speaker's formula isn't too precise, but it does add a degree of organization and consistency to the monologue, grounding readers as they navigate its erratic rhythms.

METER

While this poem does not have an overarching meter—it is written in free verse—it still has some clear rhythmic patterns that are crucial to its atmosphere. The very short words, sentences, and lines that make up this poem generally result in a terse, choppy cadence. Plus, the unpredictability of its rhythms creates a lively, tumultuous mood to match the love that the speaker describes.

In a few places, the poem's variation of stressed and unstressed syllables amplifies other sonic effects. Here is a closer look at line 1:

> Not a red rose or a satin heart.

The stresses that fall on "red rose" draw attention to alliterative /r/ sounds, which are also picked up in "or" and "heart." The repetition of these sounds creates a growling effect, giving the speaker's monologue an aggressive feel from its outset. Moreover, the stress that "Not" receives drives home the speaker's rejection of cheesy, conventional representations of love.

Elsewhere, metrical patterns briefly repeat, giving the poem a muted rhythmic undercurrent that allows momentum to build. This offers a touch of consistency to the otherwise highly erratic meter. The most prolific example of this effect results from amphibrachs, a poetic foot that follows an unstressed-stressed-unstressed pattern. The poem's refrain, which appears in lines 2 and 13, is made up of two such feet:

> I give you | an onion.

Additionally, there is a natural, brief pause between the two feet, subtly exaggerating the repetition. Line 15 follows the

same pattern:

> possessive | and faithful.

Furthermore, lines 4, 10, 19, and 22 each begin with an amphibrach, a poetic foot with an unstressed-stressed-unstressed beat pattern:

> It promis- | es light

And:

> a wobbling | photo of grief

Once more:

> Its platinum | loops shrink to a wedding ring

and finally,

> Its scent will | cling to your fingers

The repetition of this mellow, rising and falling pattern creates a slight sense of stability, which allows readers to gain their footing within the poem's rhythms, albeit on shaky ground.

Sometimes, the poem breaks from meter to create impact. For example, line 5 contains three anapests (unstressed-unstressed-stressed), while line 6 consists of only one syllable:

> like the care- | ful undres- | sing of love.
> Here.

The standalone "Here" emphatically contrasts with the looping meter of the line before it. It plays up the speaker's insistence and authority.

Similarly, the repetition of the dactylic phrase "cling to your" in lines 22-23 creates momentum that drives towards the poem's conclusion:

> Its scent will | cling to your | fingers,
> cling to your | knife.

This final line receives additional emphasis not only due to repetition, but also due to the singled stressed syllable at the end of it. The word "knife" draws attention to itself because it contrasts with the stresses of "fingers." The cutting rhythm of "knife" highlights the brutal, dangerous side of love.

Therefore, the poem's lack of conventional meter, and its strategic placement of repetitive rhythms, mirrors the speaker's candid account of love.

RHYME SCHEME

"Valentine" contains very little rhyme, which is consistent with its overall intense, tempestuous atmosphere. Obvious rhymes—especially perfect and end rhymes—tend to give verse a lighthearted musicality. Accordingly, the rhymes that *do* appear in this poem are almost exclusively slant or internal rhymes. Generally, they call attention to important images and ideas.

For example, in lines 6-7, there is a slant rhyme between "here" and "tears":

> Here.
> It will blind you with tears.

Both of these words receive metrical stress, placing additional emphasis on the speaker's assertiveness and the onion's ability to cause sorrow.

In lines 14-15, slant rhyme links the onion's "kiss" with the recipient's "lips" and the onion's "possessive" disposition:

> Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,
> possessive and faithful

In doing so, the speaker illustrates the relationship between these words and creates a strong, unified image.

There are also several rhymes in the poem's final two stanzas, particularly among words that contain the /ing/ sound, as well as between "like" and "knife":

> Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring,
> if you like.
> Lethal.
> Its scent will cling to your fingers,
> cling to your knife.

These strings of rhymes put additional force behind the poem's conclusion, especially as each rhyme occurs on a stressed syllable. The rhymes also provide a sense of completion as the monologue draws to a close. Again, because these are mostly slant rhymes, they provide emphasis without creating an overly sugary sound.

SPEAKER

Very little information is revealed about the speaker over the course of the poem. The speaker remains nameless, ageless, and genderless. All readers know is that this person has a rather distinct perspective on romance. On the one hand, the speaker rejects traditional sentimentality. At the same time, the speaker's claim of "trying to be truthful" suggests a certain earnestness or tenderness when it comes to expressing love

for their partner.

Overall, the reader comes away with the understanding that the speaker is someone who finds love incredibly powerful and is therefore committed to expressing it honestly. At the same time, the absence of biographical details allows readers of all backgrounds to connect to the poem's message.

SETTING

The poem doesn't have a clear setting, though its title and imagery suggest that it takes place on Valentine's Day. Beyond that, there's nothing to clue readers into where this gift exchange is happening—over a candlelit dinner, a romantic picnic, or on a bench during a lunch break. Perhaps it only happens in the speaker's mind.

Whatever the case, the vagueness of the setting keeps the reader's focus on the speaker—and, of course, on the onion.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

While Carol Ann Duffy has written plays, librettos, children's books, and more, she is best known for her poetry. Duffy often inhabits and amplifies the voices of people who are usually shut out from mainstream discourse in her writing (see "Education for Leisure" and "Warming Her Pearls").

The speaker of "Valentine" explicitly rejects traditional representations of love and presents an alternative through an elaborate conceit that compares love to an onion. Other poets, particularly from the Renaissance, have also used conceits to depict love unconventionally. For instance, in the poem "The Flea," John Donne uses the image of his and his lover's blood mixing in the belly of a flea as a conceit for erotic love. Relatedly, in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130," the speaker argues that his mistress doesn't fulfill any of the traditional expectations of beauty—yet he loves her anyway.

Duffy's penchant for humor and plain language are qualities she shares with the Liverpool Poets, a group of writers in the 1960s who wanted to make poetry more accessible. Duffy lived with a key figure of the movement, painter and poet Adrian Henri, for about a decade during her formative teenage and young adult years (through the 1970s and into the early 80s). His influence can be seen in her wit, references to pop culture, and representations of everyday people, language, and subject matter.

Finally, this poem originally appeared in Duffy's 1993 poetry collection, *Mean Time*, which marked a shift in her work to more open discussions of queer love. More broadly, "Valentine" can be seen as part of a wider effort in poetry to more accurately reflect real people's experiences, including people who identify as queer.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Valentine" was published in the 1990s. In the decade before this, unemployment and poverty had skyrocketed. As a result, there was a rise in neoliberalism, a political ideology that emphasizes individual rights and freedoms, and advocates for a laissez-faire or "hands-off" approach to the free market. In the UK, where Duffy lives, Margaret Thatcher ushered this ideology into mainstream politics and culture—a movement known as Thatcherism (the British counterpart to Reaganomics in the United States).

While many members of society's upper classes were able to attain new levels of wealth and prosperity, poverty and unemployment continued to rise during much of Thatcher's tenure. As a result, entrepreneurship and consumerism were fetishized, even as inequality swelled. Thus, this poem's insistence that mass-produced goods don't reflect people's real experiences can be seen as a reaction to this inequality and commercialism.

Furthermore, Thatcherism saw a resurgence of Victorian-era values, particularly moral conservatism. The nuclear family—a married man and woman with children—was emphasized as the building block for an upstanding society. As a result, anti-LGBT+ sentiment was on the rise, especially as the AIDS crisis ramped up.

Duffy, who identifies as a lesbian, began to write more openly about queer love around this time. In this context, "Valentine" can partly be seen as a form of resistance to the demonization of the queer community, an attempt to make space for more diverse understandings of love.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Carol Ann Duffy Reads "Valentine" and More — Listen to the author read and briefly discuss the poem at the Poetry on the Lake poetry festival [1:22-3:19]. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZPLIg5tFI8)
- Profile of Carol Ann Duffy — An in-depth profile of Duffy from 2002, including interview questions and details of her biographical and literary history. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/aug/31/featuresreviews.guardianreview8)
- Guardian Books Podcast: Carol Ann Duffy's Love Poems for Valentine's Day — A 38-minute podcast episode in which the author reads and discusses many of her own love poems, including "Valentine," with a live audience [3:35-6:02]. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2013/feb/14/love-poems-carol-ann-duffy-podcast)

- Biography of Carol Ann Duffy — An overview of the author's life and work from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy)
- What is Thatcherism? — A brief, straightforward overview of Thatcherism from the BBC. (https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-22079683)
- Remembering the '80s — A lighthearted but insightful piece in which about a dozen individuals (mostly from media industries) discuss their experience of Thatcher's Britain. (https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/remembering-the-80s-6101125.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- Before You Were Mine
- Death of a Teacher
- Education For Leisure
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- Little Red Cap
- Medusa
- Mrs Midas
- Originally
- Prayer
- Stealing
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer
- We Remember Your Childhood Well

HOW TO CITE

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CHICAGO MANUAL

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