

Valentine
By Carol Ann Duffy



ONIONS! How are onions like love?

We are going to the kitchen. You need:

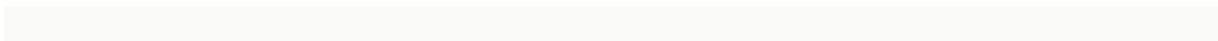
1. An onion
2. Your imagination



Setting the scene: imagine today is Valentine’s Day. You are in love. You have a romantic date with your boyfriend/girlfriend this evening. The produce a present for you: an onion.

THE ONION	Your description of the onion (be as specific as possible. Use imagery if you can.)
What does the outside of the onion look like? Describe its shape, colour, texture.	
Peel the brown or red skin from the onion. Now describe the onion. Describe shape, colour, texture. What objects would you compare it to?	

<p>Now cut the onion in half. What effect does this have on your eyes?</p>	
<p>Now taste the onion. How would you describe the taste?</p>	
<p>What effect does the taste of the onion have on your mouth or your lips?</p>	
<p>Look at the cross section of the onion. Describe it. What objects could you compare this part of the onion to?</p>	
<p>Now smell your fingers. Describe the smell.</p>	



Valentine

Not a red rose or a satin heart.

I give you an onion.

It is a moon wrapped in brown paper.

It promises light

like the careful undressing of love.

Here.

It will blind you with tears

like a lover.

It will make your reflection

a wobbling photo of grief.

I am trying to be truthful.

Not a cute card or a kissogram.

I give you an onion.

Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,

possessive and faithful

as we are,

for as long as we are.

Take it.

Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring,

if you like.

Lethal.

Its scent will cling to your fingers,

cling to your knife.

Carol Ann Duffy

What is the poem about?

The poem, on the surface, is about the giving of an unusual present for Valentine's day, but it is really an exploration of love and the nature of relationships between two people. The poem is universal: it could be any lover to any beloved as there is no indication of the sex of either the 'I' or the 'you'. This is a good poem to write about because it has a single central image, which is developed throughout the poem: the onion is an extended metaphor for love.

How is the presentation of love developed?

The most important thing to mention and refer to when discussing this poem is that it is an EXTENDED METAPHOR; the poet compares her love and the relationship to an onion, this image is extended throughout the whole poem drawing similarities throughout.

The speaker of the poem offers her lover an onion as a Valentine gift. This is clearly not a conventional gift like satin hearts or roses; nevertheless she gives an onion because it represents her love in many different ways. She continues through the poem comparing different aspects of the onion to different aspects of her love.

What is Duffy saying?

Initially the poet is positive about the love she offers saying that it has many layers which promise a joyful future:

'it is a moon wrapped in brown paper / it promises light'

However, Duffy also points out that true and passionate love can be painful:

'blind you with tears / like a lover'

She is really saying that she offers her lover an onion because it is like her love – it can be beautiful yet can also cause pain and upset. She points out that a powerful love is very difficult to forget and that just like the lasting smell and taste of the pungent onion a relationship will remain firmly in the mind of the partners, perhaps even long after it has ended:

'its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,'

'its scent will cling to your fingers'

Duffy draws comparisons between the rings of an onion and a wedding ring:

'platinum loops shrink to a wedding-ring'

This suggests that the longer the relationship continues the more serious it will become and perhaps will then lead to the ultimate commitment of marriage. However, there is also a suggestion that if something "shrinks" it becomes less valuable and perhaps hints at the end of the relationship. Certainly the end of the poem is not as positive as the opening when there is a suggestion that one partner may end the relationship:

'cling to your knife'.

How does Duffy use structure?

The structure of a poem is the way in which a poet chooses to set the poem out, this includes rhyme schemes, rhythm patterns, word or sentence patterns and the way the lines are laid out.

Duffy wants the receiver of her onion to know that she has chosen it because she feels that it is the best and most genuine declaration of her love. Duffy rejects the traditional symbols of love because she feels that they have become meaningless. The *'satin hearts', 'red roses', 'cute cards'* etc are not acceptable to Duffy because each has ceased to be original, they are stereotypical gifts which have been sent so many times that they have become superficial and insignificant.

Notice how Duffy structures these lines to emphasize that she does not approve of these types of gift:

'Not a red rose or satin heart'

And

'Not a cute card or a kissogram'

In both cases the word 'not' is stressed because it appears first in the line (notice it is also the very first word of the poem). Duffy adds impact to her point by repeating the structure of the lines, which is identical, and also by having these lines standing alone in the poem.

Also, Duffy is making a very personal and direct declaration of love. The message is sent from the speaker to the intended lover with real clarity in the way that the words *'I'* and *'you'* are used throughout the poem. Furthermore, Duffy uses short lines to emphasize the emotional plea; you can almost hear the speaker's voice as they offer their gift of love in the lines *'Here', 'Take it', 'I am trying to be truthful'*.

The whole poem is written in FREE VERSE, which means that there is no obvious rhyme scheme or rhythm. This is an important choice because it echoes the naturalness of speech and also highlights that love and relationship have no order or pattern.

How does the language chosen by the poet reflect the message of the poem?

Duffy is very careful to choose words and phrases and images that express exactly what she feels. (Remember that in poetry you should always think about the deeper meanings of words, the connotations – ideas associated with them – and be looking for examples of effective figurative language).

The early part of the poem suggests the positive aspects of the relationship. Think about the words *'promise'* and *'light'*, words linked with good things. Also look at how Duffy suggests the *'undressing'* of lovers through the image of removing the outer layers of the onion.

As the poem progresses there is more focus on both the strength and power of the relationship; *'fierce', 'possessive', 'faithful'*, yet also the pain and tears it can bring; *'blind', 'tears', 'wobbling photo of grief'*. At the close of the poem, Duffy's choice of language and image suggests that the intensity of the lovers may well be too much for the relationship, forcing an ending, *'lethal'*.

Think about the last line, *'cling to your knife'*, this image suggests one partner cutting the relationship and therefore ending it.

What does the tone of the poem reveal about the poet's attitude?

The TONE is the way a speaker would say/read the poem. The tone can reveal a great deal about the speaker's attitude towards the subject, in this case Valentines and love.

The tone is established through the language and structure. Thus in this poem the tone is DIRECT and SINCERE. The poet is making a heartfelt declaration of love to her lover, which begins in a POSITIVE manner but develops and more SINISTER feel as the potential failure of the relationship is considered.

Think about how the poet is rejecting stereotypical Valentine's presents because they do not convey the true strength of the relationship. Thus the poem has POWERFUL feeling as the poet explains all the reasons that the onion is a more appropriate gift.

What is the poem about?

Group Task

In groups, using the information you have just read, complete the table below.

NOTE: It is important to complete the table, as each group will be expected to answer any given question.

1. How does the poet portray relationships in the poem?	2. What is the tone (the way a speaker would read the poem)? What does the tone show about the poet's attitude towards the subject?
3. What is the importance, purpose and symbolism of the gift?	4. How does the language reveal the message of the poem? Look carefully at the writer's choice of words – why have these particular words been chosen? Do they create a particular effect?

The Onion and Love

Carol Ann Duffy gives the onion as a gift and uses it to signify love and relationships. Complete the table below, identifying what the onion is or does, and in what ways this is similar to relationships.

The Onion	Love/Relationships
'It is a moon wrapped in brown paper. It promises light.'	The 'brown paper' is the outer skin of the onion, the comparison also supports the ideas of a gift. The reference to the 'moon' is common in romantic poetry, it 'promises light' like the moon, and perhaps, like the optimism at the beginning of a new relationship.
'It will blind you with tears like a lover.'	
'It will make your reflection a wobbling photo of grief.'	

<p>'Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips, possessive and faithful.'</p>	
<p>'Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding-ring if you like.'</p>	
<p>'Lethal Its scent will cling to your fingers, Cling to your knife.'</p>	

Remember: Because Duffy writes about her relationship as if it is an onion, we can say that she uses a METAPHOR. Because she returns to the image over and over again, and continually develops the comparison, we can refer to the language device as an EXTENDED METAPHOR.

The table that you have completed illustrates how the extended metaphor works in both its representation of love, and also the development of the image.

Valentine – A Summary

Using the work you have done so far, complete the following passage by copying out and filling in the spaces with the appropriate words. The passage is divided into four paragraphs and each one considers a different aspect of the poem.

Subject Matter – What the poem is about

The title of the poem tells us that it is a _____. However, straight away, we learn that it is not a normal type of Valentine, it is 'Not a _____'. Instead the poet gives her lover an _____ as a sign of her love. She explains why the gift is so appropriate using original romantic images like, '_____'. There is also a note of caution; relationships can be killed off, and love can be, '_____'.

Ideas and Attitudes – What the poem is trying to say

Carol Ann Duffy rejects the usual Valentine gifts, suggesting that they are too _____. Instead, she provides what she considers to be a far more _____ representation of love and relationships.

She implies that love is not always sweet, but can be sharp, cutting and can result in tears, just like the scent and taste of an _____.

Language – The words that are used

The poet uses an extended _____, she writes about her relationship as if it was an onion. She considers the qualities of an onion, and how these are similar to those of a relationship, for example, '_____ ' can be compared to a love affair because _____.

Apart from these comparisons, the language tends to be quite simple and straightforward. Perhaps this means that she wants her relationship to be _____ as well.

The poem also contains a number of statements, for instance, '_____':

This makes the poet sound in control and sure of herself.

Form or Structure – The way the poem is set out

The poem does not have a regular structure. The lines and stanzas are of varying length. This could be for several reasons. Firstly, that _____ can not be ordered and regular. Secondly, that the poet's thoughts are going directly onto paper, she is not _____ them first, just like a relationship cannot be planned.

Also, traditional _____ poetry is very regular and so she may have deliberately decided to reject this form.

Finally, some important words and short phrases have a line or stanza all to themselves. This serves to _____.