

How does Carol Ann Duffy powerfully present her feelings about love in “Valentine”?

Carol Ann Duffy’s poem goes beyond the superficial aspects of love, instead looking at the reality of it. It explores love’s imperfection, ambiguity and contradictory nature, contrasting and juxtaposing the everyday and the idealised. The speaker refuses to follow conventions, warning that they are unnecessary for free romantic love, highlighting how sincerity and absence of glamour in a relationship can lead to both positive and negative outcomes.

The name of the poem, “Valentine”, suggests a traditional, romantic sense of love, however this poem clearly aims to reject these conventional images of love. The very first word, ‘not’, is a blunt and unexpected refusing of the cliché, sentimental and stereotypical images of romance. The first line is in itself a heavily monosyllabic, verbless one line stanza, presenting this sudden non-acceptance in a matter-of-fact tone. The line is, admittedly, abrupt, however the plain and unadorned language presents the speaker as more sincere and realistic. Although they turn down the traditional gifts of Valentine’s Day, they instead turn to an onion. The short line “I give you an onion” is surprising and even comically blunt, as the narrator presents something so base, mundane and unsentimental, but on the other hand something so romantically out of the ordinary. Even on a literal level, an onion has a strong, bitter, overpowering taste, unlike that of sweet heart-shaped chocolates. Duffy also dismisses the traditional sonnet form for love poems, instead opting for very short stanzas, with several only line long, echoing the peeling of an onion itself. She presents the onion as a “moon wrapped in brown paper”, as a celestial object concealed within the everyday, within something so mundane and cheap, but suggesting that the beauty of love comes from inside. The “moon” is associated with light, innocence, hope at night and beauty. The “brown paper” literally represents the outer layer of the onion, reminding the reader that truly romantic gifts need not expensive decorations, instead the care and attention that is implied in the verb “wrapped”. The speaker presents a realistic view of love, with the blunt alliterative “t” sounds in the eleventh line reflecting the bluntness and truthfulness of the relationship. The verb “trying” further suggests some vulnerability in the bare honesty of their love. Following this line, the alliteration of hard consonants in the line “not a cute card or a kissogram” implies contempt at such superficial images of love, as it echoes the first line of the poem. The undecorated and informal language used, such as “I give you”, mimicking a supermarket transaction, in conjunction with short imperatives such as “Here” And “Take it” present a simplistic and commanding, yet honest side to the speaker. Overall, the poem “Valentine” frankly does away with the clichés associated with the special occasion. Duffy makes apparent her disregard for stereotypical images and platitudes of love, as she opts for an unconventional and plain-spoken poem, without elaborate metaphor and simile, about being unceremonious yet sincere.

Duffy explores the positive feelings associated love throughout her poem and contrasts them with reminders of the downsides too. Her description of an onion as a “moon” that “promises light” shows her to be optimistic of what the relationship could become, the verb ‘promise’ suggesting faithfulness and unity. The “careful undressing of love” not only describes the revealing of complex feelings, but also the tender and intimate act of undressing. The adjective “careful” further suggests a certain devotion and adoration, an affection and sensitivity between the lovers as they expose themselves, either emotionally or physically, to one another. Carol Ann Duffy’s description of a “fierce kiss” brings up connotations of passionate lovers, whilst the word “lips” makes the reader think of something more erotic and sexual. Their love is “faithful”, which presents the positive associations of a trusting relationship. In addition, the speaker mentions the

word “scent”, which could be interpreted as the pleasant smell of perfume, or, indeed, a more negative side too. Although Duffy talks about plenty of positive details within her love, she juxtaposes all of them with the truthful and disappointingly unfortunate aspects too.

No matter how much one wraps an onion, its strong, overpowering taste will still linger in one's mouth. The speaker uses the comparison of love to an onion to talk about the downsides of a loving relationship upfront. In the same way that the “moon” is ever present, day and night, but not always visible, love has its ups and downs too. The onion's potency “will blind you”, showing an overwhelming nature to it. This line reflects the earlier “It promises light” – showing how too much light is not necessarily beneficial. The rest of the sentence, “with tears / like a lover” warns the reader that a relationship can cause one to cry in pain, just as an onion can, reminding the speaker that a lover can evoke suffering and sadness as well as love and positive emotions. It is clear that Duffy speaks these lines with confidence as she wishes to make it clear that love must have downsides, shown by the anaphora of the declarative phrase “It will”. She describes a “wobbling photo”, suggesting an unfixed identity, or perhaps that the photograph is a mere shadow or imitation of the real thing. The photograph itself cannot wobble, instead the transferred epithet of “wobbling” refers to the one observing it, suggesting their emotional instability and their insecurity within their self-reflection. Later in the poem, the passionate associations of a “kiss” are heavily undermined by the adjective “fierce”, suggesting some aggression and violence. Furthermore, Duffy alludes to the fact that the thoughts and feelings associated with a romantic relationship are hard to do away with, in the same way that an onion's taste is difficult to remove. The speaker explores this idea further in the last sentence of the poem: “Its scent will cling to your fingers, / cling to your knife.” The mention of “scent” here could also signify how the memories, either positive or negative, will still remain long after the relationship has broken down, equally as the smell of chopped onion persists even after the onion is gone. In addition, the verb “cling” shows a desperate, parasitical and inescapable nature to the love, as its residue will forever stay. Duffy compares the silvery rings of an onion to “platinum loops [that] shrink to a wedding ring”, since conventionally love would culminate in marriage. Although platinum is a highly prized, valuable metal, it is not arguably as beautiful as the traditional diamonds or silver, reminding the reader that the inherent value of love is far more important than the superficial aspects to it. However, perhaps the speaker believes that marriage is constricting and limiting, as revealed by the verb “shrink”. The jarring one word sentence that follows reflects how a proposal to marry is always a turning point in the relationship, whether it leads to a break-up or a comfortable married life. Moreover, the connotations of the word “Lethal” show how a relationship could be considered dangerous and risky, as it is further backed up by the menacing and emphatic final word of the poem: “knife”, presenting how love can be violent and involve pain. The honesty of two lovers, like a knife, can easily and cleanly cut through the relationship that is the onion, and the two halves will never combine to be one again – perhaps, the writer simply wishes to highlight the realistic impermanence of true love. Duffy explains very few of the downsides of love explicitly, instead opting for more subtle word choices and meanings to make the reader think and reconsider the difficulty of a romantic relationship.

Duffy's poem deals with and discusses the complex feelings between two lovers in a relationship. She gives higher value to the powerful emotions within real love, rather than the unoriginal, unthoughtful and meaningless traditional Valentine's day gifts. Through her unexpected and curious analogy of love as an onion, Duffy attempts to explain the intricacies of love, slowly revealing her strange gift to be far more harmonious with real, human romance.

Teacher's comments

Mark: 23/25 *Very good, with some lovely phrases. Super!*

- Not convinced by your analysis of the “blunt alliterative ‘t’ sounds in the eleventh line”
- You can include that the act of undressing is not only tender, intimate – it is sexual too
- Explain the negative connotations of the word “scent”
- Mention how to be blinded is not only overwhelming but also physically painful