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.

The speaker then juxtaposes these sugarcoated, romanticized representations of love with a much less sentimental image:

> I give you an onion.

The speaker's decision to give the onion as a Valentine indicates that the speaker's experience of love is very different from its mainstream portrayals.

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 establish the credibility of the speaker, who comes across as direct and confident. Plus, the simple structure and abruptness of these sentences resists the flowery language usually associated with love poems, greeting cards, etc.

Furthermore, line 1 contains consonant /r/ sounds, which recall growling and work with /t/ sounds to give the line a harsh tone. The meter reinforces the effect by further emphasizing syllables that contain consonant sounds. Plus, the high concentration of stressed syllables in this line gives it rhythmic force:

> Not a red rose or a satin heart.

The /n/ sound within "not" that opens the poem then bleeds into the next line. This consonance creates continuity between the lines, both bridging the stanza gap and suggesting a relationship between them. More specifically, it subtly reinforces the reader's understanding that "an onion" is "Not a red rose." 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.

Conceits are typically long, elaborate comparisons between two seemingly contrasting things. As a result, the relationship between these two things tends to be laid out via wit and reason, rather than the senses, which allows the speaker to avoid the sensuous imagery that love poems traditionally feature. Thus, this form of metaphor is consistent with the speaker's broader dismissal of conventional, idealized depictions of love.

The meter of line 2, which consists of two amphibrachs (unstressed-stressed-unstressed), is much mellower than that of line 1:

> I give you | an onion.

This gentle rhythm foreshadows two stylistic trends that will permeate the rest of the poem—amphibrachs will reappear, serving as the first foot for about one-third of the poem's lines; and the speaker will use softer sounds when describing the onion, while using harder sounds used to describe traditional symbols of 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. Furthermore, apostrophe places the audience in the position of the speaker's lover, eliciting the reader's empathy and building intimacy between the speaker and the reader. Indeed, apostrophe is established through an image of the speaker holding out a gift, literally reaching out to the reader.

LINES 3-5

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

The speaker begins to build out the conceit set up above with a series of metaphors. First, the onion is described as "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" gives the image of an onion being peeled an unexpectedly sensual atmosphere. Furthermore, as light has long been a symbol of truth and clarity, this simile suggests that barriers to intimacy—whether physical or emotional—must be torn down to achieve "true" love. The term "promises" is also

telling. After all, who can say whether all the promises of a relationship will be kept?

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 framing 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.

Lines 4-5 set in motion one of the poem's focal stylistic undercurrents—the speaker uses euphonic /l/, /f/, and sibilant /s/ sounds when discussing the onion and cacophonous sounds when discussing traditional representations of love:

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

This pattern subtly opposes the onion with clichéd symbols of love, reinforcing their contrast. Which is not to say that hard or soft sounds disappear altogether during various sections of the poem. Rather, softer sounds grow more prevalent as harder sounds recede, and vice versa. In this case, euphony gives the language a gentler feel and allows it to flow more easily.

The meter of these lines amplifies this effect—line 4 sees a return of the amphibrach (unstressed-stressed-unstressed) used in line 2, while line 5 consists of 3 anapests (unstressed-unstressed-stressed):

> It promis- | es light
> like the care- | ful undres- | sing of love.

This metrical regularity is unique to these lines, which ease the reader into the poem's choppy, erratic rhythms.

LINES 6-10

> *Here. ...*
> *... photo of grief.*

The poem's third stanza opens with a blunt command—"Here." It contrasts with the preceding sentence, which was significantly longer, spanning two lines and employing enjambment. Furthermore, as laid out above, that sentence flowed nicely due to its repetitive meter. As a result, the speaker's one-syllable, end-stopped directive, "Here," comes across as particularly harsh and forceful. Such subtle revelations of the speaker's temperament—confrontational, insistent, terse—are a result of apostrophe. The speaker is directly addressing their lover. The tone and manner of this address sheds light on the speaker's behavior within the relationship, revealing aspects of the speaker's character.

Although two of this stanza's lines are enjambed, they break on natural pauses—"It will blind you with tears / like a lover" and "It will make your reflection / a wobbling photo of grief." So, like end-stops, the line breaks reinforce natural pauses, contributing to the poem's assertive rhythm.

Additionally, the parallelism that pervades the poem begins to emerge. The speaker's statements, "It will blind," and "It will make," recall "It is" and "It promises" from the previous section. The parallelism reiterates a very straightforward syntax, creating a sense of consistency. In turn, it both increases the speaker's credibility and provides structure, grounding the reader. The repetition of "It" at the beginning of successive sentences and lines, an example of anaphora, brings this effect to the fore.

The light imagery that stanza 2 introduces begins to take a sinister turn over the course of this passage. The onion is first described as having the power to "blind you with tears." While the precise reason for the tears is unknown, this metaphor indicates that true love provokes overwhelming emotions, hindering one's ability to function or perceive situations as they truly are. The onion's light (i.e. true love between open, vulnerable partners) not only "blinds" the speaker's lover, but also casts the lover's reflection back as "a wobbling photo of grief." Like the previous comparison, this metaphor suggests that the intensity of true love impairs people. It can create a melancholy and unstable version of a person, distorting their self-image.

The meter of line 10 oscillates rapidly between stressed and unstressed syllables, mirroring the "wobble" it describes:

> a wobbling photo of grief.

Furthermore, the euphony among /l/ and /f/ sounds introduced in the previous lines continues throughout this section, providing a sense of continuity. Here is a closer look at lines 9-10:

> It will make your reflection
> a wobbling photo of grief.

The consonance helps bridge the poem's choppy lines and continues the pattern of employing euphony when describing the onion, in contrast to the cacophony that dominates descriptions of traditional representations of love.

Finally, /r/ sounds appear in the words "here," "tears," and

"lover." The consonant /r/ sounds highlight these three terms, strengthening the speaker's comparison by linking the presentation of the onion, ("here") and the "tears" it brings about, to the cruelty of love ("It will blind you [...] like a lover"). This simile introduces the word "lover" almost as if it's a type of weapon, one that's capable of blinding someone.

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." Here, apostrophe captures a rare indication of the speaker's uncertainty—the speaker is "trying to be truthful" rather than simply "being truthful." This moment suggests that the speaker views the poem as an ongoing *attempt* to get the comparison between an onion and a valentine *right*, an attempt to explain why an onion is the most accurate expression of love.

Getting it right is important to the speaker, and this heightens the poem's stakes. This line thus evokes an earnest sense of vulnerability and determination, increasing the speaker's credibility. At the same time, the statement's straightforward syntax and the end-stopped line project confidence, preserving the speaker's authority.

After pointing out an effort to be truthful, the speaker goes on to reject another set of traditional Valentine's Day gifts. In doing so, the speaker indicates that an honest, complete picture of love goes against its mainstream portrayals. The end-stops that contain both one-line stanzas ("I am trying to be truthful" and "Not a cute card or a kissogram") create compact, individual units. Their resulting separation from the rest of the poem draws the reader's attention to these lines.

Cacophonous /t/ and /k/ sounds also appear in both lines 11 and 12, continuing a pattern of harsh sounds when the speaker discusses conventional representations of love. Growling /r/ sounds also reappear, contributing to the harsh sonic mood:

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

The consonance creates continuity amongst these lines and underscores their relationship.

By replicating the structure of the poem's first line, "Not a red rose or a satin heart," in the line "Note a cute card or a kissogram," the speaker equalizes all four of the scorned gifts. While the classic valentines that the speaker originally calls out are sensual, those presented here are cutesy. By broadening the scope of rejected gifts, the speaker creates a unified image of *all* conventional valentines and fortifies their role as a symbol for mainstream portrayals of love. Thus, the reader understands that the speaker rejects glossy, misleading representations of love *as a whole*—not just individual products.

Next, the speaker repeats "I give you an onion," reinforcing the juxtaposition of this humble pantry item with the sappy products typically used as valentines. Plus, as in lines 1-2, the /n/ sound that introduces line 12 bleeds into line 13, underscoring that "an onion" is unlike such products—"Not a cute card." The stanza break that separates the two representations of love reflects the distance between them, how different they are.

LINES 14-17

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

The remainder of the stanza 6 introduces new metaphors, adding further depth to the 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." In a similar manner to the term "undressing" in line 5, this metaphor conveys sensuality. Alliums—the family of plants that includes garlic, onions, shallots, etc.—are notorious for their pungent scent. Because their scent lingers, many people specifically *avoid* eating alliums before romantic encounters. Thus, this metaphor has a subtle, ironic humor. Its repugnant sensuality undercuts the sensuality of traditional romantic imagery, such as kissing.

The speaker likens the onion's scent to lovers' attachment to one another, 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 duality of love, containing both positives and negatives. Furthermore, adjectives such as "fierce," "possessive," and "faithful" personify the onion, giving it familiar human qualities that the reader can relate to. The personification works to reveal the temperament of the onion, and by extension, the love it represents. Thus, the comparison reveals how intense love can be.

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.

Moreover, line 15 is made up of two amphibrachs (unstressed-stressed-unstressed):

> possessive | and faithful

As a result, this line's meter exactly replicates that of line 13 ("I give you | an onion"), strengthening the association between the onion and the listed qualities.

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

> possessive and faithful
> as we are,
> for as long as we are.

These line breaks emphasize the repetition of "as we are" and its implications. First, the repetition of this phrase supports 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.

Lastly, this passage is packed with euphonic /l/, /f/, and sibilant /s/ sounds, similar to lines 4-10 ("It promises light" to "a wobbling photo of grief"). The reemergence of these sounds continues the speaker's pattern of employing melodic sounds when discussing the onion, and discordant sounds when discussing traditional representations of love. This contrast plays up the disparity between the speaker's understanding of love and its mainstream portrayals.

LINES 18-20

> *Take it. ...*
> *... if you like.*

The speaker again urges the speaker's lover to accept the onion. This directive mirrors the opening of each multi-line stanza that precedes it. However, this command is the most direct—"Take it." Its percussive /t/ and /k/ sounds increase the harsh atmosphere. The speaker appears to grow increasingly forceful and insistent. This subtle revelation about the speaker's temperament is made possible by apostrophe, which allows the speaker to directly address the speaker's lover.

The metaphor that follows describes the onion's rings as "platinum loops" that "shrink to a wedding ring." The resonance between "wedding ring" and "shrink" strengthens the comparison, emphasizing how wedding rings can become tight and restrictive. By comparing the wedding band to the onion's *inner* rings, the speaker suggests that as a relationship develops—like peeling back the layers of an onion—longterm commitment is expected.

However, the speaker's use of the word "shrink" implies restriction and diminishment, and can be interpreted a number of ways. It could suggest that marriage limits one's freedoms. Or perhaps it signals that, as people grow more intimately familiar with one another, passion begins to fade and monotony takes over. It could also imply that collapsing love into a contract—just because it is the socially acceptable thing to do—belittles a couple's love.

Furthermore, the descriptor "platinum" recalls the imagery of the poem's second and third stanzas, in which light symbolizes the harsh intensity of true, raw love. As all of these associations begin to form in the back of the reader's mind, a well-known symbol of commitment (a wedding ring) becomes complicated. As such, the metaphor reflects the unpredictable, multifaceted nature of love.

This idea is reflected in the hodgepodge of euphonic and cacophonous sounds that permeate this stanza. While the remainder of the poem generally alternates between hard and soft sounds, these sounds converge as the poem draws to a close, reflecting love's complexity. This tension between hard and soft also reflects the speaker's ambivalence about committing to the speaker's partner.

With the phrase "if you like," the speaker makes their partner responsible for determining how long they'll stay together. The lengthiness of the preceding line ("Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring") calls attention to this concise phrase, which occupies its own line. Thus, in one fell swoop, the speaker casually proposes marriage and indicates a lack of enthusiasm about the idea, tempering the offer. By exhibiting such intimate moments in real-time, the poem's use of apostrophe animates the speaker's ambivalence.

LINES 18-20

> *Take it. ...*
> *... if you like.*

The poem's last lines contain its most overtly violent imagery, leaving the reader with graphic representations of love's destructive power. Line 21 simply reads, "Lethal." This one-word, end-stopped line is also the poem's only sentence that is comprised solely of an adjective, calling great attention to it. This line's foreboding characterization of the onion clashes with its depiction as a wedding ring in the previous stanza. Indeed, "Lethal" suggests termination—something coming to its true end—while the wedding ring represents an everlasting commitment, or so the story goes. The juxtaposition of these sentiments reflects love's complexity and further complicates the wedding ring's role as an iconic symbol of marriage.

The final two stanzas are the only ones to contain end rhymes, each of which is accentuated by end-stops. The rhymes create interest, slowing readers down and encouraging them to ruminate on the imagery. All of the rhymes that echo throughout the stanza come to a head in its last lines, drawing further attention to the poem's conclusion:

> ... a wedding ring
> if you like.
> Lethal.

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

Here, "ring" has internal rhymes with each "cling," and a slant rhyme with "finger." Additionally, "like" has a slant rhyme with "knife."

The omission of a conjunction, or asyndeton, in the final sentence helps compress the line and draw attention to its rhymes. The speaker's use of internal and slant rhymes—rather than perfect rhymes—provides emphasis without detracting from the poem's intense, brutal mood.

The repetition of "cling to your" also results in a repeating dactyl (stressed-unstressed-unstressed):

cling to your | fingers,
cling to your | knife.

This recurring pattern creates rhythmic momentum and drives the poem towards its finish. At the same time, it creates the expectation that the second "cling to your" will be followed by a trochee (stressed-unstressed). The word "knife" breaks from the anticipated rhythm, stopping short. As a result, the poem's final, end-stopped word receives tremendous emphasis, creating a strong, lasting image.

Fittingly, the repetition within this sentence mirrors the image it describes, as the word "cling" lingers from one line into the next. As a result, it further strengthens the poem's conclusion—the pungent scent of the onion persists, just as love's impact never wholly fades.

SYMBOLS

CLASSIC VALENTINE'S DAY GIFTS

The speaker invokes traditional Valentine's Day gifts and explicitly rejects them in favor of the onion. The speaker explains that this rejection is an attempt "to be truthful" when expressing love. Thus, the cheesy gifts symbolize depictions of love that distort its true nature. More specifically, the overly glossy and cutesy gifts project an idealized image of love that conceals all its messy, destructive parts.

Furthermore, each of the items listed is a commercial good produced specifically for Valentine's Day and similar occasions. Therefore, these products exemplify the many ways in which love is coopted and whitewashed to encourage the excessive consumption of goods. The speaker chooses a relatively diverse group of products to reveal how pervasive such commercialization is—everything from a plant to a pair of lips can be used to misrepresent love in the name of profit.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

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

LIGHT

Throughout the poem, the onion acts as a conceit, or overly elaborate metaphor, for love. In turn, its "light" (i.e. its pale color) symbolizes the brutal truth of real love.

The speaker begins to build this meaning in lines 4-5, where the onion "promises light / like the careful undressing of love." This image suggests a lover slowly and cautiously tearing down barriers to intimacy, whether they be physical or emotional. The light can therefore be seen as the "truth"—someone's bare and vulnerable self. Indeed, light has long been a symbol of illumination and clarity, usually with positive associations.

However, the speaker quickly reveals that the onion will "blind you with tears" and cast back one's reflection as "a wobbling photo of grief." The images of blinding light and mirrors treat light as something that brings about sorrow. Later, the speaker chooses platinum—a highly reflective metal—to describe the onion's rings, which then become a restrictive, even "Lethal," wedding ring. In this way, light reveals that "true" love between open, vulnerable partners always entails a degree of pain and sacrifice.

Where this symbol 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."
- **Lines 9-10:** "It will make your reflection / a wobbling photo of grief."
- **Line 19:** "Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring,"

THE WEDDING RING

Wedding rings are, of course, symbols of marriage. However, the wedding ring in the poem presents marriage as a restrictive, diminished form of love. The ring is formed from the inner loops of the onion, which is a conceit for the speaker's love. The speaker describes the rings "shrinking" into the ring, suggesting that marriage belittles the couple's love by collapsing into a socially acceptable contract.

By the same reasoning, marriage could also be interpreted as an indication that the intensity of a couple's love has peaked and is on the decline. Indeed, an onion's rings become progressively smaller as one moves towards its center, like passion fading as a relationship develops. Furthermore, the image of "shrinking" rings evokes increasing restriction and thus suggests that marriage limits freedoms and holds people back. Therefore, in general, the wedding ring symbolizes

marriage from a pointedly anti-marriage perspective.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring, / if you like."

THE ONION

The most obvious symbol in the poem, of course, is the onion that the speaker gives to their lover in place of more expected valentines, such as roses or a "kissogram." The onion in the poem symbolizes the true nature of love—that is, it is meant to represent love as it really is, rather than some overly romanticized and unrealistic vision of love.

There are many connotations associated with onions that, at first, make it seem like an odd choice to symbolize love. For example, onions are very common, have lots of layers, have a sharp, lingering odor, and often make people cry when they're being cut.

But these are exactly the qualities that, the poem argues, make the onion a perfect symbol for love itself. Love is something that happens all the time, everywhere. There are many different facets to any relationship and the people therein. Love is powerful, often bitingly so—and its sting can linger long after love has left. And, of course, love makes people cry all the time. As such, using the onion as a stand-in for real love suggests that the speaker has a better, more complete understanding of the nature of their relationship with their partner. The speaker isn't sugarcoating this relationship, but recognizing it for what it really is—which, depending on how you look at it, might be the most romantic thing of all.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Lines 7-10
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 18-20
- Lines 21-23

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe is a crucial element of any dramatic monologue, as it gives the poem's speaker someone to talk to, thereby revealing the speaker's thoughts and feelings . In "Valentine," apostrophe has many effects. On its most basic level, apostrophe increases the poem's authenticity because the speaker interacts with someone that personally impacts them—their lover. Because the significance of such an exchange is palpable, apostrophe also heightens the poem's stakes, creating tension and anticipation.

Indeed, "Valentine" captures an intimate moment in the speaker's life—a profession of love—so that the speaker's statements come across as genuine. The speaker even says, "I am trying to be truthful," a claim that is both vulnerable and determined, contributing to the speaker's earnest aura. Plus, the fact that the speaker is intent on selecting precisely the right gift reaffirms that this moment is important to them.

Furthermore, apostrophe places the reader in the middle of the speaker's relationship—the reader effectively becomes the object of the monologue. When the speaker says, "I give **you** an onion" in the poem's second line, the reader becomes the recipient of the speaker's gift. This technique encourages the reader to empathize with the speaker's lover, building intimacy between the speaker and the reader. Statements such as "Its fierce kiss will stay on **your** lips" illustrate the level of familiarity that the speaker is able to achieve.

Finally, apostrophe gives rise to remarks that expose the speaker's true temperament. For example, the speaker opens every multi-line stanza by urging the speaker's 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 monologue in a faintly pushy, confrontational light. Consequently, readers might find the speaker aggressive or assume that the speaker is more dominant within the relationship. As the poem comes to a close, the speaker also subtly expresses doubts about the partnership. The onion's "fierce kiss will stay on your lips [...] for as long as we are," suggesting that the speaker anticipates that this romance will come to an end.

And in line 19, the speaker slyly mentions the possibility of marriage ("Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring"), only to add the phrase "if you like." This suggests that the longevity of their relationship can't be taken for granted, that it depends on what each lover decides. Thus, apostrophe provides a fuller picture of the speaker by granting the reader unfettered access to the speaker's opinions, emotions, and true intentions.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

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

CONSONANCE

The speaker primarily uses consonance to manipulate the poem's atmosphere. Throughout the monologue, moments of

cacophony alternate with moments of euphony. 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 their authority. This poem employs 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 ten 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. However, the speaker is not lacking in opinions or a distinct perspective when it comes to the expression of love. Indeed, this dramatic monologue brings certain underlying character traits to the fore. More specifically, because the speaker addresses the speaker's lover in an apostrophe, the full intensity of the speaker's feelings about love shines through.

For example, curt statements like "Here" and "Take it" display the speaker's assertiveness, an insistent desire for the speaker's lover to accept the onion as a representation of love. On the other hand, the speaker's claim of "trying to be truthful" reveals a more earnest, tender side. As a result, the speaker's list of the negative effects of the onion reads more like an honest warning than a threat. Plus, the speaker's rejection of traditional gifts demonstrates a willingness to speak out against mainstream beliefs.

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 monologue's message.

SETTING

The setting of this poem is almost non-existent. In fact, the monologue reveals no details about the physical context in which it takes place. Because the poem's title and imagery suggest that it is Valentine's Day, some readers might imagine a candlelit dinner, a romantic picnic, or some other picturesque setting. Or, due to the speaker's rejection of traditional cutesy gifts in favor of a lowly onion, perhaps other readers imagine a plain backdrop, like a nondescript bedroom or a bench during a lunch break. Whatever the case, the vagueness of the setting keeps the reader's focus on the speaker's address. As a result, the images that fill the reader's head are those of the onion and everything it stands for (like sorrow, violence, and truth) and against (such as mass-produced, sugarcoated representations of love).

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

While Carol Ann Duffy has written plays, librettos, children's books, and more, she is best known for her poetry. And, within her body of poetic work, Duffy is famed for her mastery of the dramatic monologue, a mode that she has employed throughout her career. A dramatic monologue is a poem whose imagined speaker addresses another character who cannot respond.

One benefit of this technique is that it allows speakers to aim their thoughts and emotions directly at the person who provoked those feelings—like the speaker of "Valentine," who addresses their lover. Because of this, dramatic monologues tend to provoke fictional speakers into unwittingly revealing their true character. There is a long history of such poems in English. Some famous examples include "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot.

Duffy tends to use this technique to inhabit and amplify the voices of people who are usually shut out from mainstream discourse (see "Education for Leisure" and "Warming Her Pearls"). Indeed, the speaker of "Valentine" explicitly rejects traditional representations of love and presents an alternative. One way she does this is 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

- Education For Leisure
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- Little Red Cap
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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