Valentine
By 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 emphasise that she does not approve of these types of gifts. ‘Not a red rose or satin heart.’ & ‘Not a cute card or 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. Also Duffy uses short lines to emphasise 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 relationships 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 that 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 a 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 can you compare this poem with?**

‘Before You Were Mine’
‘Stealing’ & ‘In Mrs Tilscher’s Class’
‘In Mrs Tilscher’s Class’

different kinds of relationships
use of metaphor
the way things change