What interests you about the ways in which Duffy presents thoughts and feelings about love in this anthology? Refer to at least two poems in your answer. (AEB English Literature A Level 1999)

In response to this question don’t be tempted to discuss each of Duffy’s poems dealing with love in turn. You will write a more interesting essay and get better marks if you can compare and contrast the poems throughout in terms of theme, feeling, language, tone and structure.

Love is presented in a variety of different ways in *Mean Time*, in fact, the way feelings change over time and love develops or disintegrates in a relationship is one of Duffy’s central concerns in this collection. The following aspects of love emerge in *Mean Time*:

- First love/ young love
- Memories of love/ Nostalgia
- Faithfulness (to a memory)
- Break-up of a relationship
- Jealousy
- Faithlessness/ adultery
- Destructiveness of love
- Painful emotions connected with love
- Sex (lust? love?)
- Disintegration of love
- Family love
- Painful emotions connected with love
- Sex (lust? love?)
- Disintegration of love
- Family love
- Destructiveness of love

The poems which deal with love in *Mean Time* are often also connected with the following themes:

- Time
- The past
- Memory
- Childhood
- Disappointment in adult life

**Remembered or Imagined Love: ‘First Love’ ‘Crush’ ‘Sleeping’**

- ‘First Love’ and ‘Crush’ are not so much about first love but the memory of it. Duffy is not so much interested in the past as in the effects of the past on our present selves, the ability of memory to intrude on our present and future and the process of remembering. It is significant that two of the only poems which present love positively also present it as part of the past. In these poems love is not something felt towards another individual in the present but remembered, dreamed or imagined: ‘moments of grace’ infiltrating the present. The tone in these poems is nostalgic.

- There are at least five words or phrases which appear in both ‘First Love’ and ‘Crush’ try to identify them and then suggest why they are repeated.

- How does Duffy compare her memory in ‘First Love’? In which other poems have you noticed the emphasis on trying to remember and cinematic/ photographic imagery?

- ‘Crush’ suggests that the more disappointing adult life and love are the more seductive becomes the past: ‘The older she gets,/ the more she awakes/ with somebody’s face strewn in her head/like petals which once made a flower.’ Contrast the way Duffy describes ‘such faithfulness’ to the memory of a first love with the reality of the faithlessness of ‘Adultery’. This failure of adulthood to fulfil the promise of childhood’s ‘fizzing hope’ recurs in *Mean Time* and is central to ‘The Captain of the 1964 Top of the Form Team’.

- ‘Sleeping’ concerns an imagined act of love rather than remembered love. Her imagined lover penetrates her dreams in the same way as her body: you’re in now, hard/demanding; so I dream more fiercely, dream/till it hurts/ that this is for real, yes, I feel it.’ Again, which other poems does this urgency and desperation to remain in an imagined world recall?

- In comparison to the poems we have just discussed, the love here, though bitter and destructive, is all too real and ‘won’t give in’.

- In these poems the past, far from a collage of beautiful fragments, is painful and inescapable. In ‘Close’ the ‘two childhoods’ which stand in the corner of the bedroom watching the way we take each other to bits/to stare at our heart.’ are the damaged childhood selves of the arguing lovers. ‘Years stand outside on the street looking up to an open windows’ while ‘The ghosts of ourselves behind and before us, throng in a mirror, blind,/laughing and weeping.’ emphasising, as Duffy comments, in ‘Brothers’ that ‘time owns us’.

- The power of imagination is terrifying and destructive in ‘Adultery’. The narrator’s perceptions are coloured by the ‘sick, green tint’ of jealousy. Everyday objects are filtered through the old cliches about adultery so ‘Hands can do many things. Phone./ Open the wine./ Wash themselves.’ while the clock becomes ‘telltale’. S/he imagines how the adulterous partner’s perceptions have changed also ‘Now/you are naked under your clothes all day,’ and the fictions which are required after the urgent, sordid sex reflected in the repetition ‘Do it do it do it’ in order to maintain ‘the life which crumbles like a wedding-cake.’ The final three lines of the poem read like an angry dialogue between the lovers. Try reading it in pairs and see if you can make sense of it. In the last two lines of the poem one of the lovers is making a distinction between the act of sex (a verb or doing word) and adultery (an abstract noun or thing which is not really tangible). What is the significance of this distinction?

- ‘Disgrace’ also deals with the break down of a relationship. The lovers’ feelings are projected on to the objects which surround them so that they form a kind of conspiracy: ‘In our sullen kitchen, the fridge/ hardened its cool heart, selfish as art, hummed.’ You will need to consider the significance of the title with its religious connotations. Compare the poem to ‘Moments of Grace’.

- ‘Havisham’ is inspired by the novel Great Expectations by Charles Dickens in which Miss Havisham, an elderly woman who was jilted on her wedding day years before the novel is set, has become embittered and vengeful towards all men. Consider Duffy’s use of Miss Havisham’s voice in this poem. How has Duffy used the Havisham story for her own purposes? What do you think Duffy feels about this fictional woman? Compare this poem to other poems in Mean Time in which Duffy adopts the persona of social outcasts.

- These poems subvert the conventional symbols and language of love. The eponymous Valentine is ‘Not a red rose or a satin heart’ but ‘an onion’ which works as an extended metaphor. Like love ‘it promises light’, it is ‘possessive and faithful’, it is ‘lethal’ and, as in ‘Adultery’, it will ‘blind you with tears’. Also consider the structure of this poem, in particular, Duffy’s use of isolated lines and single word sentences. Again it is useful to identify recurrent words or phrases in these poems. Compare how wedding-cakes are used in ‘Havisham’ and ‘Adultery’. Contrast how light is used in ‘Close’ and ‘Crush’. Make a list of other words or images which appear in these poems and consider their significance. Are they used in a way that is unconventional or subversive? Think about how Duffy uses language and sound as well as the other senses. What is effective about the words ‘inconsolable vowels’ in ‘Disgrace’ and ‘language unpeels to a lost cry’ in ‘Adultery’?

- Also consider how love is presented in ‘Mean Time’ and ‘The Biographer’

Family Love: ‘Before You Were Mine’ ‘Brothers’

- In ‘Before You Were Mine’ Duffy imagines her mother before she was born and her mother’s own experiences of first love. How does Duffy convey her mother’s sense of hope and expectation? What impression do you get of Duffy’s mother’s life after her birth? What are Duffy’s feelings towards her mother?

- Consider what kind of relationship Duffy had and has with her brothers. What is revealed of Duffy’s mother in this poem? What is the effect of the last sentence? Comment on the significance of the following phrases: ‘in my other eyes’, ‘like a new sound flailing for a shape’, ‘the breeding words, the word that broke her heart’, ‘time owns us’.

Other Aspects of Love

- Also consider ‘Moments of Grace’, ‘Steam’ and ‘Oslo’. How does Duffy present her thoughts and feelings about love in these poems?