

On the surface the title suggests that the poem will be a simple expression of love. However, just like an onion, there are many different layers to the poem, surprising the reader as we 'unpeel' the meanings.

## Valentine

Duffy creates an unusual but memorable metaphor to symbolise her love – “an onion”, “wrapped in brown paper”. An onion has a strong, sharp and acidic taste, giving flavour and depth to a meal. The comparison with the onion suggests her love is very distinctive and cannot be ignored – perhaps overwhelming for some?

Not a red rose or a satin heart.

The first line stands out and creates an initially assertive and negative tone. This surprises the reader who is perhaps expecting a traditional romantic poem having read the title. This confrontational tone is repeated throughout the poem, emphasising the poet’s intention to challenge the stereotypical ideas of love – “cute card”, “red rose”.

I give you an onion.

It is a moon wrapped in brown paper.

It promises light like the careful undressing of love.

The “moon” metaphor is also an interesting comparison. Whilst the moon is associated with love it is also linked with mystery. “It promises light” could suggest that her love might be attractive at first, but may bring darkness later.

Here.

It will blind you with tears like a lover.

This hints at a bad experience with love in Duffy’s past – she knows the pain of lost love. Did an ex-lover cheat on her?

It will make your reflection a wobbling photo of grief.

I am trying to be truthful.

The “brown paper” suggests Duffy is being honest about herself – she is not dressing herself up to pretend she is something she is not.

Duffy uses the first person (“I”) and present tense to make the poem seem very personal and immediate. It is like we are watching her profess her love.

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.

The language becomes increasingly dark and almost violent in the second half of the poem.

The use of pronoun “we” suggests she sees them as a couple already.

Take it.

Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding-ring, if you like.

Duffy repeatedly uses imperatives to command her lover’s attention. This could suggest she is confident in communicating her love – or perhaps hints at a desperate and needy side to her.

Lethal.

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

The “wedding-ring” shows she intends to marry this man – this makes her seem very forward and almost obsessive.

The verb “cling” is repeated twice to suggest she is not going anywhere until he returns her love.

The final stanza leaves the reader wondering what the ‘lethal’ consequences might be if she doesn’t get her way!

**Carol Ann Duffy**

## Valentine by Carol Ann Duffy

### The one with the onion

Valentine describes a gift for a lover, such as you would give on Valentine's Day. It is a rather unusual present - an onion. The poem explains why it is a powerful gift of love, much more than the clichéd roses or box of chocolates. The onion becomes a metaphor for love, and so the poem is about love as well as Valentine gifts.

#### Key Quotes:

- The title suggests a typical love poem but the opening line "Not a red rose or a satin heart" suggests the poet flouts traditional images of love.
- The poem is written in first person, "I give you an onion" immediately debunking the idea of a traditional gift.
- The idea of love isn't elevated or refined as "a wobbling photo of grief" suggests love can be painful and our emotions can overwhelm us.
- Language such as "blind", "fierce" and "possessive" suggests an intensity to love that will only last as long as they are true to each other. "If you like" implies the intensity of love isn't dependant on a wedding ring.
- Final words - "cling to your knife" suggests love can be dangerous and all consuming. The slightly sinister tone suggests an obsessive side to love.

#### Context:

- Duffy likes to break conventions and in Valentine she is criticising society's views of being materialistic.
- Duffy's poetry is often feminist in its themes and approach.

#### Structure:

- The poem begins by listing clichéd gifts that people give and receive for Valentine's Day. As the poem progresses, Duffy explores pain and hurt that is associated with love and she ends the poem using a negative tone and a hint of danger.

#### Possible Themes and Links:

- Relationships and love - Sonnet 43, She Walks in Beauty and Cozy Apologia