

The Poet –Carol Ann Duffy

Carol Ann Duffy was the eldest sister to four brothers who were born into a working class, catholic family, in Glasgow in 1955. She moved to Stafford when she was six, where her aspirations to become a writer were encouraged by her education, with her earlier poems being published whilst at school. Her father worked as an electrical fitter. His position as a Trade Unionist and involvement in attempting to become a Labour Councillor in Stafford gave her an insight into politics.

Duffy went on to study philosophy at Liverpool University from 1974 to 1977, before working for Granada Television and then in the early 80s becoming a freelance writer in London, whilst also working as a writer in residence in East End Schools. In 1985 she became a full-time writer and has written a number of plays, along with her poetry collections, for which she has received numerous awards. She went on to become Professor of Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. She is also currently Britain's first woman Poet Laureate, for which she was appointed in 2009. She is also a mother to her only daughter.

War Photographer

Carol Ann Duffy

Overview

Duffy was inspired to write this poem through her friendship with someone who was a war photographer. She was especially intrigued by the peculiar challenge faced by these people whose job requires them to record terrible, horrific events without being able to help them directly. Duffy perhaps shares an affinity with these photo journalists; while they use the medium of photography to convey certain truths about the human condition, she uses words and language to do the same job. Throughout the poem, Duffy provokes her reader to consider their own response when confronted with the photographs that we regularly see in our newspaper supplements and why so many of us have become desensitized to these images. By viewing this issue from the perspective of the photographer, she also reveals the difficulties of such an occupation. By the end of the poem, it is clear our subject straddles two vastly different worlds yet increasingly feels he belongs to neither.

Form and Structure

The poem is laid out in 4 regular 6 line stanzas, with each stanza ending in a rhyming couplet. This structure is interesting since its very rigid order contrasts with the chaotic, disturbing images described in the poem. This organisation mirrors the actions of the photographer, who lays out his films in "ordered rows", as though in doing so he can in some way help to restore order to this chaotic world. The poem moves through a series of observations in the first three stanzas to a conclusion of sorts in the fourth. The style is almost clinical and matter of fact, perhaps to imitate the clinical approach required by people in this line of work to allow them to do their job under extreme pressure. Unlike the readers of the newspaper he works for, this sense of distance is a necessary requirement for the photographer.

Unsurprisingly, in a poem that is so focused on the images of human suffering, Duffy concentrates on the sense of sight throughout the poem and the final image is almost like a photograph itself,

depicting the journalist surveying the landscape and its inhabitants below “impassively” as he travels to his next assignment.

Stanza One Summary and Analysis

The poem opens in the intimate, tranquil setting of the poet’s darkroom. He is compared to a priest and there is a definite sense of ritual in the way he develops his film. He sets out the film: **“spools of suffering”** in **“ordered rows”**, perhaps in an attempt to restore order to the chaotic images contained within them. He handles them with the same respect with which a priest would prepare for communion and there is a definite spirituality to this process. This religious imagery is effective in not only conveying the dedication the photographer feels towards his occupation but also because, like a priest he too is exposed often to death and suffering.

The **“red light”** of the darkroom has connotations of the light that burns continuously in catholic churches to symbolise the presence of Christ and also of blood – a sight that he must be all too familiar with. Aside from the function of the light to help process the films and protect the images he has taken, there is more than a suggestion that the darkroom is a place of sanctuary for the photographer, just as a religious or spiritual person may look for the same kind of solace in a church had they been confronted with the same horrors that the photographer must endure.

However, instead of preparing for mass, the photographer is developing images of war – evidence of man’s continuing inhumanity to man which only serves to contradict the fundamental teachings of the Church. The final line of the stanza ends in a list of the places where he has recorded images of conflict. Her deliberate use of full stops here helps to “fix” the images– the final part of the printing process - into the mind of the reader. The stanza ends with the quotation **“all flesh is grass”**, which comes from the New Testament and reinforces the religious imagery as well as emphasising the fragility of life.

Stanza Two Summary and Analysis

This stanza breaks the reverie and calm of the dark room with the line **“He has a job to do.”** The phrase **“solutions slop in trays”** has a dual meaning, referring both directly to the onomatopoeic sound of the chemicals he is using to develop but also the hope that in some way these photographs may help to contribute to the resolution of the conflicts they depict. Significantly, the photographer’s hands are shaking though they **“did not tremble then”**. The implication is that in order to function and do his job properly in the field, the photographer must be able to distance himself from the subjects of his photographs. However, he is able to let down his guard in the privacy of the darkroom as he finally allows himself to react to the terrible suffering he was forced to witness and record.

He considers the contrast between “Rural England” and the war zones that he visits, noting how our “ordinary” problems can be dispelled by the simplicity of clement weather. The injustice of the situation is exemplified when he notes how our children don’t have to be fearful of landmines when they are at play. One of the most iconic images of war photography is deliberately evoked in the final line of stanza two: **“of running children in a nightmare heat”**. This photograph, of children fleeing a napalm attack in Vietnam directly helped to end this conflict and emphasises just how indifferent we have become today when similar images fail to resonate with us.

Stanza Three Summary and Analysis

The opening line “**something is happening**” injects drama and suspense into the poem and suggests the photographer is not wholly in control of the development process. Duffy allows us to “see” the horrific photograph develop before our eyes. In it, the photographer has captured the image of a man in his dying moments and he is described as a “half formed ghost”. This description is dually effective since it both describes the way the figure is gradually appearing on the paper, while also alluding to the fact that since he no longer exists he has effectively become a “ghost”. The photographer recalls how, unable to speak the same language, he “**sought approval**” through the unspoken exchange of looks from the victim’s wife. Again the analogy to a priest is effective here as they, like this photographer, must tend to people in their final moments. The impact of this memory on the photographer and his sensitivity in seeking permission to capture such an intimate moment on film is clear. Just like a priest, he feels his job is a vocation, a calling rather than a career as he asserts he does “**what someone must**”. Although he is aware of the intrusiveness of his occupation, he conducts himself with the utmost compassion and sensitivity.

Stanza Four Summary and Analysis

As the poet begins to reach her conclusion, she makes a comment on the way these images are received by the people they are produced for: both the newspaper editors who commission the work and us, the readers of these publications. The “**hundred agonies**” that the photographer has selected for his editor contrasts immediately with the phrase “**will pick out five or six**” in the next line. The careless indifference in the way the editor selects the images reinforces how little regard we have for the subjects in the pictures. Duffy extends this disingenuous response to us, the readers of the newspapers, using bathos when describing how our “**eyeballs prick with tears between the bath and pre lunch beers**”.

The poem ends with the photographer departing once more for a new job as the cycle begins again. His sense of separateness from his countrymen is evident as he refers to us as “**they**”, emphasising how little he identifies with our lives and values. As he surveys the landscape of rural England from the aeroplane, there is a growing acceptance that despite his best efforts his photographs will ultimately make no real difference.

Themes

The poem focuses on two main themes:

- The Horror of War
- Our Increasing Indifference to the Victims of Conflict

These themes are revealed not only through Duffy’s word choice and imagery, but the **central paradox** that while the imagery of war is more widespread and prevalent than at any other time in history, its impact upon those of us exposed to it is rapidly declining.

The Horror of War

Duffy’s skilful yet understated imagery helps to convey the terrible personal stories that lie behind every conflict. Perhaps almost in an attempt to counter the graphic imagery that we have become so used to seeing, her depictions are subtle and understated and she often leaves the reader to compose their own images. For example, in the line “**to fields which don’t explode beneath the**

feet /of running children”, she takes an image that we would usually associate with something innocent and happy and subverts it into something much more sinister. Similarly, her description of the dying man contains almost no visual imagery and instead focuses on the sense of sound through the word-choice **“cries”** and the unspoken communication between the photographer and the victim’s wife. By focusing on just one image rather than the countless others that were taken, Duffy forces us to confront the personal cost of war. In doing so, Duffy again exposes another paradox inherent in the coverage of modern conflict, implying that we have lost the capacity to view the subjects of war as real human beings, each with unique, individual stories and tragedies.

Our Increasing Indifference to the Victims of Conflict

Throughout the poem, Duffy conveys the increasing separateness and isolation the poet feels both towards his own country and the newspaper he works for. Unlike us and his editor, he is unable to protect himself from the horror of the subjects he photographs and there is a sense of growing bitterness as he continues to feed the voracious need for news in the knowledge that despite his best efforts we are increasingly unmoved and unaffected by the photographs. Our disingenuous response is recorded most clearly in the line **“The reader’s eyeballs prick/with tears between the bath and pre - lunch beers.”**

His contempt for his editor is revealed in the careless, thoughtless way he notes how he chooses photographs for the paper, picking out **“five or six/for Sunday’s supplement.”**

Ironically, in an almost parallel response to our desensitization, the photographer too feels increasingly indifferent towards his homeland and fellow countrymen as he stares **“impassively where/ he earns his living and they do not care.”**

Questions

In what way is the structure and organisation of the poem significant?

Answer: The rigid, very organised structure conveys the desire of the photographer to restore a semblance of order to the chaos of the conflict that he recorded.

Why is the comparison of the photographer to a priest effective?

Answer: The way he develops the photographs is similar to the solemnity and religious observance to which a priest would prepare for saying Mass. In doing so Duffy elevates the process of developing the photographs into something much more profoundly spiritual. Similarly, like the priest, the photographer is often exposed to death and suffering.

Why is the word choice of “solutions” (stanza 2) doubly effective?

Answer: It refers both to the literal developing solution the photographer is using to process the photographs and also the idea that these photographs may perhaps form part of the resolution to the conflict that they depict.

What is significant about the fact that in the darkroom the photographer’s hands “tremble” while they didn’t when he was actually taking the photos?

Answer: It reveals that while he is able to create a professional distance and mindset that allows him to function under extreme stress, he does have an emotional response that he allows himself to experience once he returns home.

From the last stanza, how is the critical attitude of the photographer towards both his editor and the readers of the newspaper conveyed?

Answer: The contrast of the “hundred agonies” contained in his photos with the careless selection of choosing just “five or six” for the supplement shows the photographers contempt for the editor.

The bathetic comment: “The reader’s eyeballs prick with tears between the bath and pre lunch beers” reinforces our own scant regard for the suffering depicted in the newspapers. It barely causes us to pause for more than a moment before we continue with our own plans.

Originally

Carol Ann Duffy

Overview

In this autobiographical poem, Duffy considers and explores the sense of isolation and confusion felt when as a child her parents moved from the Gorbals in Glasgow to England. She describes both the literal details of the journey and the move as well as the deeper, metaphorical journey that she and her family experienced as a result of this decision. As the title suggests, she considers to what extent our identity is shaped and defined not only by our environment but by changes in dialect and culture. The initial catalyst for the poem, the memories of the move and her gradual assimilation to her new home, provokes a bigger, more philosophical meditation on the subject of childhood itself. Perhaps the most significant line of the poem comes at the start of stanza two when she asserts that **“All childhood is an emigration”**, revealing clearly the universal truth that the process of growing up is always synonymous with change.

Form and Structure

Like much of Duffy’s work, the poem has a regular structure. The three stanzas of eight lines help to divide the poem into a straightforward chronology: Stanza 1 recalls the journey from Glasgow towards her new home; Stanza 2 explores her initial sense of not fitting in to this new landscape while in the third she considers the larger question about how our sense of identity is formed, shaped and affected by such transitions. However, underneath this apparently ordered structure, the poet’s anxiety and uncertainty is revealed through the lack of a regular rhythm or rhyme scheme which reinforces the lack of order in her own life at this time. The fact that the poem is mainly composed by of a series of fragmented memories, occasionally using deliberately childish words or phrases is reminiscent of the way most of us recall our own childhoods and adds to the authenticity of the poem.

Stanza One Summary and Analysis

In the first stanza, Duffy emphasises that this decision impacted on her entire family unit through the first person plural in the opening line: **“We came from our own country”**. Similarly, the deliberate assonance of **“our own”** reinforces her definite sense of belonging to and possession of a particular place. She describes the interior of the train as a **“red room”** which **“fell through the fields”**. The

colour red has connotations of passion or anger, perhaps reflecting her own feelings about being forced to leave the city of her birth and early childhood while the word choice and alliteration of *“fell”* and *“fields”* emphasises her feelings of impotence and lack of control in the making of this important decision. She recalls hearing *“our mother singing/our father’s name to the turn of the wheels”*. The optimistic mood of her mother acts as a distinct contrast to the obvious negativity of Duffy herself and is also slightly ambiguous: the reader is unsure whether their father is in the train carriage with them or if they are travelling to meet him at their destination.

She also remembers the behaviour of her younger brothers whose emotions seem to reflect her own: they *“cried”* and one of them is *“bawling Home/Home”*. The repetition and capitalisation of the word “home” reinforces the misery and overwhelming sense of loss and separation that she associates with this time.

Duffy uses personification in the line *“the miles rushed back to the city”* to emphasise her own desire to return to Glasgow, to reverse this trip and reinhabit *“the street, the house, the vacant rooms/where we didn’t live any more”*. Again, the first person plural of “we” emphasises that even though this poem is written from her own perspective, she very clearly considers the impact of the move not just as an individual but for the rest of the family. In contrast to her younger siblings, whose protestations are loud and vocal, Duffy is silent as she *“stared/ at the eyes of a blind toy”*. The word choice of “blind” again exposes her uncertainty and anxiety as they head towards something unknown and unfamiliar.

Stanza Two Summary and Analysis

This stanza opens with perhaps the most memorable words in the poem in her assertion that *“All childhood is an emigration”*. This metaphor reveals one of the key ideas explored by Duffy in this work as she considers the wider, more generic experience of childhood itself which, by definition is equated with changes and transitions that are often beyond our control. The construction of the remainder of the stanza; the elongated, drawn out phrasing of the first 3 lines emphasises the “slow” stages of childhood and provides a contrast with the short, abrupt sentences that follow in the lines *“Others are sudden./ Your accent wrong.”* Having the “wrong” accent conveys how communication and acceptance is much more complex than merely speaking the same language. Her sense of confusion and not belonging is again reinforced as she recalls how *“Corners, which seem familiar”* lead to *“unimagined, pebble-dashed estates”*. The word choice of “seem” and “unimagined” exposes her inability to negotiate her way successfully through this new, strange and unfamiliar landscape. Similarly, her recollection of *“big boys/eating worms and shouting words you don’t understand”* underpin her sense of confusion as she is confronted by behaviour and language that is alien to her.

In the last two lines of this stanza, the initial optimism of her mother in the first stanza has been replaced with an *“anxiety”* that *“stirred like a loose tooth.”* This is an interesting simile since while it emphasises that her parents too are struggling with aspects of the move, their fears are not enough to provoke a strong reaction – a loose tooth can easily fall out of its own accord or be quickly extracted. The italicisation of the final line of this stanza *“I want my own country”* reminds us again of the autobiographical nature of the poem and is a reference back to the first line of stanza one. It acts almost as a childish lament, perhaps one that was constantly repeated during this upsetting transition and reminds us, like the words *“big boys”* used earlier, how young Duffy was when this event occurred.

Stanza Three Summary and Analysis

The final stanza opens with the conjunctive **“But”** to indicate a change in the writer’s line of thought as she meditates on the inevitability of change and adaptation. She uses the 2nd person **“you forget, or don’t recall”** to directly expose the often fragile nature of childhood memory. The speaker in this stanza is older and more reflective as she considers her own gradual transition. Recalling seeing her brother **“swallow a slug”** refers back to the boys eating worms in the second stanza and implies that this act is evidence that he has fully assimilated to his new home, the simple alliteration indicating that this was a straightforward process for him. However, the deliberate employment of the Scottish dialect in the phrase **“a skelf of shame”** reveals that she still feels attached to her Scottish roots unwilling to fully relinquish the last traces of her Scottish dialect. While her brothers have successfully adapted, she still feels out of place and like a splinter, memories of her former life continue to trouble her. While she remembers eventually her **“tongue shedding its skin like a snake”** and her **“voice in the classroom sounding just like the rest”** there is a definite implication that despite these outward signs that she had adapted she continues to feel out of place.

As the poet moves towards her conclusion, she asks the first of three questions: **“Do I only think/ I lost a river, culture, speech, sense of first space/and the right place?”** It is this question that the poet has been attempting to answer throughout the entire poem and yet still by the end she is nowhere nearer to a resolution. In asking this, she challenges both herself and the reader to consider our own notions of self and identity. The deliberate inversion of the **“I only”** again emphasises her feelings of isolation and separateness from the other members of her family during this period. By the end of the poem it is clear that the poet is no closer to defining her identity. When asked the question **“where do you come from”** she still has to qualify and clarify this simple query with the response **“Originally?”** This momentary hesitation reveals that even though older, the speaker continues to have mixed feeling about her true origins.

Themes

In this poem, Duffy reveals the importance of early childhood memories and experiences in shaping identity and also considers the impact of significant domestic changes during the formative years. It is clear that even though Duffy was only six when she moved to England, her sense of Scottishness has stayed with her. However, this affinity has resulted in a sense of confusion about her own identity and where she belongs and the poem is her own attempt to define more precisely where her true origins lie. Although asserting that all childhoods involve change and transition, she feels a distinct pull towards this country that she left so young and there is a definite feeling of loss running through the poem. In recalling how easily her brothers were able to adapt she emphasises her own sense of separateness.

Questions:

How does the decision to divide the poem in three distinct stanzas help the reader to understand the key ideas of the work?

Suggested Answer

Each stanza refers to a specific period in this stage in the poet’s life. The first recalls the journey from her birth land to this new, unknown place that she was moving to and describes her anxiety at this

time. The second stanza concentrates on the specific differences that she noticed about her new town and the effect of these changes not only on the poet but on her brothers and parents also. The concluding stanza is used to reflect on how this relocation during her childhood has created some confusion in her own sense of identity.

Show how the poet demonstrates anxiety over the move on both herself and also her brothers.

Suggested Answer

Duffy describes how she remembers that her brothers were vocal in showing they were upset through words like “cried” and “bawling”. In contrast, and fittingly since she is the eldest, Duffy’s anxiety is revealed through her silence.

Consider the metaphor “All childhood is an emigration” and show how it clarifies a central idea contained in the poem.

Suggested Answer

The poet is revealing that the process of change, although often unwanted and unpleasant, is synonymous with childhood since the journey towards adulthood and maturity is filled with constant flux that is often out with our control.

Anne Hathaway

Carol Ann Duffy

Overview

This poem, like Mrs Midas, comes from the “The World’s Wife”, Duffy’s first themed collection of poems. In this set of poems, Duffy considers both real and fictional characters, stories, histories and myths which concentrated on men, and gives voice to the women associated with them. Although “Havisham” was printed a year earlier, it would make a good comparison with this poem since both take the perspective of a woman living without her lover: Havisham having been jilted at the altar, while Hathaway has been widowed.

Anne Hathaway was the wife of Shakespeare. She was seven years his senior and already pregnant when the 18 year old, William Shakespeare, married her. The poem begins with an epigraph taken directly from Shakespeare’s will, in which despite being a man of some considerable property at this time he leaves her only his **“second best bed”**. While some critics have viewed this as an insult, Duffy presents a new perspective and uses the bed as a metaphor for the intense passion and romance shared by the couple. The **“second best bed”** was in fact the couple’s marital bed, the best being reserved for guests. Duffy imagines then that this legacy was the playwright’s last romantic gesture.

Form and Structure

Fittingly, Duffy employs the sonnet form so adored by Shakespeare. This 14 line structure is often associated with love poetry, deemed highly appropriate given the subject matter of the poem. Shakespearian sonnets contain three quatrains and a couplet. The quatrains usually present the key ideas explored by the poet with the resolution or volta (an Italian term which literally translates as

“the turn”) arriving in the couplet. In the poem, Duffy quite literally employs a “softer rhyme” with a much more relaxed, less restrictive rhyme scheme combined with overtly sensual, erotic language and imagery. She uses a regular meter but her deliberate choices of assonance and alliteration are designed to imitate the random touching made during lovemaking, so that it is almost as though the words themselves are grazing each other. Duffy makes frequent use of enjambment in the poem to show how freely and without obstruction the love flowed between the couple as well as to place emphasis on important words or phrases. The entire poem is a metaphor comparing the couple’s love making to the process of artistic and poetic creativity.

Epigraph

*‘Item I gyve unto my wife my second best bed ...’
(from Shakespeare’s will)*

The poem begins with this actual extract from the will of Shakespeare. Although many critics consider this legacy an insult to Hathaway, given that the playwright was fairly wealthy when he died, Duffy uses it as the catalyst for the poem and imbues the bed with a much more magical and sensual meaning.

1st Quatrain - Lines 1-4

*The bed we loved in was a spinning world
of forests, castles, torchlight, clifftops, seas
where we would dive for pearls. My lover’s words
were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses*

Immediately the reader is transported to a magical landscape filled with metaphor, especially appropriate given that Shakespeare himself was the master of this technique. The bed is a “**spinning world**”, suggesting their love made her dizzy and was all encompassing. Interestingly, despite bearing him three children, the persona created by Duffy makes no reference to this aspect of their marriage focusing only on their relationship as lovers, not parents. The “**forests, castles, torchlight, clifftops, seas**” recalls the setting of some of Shakespeare’s more famous works such as; **Macbeth, Hamlet and The Tempest**, suggesting a link between these iconic works of literature and the poetry which together are echoes of the excitement that took place in this bed. In their lovemaking, they found something precious and valuable, as implied by the “**pearls**” in line 3. This intimate, sensual tone is continued in the metaphor comparing her lover’s words to “**shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses.**” Hathaway was seduced firstly by her lover’s language and poetry, which literally seems to fall from the heavens as though a gift from the Gods before transforming into the physical touch of a kiss. In this opening quatrain then, Duffy clearly illustrates the intensity of the romantic, passionate relationship of the two lovers.

2nd Quatrain – Lines 5-8

*on these lips; my body now a softer rhyme
to his, now echo, assonance; his touch
a verb dancing in the centre of a noun.
Some nights, I dreamed he’d written me, the bed*

In this quatrain, Duffy extends the language metaphor: her body is a “**softer rhyme**” to his harder, more masculine body, while the erotic touch of his hand on her body is described as “**a verb dancing**

in the centre of a noun.” This deliberate comparison elevates their lovemaking to something poetic and in doing so literary or linguistic terms become loaded with sensuality. She imagines too that, like the characters in his plays he has ***“written her”***, suggesting that it is only when she considers herself through his eyes and imagination that she feels most fully alive. The reference again to the bed at the end of line 8 creates a link to the opening line of the poem and reinforces the symbolic significance of the bed as a representation of their love.

3rd Quatrain – lines 9-12

***a page beneath his writer’s hands. Romance
and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste.
In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on,
dribbling their prose. My living laughing love –***

The enjambment from line 8 continues the extended metaphor from the previous quatrain as the bed is compared to the parchment in which the passion and excitement so associated with the playwright was written. All the ***“romance and drama”*** contained in these pages was played out or begun on their bed and again Duffy implies the inspiration for his characters and plots came from their lovemaking. The word ***“romance”*** is deliberately placed at the end of line 9 to emphasise that this is what she most associates with their relationship. The senses are employed ***“touch”, “scent”, “taste”*** to reinforce just how vividly she can still recall their lovemaking as though through immersing herself in these memories she can experience this passion once more. In a marked contrast, she compares the poetry and sensuality of their lovemaking with those who slept in the ***“other bed”***. In a withering, disparaging comment she asserts that they are only capable of ***“dribbling their prose”***. The implication is clear: poetry symbolises the most skilful and creative use of language while prose by comparison is ordinary, utilitarian and unexceptional. At the ending of this quatrain, Duffy employs elongated assonance in the phrase ***“My living laughing love”*** to emphasise again how vividly and clearly the speaker can recall their passion, suggesting that her lover continues in some ways to exist and survive in her memory. The dash creates a pause to allow us to reflect on this idea and prepare us for the resolution and the final couplet.

The Couplet

***I hold him in the casket of my widow’s head
as he held me upon that next best bed.***

The final couplet ends with the masculine full rhyme of “head” and “bed” to provide a defined conclusion to the poem. The metaphor of holding her lover in the protective ***“casket”*** of her imagination reiterates the idea presented in the previous line suggesting that our memory of a deceased loved one in a way allows their continued existence. Duffy seems to suggest that this is much more fitting than an urn or coffin, which although may contain the physical remnants of a body, it can never capture the energy or vitality of their character. In doing so and by allowing her to replay her memories of their passion, she is really honouring his true legacy and repaying him for the way that he held her in ***“that next best bed.”***

Themes

This poem deals with the themes of **passionate, sensual erotic love** as well as **death and remembrance**. In the poem, Duffy really concentrates on conveying that this was a marriage based

on an all encompassing deeply physical relationship. She uses the actual legacy of the bed left by Shakespeare to his wife to meditate on this specific aspect of their relationship. In doing so, she presents a couple completely in tune with each other both sexually and emotionally. Fittingly, in a poem about the world's greatest ever poet and wordsmith, she uses language itself as an extended metaphor to convey the intensity of their passion. As well as emphasising the profound physical connection of the lovers, Duffy also considers that the most fitting way to honour our dead loved ones is by preserving the most enduring, vivid aspects of their character in our memories, thus allowing them to continue to survive.

Textual Analysis Questions

Why is it particularly appropriate that Duffy chose the sonnet form for this composition?

Suggested Answer

In a poem which deals with romantic love and passion, the decision to choose a sonnet form is highly appropriate since it is deeply associated with this subject matter. In addition, by imitating a form so often used by Shakespeare, it is yet another way for the speaker to show her deep love and admiration for her husband. This sonnet is overtly feminine in tone and language and acts as a kind of poetic partner to those composed by Shakespeare to reflect the relationship between a husband and wife.

The poet uses language itself as a metaphor for their passion. Why is this particularly effective?

Suggested Answer

Since Shakespeare is renowned as the world's greatest ever playwright, poet and wordsmith, it is appropriate that language itself becomes the primary tool in his seduction. She suggests that like the iconic characters in his plays, she feels that she too has been "written" by him, as though she only really feels that she exists and is truly alive in his imagination of her. She playfully uses language: "his touch/a verb dancing in the centre of a noun" to convey not only the deeply erotic side of their relationship but also to remind us of a technique often employed by Shakespeare when he would deliberately replace nouns with verbs.

Havisham

Carol Ann Duffy

Overview

This poem comes from the collection "Mean Time" published in 1998 and probably provided the inspiration for Duffy's first themed collection of poetry "The World's Wife" published the following year in which she considers the often neglected women behind some of the most iconic male figures from history, literature and legend. The speaker of this dramatic monologue is the fictional Miss Havisham from Charles Dickens, "Great Expectations". Jilted by her lover, Miss Havisham spends the

rest of her life decaying in her wedding dress sitting amidst the remnants of her wedding breakfast, grooming her beautiful niece Estella to exact revenge on all men. The title of the poem, her unmarried surname, reveals her self-loathing and bitterness at being denied the epithet of Mrs and being forced to live the remainder of her life as a spinster.

Form and Structure

The poem is written in four unrhymed stanzas. Duffy has said that she enjoys the way stanzas help her to concentrate and fix her ideas more effectively, describing them in the past as almost “mini-canvases”. The lack of rhyme and the presence of enjambment help to create a more defined “voice” in the poem. However, while this can often produce a more natural, realistic speech pattern, in this case it has the opposite effect: Havisham’s voice is choppy and stilted which emphasises the lack of order and structure to her thoughts. Similarly, although at first glance the poem looks fairly regular, there is no fixed meter. This, combined with the occasional slightly off kilter half rhymes and assonance help to reinforce this lack of logic and the erosion of the speaker’s psyche.

Stanza One Summary and Analysis

The poem opens with the oxymoronic minor sentence “**Beloved sweetheart bastard**” revealing without ambiguity the focus of the speaker’s hatred and emphasising the expletive. The alliteration of the plosive “**b**” sounds creates the impression that the words are almost being spat out helping to create the caustic, bitter tone that runs throughout the entire poem. This entire stanza is a kind of curse; detailing the extent to which she wishes her former lover dead through the all-consuming nature of her hatred. She is literally stuck in time, paralysed as a ridiculous parody or imitation of a bride whose love has been rejected by her fiancée. In giving a voice to Miss Havisham then, Duffy clearly exposes the terrible, corrosive effects on the human psyche of such an experience. She has prayed so earnestly for his death, with her eyes tightly shut and her hands clasped together that her eyes have become “**dark green pebbles**” and the veins on the back of her hands protrude like “**ropes**”. Green of course is the colour of envy and jealousy and if the eyes are the window to the soul, the pebble imagery conveys that hers is now cold, dead and hard. The reference to strangling her lover is an allusion to Dickens’ novel, in which Estella’s natural mother strangled a rival with her unusually strong hands.

Stanza two Summary and Analysis

This stanza opens with the word “**Spinster**” spoken like a profanity or insult. It is deliberately isolated in a sentence on its own to emphasise her own feelings of isolation in a society in which women were often defined by their marital status. As the wedding dress decays on her year after year she is left only to “**stink and remember**” the pain inflicted on her by her lover’s rejection. The “**yellowing**” dress imitates her emotional atrophy, and like the colour green mentioned earlier, Duffy exploits the negative connotations of the colour with decay. The onomatopoeic “**Nooooo**” reveals the extent of the speaker’s anguish after she was jilted as she recalls viewing herself “**full-length**” in the “**slewed mirror**” and asking “**who did this**”. She no longer recognises the image that appears before her and the deliberate word choice of “**slewed**” shows how the world that she once knew and felt she belonged to is now similarly unfamiliar and strange. This emphasises just how entirely out of place and alien she feels inhabiting her new persona as a spinster. In this stanza, the construction and order of the lines and words is deliberately jumbled and confused to emphasise the speaker’s irrationality and her muddled, tormented state of mind. She presents herself as the victim: this was

a wrong that was done to her and she is determined to exact revenge. The irony is though that this quest and lust for vengeance is utterly self destructive and only exacerbates her pain.

Stanza Three Summary and Analysis

The completion of the question in the enjambment between stanza 2 and 3 reinforces the continuation of her suffering. Again, Duffy chooses the colour *“puce”* with its negative associations of disease and fever to create synaesthesia, when one sense, in this case sight is used to describe another, the sounds of the speaker’s “curses”. Her hatred has left her almost mute, unable to articulate her emotions through language, and instead she can only vocalise her bitter anger through *“sounds not words”*. However, in an abrupt change in direction, a glimpse at the softer side of the speaker is revealed in the next two lines:

*“Some nights better, the lost body over me
my fluent tongue it its mouth in its ear”*

In contrast to her ineptitude with language now, she recalls how her tongue used to *be “fluent”* when she could skilfully use it to seduce her lover. Even here though the strength of hatred continues to permeate and sour all of her most pleasant memories. The deliberate choice to deprive him of pronouns – instead of “his” she uses *“the”* and *“its”* creates a sense of distance from him while simultaneously depriving him of his humanity and therefore makes it easier for her to continue to hate.

The stanza concludes with the violent interruption of her dreams: *“till I suddenly bite awake”*. The use of the present tense in the verb *“bite”* reminds us that despite the passing of years her anger and bitterness have not abated and are just as raw today as when she was first jilted. In addition, the choice of the word *“bite”* could also imply that she bites her tongue in her sleep, helping to explain her current inability to articulate herself or even more sinisterly that she fantasises about inflicting pain on her lover by biting him.

Stanza Four Summary and Analysis

Again enjambment is used at the end of Stanza 3 with the word *“Love’s”* running incongruously into *“hate”* in the Fourth. In doing so, Duffy exposes just how inextricably linked these two seemingly opposing emotions are. There is something almost possessive, distinct about the specific and enduring type of hate that is provoked through the betrayal of love. The *“white veil”* normally associated with the purity and virginity of a bride has now become something that the speaker hides behind. Although she clearly identifies herself as the wronged, innocent party in this image, she cannot maintain it for any length of time as there is an almost immediate contrast in the next image of the *“red balloon bursting”*. This violent metaphor represents the speaker’s heart and the rage and hatred that now consumes her. The plosive “b” in *“balloon”, “bursting”* and *“bang”* emphasises the suddenness and shock of this experience as her dreams were so abruptly and irrevocably shattered. The isolation of the onomatopoeic *“Bang”* in its own sentence also serves to awaken the speaker from her reverie and prompt her back to the miserable reality of her present existence. Hate is the only emotion she is now able to feel. Without it she would be utterly numb and so in many ways it is only by preserving and nurturing her loathing and hatred that she has a purpose to her life.

As the stanza continues, Duffy subverts our usual happy associations of weddings into another violent image by stabbing at the cake. As it lies there decaying, it reminds us that like her, it too has

never fulfilled its purpose. Just as the cake was never consumed, so too her marriage remains unconsummated and like her it continues to stagnate and atrophy. The penultimate line of the final stanza is loaded with sinister, perhaps even necrophiliac undertones: **“Give me a male corpse for a long slow honeymoon”**. Again, she subverts our usual associations of the honeymoon with joy and happiness into something much more menacing. The final line of the poem though is more poignant: **“Don’t think it’s only the heart that b –b –breaks”** The last word is broken up to imitate not only the sound of the speaker finally breaking down in anguish but to emphasise the extent of her mental and emotional disintegration. This hatred and anger have consumed and destroyed every other aspect or facet of her personality so that she is now little more than an empty husk.

Themes

The key theme in this poem is the **corrosive nature of hatred on the human psyche**. In giving Miss Havisham a voice outside of Dickens’ novel, the poet is able to crystallize perfectly how the singular event of being jilted can completely shatter and destroy a human being and erode any love or compassion that could once be felt. The mood throughout is bitter and caustic as Duffy clearly conveys how love can quickly be replaced with hatred and violence. The wedding imagery, the cake, the dress and the honeymoon, are all used to reinforce how quickly experiences and events associated with joy can be soured and become toxic symbols to feed and nourish hatred instead of love.

Textual Analysis

How does the poet’s use of language create a dramatic opening to the poem?

Suggested Answer

The poem opens with the oxymoronic “Beloved sweetheart bastard”. The plosive B, as though spat out through clenched teeth, really emphasises the speaker’s loathing while simultaneously introducing us to the subject matter and the continuing bitterness still felt by the speaker by the betrayal of her former fiancé.

What is significant about the omission of the epithet “Miss” in the title of the poem?

This word is deliberately omitted from the title of the poem to remind the reader that the speaker’s anger and distress in many ways is because she has been denied from ever becoming a wife, a Mrs and is doomed to remain a spinster for the rest of her life. Duffy is also reminding us of a period in history when women were often defined by marriage and that failure to marry suggested that you were in some way inferior to others.

Mrs Midas

Overview

Mrs Midas is a poem written from the viewpoint of the wife of the mythological King Midas, from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. King Midas was granted a wish by the god Dionysus whereby everything he touched would turn to gold. With comical undertones, a wide range of emotions is presented through the persona of Mrs Midas as she speaks out against her husband’s foolish actions and gradually separates herself from him, leaving him to waste away in isolation whilst she laments the loss of their physical relationship and the chance to have a baby together to fulfil their dreams.

Form and Structure

This poem is written in the form of a dramatic monologue from a female perspective, similar to all of the poems from The World's Wife collection in which well-known characters from myths or history are presented from the perspective of their forgotten or disregarded wives. Duffy focuses on an aspect of this well-known character and presents an imaginary response from the wife's viewpoint, providing fresh, thought-provoking and comical insight into their lives.

Mrs Midas is made up of eleven stanzas of irregular line length ranging from six lines to ten in order to reflect how unpredictable and chaotic life has become for this couple in that at any second with a simple touch, Mrs Midas could also soon be turned to gold.

Stanzas 1 to 6 deal with the discovery of King Midas' granted wish and the realisation and then sheer panic of how he has been given such a tremendous power, whilst a comic tone is maintained throughout, as Mrs Midas even catalogues everyday items being turned to gold.

The remainder of the poem reveals the harsh heartfelt implications of Midas' gift, highlighting the damage it has done to the couple's relationship and their future together. The final line in the poem sums up Mrs Midas' regret at the loss of physical contact with her isolated husband.

Stanzas One – Six Summary and Analysis

In the first stanza, Duffy presents Mrs Midas in a typical domestic scene, pouring a glass of wine as she cooks and begins to *'unwind'* in the personified kitchen; *'filled with the smell of itself'*, during the peak of the golden autumnal month of September. The kitchen's *'steamy breath'* which is *'gently blanching'* is in contrast to the life sapping events which are taking place in the garden as Midas snaps a twig from under a pear tree which has miraculously turned to gold. Having wiped the steam from the kitchen window and putting it down to poor visibility, Mrs Midas has to look again and this time witnesses her husband plucking a pear from a branch and describes the way: *'...it sat in his palm like a light-bulb. On.'* This simile effectively conveys both the shape of the pear and also the brightness emanating from it. The full stops add a comedic effect, highlighting Mrs Midas' shock, disbelief and sudden dawning of awareness in her own mind as to what she has just witnessed. This whimsical, light and humorous imagery is continued and contrasts with the seriousness of what has just happened and her incredulity is evident when she questions whether he is just *'putting fairy lights in the tree?'*

Stanza 3 relays Midas' return journey through the house as he turns the doorknobs and blinds into gleaming gold making his wife think back to a school history lesson on *'the Field of the Cloth of Gold'* which was the meeting place between the Kings of England and France in 1520, near Calais in France. This was embellished with gold to disguise the surrounding deprivation of the nation.

Mrs Midas goes on to describe the *'strange, wild, vain'* face of her husband as he realises that he has been given a tremendous power, motivated by greed. As the exasperated wife, Mrs Midas makes a typical expression: *'What in the name of God is going on?'* Her perplexed reaction causes her husband to laugh.

In Stanza 4, Mrs Midas attempts to instil a sense of normality by her matter of fact tone in serving up dinner: *'For starters, corn on the cob.'* This comedic effect is maintained as Midas ends up *'...spitting out the teeth of the rich'*. This line clearly demonstrates the negative effects of such a "gift" as Midas can no longer enjoy the simple pleasures of food while emphasising that gold teeth are usually only seen in the mouths of the wealthy. With the catalogue of food utensils also having

been turned to gold, Mrs Midas' anxiety about what is happening is revealed in the way she pours wine with **'a shaking hand.'** Alliteration is used to highlight the seriousness and reality of the situation when she witnesses the transformation of a glass into a **'golden chalice'**. She notes how **'as he picked up the glass, goblet, golden chalice, drank.'** The blend of the vowels with the letter 'l' links to the golden luxury of the item, whilst the harsh alliterative 'g' sound drives home the seriousness of this so-called gift.

The sinking in of reality is further echoed in the first line of Stanza 5 when Mrs Midas **'started to scream'** while her husband **'sank to his knees'**. As both come to terms with his new power, Mrs Midas finishes off the wine and forces her husband to sit **'on the other side of the room and keep his hands to himself.'** Even after becoming aware of the consequences, this humorous line reveals that while Midas still seeks to enjoy a physical relationship with his wife, his new "gift" means that he will be deprived this pleasure.

The stanza ends with Mrs Midas relaying the precautions she took to protect the cat by locking it in the cellar and then moving the phone, but allowing the toilet to be changed into gold. Duffy then inserts a deliberate pause to imitate the speaker's incredulity upon hearing how her husband has been **"granted"** a wish. The word **'granted'** is a pun which is repeated to convey her opinion, that in general, people do and can make wishes but if they are going to be given, then of course her **'fool'** of a husband had to be the one to have his wish come true. She is truly aggrieved by this and goes on to justify the futility of such a wish since gold **'feeds no one'**. In doing so she exposes the inherent lack of real value of gold. Even so, humour is injected to contrast with this harsh fact as Mrs Midas considers, on a more positive note, how the situation will mean that at least Midas will **'...be able to give up smoking for good.'**

Stanzas 7 -11 Summary and Analysis

The remainder of the poem continues to highlight the damage Midas' gift has done to their relationship with the beginning of Stanza 7 summarising the full effect with the single statement: **'Separate beds.'** Mrs Midas' terror of her husband touching her is continued and emphasised as she reveals how she even puts a chair against the door at night as she is **'near petrified'**, scared of being turned into stone, a harsh consequence and the reality, should he come near her. Humour again, offers a bit of light relief as she relays how the spare room has been transformed into the impressive **'tomb of Tutankhamen'**. This symbolises that their relationship and dreams are effectively dead. The separateness of the couple is further highlighted as she focuses on the physical suffering they must now endure, in contrast to the fulfilling relationship they enjoyed before he was granted his wish: these were **'halcyon days'**, days of joy when they were **'passionate'** and **'unwrapping each other, rapidly, like presents, fast food.'** However, she now rightly fears Midas' **'honeyed embrace'** since it would be deadly to her.

In Stanza 8, Mrs Midas presents her sadness now of being deprived the opportunity to have a real baby. She begs the question: **'who...can live with a heart of gold?'** Usually, this expression has positive connotations and is associated with kindness and empathy. Here, this familiar metaphor is ironically inverted as the literal meaning is implied, inferring that it would be impossible to survive as a living being with such a heart. A superficial, initially attractive description of the baby she dreamt about is presented with its **'perfect ore limbs'** and **'amber eyes'**, but this descends into a disturbing image as these flame coloured eyes are deemed to be **'holding their pupils like flies.'** Sadly, her milk will remain only a 'dream' too as her breasts can never bear any milk as long as her husband has this 'gift'. Waking to the **'streaming sun'**, again, poignantly reminds us that each day she will awake to a world in which gold dominates every waking moment.

In Stanza 9, the consequences of the myth and the effect on their lives continues to destroy their relationship as Mrs Midas bluntly informs us: **'So he had to move out.'** She then conveys how she had to drive him to live in their isolated caravan 'under cover of dark' and how she returns alone as: **'the woman who married the fool'**, clearly blaming her husband for stupidly wishing for gold. She tells of how at first she visited at odd times, always parking the car a safe distance away in case she was affected by his gift.

Stanza 10 continues to present images of this solitary, distanced, detached separate lifestyle as she describes the rural single golden items she discovers on her walk from the parked car to her husband: **'Golden trout'** and **'a hare hung from a larch'**. She describes him in a sorrowful state **as 'thin, delirious, hearing, he said, the music of Pan.'** This associates him to another Greek God, this time the isolated figure of Pan who was the God of shepherds and flocks and we note the irony that a gift so equated with wealth and prosperity should result in such emotional poverty.

The final Stanza stresses Mrs Midas' anger at her husband's **'pure selfishness'** in making his wish which has not only affected him but also deprived both of any physical relationship but also of his wife's chance to have her dream baby. The poet is reminding us in the end that the myth of Midas, normally only viewed in connection with how it affected Midas and his life, also affected his poor wife, whom even after all her anger has been unleashed, is still left alone with nothing but a wistful, regretful sense of loss for the man she married. In a poignant line, she remembers fondly their once full, physical relationship and mourns its passing: **'even now, his hands, his warm hands on my skin, his touch.'** The repetition of the words **"hands"** emphasises too that his touch, once a potent symbol of their intimacy is now lost forever and reminds us that unlike human skin to skin contact, gold is cold and hard.

Themes

Greed is certainly a recurring theme as this what motivated Midas to make his wish in the first place and the damaging effects are portrayed throughout with both husband and wife, in the end, being left alone to suffer the effects of wishing to possess a substance which ultimately 'feeds no one.'

Consequences of our actions: This is a prevalent theme as both Midas and his wife pay the price of not really taking the time to deliberate and think through what would follow if they chose one action over another.

Loneliness and Solitude are all that is left for both characters by the end of the poem as a result of one selfish act. A life of solitude is chosen as soon as Midas is 'granted' his foolish and selfish wish.

Textual Analysis

How does the poet use imagery to make Midas' gift appear convincing to Mrs Midas and the reader?

Suggested answer

The poet initially presents us with a typical domestic scene whereby Mrs Midas is pouring a glass of wine whilst preparing dinner, only to then have to look again as she witnesses her husband transforming an ordinary pear into what appears to be a modern day lit up 'light-bulb' which we are all more familiar with. By using this simile and relaying, through the single worded, minor sentence, that when the pear was turned to gold it switched 'On', just as a light lights up, so too does the pear

appear to convincingly change before the very eyes of Mrs Midas through Duffy's effective use of imagery.

Despite the seriousness of events in the poem, how does the poet effectively instil and maintain a comic tone throughout the poem?

Suggested answer

The poet effectively injects humour throughout the poem initially from the point where Mrs Midas whimsically wonders whether her husband, 'Is putting fairy lights on the tree?' Despite the seriousness of what she has just witnessed and even though it is only September, this creates a comic effect providing an image of her husband out in the garden innocently decorating a pear tree with artificial fairy lights.

Having both realised the damaging effect of Midas' gift and the harsh reality of the situation, Mrs Midas still manages to come away with the comical remark: '...you'll be able to give up smoking for good.' This is the least of Midas' worries when all things are considered which is the reason why it is perhaps humorous. Mrs Midas then goes on to state that Midas not only metaphorically but literally turns the 'spare room into the tomb of Tutankhamen', injecting further humour into an otherwise serious situation whilst at the same time highlighting the extensive excessive powers of her husband's 'granted' greedy wish, comparing their homely surrounds to the golden crypt of an Egyptian pharaoh.

Valentine

Overview

Valentine is from a collection of poems entitled Mean Time of 1993, and expresses love and affection in the form of a conceit whereby the symbol of love being offered by the persona is an unconventional onion. The poem challenges the stereotypical view of valentine's gift as the speaker presents their lover with the metaphorical onion as '**a moon wrapped in brown paper**'. This is reminiscent of the metaphysical poets such as John Donne, who approached ordinary objects in original and surprising ways. The multi-layered complexity of the onion represents a real relationship and is used as an extended metaphor throughout. The strangeness of this unusual gift, which can make a lover cry, highlights the negative as well as positive effects of a deep and loving relationship. The forceful presentation of this gift and final word choice also suggests this is a relationship which is cruel, domineering and menacing.

Form and Structure

The poem is written in free verse using irregular stanzas to support the content and purpose of the poem; to reject traditional restrictive conventions such as marriage and other notions of love and warn lovers that being overly possessive can have fatal undesirable consequences. While ostensibly a poem on the theme of love, Duffy deliberately avoids the use of language or imagery that we associate with this type of poetry. Instead, the words are often stark and monosyllabic to allow her to present her ideas clearly and unambiguously.

Summary and Analysis

Stanzas 1-2

The title itself, 'Valentine', initially suggests that this poem will deal with the fairly conventional notions of love with the connotations of flowers, hearts and romance which one associates with this word. However, the traditional idea as suggested from the title is subverted from the very beginning in the opening line: '**Not a red rose or a satin heart.**' and also in line 12: '**not a cute card or a kissogram**'. By inserting a negative at the opening of both these lines, the speaker is effectively dismissing traditional symbols of love and instead presents an object that is much more truthfully representative of love. In the repetition of the line '**I give you an onion**' in line 2 and again in line 13, the poet emphasises the importance that this gift be accepted by their lover. The use of the imperative commands "**Here**" (line 6) and "**Take it**" (line 18), further establishes the forceful character of the speaker.

The gift, the metaphorical onion is described as "**a moon wrapped in brown paper.**" Thus although initially puzzling and unconventional, the allusion to the moon does remind us of more traditional notions of romance. The "**brown paper**" refers both to the texture and colour of the outer layer of the onion as well as reminding us that real romantic gifts do not need to be embellished or concealed within expensive wrapping. The speaker is asserting then that the onion symbolises a positive aspect of love since it represents refreshing honesty and optimism, often experienced at the beginning of a relationship. The line '**It promises light**' also indicates that this will be an enriching and fulfilling relationship for both parties. This too conveys the optimism and hopefulness of lovers embarking on a new relationship.

The simile *'like the careful undressing of love'* can be interpreted both as a reference to the sexual aspect of their relationship love and also the growth of their emotional bond which the peeling away of clothes and layers of personality may bring. The word *'careful'* suggests tenderness, affection, warmth and sensitivity between the lovers as they gradually allow external barriers to come down and expose their true selves to each other.

Stanza 3

This verse opens with one commanding single word line: *'Here.'* The full stop and solitary stance emphasises the forceful presentation of the gift. However, this gift also bears a warning that *'It will blind you with tears'* conveying the realisation that this relationship may occasionally cause pain and make you cry, just as getting too close to a chopped up onion can bring tears to your eyes. In doing so, the speaker reminds us that the onion, just like a lover, can elicit pain and distress as well as love and passion.

An additional warning in the form of an extended metaphor follows with the words *'It will make your reflection a wobbling photo of grief'*. This emphasises once more the vulnerability and danger one exposes themselves to when they submit wholly and completely to a romantic relationship and reminds us of its destructive potential.

Stanza 4

This harsh disclosure is further supported by a single emphatic statement: *"I am trying to be truthful"*. In doing so, the speaker is perhaps attempting to justify all that's been said so far, and continues to stress the desire for honesty within the relationship. Through this openness and frankness, the speaker is attempting to stress the significance of truthfulness and honesty in their relationship. Before this line, the persona had spoken of their love in mainly gentle terms to show the sincerity of their feelings, yet what follows from this is a change in tone to one which appears to be more brutal and threatening. Through the use of the first person, the poet conveys the strength of feeling in the speaker in their desire for a relationship which is based on honesty.

Stanza 5 and 6

Having echoed the opening with a single line rejecting more stereotypical Valentine's gifts of *'a cute card'* and a *'kissogram'*, Stanza 6 then goes on to stress their insistence that the onion be accepted by their lover: *'I give you an onion.'* The full stop signifies a pause as the speaker awaits their gift to be received. As the poem continues in the line *"Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,"* the lover is attempting to articulate not only the romantic, positive aspects of love but its more negative, darker associations through the deliberate word choice of "fierce" There is also the continued allusion to the senses through the taste of the onion, which just like some romantic relationships is strong, unpleasant and difficult to erase. Similarly whilst the word choice of *'faithful'* has positive connotations of a trusting shared relationship, the word choice of *'possessive'* signals a change in the relationship as it suggests an element of jealousy, distrust, control and insecurity.

In **Stanza 7**, Duffy builds to a penultimate climax with the speaker becoming even more insistent by using the imperative command in the words *'Take it'*. The speaker then reminds us that traditional romantic relationships usually culminate in marriage which here is considered to be similar to a constricting death. She compares the creamy white rings of the onion with the precious metal platinum loops of a wedding-ring which over time will, like the onion rings, *'shrink'* in size. Here the poet is inferring that marriage requires an adjustment which may in fact restrict a person both

physically as well as emotionally, warning others of the consequences of following conventions which can be destructive, diminutive and even unnecessary when compared to free romantic love.

The final stanza begins with the single minor sentence and powerful adjective **'Lethal'** which reinforces the notion of imminent death to individuality, where a long-term union is pursued. The 'scent' from this relationship has positive connotations of the pleasant smell of perfume; echoing back to the 'fierce kiss', reiterating the fact that the memory of a deep relationship may last, even long after the relationship has ended. However there is no doubt that even where powerful love is very difficult to forget, it may lead you into dangerous situations where the final outcome could be brutal and violent as suggested by the final word 'knife'. Violence is very much threatened but is in keeping with the preceding honest examination of a relationship, as just like a knife, a relationship can bring much pain and suffering. A knife can slice through an onion just as honest language can incisively reveal the truth concerning a loving relationship.

Themes

Similar to most of the poems from Duffy's Mean Time collection, the poem Valentine deals with those involved in damaged or irreconcilable relationships. This also reflected the gloomy atmosphere of the political climate of this time. In Valentine, Duffy ends on a warning note that love can be 'Lethal' and so life-threatening, forcing the reader to confront the notion that a real love based on honesty and truthfulness can be painful and destructive as well as fulfilling and enriching. The allusion to the negative aspects of conventional relationships suggests that ultimately such relationships can often be restrictive to the individual, while a love which is free from such constraints is an ideal worth pursuing.

Textual Analysis

Show how the poet dismisses the initial idea as suggested in the title that is a purely a simple love poem.

Suggested answer

Despite the poem's simple one word title 'Valentine' immediately presenting the impression that this poem is to be wholly about a conventional day, the 14th of February, when traditional gifts of love are exchanged, the poet evidently dismisses this association with the first single negative line: 'Not a red rose or a satin heart.' Together, both red roses and shiny hearts fulfil the most common notions of the types of gifts which should be delivered as expressions of true love. The poet pre-empts these from the start and goes on to reinforce this dismissal in line 12, again, in a further, single, negative statement: 'Not a cute card or a kissogram.' The atypical Valentine's card is written off as a supercilious personal messenger who would declare in a song or piece of pretentious poetry, their undying love for another.

How does the lover in the poem use language to put across their insistent acceptance of their chosen gift to represent their love?

Suggested answer

The poet uses the first person singular and directly addresses their lover in a clear serious of single forceful statements to put across their demand that their lover must accept this apparently simplistic, yet underlying complex gift of an onion; 'I give you an onion.' This statement is repeated at the beginning of the second half of the poem to emphasise presentation of the gift.