



Poppies – by Jane Weir

KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER



Context – *Poppies* was written by Jane Weir, and was published in *The Guardian* in 2009.

Jane Weir – Jane Weir was born in 1963, to a British mother and an Italian father. She spent her childhood growing up in both Italy and northern England. She also lived in Northern Ireland during the troubled 1980s, which allowed her to continue to take in different cultures and traditions. *Poppies* was written after Carol Ann Duffy asked Jane Weir (and other poets) to compose poems to raise awareness of the mistreatment and deaths of British soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq.



Poppies – Poppies are a type of flowering plant that have become known as a symbol of remembrance for military personnel killed serving the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand in war. Small artificial poppies are traditionally worn in these countries in the lead up to Remembrance/Armistice Day. The poppy as a symbol of remembrance was first inspired by the WWI poem 'In Flanders Fields', which describes how poppies were the first flowers to grow in the fields churned up by soldiers' graves.



Armistice Day – Armistice Day is celebrated every year on 11th November, in order to celebrate the Armistice signed by the Allies of World War I and Germany. It took place on the '11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, in 1918. The date also coincides with Remembrance Day (UK) and Veterans Day (US). In Britain, many people attend an 11am ceremony held at the Cenotaph in London – an event that is organised by the Royal British Legion, a charity devoted to continuing the memory of those who served in WWI and all subsequent wars.



The Iraq/ Afghanistan Conflicts – The War in Afghanistan began in 2001 after 9/11, when USA and its allies invaded Afghanistan in order to rid the country of Al-Qaeda, through removing the Taliban from power. The Iraq war began in 2003, when a United States-led government invaded Iraq in order to overthrow Saddam Hussein. In both wars, the power vacuum that resulted from removing these powers meant that the coalition troops faced several years in battle against insurgents, in which many were killed.



Language/Structural Devices

Imagery – Weir uses imagery to accentuate the contrast between the horrific manner in which the son has assumedly died, and the comforts of home. For example, the use of the term 'Sellotape Bandaged' causes the reader to consider a battlefield injury, whilst on another level gives a more comforting image of a mother cleaning cat hairs off her son's blazer. The same is true of her pinning the poppy on her son, a nurturing image which is contrasted with the words 'spasm' and 'red', presenting the idea of a horrific, violent death.

Varied Verbs – A wide range of verbs are used to demonstrate the manner in which actions are carried out – this helps to carry the tone and key messages of the poem. For example, the narrator reminisces about fond memories from the past, using positive verbs such as 'play' and 'smoothed.' Verbs used to describe their interactions in the present all offer connotations of pain and discomfort, e.g. 'flattened,' 'pinned', and 'graze.' The variation in these verbs helps to form the sharp contrasts that shape the poem.

Quote: "I pinned one onto your lapel, crimped petals, spasms of paper red, disrupting a blockade"

Quote: "All my words flattened, rolled, turned into felt,"

Metaphors – Figurative language is highly prevalent throughout the poem, particularly from the third stanza onward. For example, the door to the house represents the door to the world. The release of the songbird symbolises the narrator letting go of something that has given her joy. Furthermore, the dove represents the symbol of peace – showing the narrator that their son is now at peace.

Interesting Adjectives – Weir uses few adjectives throughout the poem (largely in keeping with its simple and sombre tone) but those that are included are hugely descriptive. For example, the use of the adjective 'intoxicated' gives the reader a depth of understanding about both the son's mindset heading into war (enthusiastic) and the narrator's trepidation regarding the son's mindset.

Quote: "After you'd gone I went into your bedroom, released a song bird from its cage."

Quote: "A split second and you were away, intoxicated."

Form/Structure – At first glance, the poem appears to have a strong, regular form. There are four stanzas – the first and last have 6 lines, whilst the middle stanzas have 11 and 12. But, a closer look reveals that 19 of the 35 lines in the poem have breaks in the middle. This is suggestive of a narrator that is trying to keep calm, but is breaking down inside.

Narrative Structure – The time sequence throughout the poem changes along with the narrator's emotions. The reader is led through the time sequence from 'three days before' (line 1), 'before you left' (3), 'after you'd gone' (23), to 'this is where it has led me' (25). At the end of the poem, the narrator finds themselves caught between the past and the present.

Quote: "play at/being Eskimos like we did when you were little/ I resisted the impulse"

Quote: "and this is where it has led me, skirting the church yard walls, my stomach busy"

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Remembrance – Weir opens the poem mentioning 'Armistice Day' – a day all about remembrance – and this is a theme that runs throughout the entirety of the poem. The reader is forced to consider the soldier not just as a number or statistic, but rather as someone's son, who have shared innumerable memories with the person.



Loss and Suffering – By telling the poem from the viewpoint of the parent, Weir gives a voice to the relatives and friends who are forced to endure loss and suffering away from the battlefield at home. Although they do not experience the physical pain of battle, the psychological and emotional suffering can be just as potent.



Line-by-Line Analysis

STANZA	LINE	POEM	ANALYSIS
1	1	Three days before Armistice Sunday and poppies had already been placed on individual war graves. Before you left, I pinned one onto your lapel, crimped petals, spasms of paper red, disrupting a blockade of yellow bias binding around your blazer.	The poem starts with the speaker's close relative (assumed to be a son) leaving. <u>Armistice Sunday</u> is associated with remembrance, so the mention of this in the first line sets the tone of the poem. The description of the poppy provides a <u>powerful piece of imagery</u> – the 'spasms of red' on a 'blockade' could just as easily symbolise a soldier who has been brutally shot dead in action. The speaker shows fear through using the <u>symbol of remembrance</u> as a token of goodbye.
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2	7	Sellotape bandaged around my hand, I rounded up as many white cat hairs as I could, smoothed down your shirt's upturned collar, steeled the softening of my face. I wanted to graze my nose across the tip of your nose, play at being Eskimos like we did when you were little. I resisted the impulse to run my fingers through the gelled blackthorns of your hair. All my words flattened, rolled, turned into felt,	The behaviours that the narrator speaks of are typical of those exhibited between a <u>parent and their child</u> (in this case likely a mother and son). The speaker describes partaking in some nurturing tasks (e.g. cleaning his blazer of fluff, smartening up his shirt) but appears to feel sorrow at not being able to do the other things that he has outgrown (e.g. Eskimo kiss, rub fingers through hair, etc.). To substantiate this idea, the use of the <u>interesting verb 'steemed'</u> is used to show how the narrator retains a stiff upper lip in the face of an emotional time. The use of the <u>metaphor 'blackthorns of your hair'</u> makes reference to both the visual appearance of the son's hair and the fact that it is now something that the speaker cannot touch, since the son is no longer a child.
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3	18	slowly melting. I was brave, as I walked with you, to the front door, threw it open, the world overflowing like a treasure chest. A split second and you were away, intoxicated. After you'd gone I went into your bedroom, released a song bird from its cage. Later a single dove flew from the pear tree, and this is where it has led me, skirting the church yard walls, my stomach busy making tucks, darts, pleats, hat-less, without a winter coat or reinforcements of scarf, gloves.	Another <u>metaphor</u> is used to describe the narrator as 'melting', referencing the fact that they feel as though they are falling apart inside through the despair of the parting moment. The <u>verb 'threw'</u> suggests that the narrator wants this desperate moment to be over hastily. The <u>simile 'world overflowing like a treasure chest'</u> describes the idea that the narrator is full of 'overflowing' emotions. The interesting <u>adjective 'intoxicated'</u> is used to describe the son as he leaves – possibly an indication that he is enthusiastic about going away to war, not fully aware of the atrocities that take place there. The mention of releasing the songbird is unlikely to be literal – rather a <u>metaphor</u> regarding the narrator 'letting go' of something that has brought them joy. Doves are often seen as <u>symbolic of peace</u> , leading the narrator to follow it – giving the idea of them hoping for peace, but also representing the idea that they have little to do with their son gone.
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4	30	On reaching the top of the hill I traced the inscriptions on the war memorial, leaned against it like a wishbone. The dove pulled freely against the sky, an ornamental stitch, I listened, hoping to hear your playground voice catching on the wind.	The speaker is led by the dove to a war memorial. Here the bird departs – thus suggesting that its sole purpose was to lead the speaker there. We can imply from this that the son has died in the war – the memory of him leaving is the last moment the narrator will ever have with him. Even in the final stanza, <u>language relating to textiles/ clothing (stitch)</u> as there is earlier in the poem (blazer, scarf, gloves) is representative of domestic comfort, in contrast to language showing the <u>violence and horror of war</u> (red, spasms). Ending the poem, the narrator reaches for memories but only hears silence.
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Poems for Comparison

Poem	Comparison	The Poet's Influences
Ozymandias	<i>Poppies</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of <u>remembrance</u>	The poem came out of sadness and anger, the two emotions combined, and it was written quickly, which is fairly unusual...At the time the news was full of conflict: Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, and of course we'd had the Balkans, and various 'tribal wars' in Africa... We very rarely hear the women speak. I have two sons myself and I'd read in the newspapers, seen on TV the verdicts from the inquests on soldiers killed in Iraq. Who could forget the harrowing testimonies of the soldiers families, and in particular their Mothers...and I was angry and frustrated at the apathy, or what I perceived as 'voicelessness' and ability to be heard or get any kind of justice. I wanted to write a poem from the point of view of a mother and her relationship with her son, a child who was loved cherished and protected... and it had led to this... heightened and absolute fear that parents experience in letting their children go, the anxiety and ultimately the pain of loss...
Exposure	<i>Poppies</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem in the approach to the theme of <u>loss and suffering</u> .	

