

Literature Paper 2 Section B: Anthology Poetry
Learning compendium
'Poppies' Weir

Key ideas

*The poem is set in the modern day where the poet imagines the feelings and perspectives of a mother whose son has gone to war.

*In the poem a mother describes the day her son left home to join the army. She struggles to contain her emotions as she pins a poppy to his lapel.

*After he has gone she releases her emotions by visiting his bedroom and later visits a local war memorial and remembers him. The ending is ambiguous: by ending at the memorial it may either suggest her son has died at war or that she misses him and fears the worst.

*The poem is predominantly based on the concept of poppies as memorials and therefore the idea of memory. Throughout the poem the mother remembers and the poem flashes back to key moments of the life of the mother and son.

*The poem is a modern poem published in 2009. Weir was commissioned to produce a collection of poems which were published by *The Guardian Newspaper*. The collection was called 'Exit Wounds'. Although the poem has a modern day setting, it reaches right back to the beginning of the Poppy Day tradition.

*When 'Poppies' was written British soldiers were still dying in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The purpose of the poem was to convey the suffering caused because of the death of the soldiers.

*Jane Weir said, "I wrote the piece from a woman's perspective, which is quite rare, as most poets who write about war have been men.

"As the mother of two teenage boys, I tried to put across how I might feel if they were fighting in a war zone.

*She also said, "I was subliminally thinking of Susan Owen [mother of Wilfred]... and families of soldiers killed in any war when I wrote this poem. This poem attempts on one level to address female experience and is consciously a political act."

CHECK-POINT!

1. Complete 'who', 'what', 'when', and 'where' for the poem using the information given in bullet points 1 and 2.
2. What are two interpretations of the poem's ending?
3. What is the poem predominantly based upon?
4. What is the purpose of the poem?
5. Whose perspective is the poem from?
6. What influenced Weir when writing the poem?

Form and structure

The poem is a dramatic monologue which is written in first person. This allows the reader a clear insight into the feelings of the mother- something which we don't typically read about in war poetry. The poem could also be described as an elegy (a poem of mourning).

It has four stanzas of which stanza 1 and stanza 4 have 6 lines. The similarity in structure of stanzas 1 and 4 may be because both stanzas focus upon memory and are linked to *how* families and friends and society in general can remember those who gave their lives for us.

Basic outline of the stanzas and narrative structure

Stanza 1: The mother reflects on the present situation and Remembrance Day. The concept of poppies is used to trigger the speaker's memory of her son leaving for war.

Stanza 2: The speaker describes helping her son to get ready and her inner conflicting emotions.

Stanza 3: The speaker describes how she managed to contain her sorrow until her son left and then describes her feelings of emptiness that his absence brings.

Stanza 4: The poem ends with the speaker at a war memorial thinking about her son.

The poem can be described as having a clear narrative structure (or telling a story). The sequence of time changes with her emotions. 'Three days before' (line 1), 'Before you left' (line 3), 'After you'd gone' (line 23) to 'later' (line 25) and the present in 'this is where it has led me' (line 26). The poem ends with the speaker suspended between the present and the past. This is also reflected through the use of long line lengths and enjambment which show how the speaker is absorbed in her own thoughts and emotions.

'...All my words

flattened, rolled, turned into felt,

slowly melting.'

The meaning of this line is split over the end of stanza 2 and the start of stanza 3 showing how preoccupied the speaker is with her feelings.

Use of caesura

The poet employs the use of caesura (breaks in the middle of lines created by either commas or full stops) throughout all stanzas. This is used to suggest the inner emotion of the speaker, who is trying to remain calm and composed in front of her son.

'I rounded up as many white cat hairs
as I could, smoothed down your shirt's
upturned collar, steeled the softening
of my face.'

The combination of breaks within the lines, enjambment and sibilance ('smoothed', 'shirt's', 'steemed' 'softening') convey the clear struggle of the speaker to contain her emotions in front of her son. The domesticity and practicalities of the speaker's actions are juxtaposed with her inner anguish and heartache of having to say goodbye to her son.

CHECK-POINT!

1. What 2 forms is the poem described as? And why has the poet used these 2 forms?
2. Why do stanzas 1 and 4 have a similar structure?
3. Why does the poet use caesura frequently in the poem?
4. Why has the poet used a combination of breaks within lines, enjambment and sibilance in the following lines:

'I rounded up as many white cat hairs/ as I could, smoothed down your shirt's/ upturned collar, steeled the softening/ of my face.'

5. What does the poet juxtapose in the poem?

Language

The mother's feelings are presented through references to war and references to domesticity. These two concepts are juxtaposed together to create uncertainty regarding the speaker's son, whether he is still alive and to show the inner turmoil the speaker is feeling and trying to hide from her son.

War imagery to describe physical and emotional pain

Stanza one: In this stanza war graves and the tradition of wearing a poppy is contrasted with the mother's help in preparing her son for leaving. The poet's reference to pain and the colour red may possibly hint at suffering or death.

'spasms of paper red'

The poet creates a semantic field of suffering through the use of colour imagery and movement: spasms has connotations of being wounded. This could refer to the mother, the son or both.

This concept is also used in stanza two. 'Sellotape bandaged around my hand'. The verb 'bandaged' acts in a metaphorical way: it could be describing how the speaker feels emotionally wounded and/or another hint that her son has been wounded or killed in service.

Use of the senses

The mother's separation from her son and her feelings of loss are emphasised by the way she can't touch or hear him. She touches other things and listens for his voice but none of these things can replace her son.

'...I traced
the inscriptions on the war memorial,
leaned against it like a wishbone...
I listened, hoping to hear
your playground voice catching on the wind.'

The war memorial gives the speaker a physical 'presence' something that has more solidity than her memories. The use of the simile creates visual imagery of her desperation for him to be saved.

The use of alliteration amplifies the way she seems to be almost straining to hear him.

Presentation of the son

For the son, his new experience of joining the army represents a new opportunity and adventure for him.

'A spilt second

and you were away, intoxicated.'

The use of sibilance and enjambment are used to emphasise how quickly the speaker feels her son leaves her as he is excited about the new chapter in his life. The verb 'intoxicated' may suggest that the speaker's son doesn't understand the reality of what is ahead of him and that his life is going to be still be controlled but in a different way.

'...the gelled

blackthorns of your hair'

The 'blackthorns' allude to Jesus, who wore a crown of thorns when he was crucified. This hints at the sacrifice the son may make and one which the speaker is fully aware of; this may be the last time she sees her son.

CHECK-POINT!

1. What is contrasted in stanza 1?
2. What type of semantic field is created in stanza 1?
3. Explain the meaning of the metaphor 'bandaged' in stanza 2.
4. How are the senses used to emphasise the speaker's feeling of loss and separation?
5. What does joining the army represent to the speaker's son?
6. What might the verb 'intoxicated' suggest about the speaker's son?

Explain the allusion of the following lines: '...the gelled/ blackthorns of your hair'

Feelings and attitudes

Loss- The mother acts as if she has lost her son. This may be a temporary or permanent situation. She is struggling to cope with her feelings and her mind is constantly full of memories of her son. References to her son starting school allude to a different kind of loss that the mother has previously experienced. The speaker is stuck in her memories which she can't go back to but she is also unable to be in the present. She is in a state of limbo.

Fear- The mother is anxious and fearful for her son's safety. The poem focuses upon the difficulties faced by the people left behind when their loved ones go to war.

Freedom- From the son's perspective, his place in the army offers freedom and new experiences.

Themes

Women and conflict: Although the poem focuses upon the plight of one mother left behind and her feelings of loss, it reminds the reader that many women have been in similar situations in past wars.

Loss and absence: The poem gives a voice to those who are left behind when loved ones go to war.

Memory: The poem explores memories on a personal and broader societal level.

STOP-CHECK!

Create spider diagrams for each 'feeling and attitude' and theme, explaining how each one is represented in the poem. Use the other sections to help you.

Compare with...

'War Photographer' - memory and the experience of war through someone who is not a soldier.

'Kamikaze' - memory and alternative viewpoint

'The Emigree' - feelings of loss

'London' and/or 'Exposure' - both of these poems have a political purpose.

STOP-CHECK!

Without looking, write down the poems you could compare with 'Poppies' and how you could compare them.

Key quotations

'I rounded up as many white cat hairs
as I could, smoothed down your shirt's
upturned collar, steeled the softening
of my face.'

'spasms of paper red'

'blackthorns (of your hair)'

'...I traced
the inscriptions on the war memorial,
leaned against it like a wishbone...
I listened, hoping to hear

your playground voice catching on the wind.'

STOP-CHECK!

1. Learn the key quotations.

Challenge: can you learn the other quotations referred to on the compendium?

Glossary

Armistice Sunday – the Sunday nearest to November 11th where we commemorate the ceasefire of WW (also called Remembrance Sunday).

Lapel – the part on each side of a coat or jacket below the collar which is folded back on either side of the front opening.

Spasms – a sudden (involuntary) muscle movement or contraction.

Blockade – barrier

Bias binding – a narrow strip of material used to bind seams for decoration.

Intoxicated – drunk / excited.

Skirting – going around the edges of something.

Darts – a tapered or pointed stitch.

Reinforcements – help / support / back up.

Inscriptions – engravings.

Ornamental – decorative

Useful You Tube Videos

The NTS English teachers recommend you watch one of the following videos in order to develop your knowledge further or gain a different perspective.

Mr Bruff video link = <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEqSAT77SDQ>

OR

Stacey Reay video link = <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TcJavT5Bvxw>