

Poppies – Jane Weir (anthology pg 39)

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.

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,

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.

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.

Armistice – the agreement to end the fighting, here for WW1, signed in November 1918.
This is part of what we remember each November when we wear poppies.

Bias binding – a strip of fabric sewn on to conceal rough edges of add decoration. Here is
could indicate the son's rank or regiment in the army.

'Poppies' Story

Use this activity sheet to record your ideas about the story in 'Poppies' as you study it. Keep this in your notes for revision. What do you learn about the narrator? What do you learn about the person she is talking to? How do you know? Find quotations that back up your ideas.

<p>The Narrator</p>	<p>Quotations:</p>
<p>The Person She Speaks to</p>	<p>Quotations:</p>

Analytical Tasks:

1. What is the poem about? What happens in it?
2. The chronological order of events in the poem is disrupted by the mother's memories of her son when he was younger. Why do you think the poet does this?
3. Highlight words which suggest war or pain in one colour. Annotate the connotations (what impression we gain from that word) and effect of 3 of the words/phrases you have highlighted.
4. Highlight words which suggest domestic home life or caring in another colour. Annotate the connotations and effect of 3 of the words/phrases you have highlighted.
5. What is the impact of having this juxtaposition between war and home life within the poem? What could it suggest about war, mother-son relationships, or the emotional impact war has upon families?
6. In what way/s does the title relate to the poem? Give reasons for your ideas.
7. Is this a poem about war, or a poem about family? Explain your ideas.
8. Work through the 2 other analysis sheets to help you explore the poem.
9. Which other poems, from those you have studied so far, could you link to this poem? Why? What are the key themes that link this poem to others? What are the similarities and differences between them?

Creative Tasks:

- a) Rewrite the poem as a letter, from the mother to her son at war, explaining how you feel about him being away from home. You can decide whether the son is already dead, and whether or not the mother knows this.
- b) Imagine that you are the son, receiving this poem/letter from your mother. Write a first person description, as the son, explaining your reaction to her words. Imagine that you are in the trenches at this time – describe your surroundings to show a contrast between how your mother feels, and the life you are now living.
- c) "Families of soldiers are equally, sometimes even more, affected by the emotional turmoil of war." Write an article for a national newspaper which argues **either** for **or** against this statement.

Stanza 1: The theme of remembrance and sacrifice is introduced from an individual, rather than mass, perspective.

1. Find and annotate a quotation that uses emphasises the personal/ individual loss of life in stanza 1.

2. How are connotations of pain used in stanza 1?

Stanza 2: The narrator attempts to contain her emotions and not show her fear.

1. Find and annotate a quotation that uses domestic, motherly imagery in stanza 2.

2. Find and annotate alliteration in stanza 2 that shows the mother's trying to be brave and not show emotion.

Poppies – Jane Weir



CHALLENGE: How is religious symbolism used in stanza 2?

Stanza 3: The poet contrasts the mother's fear with the son's excitement and sense of freedom.

1. Find and annotate a simile that shows the son was excited and optimistic about war in stanza 3.

2. Find and annotate a metaphor that shows how the mother feels about her son's departure in stanza 3.

CHALLENGE: How is religious symbolism used/ subverted in stanza 3?

Stanza 4: There is a sense of tragic loss as the mother wishes to have her innocent son back.

1. Find and annotate a simile in stanza 4 that shows the mother's longing for her son.

2. How does the last stanza juxtapose ideas of childhood innocence and war?

CHALLENGE: 'an ornamental stitch' – how does this metaphor present her son?

'Poppies' Language

Use this activity sheet to record your ideas about the language used in 'Poppies' as you study it. Keep this in your notes for revision. What do you notice about the language used in the poem? What poetic techniques are being used? Find quotations that prove your points.

Quotation	Language technique used	What effect this has on the reader
'disrupting a blockade of yellow bias binding'		
'the gelled blackthorns of your hair'		
'turned into felt, slowly melting'		
'the world overflowing like a treasure chest'		
'my stomach busy making tucks, darts, pleats'		
'leaned against it like a wishbone'		

This example answer could only score a maximum of 10/30 marks, because it only mentions and analyses one poem.

Rewrite, develop and improve this response by adding in analysis of a second, relevant, poem.

Compare how the poets present the effects of conflict in 'Poppies' and one other poem from the 'Power and Conflict' cluster.

[30 marks]

'Poppies' concentrates on the domestic effects and costs of conflict. It is the story of a mother remembering how she prepared her son for his entrance into the army. The poem is written in the past tense and so the reader is not sure whether the son has since died (forcing the mother to face her memories of his leaving) or whether she is simply taking a moment to think of her child. Rather than looking at the immense loss of life that a conflict causes, Weir chooses the perspective of one mother - when her poem was published as part of a collection in 2009 it touched many people and she heard from many mothers who had lost their children in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The poem opens with memories of three days before Armistice Day. The mother, preparing her child for the army, pins a poppy to his blazer while she thinks of 'individual war graves' (the personal losses of other mothers). The poppy is 'spasms of paper red', making the reader, even in the first stanza, think of an injured body racked with pain and the red of splashed blood rather than dyed red paper.

While Armistice Day is mentioned, it is the simple domestic scene that pulls at the heart strings here. Language of war such as 'a blockade' of bias binding, 'reinforcements' of winter clothing and the sellotape being 'bandaged' around her hand seem to bring the conflict directly between the mother and son. The mother struggles to let her child go to this dangerous environment, while the boy is 'intoxicated' by the future and sees the world 'overflowing like a treasure chest'. There is a reminder here of school days as she reminisces about touching noses like Eskimos and his 'playground voice', and the scene becomes a reflection of that earlier letting go, preparing a child for their first days of school.

The mother is nervous and full of anxiety for her son and this is reflected in the sewing imagery used to describe the butterfly sensation in her stomach. She speaks of her stomach making 'tucks, darts and pleats', again bringing the semantic field of sewing and womanly domestic pursuits into this poem about war. This use of sewing metaphors is repeated with her words 'turning into felt' having been flattened and rolled, while the dove (symbolically her son) is described as 'an ornamental stitch', something small but beautiful in the vast sky.