

# AQA English GCSE

## Poetry: Power and Conflict

Poppies - *Jane Weir*

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# POPIES

Jane Weir

## Brief Summary

A mother recalls caring for her son and reminisces about his childhood before it is revealed that he is no longer there and it is implied that he has died in conflict.

## Synopsis

- The poem opens “**three days before armistice Sunday**” to establish the theme of remembrance
- The narrator places a poppy on her son’s blazer
- She recounts memories of her son- Using Sellotape to remove cat hairs from his clothes, smoothing down his collar
- She remembers trying to stop her emotion and resist smothering him
- After he leaves the house she goes to his room
- She then climbs a hill to lean on the war memorial and watch a dove
- The narrator wishes she could hear her son’s voice still

### Summary

**Context** – Remembrance day is a recurring theme.

**Structure** - Cyclical // The son goes from participating in remembrance day to being remembered.

**Language** – Memory // Grief // Childhood

**Key Points** – A mother’s grief is explored to reveal the unconventional victims of conflict // She gains solace from remembering him.

## Context

### Jane Weir (1963-)

Weir was born in 1963 and lived in Northern Ireland during the troubles in the 1980’s. She has two sons which may have influenced her desire to explore what caused young boys to go to war and fight. Weir was also a textile designer which explains her use of related imagery.

### Poppies

The poem comes from the collection commissioned by Carol Ann Duffy called “exit wounds”. Poppies grew in battlefields and became a symbol of remembrance in 1921, armistice Sunday also became a way to remember World War Two. Weir uses these symbols to establish from the outset that the poem is an act of remembrance.



## Poppies

*This use of temporal deixis establishes the theme of remembrance from the start.*

*The word choice implies that the memory also has painful undertones.*

*The poem ends with sad metaphor.*

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.

*This use of asyndetic listing shows how detailed the memory is to the narrator.*

*This metaphor creates an image of there being an outpouring of emotion by the narrator.*



## The opening

The poem sets the **tone of remembrance** from the start. Weir sets the scene of the poem at a memorial service to show the reader that the speaker and her son, who made the ultimate sacrifice, are victims of war.

By showing the son participating in armistice Sunday and then being killed in war himself, the cyclic nature of war is demonstrated.

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on individual war graves. Before you left,  
I pinned one onto your lapel, crimped petals,  
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of yellow bias binding around your blazer.

## Form

The poem takes the form of a **dramatic monologue**. The speaker uses a **second person narrative** to directly address their son however, he never replies, implying that he is no longer there which creates a sense of death and loss. This form serves to focus the listener on the mother

## Structure

### Free verse

There is no rhyme scheme or meter as well as a lot of variety in stanza length. This shows that these are the speaker's **uncensored thoughts** through which she desperately tries to make sense of the situation.

Weir's use of **free verse** also creates the impression of the poem being an **outpouring of emotion** or a **stream of consciousness** which is common in modern poetry. The chaotic structure of the poem reflects the narrator's **lack of control** over her emotions as well as the events she has endured and shows that the chaos created by war is much further reaching than the battlefield.

### Enjambment

Weir's use of **enjambment** is seen in "**rolled, turned into felt // slowly melting**" which gives the sentences a **fragmented feeling**. This alludes to the narrator having to grasp at incomplete memories.



## Language

### Blending domestic with conflict

Weir interweaves **domestic imagery** with **violent military metaphors** throughout the poem. This is evident when the speaker describes leaving the house **“without a winter coat or reinforcements of scarf, gloves”**. The lack of protection from the cold shows how violence has left a mark on all parts of her everyday life. This could also imply that she feels she needs reinforcement to face seeing the memorial for her son as it is still difficult to face the reality of her situation.

The speaker remembers wanting to **“graze my nose across the tip of your nose”**, a phrase in which **maternal affection is juxtaposed against the injury-like connotations of “graze”**. Throughout the poem, Weir shows how war prevents people from having a normal domestic life.

### Unconventional bravery

Weir is unusual as a war poet in the way in which she explores **emotional suffering** as opposed to **physical pain**. This is evident in the speaker’s declaration of **“I was brave”** which opposes conventional ideas of bravery associated with fighting and risk taking.

In “Poppies”, the narrator is acting bravely by carrying on with her daily life despite what she is suffering. The narrator is also brave because despite her fear of losing her son to war, she still lets him go.

### Suffering

The use of **enjambment** between stanzas in **“all my words flattened, rolled, turned into felt // slowly melting”** breaks the structure of the poem to correspond with the mother emotionally breaking. Hints of the mother’s suffering are heard throughout the poem as she is repeatedly assaulted by painful memories.

## Comparisons

### Kamikaze

<p>Similarities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The psychological effects of war is seen in both poems. Weir shows how grief leads the narrator to processing blissful, domestic memories of having <b>“sellotape bandaged around [her] hand”</b> whereas Garland recounts the day the character’s <b>“father embarked at sunrise”</b>.</li> <li>• Both poems are focused on the unconventional victims of war, not those who went into battle themselves. This shows how far reaching the effects of violence are.</li> </ul>
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Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In Poppies, the narrator's physical loss is shown by the wistful "<b><i>I listened, hoping to hear // your playground voice</i></b>". Conversely, in Kamikaze, the main character's father is rejected by society rather than killed and she has to "<b><i>live as though he had never returned</i></b>". This shows how even those not actually killed in war can have their lives ruined also.</li> </ul>
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### Exposure

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The sense of duty imposed by patriotism disguises the true nature of war in both poems to give the soldiers motivation for fighting.</li> <li>Both poems present unprepared soldiers</li> <li>In Bayonet charge, Hughes implies that the soldier is motivated for fighting by his sense of patriotism through the metaphor "<b><i>The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye</i></b>". Similarly, in Owen's poem, the narrator questions their beliefs in "<b><i>What are we doing here?</i></b>".</li> </ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Owen actually experienced war whereas Hughes did not giving Owen a more valid perspective</li> </ul>

### Remains

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The psychological impact of losing a son is seen in Poppies through the desire to return to "<b><i>play at being Eskimos like we did when [he] was little</i></b>". Armitage also explores the psychological effect of losing someone however, whilst Weir's narrator wishes to remember, Armitage's attempts to forget "<b><i>the image of agony</i></b>" after killing a man. This is damaging to both narrators as in Remains, he is unable to "<b><i>Sleep</i></b>" or "<b><i>Dream</i></b>" and in Poppies the irregular structure shows her unable to hold herself together. These memories seem to extend the impact of war for both narrators however, they are more positive and welcomed by Weir's who sees the sad memories as a chance to remember her son.</li> </ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Armitage presents the narrator's guilt through the harsh repetition of "<b><i>his bloody life in my bloody hands</i></b>" as well as the desperate "<b><i>the drink and the drugs won't flush him out</i></b>". In Poppies, the narrator instead experiences grief which is shown in the declarative "<b><i>I was brave</i></b>" and having to "<b><i>[lean] against it</i></b>" when seeing the war memorial.</li> </ul>

