



# POPPIES BY JANE WEIR

## Table of Contents

FULL POEM	2
HOW TO FIGURE OUT A POEM	3
WHO IS JANE WEIR? (1963 - )	3
CONTEXT: GLOBAL CONFLICTS	3
POWER AND CONFLICT IN THIS POEM	4
CONTEXT: WOMEN'S TRADITION (PALGRAVE MACMILLAN)	5
CONTEXT: THE POWER OF WWI PROPAGANDA ( <a href="http://www.bl.uk">www.bl.uk</a> )	5
CONTEXT: TYPES OF WWI PROPAGANDA	6
JANE WEIR'S NARRATIVE STYLE	7
JANE WEIR'S STYLE OF LANGUAGE	8
INTERPRETATION	8
FORM – 'DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE'	8
FORM - THE ROLE OF THE SILENT INTERLOCUTOR	9
'DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE' FORM DEVELOPMENT	9
'DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE' GENERAL FEATURES	9
FORM: DRAMA AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE	11
FORM – A 'PERCEIVED' RATHER THAN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL VIEWPOINT	12
FORM - THE ROLE OF THE SILENT INTERLOCUTOR	12
FORM - BROWNING'S PURPOSE	13
SETTING	13
HOW BROWNING COMBINES THE SUBJECTIVE AND THE OBJECTIVE	13
FORM: INTERIOR MONOLOGUE	14
AUTHOR'S PURPOSE	14
ANALYSIS – STANZA 1	15
ANALYSIS – STANZA 2	15
ANALYSIS – STANZA 3	16
ANALYSIS – STANZA 4	17
STRUCTURE	17
LANGUAGE	18
WEIR'S PURPOSE	18





---

## FULL POEM

---

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.





## HOW TO FIGURE OUT A POEM

If you want to figure out a poem you have to figure out how the speaker is seeing the world

- If you want to figure out how the speaker is seeing the world you have to look at the symbolic language the speaker is using
  - There are many kinds of symbolic languages but one of the most important is metaphor
    - Metaphor is a counter-logical use of language but makes all the sense in the world on a higher level
      - This is how you know you are dealing with a metaphor
      - It makes no sense on the literal level
        - But it makes sense on a 'higher' figurative level
    - We use metaphorical language everyday
      - 'the Whitehouse announced today that...'
      - 'she is a flower, the glory of the day'
        - the beauty, fragility, freshness, fragrance etc are all appropriate to the description of the woman
- when the features of the thing which the speaker is comparing the subject to become so overwhelming that they have stopped seeing the differences, then we can see how the speaker sees the world

## WHO IS JANE WEIR? (1963 - )

Jane Weir describes herself as Anglo-Italian, and grew up in on the outskirts of Manchester on a council estate.

- As an adult, she has lived 'all over the place', including in Belfast, Northern Ireland during the Troubles (in the 1980s).
- She has won several poetry prizes and her first collection, *The Way I Dressed During the Revolution* (2005) was shortlisted for the Glen Dimplex New Writers Award in 2006.

## CONTEXT: GLOBAL CONFLICTS

When *Poppies* was written, British soldiers were still dying in Iraq and Afghanistan.

- As a way of expressing and understanding the suffering and grief caused by those deaths, the poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy asked a number of writers, including Jane Weir, to compose poems.
  - The collection was called *Exit Wounds*
    - Duffy said: 'Today, as most of us do, poets largely experience war – wherever it rages – through emails or texts from friends or colleagues in war zones, through radio or newsprint or television, through blogs or tweets or interviews. With the official inquiry into Iraq imminent and the war in Afghanistan returning dead teenagers to the streets of Wootton Bassett, I invited a range of my fellow poets to bear witness, each in their own way, to the matters of war'





Weir's poem *Poppies* was commissioned by Duffy as part of a collection of ten contemporary war poems, which were published in the Guardian in 2009, as part of a response to the escalating conflict in Afghanistan and the Iraq inquiry.

- Weir describes being surprised by the 'overwhelming response' she had from readers across Europe to *Poppies*.
- Many of the readers who contacted her were mothers of soldiers killed in action in recent conflicts.
  - She commented in an interview that, '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. 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... I hoped to somehow channel all of this, convey it into something concise and contemporary, but also historically classic, in terms of universal experience.'

In Northern France and Flanders after WWI, poppies were one of the only types of flowers to still be growing in the fields and came to symbolise the lost lives of the war.

- Scarlet corn poppies (popaver rhoeas) grow naturally in conditions of disturbed earth throughout Western Europe.
- The destruction brought by the Napoleonic wars of the early 19th Century transformed bare land into fields of blood red poppies, growing around the bodies of the fallen soldiers.

In late 1914, the fields of Northern France and Flanders were once again ripped open as World War One raged through Europe's heart.

- Once the conflict was over the poppy was one of the only plants to grow on the otherwise barren battlefields.

The significance of the poppy as a lasting memorial symbol to the fallen was realised by the Canadian surgeon John McCrae in his poem *In Flanders Fields*.

- The poppy came to represent the immeasurable sacrifice made by his comrades and quickly became a lasting memorial to those who died in World War One and later conflicts.
- It was adopted by The Royal British Legion as the symbol for their Poppy Appeal, in aid of those serving in the British Armed Forces, after its formation in 1921.

Armistice Sunday is the closest Sunday to November 11<sup>th</sup>, Remembrance Day, chosen because WWI ended on 11/11/1918

- It began as a way of marking the end of the first world war
  - It was set up to remember the 100s of 1000s of ordinary men who had been killed in war
    - Today, the event is used to remember soldiers of all wars who have died since then

---

## POWER AND CONFLICT IN THIS POEM

---

Power

- The power of propaganda





- The speaker's son was 'intoxicated' possibly by WWI propaganda
  - The powerlessness of the suffering of mothers and women who lose loved ones to conflict
  - The powerlessness of the voiceless in society and conflict
- conflict
- women and conflict
    - the poem is about the indescribable suffering women go through when they lose male relatives to war, even when the women themselves are not directly involved in the fighting
  - the conflict of mother-son relationships
    - the conflict is portrayed in his desire to go into the world and her fear of his naivety
  - the internal conflict of emotions of loss
  - the domestic conflict caused by national conflict
    - Like Kamikaze and war photographer

---

## CONTEXT: WOMEN'S TRADITION (PALGRAVE MACMILLAN)

---

In the last decades of the twentieth century, perhaps the most significant development can be seen in the emergence of a strong women's tradition

- Having previously been denied access to the mainstream for centuries, women began to find increasing opportunities for publication
  - Like the Romantic poets, they aimed to give a voice to those who had no voice, and to use the language of ordinary people
    - A major theme is the relationship between the self (internal) and society, culture and politics (external)
      - The women's tradition sought to transform male versions of history and literature by retelling them from a female point of view
        - In this poem, Jane Weir gives us an insight into the pain felt by the women who were left behind in war and who are often the forgotten sufferers in conflict

---

## CONTEXT: THE POWER OF WWI PROPAGANDA (www.bl.uk)

---

During World War One, propaganda was employed on a global scale

- Unlike previous wars, this was the first total war in which whole nations and not just professional armies were locked in mortal combat.
  - This and subsequent modern wars required propaganda:
    - to mobilise hatred against the enemy;
    - to convince the population of the justness of the cause;
    - to enlist the active support and cooperation of neutral countries;
    - and to strengthen the support of allies.





- 'The world overflowing / like a treasure chest...' may suggest that the speaker's son was the victim of WW1 propaganda that glorified the war effort in an attempt to lure young and naïve volunteers
  - This is likely to be the 'political' aspect of the poem and works as a scathing criticism of politics

---

## CONTEXT: TYPES OF WWI PROPAGANDA

---



Propaganda for patriotism and nationalism

- nations relied heavily on symbols and slogans of nationalism and patriotism
  - While the armies of continental Europe were made up of conscripts, the British army was made up of professionals and then volunteers
    - The British placed immense reliance on propaganda to justify the war and help promote recruitment
  - 'Your Country Needs You'
    - Stereotypes were also used
      - Religious symbolism of St George slaying the (German) dragon
    - Recruitment posters changed from appealing to national honour to 'mobilisation by shame'
  - Savile Lumley's 1915 poster written 'Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?'
    - Other strategies included a need to
      - channel emotions such as courage or hatred
      - conserve resources
      - strengthen national identity
      - emphasise the barbarity of the Germans and Austro-Hungarian armies
      - use women as symbols, victims and homemakers
      - influence children to develop particular values and contribute to the war effort

- propaganda was designed to manipulate every type of person into signing up for the army





---

## JANE WEIR'S NARRATIVE STYLE

---

Weir acknowledged that 'A lot of my poems are narrative driven or scenarios'

- in *Poppies* she tells the 'story' of a mother's experience of pain and loss as her son leaves home to go to war.
- She indicated that: 'I was subliminally thinking of Susan Owen [mother of Wilfred]... and families of soldiers killed in any war when I wrote this poem.'
  - Wilfred Owen was killed one week before the Armistice in November 1918 at the age of 25
    - This may be the inspiration for the reference to Armistice Sunday in the first line of the first stanza
  - Wilfred Owen also claimed the very first poem in the selection 'On my Songs', was, the nineteen-year-old Owen explained to his mother, about his hoped-for 'flight... from overbearing elders' (Letter 172)
    - The speaker is unaware of the deep irony in his sonnet
      - The speaker in Jane Weir's poem says
        - '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,'
          - This may be a reference to Owen's hoped-for 'flight... from overbearing parents'
            - The irony is that this wish comes to fruition through death
              - Weir may also be criticizing the propaganda of the time which, perhaps, took advantage of young men's desire for independence to lure them into the army
    - One of Owen's later poems movingly mentions another audacious ambition dating from these early years to earn himself an eventual memorial in Westminster Abbey's Poet's Corner
      - *Poppies* mentions both 'war memorial' and 'war grave', another possible reference to Owen's mistaken words from his teens
        - Of course, the references may also be generic and therefore referring to all soldiers who lost their lives to war, however, there seems to be an unspoken sense of irony in the references
          - Owen got the war memorial in Westminster Abbey but Weir suggests that it is in many ways, worthless when compared to the pain the mother feels when she remembers the day he left
  - This poem attempts on one level to address female experience and is consciously a political act.
    - 'crimped' and 'spasms' subvert the poppy's symbolic representation of peace
      - Syntactical inversion of 'paper red' reduces the poppy to simply a colour
        - Even the paper that it is made of is dismissed, as if worthless, and we are driven to focus on the symbolic meaning of the colour red as representing the bloodshed of the innocent and the naïve, rather than the meaningless material it is made from





## JANE WEIR'S STYLE OF LANGUAGE

---

Weir has commented that she likes the adventure of 'cross dressing' in terms of her use of language, often borrowing from the 'language of other genres, be it fashion, art... and so on'.

- This is apparent in *Poppies* where the tactile language of fashion and textiles seems to permeate the text. Her poems have been described as 'multi-sensory explosions'.
  - She uses everyday language but infuses it with rich similes and metaphors of war and suffering
    - This shows that perhaps the idea of her son in conflict zones is constantly on her mind
      - It is in everything she sees and does
  - She said 'the principle motive is language itself; its mutability in representing both the abstract or the real'
    - In other words, language has two different sides to it
      - It can be domestic and ordinary but also filled with a deeper meaning as this poem is
- 

## INTERPRETATION

---

It is an interesting fact that neither of Weir's two sons have ever gone to war.

- However, this poem is about saying a last goodbye and questions who's really the brave one.
- This poem can be seen as giving a voice to the mothers whose pain and suffering are forgotten in the aftermath of war
- It could be seen as a poem about the pain of those left behind
- It could also be seen as a domestic conflict caused by national conflict
  - Like *Kamikaze* and *War Photographer*
- An interesting comment made by one reader is that the soldier could be a daughter if one applies the story to recent times.

The poem, though set in the present day, could refer to any war, from the Great War of 1914-1918, to the Afghan and Iraq wars of the 20th century.

- It reaches back to the beginning of the Poppy Day tradition.
  - Armistice Sunday began as a way of marking the end of the First World War, so people could remember the hundreds and thousands of ordinary men who had been killed. Today, the event is used to remember soldiers of all wars who have died since then.
- 

## FORM – 'DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE'

---

*Poppies* can be seen as a dramatic monologue:

- The form of a poem can highlight the kind of relationship the poet desires to create with the reader
    - The dramatic monologue may be the most distinctive structure of the Victorian period
      - Robert Browning used this form often
- 







- It represents the distillation of a crucial moment of human experience, focusing on a particular occasion that becomes a revelation of an almost religious nature as the speaker tries to transcend the finite
  - In this case the dramatic monologue creates a narrative about how a mother deals with the pain of losing her son
    - We are given an internal view of the emotional turmoil the mother goes through
      - The first person narrative perspective gives us access to the speaker's experiences, emotions, feelings and memories so we can experience, vicariously, the mother's pain
        - The dramatic monologue form allows the poet to dramatise the human condition and in this case, because the son's voice is absent, it forces us to focus on the mother's voice and therefore presents the mother's perspective on loss and pain

---

## FORM - THE ROLE OF THE SILENT INTERLOCUTOR

---

It is the role of the silent interlocutor, more than anything else that gives the dramatic monologue its innovatory distinctiveness, though this is less true of Tennyson than of Browning.

- The silent interlocutor is particularly appropriate here because he is dead and so the silence represents death

---

## 'DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE' FORM DEVELOPMENT

---

The form of a poem can highlight the kind of relationship the poet desires to create with the reader

- During the Romantic period, many poets adopted a first person, confessional style, creating intimacy with the reader through direct address
  - William Wordsworth's [The Prelude](#) (begun in 1799, but revised many times) is an autobiographical account of the poet's journey to artistic maturity
    - Browning and Tennyson's innovation, however, was to write in the voice of fictional personae
      - Weir has carried on Browning and Tennyson's tradition of writing from the perspective of a fictional persona (see **FORM – A 'PERCEIVED' RATHER THAN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL VIEWPOINT**)

---

## 'DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE' GENERAL FEATURES

---





Dramatic monologues tend to focus on interiority rather than action

- They represent one person's response to life
- they give us an interior view of the workings of the speaker's mind
  - Browning wished to make us feel the complex and unstable nature of an individual person just as Weir focuses on the unstable nature of the speaker's emotions as she remembers the moment she had to let go of her son
    - In the preface to *Sordello*, he writes:
      - 'My stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul. Little else is worth study'
      - Accordingly Browning pays the least possible attention to outward nature.
        - There is a slight difference in this poem, however, in that the mother's emotional turmoil is expressed through her domestic and maternal actions
          - But they also seem to express her need to keep herself busy in order to control the intensity of the pain she feels
            - 'I pinned... bandaged, rounded up... smoothed down' etc
              - Yet, the semantic field of war suggests that her thoughts of his suffering permeate everything she sees and does
- It is a poetic form in which there is one imaginary speaker addressing an imaginary audience
  - The speaker ('I') cannot be identified with the poet
  - Speaker addresses an audience within the poem
    - In this case, the audience is her dead son
      - The silence here adds to the dramatic aspect because he is dead
- The dramatic monologue represents someone presenting a case to an auditor
  - 'Porphyria's Lover' is slightly unusual in this respect
  - there doesn't seem to be an auditor in the poem
  - the woman in the poem may be the auditor but this is debatable
- *My Last Duchess* is a poem in which there is one imaginary speaker addressing an imaginary audience
  - In *My Last Duchess* the speaker appears to confess to the murder of the wife he is hoping to replace
    - This self-revelation is a hallmark of Browning's monologues
      - The self-revelation in *Poppies* may be the suggestion that she may not be able to overcome the grief she feels because it ends with 'I listened, hoping to hear / your playground voice catching on the wind'





- The combination of the past simple tense, as well as the present continuous tense suggests that her suffering began in the past, is felt in the present and may continue for an indefinite amount of time into the future
- Characters in dramatic monologues often teeter on the verge of madness or delusion
  - Elsewhere they may represent themselves directly to the reader, perhaps pleading for understanding or anticipating judgment for their actions
    - **Porphyria's Lover**
      - Through the mother's impulsive and almost OCD-type actions, Weir seems to be pointing to the ways in the grief the mother feels overcomes her physical actions and so her ability to act rationally gradually reduces from the beginning to the end of the poem
        - Ironically, it is through her uncontrolled actions that we understand the psychological effects loss has on her and with the poem ending on 'hoping to hear / your playground voice catching on the wind', we feel that, ironically, she is hanging onto delusion as a final hope of keeping herself sane.
- In most dramatic monologues, some attempt is made to imitate natural speech
  - Use of enjambment
  - Iambic pentameter
  - Careful use of linguistic techniques
- It represents the distillation of a crucial moment of human experience, focusing on a particular occasion that becomes a revelation of an almost religious nature as the speaker tries to transcend the finite
  - The finite in Poppies is the speaker's inability to express herself adequately and to control her emotions

---

## FORM: DRAMA AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

---

The dramatic monologue form allows the poet to dramatise the human condition

- It works as a piece of drama which Weir conveys through her use of verbs, rather than abstract nouns
  - The form makes it possible to combine rhyme, rhythm and metre with narrative
    - In Poppies, there is a clear narrative structure to the poem
      - Stanza 1 acts as the **exposition**
        - The speaker informs us that the memory situates itself 'Three days before Armistice Sunday'
      - Stanza 2 acts as the **rising action**
        - Tension begins to build through the juxtaposition of intense love and the heightened and absolute bottled up fear of letting him go
          - 'I smoothed down your shirt's upturned collar'
          - 'I wanted to graze my nose / across the top of your nose'
          - 'I resisted the impulse'
      - Stanza 3 contains both the **climax** and the **falling action**





- o The climax can be seen in the metaphor 'After you'd gone I went into your bedroom, / released a song bird from its cage'
    - it conjures up an image of an expression of the pain of loss
  - o The falling action is found in the image of the 'single dove' which lead her to 'the church yard walls'
- Stanza 4 is the resolution
  - o Her new challenge here is to find a way to channel the her tumultuous emotions in as constructive a way as possible
    - She appears to resolve to hold onto memories and delusion 'hoping to hear your playground voice catching in the wind'
- The dramatic quality of the verse derives from the speaker's appeal, the disjunction between their understanding of the world and the listeners' and, perhaps, their own growing appreciation for the reality of the situation

---

## FORM – A 'PERCEIVED' RATHER THAN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL VIEWPOINT

---

The form of a poem can highlight the kind of relationship the poet desires to create with the reader. For example, the lyric is often based on autobiographical material and is written from a personal point of view, thus allowing the poet to forge a link between the reader and herself; however, the dramatic monologue creates a different kind of relationship between poet, subject matter and reader

- It gives us an interior view of the workings of the speaker's mind
- The poet and 'I' are separate entities; imagination replaces experience; and the viewpoint is 'perceived' rather than personal
  - o In the 1970s and 80s, women poets used real, fictional, mythical and historical personae as an alternative means of exploring what it meant to be a woman – or at times, a man.
  - o They often used this technique to challenge gender, racial, social and religious expectations through the characters they create
    - In Poppies, even though Weir's sons never went to war, she uses the fictional persona
- Dramatic monologues are also seen as a method for inviting sympathy for the speaker
  - o We judge them but we are also sympathetic towards them

---

## FORM - THE ROLE OF THE SILENT INTERLOCUTOR

---

It is the role of the silent interlocutor, more than anything else that gives the Victorian monologue its innovatory distinctiveness, though this is less true of Tennyson than of Browning.

- With few exceptions – The Holy Grail being the most important – Tennyson represents the speaker addressing a not very closely defined audience.
- By contrast, Browning's silent interlocutor is always a specific personage, whose role and reactions are inferred from the speaker's words





- o The outstanding example is *My Last Duchess*, in which an Italian Renaissance duke, addressing an envoy of a prospective father-in-law appears to confess to the murder of the wife he is hoping to replace. This sort of self-revelation is a hallmark of the Browning monologue
- o In certain other poems of Browning's, the speaker is not himself the object of interest, but either addresses in imagination the character who is, or describes the character to an unnamed person

---

## FORM - BROWNING'S PURPOSE

---

Browning wished to make us feel the complex and unstable nature of an individual person

- In the preface to *Sordello*, he writes:
  - o 'My stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul. Little else is worth study'
    - Accordingly Browning pays the least possible attention to outward nature.
      - Similarly, in *Poppies*, the focus is on the speaker's memories of the day her son left for war;
    - o Weir explores the pain she felt at not being able to stop her son from leaving even though she knew he would never return,

---

## SETTING

---

The setting is ambiguous

- It starts at a war grave
- then switches to the memory of the speaker, apparently at home
- then ends at a war memorial
  - o the setting creates a cyclical structure
    - the cyclical structure suggests that every year, the mother has to relive her painful memories of her son leaving for war, never to return

---

## HOW BROWNING COMBINES THE SUBJECTIVE AND THE OBJECTIVE

---

Browning's dramatic monologues combine both the subjective and the objective

- They explore the 'truth broken into prismatic hues' – that is, 'truth' as it is seen by particular individuals, broken down into its component parts
  - o Browning presents the Duke as morally corrupted by power and money, to the point that he can no longer think rationally
    - o In *Poppies*, Jane Weir explores the conflict of a mother's will versus her son's will;





- She relives a climactic moment where her desire to protect her son from certain death in war is overcome by her son's delusional desire to explore the world through going to war.
- 'the world overflowing like a treasure chest'

---

## FORM: INTERIOR MONOLOGUE

---

The form of the poem can also be read as an interior monologue

- Although there are disagreements as to the true definition of an interior monologue, it is generally regarded as a method of self-revelation
  - o In this case, the author takes us on an intense journey through the pain she is grappling with
    - Interior monologues also suggest that although the speech is about someone else, it is, in fact more about internal reflection
      - It implies that the speaker perhaps has never shared these emotions with the person it is about
        - o In this case, it appears as though she did not share her feelings with her son because he died in battle.
          - However, we may also ask why she didn't share her feelings before he left; perhaps she did, but he was so 'intoxicated' with romantic fantasies about war that he didn't listen.

---

## AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

---

As with other first-person poems, it puts us in an unusual position and we wonder if the poets have chosen NOT to keep the poem private and keep their thoughts and feelings between themselves and their intended audience because these are words they could never say directly,

- or they are words they cannot say any longer, if someone has died or moved on.
- Or perhaps the poets find something so very common in what they are saying that they're sharing it because they know that it's a sentiment that many people have felt too.
  - o For whatever the reason, we must ask ourselves why the poem was published,
    - especially when it is so intensely personal.
      - But many poets lay their thoughts and feelings out on a slab for readers to carve up and dissect – it is often what touches us most about their poems,
        - o because they speak about the human experience
          - and something of what they say resonates within any of us who have shared that experience.
            - Like Follower, it is the emotional intensity of the poem that is central to its success.
              - o And like the Heaney poem, it too has a brevity and a neatness focusing in on one central moment.





---

## ANALYSIS – STANZA 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.

- Notice the toing and froing of time here, especially in the first 3 lines
  - the speaker appears to shift between the present (Three days before Armistice Sunday / and poppies had already been placed / on individual war graves.) and the past (Before you left.), perhaps in an effort to reconcile the memories of the past and the painful results of the present
    - it also foreshadows the idea that this poem is about memories, most likely painful ones
      - the caesura in the middle of the third line indicates disruption
        - on one hand, it is the disruption of the mother's life as a result of the pain she is suffering through the loss of her son
          - on the other hand, it also symbolises death
            - in this case it presents the death of the speaker's son but it is also about the deaths of 100s of 1000s of very young soldiers who perhaps fell for the propaganda of a romantic vision of war leaving behind grieving families, and particular, mothers
- 'crimped' and 'spasms' subvert the poppy's symbolic representation of peace
  - Syntactical inversion of 'paper red' reduces the poppy to simply a colour
    - Even the paper that it is made of is dismissed, as if worthless, and we are driven to focus on the symbolic meaning of the colour red as representing the bloodshed of the innocent and the naïve, rather than the meaningless material it is made from

---

## ANALYSIS – STANZA 2

---

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,

- This stanza largely focuses on the idea of protection and the cherish a mother has for her son
  - The language is very domestic and caring
    - ...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...
    - However, the language of care and of love is infused with a contrast of harsh,  
ambiguous imagery of war
      - Bandaged... rounded up... steeled... graze... impulse to run... blackthorns...  
flattened, rolled, turned into felt
      - The contrast here is used to illustrate the conflict between her love for  
her son and her hatred of the pain caused by the loss of his life to war
        - The stanza ends with the powerful and negative image of  
'flattened, rolled, turned into felt'
        - This might suggest that at times she feels as though  
war has triumphed over love because the young men  
who go to war are 'flattened, rolled, turned into felt'

---

## ANALYSIS – STANZA 3

---

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.

- This stanza recounts the pain of the moment she had to let her son go and challenges our preconceived  
ideas of conflict and who really suffers
  - It signals the moment of no-return for both of them and normally we would expect the soldier to talk  
about bravery but here the mother is saying it
    - She would never be able to change his mind about going to war and he would never return,  
except in a coffin







- The verb 'melting' sets up, in a metaphorical sense, the idea that having to let him go to his death was destroying her and this is made even more painful through the adverb 'slowly' which suggests elongation which only increases the pain.
  - The verb threw creates a metaphor to portray a feeling of impulsiveness and anger; it is not him who throws the door open, but her because she knows there is nothing she can do to stop him, so there and then she has to accept his death and she knows that once he walks through the door, she will never be able to 'play at being Eskimos again' or 'graze her nose across the tip of his nose' again
    - The 'release of a song bird from its cage' represents an attempt at accepting letting her son go but also at accepting his fate
      - 'skirting the church yard walls, my stomach busy making tucks, darts, pleats, hat-less,'
        - The imagery of the church walls perhaps foreshadows the idea that she knows that at some point she will have to return to the church to pay homage to his death

---

## ANALYSIS – STANZA 4

---

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 final stanza represents the ongoing struggles mothers faced in accepting the loss of their sons to war
  - The hill could symbolise the internal battle they face but the final two lines illustrate the idea that this kind of loss may be impossible for mothers to overcome, even with time
    - This is particularly evident with the use of the present continuous tense in 'hoping to hear'
      - It portrays the fact that these are not hopes of the past, but hopes that are present and will continue into the future for an unspecified amount of time

---

## STRUCTURE

---

### Enjambment

- lines continue onto the next which means that they don't make sense on their own; you have to read the next part of the line to make sense of it
  - but it also focuses our attention on the words at the end of the line and at the beginning of the next line.





- We can also look at it as meaning which is continued across line boundaries.
- This approach was common in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century poetry but was used far less frequently by eighteenth century poets.
- In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Romantic poets were reacting against the restrictive rules governing 18<sup>th</sup> century verse.
  - They aimed to use everyday language and the rhythms of speech; run-on lines were a natural extension of this principle – therefore, they represent natural speech, an essential part of our human nature and this poem is about human nature.
- In a way the enjambment (run-on lines) remove the pleasure that comes with the correspondence of line and thought neatly concluding at the end of the line.
- Enjambment can also produce a kind of pleasure where emotion and intellect compels us forward in order to obtain that pleasure of meaning.
- Enjambment can also reflect the erratic nature of thought, as well as environment, perhaps representing the mother's erratic thoughts caused by the pain of her suffering
  - the run-on lines can also create a sense of surprise
    - clearly Weir is trying to convey a sense of sadness and anguish, to help us understand the mother's point of view and why she realizes that sacrificing a life for patriotic reasons of war has no real value and goes against human nature.
- Enjambment can also create a kind of dramatic pause in order to represent the dramatic pause death causes in other people's lives and to focus our attention on words and phrases at the beginning and ends of specific lines

Free verse and stanzas of different lengths

- No organised rhyme scheme or structure to the poem
- The structure can be seen as chaotic, reflecting the chaos of war and the aftermath of war
  - Reflects the chaotic impact of those at home
  - Breaks in structure reflect how the mother is breaking
- Free verse could also suggest that the speaker is trying to free herself of the pain and suffering she feels

---

## LANGUAGE

---

'The world overflowing like a treasure chest'

- This is a simile showing us the world from the perspective of the son
  - This portrays a childish image a her son's sense of excitement at leaving home but it also suggests that his expectations are not realistic
    - The adjective 'intoxicated' is metaphorical of how he is not making a measured decision and also suggests that he has been tricked by the romantic propaganda of war
      - This seems to be an indirect critique of those in government and positions of power who lure young people in to the army to fight for their country
        - By the time they may realise that it was not what they were told it was, it would be too late and the after-effects on those left behind may be felt for the rest of their lives





## WEIR'S PURPOSE

---

- To face life's hardships realistically
  - To make the reader question whether the ideals of patriotism are worth sacrificing lives for
  - To make the reader question what drives soldiers to sacrifice their lives for a higher cause
  - To criticise the type of propaganda surrounding WWI that tricked people into giving up their lives for war
  - To channel the experience and pain of loss
  - She commented in an interview that, '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. 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... I hoped to somehow channel all of this, convey it into something concise and contemporary, but also historically classic, in terms of universal experience.'
  - to give a voice to those who had no voice, and to use the language of ordinary people
  - to retell male versions of history and literature by retelling them from a female point of view
  - to give us an insight into the pain felt by the women who were left behind in war and who are often the forgotten sufferers in conflict
  - to remind the reader that many women have been in the speaker's situation in past wars
    - mothers, grandmothers, wives and sisters also feel the effects of conflict in their feelings of worry and grief for male relatives, though they may not be directly involved in battle
  - to criticise politics and the propaganda of war that leads to loss
- 

