Poppies in October

SUMMARY

Not even the sunlit clouds can compare to the poppies' petals, nor can the woman in the ambulance, whose red heart bleeds through her coat so vibrantly.

The flowers are a gift, a gift of love that nobody asked for, not even the sky as it mixes its pale color with a fiery explosion of carbon monoxide; nor was this gift asked for by men whose eyes have become incurious and motionless beneath their bowler hats.

Oh my God, what does it mean that I exist in a world where the poppies bloom so late in the year, in frost-covered forests and on a morning that is full of cornflowers?

THEMES

BEAUTY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

"Poppies in October" is an ambiguous, abstract poem that resists a tidy explanation, given that the "poppies" of the poem—and, in fact, all the poem's vivid images—may represent different things to different readers. What's clear is that the speaker sees these poppies (which don't bloom in October, suggesting that the speaker is either in a sort of fantasy world, remembering seeing a field of flowers in the past, or looking at a display of cut flowers somewhere) and feels that nothing can match the flowers' brilliance. As bright red flowers, perhaps the simplest interpretation is that the poppies in the poem represent beauty and passion—things that seem out of place in the melancholy, mundane modern world.

The speaker begins by saying that the flowers create a pop of beauty that even the sunlight bouncing off the clouds can't match. The poppies don't make the speaker feel like the world is full of beauty, then, but rather that genuine beauty is scarce.

In a striking moment of juxtaposition, the speaker then compares the flowers to a woman in an ambulance whose "red heart blooms through her coat." What landed the woman in the ambulance is unclear; regardless, even this vivid image of blood can't compete with the redness of the poppies.

The flowers are a "love gift" that nobody asked for, again suggesting that their beauty goes unseen or unappreciated by the rest of the world. The speaker's reference to men in "bowlers" (a kind of hat) and a pale sky "[i]gniting its carbon monoxides" specifically evoke an image of a dirty urban environment, perhaps implying that the demands of modern life have polluted the natural world in which the poppies exist and also numbed human beings to its wonders. That these men in hats have "eyes / dulled to a halt" reflects their general lack of emotional engagement with the outside world. That their eyes have "halted" suggests they don't see the beauty of the poppies—or anything—at all.

Unlike these unobservant, uninterested men, the speaker *has* noticed the beauty of the flowers. The problem, though, is that the speaker doesn't know what to *do* with this beauty, wondering what one is supposed to make of the vivid color and the fact that it stands out so prominently against everything else.

Illustrating this, the speaker mentions that the poppies are surrounded by a "forest of frost," an image that emphasizes the world's cold gloominess. The poppies also stand out against the more subdued blue color of nearby cornflowers, which can't measure up to the arresting sight of the poppies. In the end, the poppies are simply so dazzling that they seem at odds with all parts of the speaker's comparatively dreary everyday life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

DEATH AS PEACE

Part of the poem's power comes from its ambiguity, and readers might interpret the poppies not just as symbolic of passion and beauty, but also of death, sleep, and peace. After all, opium comes from poppies, and the flowers often appear on tombstones as symbols of eternal rest. In this reading, the speaker presents death as something peaceful and beautiful, a kind of restful escape from life.

This link between poppies and death is clearest when the speaker compares the flowers to "the woman in the ambulance / Whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly." The image of the woman's blood seeping brightly through her coat feels suddenly ominous, but the speaker actually presents the image as strangely appealing.

Both blood and poppies are bright red, and the fact that the speaker uses the words "astoundingly" and "bloom" to describe the way the woman's heart bleeds through her coat further links the woman and her wound to the flowers (which, like the wound, bloom). This hints at the speaker's fascination with and even attraction to death, which seems to have its own vivid beauty.

Death's apparent beauty also has a certain magnetism, at least for the speaker. This is made clear when the "late mouths" of the poppies "cry open" to the speaker at the end of the poem. Since the poppies are linked to death, this idea frames the act of

dying as alluring and attractive; the poppies' beckoning call seems to comfort the speaker, who otherwise faces icy "forests of frost." Death, therefore, is presented as a relief from the harsh, unappreciative world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-3
- Lines 10-12

FEMININITY AND SACRIFICE

The poppies in the poem are subtly linked to femininity. They're described, for example, as having "skirts," and they're also connected to the woman with a "bloom" of blood in the ambulance. Those who don't notice or appreciate the flowers, meanwhile, are implied to be men, given that they're wearing "bowlers" (which typically are worn by men). Taken in context with the feminist leanings of much of Plath's work, the poem is perhaps meant to reflect women's oppression and sacrifice as wives and mothers on behalf of an unappreciative world.

The speaker at first seems to celebrate femininity by declaring that even the sun's rays are unable to match the poppies' vibrant beauty. But the next poppy comparison is decidedly darker, as the speaker juxtaposes the flowers against the way a woman bleeds through her coat in an ambulance.

It's unclear *why*, exactly, the woman is in the ambulance, but it's possible that she's giving birth or having a miscarriage—especially considering the subsequent reference to an unwanted "love gift" that men in bowler hats have no interest in receiving (perhaps implying that they don't want to be fathers). Maybe the woman herself never asked for this gift of a child but was impregnated by one of these apathetic men.

To that end, Plath wrote other works about the pains of motherhood (described, for example, in "Nick and the Candlestick" as a kind of life-sucking force). While it's not necessary to read the poem autobiographically, the ambiguous image of the bleeding woman followed by that of an "unasked for" "love gift" being presented to uninterested men certainly seems to speak to the way women's pain and sacrifices so often go unnoticed or unappreciated by society.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Even the sun-clouds ...

... so astoundingly —

The speaker begins by mentioning the "sun-clouds," a phrase that creates the image of sunlight bouncing off (or perhaps filling) the clouds in the sky. These clouds, the speaker says, "cannot manage such skirts." This is a difficult line to understand, since it's not immediately clear what the speaker means by "skirts." However, the title of the poem provides some clarity, hinting that the speaker is comparing the color of the clouds to the color of nearby poppy flowers.

In this context, the word "skirt" refers to the outer edge of something, as the speaker describes the petals that create a colorful rim around the center of the poppies. More commonly, though, the word "skirt" refers to the lower half of a woman's dress or gown. This subtly associates the poppies with womanhood, establishing the poem's (admittedly ambiguous) interest in femininity.

The speaker goes on in lines 2 and 3 to refer to a woman bleeding in an ambulance. It's unclear who this woman is or why she's in an ambulance, but she's bleeding enough that the blood seeps through her coat. The speaker seems oddly undisturbed by this grisly sight, saying that the woman's heart "blooms" through her clothing "astoundingly"—a description that romanticizes the woman's pain, almost making it seem as if she's a flower in bloom. The startling color of the woman's blood still pales in comparison to the vividness of the poppies, however. In other words, even the most extraordinary sights in the speaker's life are at odds with the image of the poppies.

From the poem's very first line, the speaker makes the environment of the poem feel especially alive by personifying the sky as something that actively competes with the poppies. This personification makes it seem as if everything in the speaker's surrounding world is trying, and failing, to measure up to these beautiful, late-blooming flowers. This juxtaposes the poppies' beauty with the rest of the world, which the speaker presents as comparatively drab, even if the sights the speaker mentions are actually quite remarkable—a sign that the speaker is unhappy or unimpressed by most things in life.

"Poppies in October" is very ambiguous, so it's hard to pin down and make sense of its potential references. However, it's possible that the speaker's interest in poppies is an allusion to the British holiday known as Remembrance Day, when people display paper or cloth poppies in November to commemorate soldiers who have died in battle. This has been in practice since just after World War I, and the holiday is even known as "Poppy Day." Even if the poem isn't explicitly about Remembrance Day, the association between poppies and this holiday imbues the poem with thoughts of death—something that is clearly on the speaker's mind, given the morbid fascination the speaker seems to have with the woman bleeding out of her chest.

LINES 4-9

A gift, a ...

... halt under bowlers.

In the second stanza ("A gift [...] a sky"), the speaker deems the poppies an "unasked for" "gift," going on to suggest that nobody in the surrounding environment specifically sought out the sight of these beautiful flowers. This underscores the idea that this kind of natural beauty is out of place in the speaker's everyday life.

In lines 7 and 8, the speaker says that the sky "palely and flamily / ignit[es] its carbon monoxides," presenting readers with the image of a cloudy sky lit up not just by natural sources, but by big banks of carbon monoxide that have drifted up into the atmosphere from a busy city. This leads to a "pale[]" and fiery color that contrasts with the clean, vivid color of the poppies.

By creating this contrast, the speaker pits the natural world against the human world, implying that the ugly elements of everyday life are so at odds with the pretty parts of the natural world that it's nearly impossible for people to simply appreciate things like late-blooming poppies. Instead of rejoicing in the sight of these gorgeous flowers, then, the speaker ends up focusing on the unattractive aspects of the surrounding environment.

When the speaker says that the poppies are a gift that was "unasked for" by "eyes / Dulled to a halt under bowlers," the implication is that men in the speaker's society are so apathetic and bored that they can't even be bothered to *notice* beauty, let alone appreciate it. As they go about their day wearing their brimmed bowler hats, their eyes essentially glaze over, making them indifferent to the brilliant redness of the flowers. This once again supports the idea that nobody in the speaker's society can reconcile the beautiful poppies with the bleak and drab human world.

As previously mentioned, "Poppies in October" is very ambiguous, so there's another way to look at these two stanzas. If the "gift" that the speaker mentions is meant to be read as an extension of the image of a woman bleeding in an ambulance, then this might suggest that the woman is either giving birth or having a miscarriage. Under this interpretation, the woman's baby would be the unwanted "gift."

Of course, it's possible that the woman is simply going to the hospital to treat some kind of wound, but the em-dash at the end of line 3 ("Whose red heart [...] coat so astoundingly —") suggests that the speaker's words in the second stanza are directly linked to the mention of the bleeding woman. If this is the case, it might mean that the woman is pregnant and doesn't want her baby.

The idea of an "unasked for" baby also aligns with the speaker's mention of apathetic men in bowler hats, since they represent just how little men in the speaker's society care about the painful sacrifices women make during pregnancy. This dynamic emphasizes the burden that women carry, especially when it comes to having and raising children—a common theme in Plath's poetry, which often casts motherhood as depleting and dispiriting.

These lines contain a fair amount of consonance, making the language sound poetic and pleasing. In line 4, for example, the combination of the /f/ and /v/ sounds creates a soft, soothing effect: "A gift, a love gift." The gentleness of the /f/ and /v/ pairs nicely with the sharper, more percussive /t/ in "gift." This heightens the language, making the speaker's words sound particularly musical.

In other moments, the speaker uses assonance to achieve a similar effect. Consider the repetition of the /uh/ sound in line 5: "Utterly unasked for." There is also the assonant /i/ sound in line 6 ("By a sky") and the /ee/ sound in line 7 ("Palely and flamily"). Altogether, these devices give this section a sense of melody—something that makes it easier for readers to make their way through the poem, since at least the sound is interesting even if the *meaning* of the words remains ambiguous.

LINES 10-12

Oh my God, ...
... dawn of cornflowers.

The speaker begins the final stanza ("Oh my God [...] of cornflowers") with a rhetorical question, asking:

> Oh my God, what am I

Overwhelmed by the unexpected beauty of the poppies, the speaker experiences a moment of total disorientation, asking this rhetorical question as a way of expressing a feeling of existential unease and uncertainty.

Another reading of this moment is that the speaker isn't *literally* asking "what am I," but asking something more along the lines of: *How is it that I exist in a world in which beautiful, late-blooming flowers can suddenly appear in such unlikely circumstances?* This question still revolves around a feeling of uncertainty, but it has less to do with the speaker's actual identity and more to do with how impossible it feels to reconcile the beautiful poppies with the cold, uninviting world.

The speaker uses personification once more to intensify the imagery of the surrounding environment, this time suggesting that the poppies have mouths that "cry open." This creates the sense that the flowers yell out to the speaker, calling the speaker toward them. Given that the poppies themselves are a possible allusion to England's day of remembrance for fallen soldiers, this might imply that the speaker feels pulled toward death, which in this reading is presented as a startling, almost otherworldly kind of beauty.

When the speaker notes in line 12 ("In a [...] of cornflowers") that the poppies are in "a forest of frosts," the juxtaposition between the bleak, harsh world and the poppies' beauty

becomes especially stark. The speaker also mentions that the poppies bloom in a "dawn of cornflowers," indicating that they're surrounded by small blue flowers that complement their red color. And yet, the speaker doesn't mention these cornflowers until the poem's very last line, indicating that they aren't nearly as attention-grabbing as the poppies. This only further underscores that nothing in the surrounding world can match the beauty of the poppies—not even these pretty cornflowers.

This suggests that the speaker has a cynical, pessimistic outlook on the surrounding environment. Instead of letting the poppies accentuate the world's beauty, the speaker sees the poppies as evidence of a *lack* of beauty in the world. This casts the speaker as a sad, melancholy person.

To that end, the final stanza of "Poppies in October" alludes to the speaker's interest in death by clarifying that the poppies are surrounded by frost. This subtly reminds readers that poppies don't usually bloom in colder months, meaning that, despite their breathtaking beauty, they will soon die. The poem therefore implies that true beauty cannot last.

The final two lines contain a noticeable amount of sibilance, as the speaker uses the /s/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds alongside other hissing sounds like /th/ and /f/:

> That these late mouths should cry open
> In a forest of frosts, in a dawn of cornflowers.

In particular, the alliteration of the /f/ sound in the phrase "forests of frosts" makes the end of the poem sound soft and soothing. This smooths out the language, even though the speaker's tone has become increasingly distressed in these final lines.

SYMBOLS

POPPIES

The poppies in "Poppies in October" certainly seem symbolic, but what, exactly, they symbolize is up for interpretation!

On one level, the flowers seem to simply represent natural beauty. Their vibrant red coloring is also often associated with passion, liveliness, and desire. Looking at these striking, late-blooming flowers, the speaker feels as if nothing in the surrounding environment can compare to them—suggesting a dearth of beauty and passion in the speaker's world.

That said, poppies can also symbolize death, peace, and sleep. These are common symbolic associations for poppies, which are frequently laid on tombstones as a sign of remembrance. Poppies are also the flower that the United Kingdom uses each year on Remembrance Day to honor soldiers who have died in battle. And because opium can be extracted from poppies, the flower is associated with deep, uninterrupted slumber.

These symbolic interpretations aren't mutually exclusive; on the contrary, the fact that the flowers are at once linked to vibrant beauty and to death suggests that the speaker finds death beautiful and alluring. In comparing the poppies' red color to the blood of the woman in the ambulance, the speaker implies that the flowers themselves are "astounding[]." And given that the poppies seem like "a gift" to the speaker, this suggests that death offers release from an uncaring world.

The poppies "cry open"—perhaps to the speaker directly—"[i]n a forest of frosts." Winter itself is symbolically linked to death as well, and this imagery again suggests that the speaker feels the pull of eternal rest. For the speaker, the flowers seem to represent not just death, but also the idea that dying could be a beautiful and surprisingly pleasant thing—a final release from the harsh realities of everyday life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

Personification creates the feeling that everything in the poem is alive and that the speaker is particularly attuned to the rhythms of the natural world.

The speaker says that "even the sun-clouds" can't compete with the poppies and their deep, striking color. This statement gives personal agency to the clouds, as if they're actively trying to compete with the poppies. It also implies that the speaker thinks nothing is as beautiful as the unexpected sight of the flowers—an idea that bears a hint of cynicism, as if the speaker thinks otherwise beautiful things like the sky shouldn't even *try* to measure up to the rare and inimitable beauty of the poppies.

The speaker personifies the sky once again in the second stanza ("A gift [...] a sky"), saying that the poppies are a "love gift" that was "utterly unasked for / By a sky." Again, this suggests that the sky is sentient and, in this case, uninterested in the poppies.

This disinterest in the poppies actually *contradicts* the speaker's implication in the first stanza that the sky is in active competition with the flowers. The sky emerges in this section as an indifferent force that is at odds with the beautiful flowers—a sign that, since nothing in the speaker's everyday life can live up to the poppies, the entire world has lost interest in them. By personifying the sky as indifferent to beauty, then, the speaker emphasizes the notion that the drab surrounding world can't fully integrate true beauty into everyday life.

Lastly, the speaker personifies the poppies themselves in the

final stanza ("Oh my God [...] of cornflowers"), saying that their "mouths" "cry open" in a frosty forest. Hearing this cry, the speaker most likely feels drawn to the flowers. But the flowers will soon die, since they are surrounded by frost and aren't normally able to survive in such a cold climate. Their cries might also communicate a certain sense of agony, then, as if the poppies are suffering. The idea that this desperate call reaches the speaker so clearly indicates that the speaker feels drawn to pain and death.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirts."
- **Lines 5-6:** "Utterly unasked for / By a sky"
- **Lines 10-12:** "what am I / That these late mouths should cry open / In a forest of frosts, in a dawn of cornflowers."

JUXTAPOSITION

The entire poem is based on the juxtaposition between the poppies' unexpected beauty and the bleak ugliness of the speaker's surroundings. Looking at the poppies, the speaker feels as if nothing else in everyday life can compete with their loveliness. To illustrate this, the speaker mentions that the sun-lit clouds can't "manage" the redness of the poppies' petals, nor can a woman bleeding through her coat in a passing ambulance.

These images are obviously at odds with the sight of red poppies. The woman bleeding in the ambulance provides an especially stark contrast with the flowers, since this gory image would be a very startling and troubling sight. But the speaker seems totally undisturbed by the bloody scene, and the fact that the speaker tries to compare the woman's blood to the flowers in the first place suggests a certain fascination with pain and death.

On a smaller scale, juxtaposition is everywhere in "Poppies in October." For instance, the phrase "sun-clouds" in line 1 ("Even the [...] such skirts") is a subtle oxymoron, since clouds tend to *block out* the sun. Right away, then, the poem begins with a feeling of contradiction, even if the speaker's intention is to indicate that the clouds are filled with the color of the sun.

Another example of this comes in the third stanza ("Palely and [...] under bowlers"), when the speaker suggests that the sky "palely and flamily / ignit[es] its carbon monoxides." The words "palely" and "flamily" stand in opposition, since it's hard to envision something that is simultaneously pale *and* fiery.

The final line ("In a forest [...] of cornflowers") also features juxtaposition, since the image of a frost-covered forest doesn't match the image of a "dawn of cornflowers." Like poppies, cornflowers are unlikely to blossom in such a cold environment, so there is a noticeable juxtaposition between the poem's winter-related imagery, tied to death and the end of the year, and the presence of so many flowers at "dawn," or the start of a new day. This helps accentuate the idea that the speaker sees the beauty of the poppies as something that is deeply out of touch with the rest of the world.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 2-3
- Lines 6-9
- Line 12

CONSONANCE

Consonance intensifies the language and imagery in "Poppies in October." For example, notice how the speaker spotlights the /n/ and hard /k/ sounds in the first line:

> Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage
> such skirts

This line also features the /m/ sound in "morning" and "manage," along with the sibilant /s/ sound in the words "sun-clouds," "this," "such," and "skirts." Taken together, all this consonance makes the first line stand out as extraordinarily poetic, elevating the language and, in doing so, making the speaker's words seem filled with passion and reverence for the beauty of the flowers.

In the third stanza, consonance suggests the harshness of modern life. Note all those booming /b/ and /d/ sounds, sharp /k/ sounds, growling /r/ sounds, and languid /l/ sounds that together suggest the bitter drudgery of the world:

> [...] carbon monoxides, by eyes
> Dulled to a halt under bowlers.

The last line of the poem is also filled with consonance, as the speaker repeats the /n/, /f/, /st/, and /r/ sounds:

> In a forest of frosts, in a dawn of cornflowers

Consonance here helps the imagery stand out for the reader. For example, it links a "forest," typically something associated with an abundance of life, to "frosts," linked to winter and death. The shared /n/ of "in a dawn of cornflowers" then ends the poem on a lovely, lyrical note, suggesting the allure of this new morning filled with blue flowers.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Even," "sun-clouds this," "morning cannot manage," "such skirts"
- **Line 2:** "woman," "ambulance"
- **Line 3:** "blooms," "so astoundingly"
- **Line 5:** "unasked"

- **Line 6:** “sky”
- **Line 7:** “Palely,” “flamily”
- **Line 8:** “Igniting its,” “carbon monoxides,” “by”
- **Line 9:** “Dulled,” “halt,” “under bowlers”
- **Line 12:** “forest,” “frosts,” “in,” “dawn,” “cornflowers”

SIBILANCE

The speaker's use of sibilance gives certain moments of the poem a calm, soothing sound. The first line is a good example of this:

> Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage
> such skirts.

The repetition of the /s/ sound makes the line feel pleasant and gentle. This aligns with the image of sun-filled clouds drifting through a morning sky. Of course, the speaker thinks the clouds pale in comparison to the poppies, but the sibilance still gives the opening line a feeling of soft musicality that eases readers into the poem.

Many readers also view the /f/, /th/, and /z/ sounds as sibilant themselves, or at least as contributing to some of the muted effects of sibilance. This is certainly the case here. The most striking example is "forest of frosts" in the poem's final line, which evokes the hushed, still atmosphere of a wintertime wood.

The combination of /f/ and /s/ also does some interesting work in lines 4 through 7:

> A gift, a love gift
> Utterly unasked for
> By a sky

While perhaps not traditional sibilance, the mixture of /s/ and /f/ sounds here creates a subdued, gentle feel that suggests the delicate nature of this "unasked for" "gift."

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “sun-clouds this,” “such skirts”
- **Line 3:** “so astoundingly”
- **Line 5:** “unasked”
- **Line 6:** “sky”
- **Line 12:** “forest,” “frosts,” “cornflowers”

ASSONANCE

Assonance helps the speaker highlight certain sounds and phrases in the poem. This is the case in the very first line, in which the speaker repeats an /a/ sound (as well as consonance on the /n/ sound) in "cannot manage." This assonance adds a subtle emphasis to the words, underscoring that the color of the sun-filled clouds is no match for the color of the beautiful poppies.

The assonance in line 3 is even more prominent, as the speaker uses the /oo/ sound three times:

> Whose red heart blooms through her coat so
> astoundingly —

This assonance makes the speaker's language sound extra rich and poetic. This, in turn, draws attention to the line, spotlighting the disturbing image of a woman bleeding through her coat in an ambulance.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses the long /i/ sound, which appears several times in lines 6 through 11:

> By a sky
> [...]
> Igniting its carbon monoxides, by eyes
> [...]
> Oh my God, what am I
> That these late mouths should cry open

Throughout these lines, the long /i/ sometimes appears in tight clusters, like when the speaker says "By a sky" or "monoxides, by eyes." This kind of quick repetition adds rhythm to these moments, giving the poem a sense of momentum that it might otherwise lack (given that there's no specific meter or rhyme scheme in play). Assonance therefore helps the speaker not only highlight certain images in the poem, but also to control the flow and pace of the language.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “cannot manage”
- **Line 2:** “ambulance”
- **Line 3:** “Whose,” “blooms through,” “coat so”
- **Line 4:** “love”
- **Line 5:** “Utterly unasked”
- **Line 6:** “By,” “sky”
- **Line 7:** “Palely,” “flamily”
- **Line 8:** “Igniting its,” “monoxides, by eyes”
- **Line 9:** “under bowlers”
- **Line 10:** “my,” “I”
- **Line 11:** “cry”

ALLITERATION

The alliteration in "Poppies in October" enhances the rhythm of the speaker's language. Take the poem's first line, which uses alliteration of the /s/ and /m/ sounds:

> Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage
> such skirts

The combination of the muffled /m/ and the swift /s/ makes the line sound well-balanced and rich. The repetition of the /s/ sound in the phrase "such skirts" also feels especially rhythmic, making the poem's opening sound distinct and engaging.

This is also the case in line 5, when the speaker alliterates the /uh/ sound in the phrase "utterly unasked for." This calls attention to these words and, in turn, the idea that nothing (or nobody) in the speaker's surrounding environment seems to care about the unexpected beauty of the vibrant poppies. After all, nobody asked for this breathtaking sight.

The speaker also uses alliteration in the poem's final two lines, beginning with the /th/ sound and moving on in the final line to the /f/ sound:

> That these late mouths should cry open
> In a forest of frosts, in a dawn of cornflowers.

These instances of alliteration make the end of the poem sound harmonious and pleasing, especially because both the /th/ and /f/ sounds are soft and soothing. In a sense, then, the alliteration in this section aligns with the possible interpretation that the poppies, which might represent death, are beckoning to the speaker. As the "late mouths" of the flowers cry out to the speaker, the poem's overall sound becomes especially gentle and pleasing, as if the speaker sees death as a lulling presence that promises comfort and relief from the hardships of everyday life.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sun," "morning," "manage," "such skirts"
- **Line 3:** "Whose," "heart"
- **Line 5:** "Utterly unasked"
- **Line 8:** "Igniting its"
- **Line 11:** "That these"
- **Line 12:** "forest," "frosts"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker poses a rhetorical question in the final stanza of the poem, saying:

> Oh my God, what am I
> That these late mouths should cry open
> In a forest of frosts, in a dawn of cornflowers.

Before unpacking the implications of this question, it's helpful to understand what the speaker is saying. The question here is essentially: *Oh my God, how is it that I exist in a world in which these poppies bloom so late in the year, in a frost-covered forest or in a field of cornflowers in the morning?*

According to this reading, this question simply expresses the fact that the unexpected beauty of the poppies has thoroughly discombobulated the speaker, who can't reconcile the ugliness of the surrounding world with the vibrant color of the late-blooming poppies.

Another reading, though, is that the speaker is asking something more along the lines of the following: *Oh my God, what kind of person am I that these poppies call out to me from a frost-covered forest or a field of cornflowers in the morning?*

This would suggest that the speaker recognizes that the sight of poppies in October would for many people be a welcome and happy occurrence. For the speaker, though, the poppies—which might represent death in the poem—"cry" out in an ominous way. This rhetorical question is therefore an indication that the speaker acknowledges that the speaker's own morbid response to the poppies is out of the ordinary.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-12:** "Oh my God, what am I / That these late mouths should cry open / In a forest of frosts, in a dawn of cornflowers."

ALLUSION

The poem's focus on poppies is a possible allusion to Remembrance Day in the United Kingdom. On Remembrance Day, people display or wear poppies (usually artificial ones) as a way of paying tribute to soldiers who have died in the line of battle. This tradition began at the end of World War I and has been in practice ever since.

Because of this holiday's symbolic use of the poppy flower, one interpretation of "Poppies in October" is that it takes place in the days leading up to Remembrance Day. According to this reading, the speaker isn't looking at actual flowers, but at the artificial poppies that people have made in preparation for the holiday, which takes place on November 11.

Regardless of whether the speaker is looking at real or fake poppies, though, the link between poppies and Remembrance Day remains. This aligns with the fact that the poem uses the presence of the beautiful poppies to hint at the speaker's negative outlook on life—a rather morbid outlook. That the poppies might be connected to Remembrance Day associates them with death, which is perhaps why the speaker seems so unnerved in the final stanza ("Oh my God [...] of cornflowers") that the poppies are "crying" out to the speaker. In other words, if the poppies are indeed an allusion to Remembrance Day, then they represent death, meaning that the speaker is oddly drawn to the idea of dying.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

IMAGERY

"Poppies in October" is filled with imagery. For example, the poem begins with the image of "sun-clouds," or clouds that have been lit up by the sun. This is a vivid image, but the speaker quickly moves on to describe a disconnected, even *more* vivid sight: a woman in an ambulance "whose red heart blooms through her coat."

The only thing that connects the woman in the ambulance to the image of the "sun-clouds" is the fact that both sights are vibrant or colorful; the woman's blood is a striking red, and the sunlight bouncing off the clouds is implied to be similarly bright. Neither, however, are as vibrant or striking as the colorful poppies themselves.

In some ways, the image of the woman in the ambulance is actually a metaphor, since the speaker suggests that her bleeding heart "blooms" like a flower. This implies that the speaker admires the woman's gory wound, finding it as remarkable and "astounding[]" as the late-blooming poppies. The speaker seems to be romanticizing suffering and pain.

Until the final stanza ("Oh my God [...] of cornflowers"), the poem is more or less organized around visual images. At the end of the poem, though, the speaker says that the poppies are "cry[ing] open / In a forest of frosts." This personification of the flowers is rooted in sound, as the speaker suggests that the poppies are actually yelling out to the speaker.

At the same time, though, the phrase "cry open" also brings to mind the sight of wide-open, fully blossomed flowers. The speaker therefore combines both visual and auditory imagery to vividly describe the flowers, giving readers the sense that the poppies are opening themselves up to the world and screaming out to the speaker in a way that is impossible to ignore.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 6-8
- Lines 10-12

VOCABULARY

Sun-clouds (Line 1) - Clouds that have obscured the image of the sun.

Manage (Line 1) - In this context, the speaker uses the word "manage" to suggest that the redness of the sun-lit clouds can't compete with the redness of the poppy flowers.

Skirts (Line 1) - An outdated way of describing the edge or border of something. The speaker uses this word to refer to the petals of a poppy flower, though the word also subtly hints at the image of a woman's skirt.

Utterly (Line 5) - Completely.

Flamily (Line 7) - A word of the poet's own invention, in which the speaker makes the word "flame" into an adverb in order to describe the fiery and explosive image of carbon monoxide combusting in the sky.

Palely (Line 7) - The adverb form of "pale," which is used describe light, faded colors.

Igniting (Line 8) - To "ignite" something is to set it on fire.

Carbon monoxides (Line 8) - Carbon monoxide is an odorless, poisonous, and flammable gas.

Halt (Line 9) - Stop.

Bowlers (Line 9) - A round, felt hat most often worn by men in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Late mouths (Line 11) - The speaker's phrase "late mouths" personifies the poppies and indicates that they're in full bloom late in the year.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Poppies in October" is a 12-line poem organized into four tercets (three-line stanzas). Although each stanza is made up of the same number of lines, the lines themselves range drastically in length, destroying any sense of consistency that the layout of the poem might otherwise achieve. This perhaps reflects the discrepancy between the beauty of the natural world and (what the speaker sees as) the mundanity of human life—the beauty is like the chaotic, uncontrolled lines, whereas everyday life resembles the boring consistency of the tercets.

METER

"Poppies in October" is written in free verse, meaning that it doesn't follow a set meter.

The number of syllables in each line varies drastically throughout the poem, in fact. For example, the first line ("Even [...] such skirts") contains 14 syllables, whereas line 6 ("By a sky") contains just 3. As a result, the poem feels unpredictable and even a bit choppy. Whereas the first stanza features long, smooth lines, the second stanza is made up of terse, short lines that sound clipped and blunt in comparison.

On the whole, the lack of meter in "Poppies in October" creates an unsettled feeling, since the poem never allows readers to relax into a rhythmic groove. Instead, the rhythm sounds jagged and raw, and this reflects the speaker's emotional state, creating a sense of discomfort even though the poem is about beauty.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem doesn't follow a rhyme scheme. This makes sense,

since it would most likely sound too overtly musical and happy if it *did* adhere to a strict rhyme scheme. As it stands, the overall lack of steady rhyme in the poem better reflects the speaker's contemplative, rather bleak tone.

There are, however, several moments in which the speaker actually does use rhyme. For example, there is a noticeable internal rhyme in line 6 between the words "by" and "sky":

> By a sky

The next several lines then feature clear assonance of that same long /i/ sound :

> Igniting its carbon monoxidides, by eyes
> [...]
> Oh my God, what am I
> That these late mouths should cry open

Through this, the speaker manages to add musicality to the poem without making it sound too cheerful or lighthearted.

SPEAKER

Sylvia Plath is often considered a confessional poet, since she integrated autobiographical details into her work. Because she seemed to draw so heavily on her own emotions in her writing, many people read her poems with the understanding that she herself is the speaker.

"Poppies in October" is no exception, especially because the image of a woman bleeding in an ambulance possibly hints at the idea of suicide (Plath took her own life just one year after writing this poem). For this reason, many readers view the speaker as an extension of Plath herself.

Having said that, it's important to avoid superimposing Plath's life on the poem in a way that might overshadow what the poem actually says, especially since there's no way to definitively determine the speaker's identity. In fact, the speaker in this poem is never even identifies as being a woman.

What's clear is that the speaker notices the bright red color of poppies in October, and that this observation leads the speaker to contemplate the surrounding world. It's also clear that the speaker feels as if everyday life can't measure up to the beautiful flowers—a perspective that suggests the speaker has a bleak outlook on life. Regardless of whether the speaker is Plath herself, then, it seems that this person is unhappy and has trouble appreciating joy and beauty.

SETTING

As the title indicates, the poem takes place in October. This is an important detail because poppies usually bloom in the spring or summer months, not in the colder months of autumn or winter. This makes the presence of these colorful poppies unexpected and extraordinary. Perhaps the speaker is seeing some sort of fantastical event, looking at cut or dried flowers in a shop window, or simply remembering seeing poppies earlier in the year.

This also seems to be an urban environment, given the references to men walking about in "bowlers" (a kind of hat) and "carbon monoxides" (possibly a reference to pollution). There's a mixture of clouds and sun in the sky too.

Plath composed "Poppies in October" in England in 1962. If she is indeed the speaker, then this might indicate that the poem is specifically set in England during this time period, though there's no way to know for sure whether this is the case. All the same, the speaker's fixation on the poppies might also be an allusion to Remembrance Day in England, when people display paper or cloth poppies to commemorate British soldiers who have died in battle. According to this interpretation, this detail is an indicator that the poem is most likely set in England.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Sylvia Plath wrote "Poppies in October" in 1962 or 1963, around the time she wrote other famous poems like "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," and "Ariel." All of these poems would later appear in *Ariel*, which was published posthumously in 1965. Plath had been dead for two years by the time *Ariel* was published, but the book had a sizable impact on the world of poetry in the 1960s.

In particular, *Ariel* helped shape what was then the emerging genre of Confessional poetry, a mode in which poets didn't shy away from using deeply personal material that was often unsparingly dark. Plath was especially influenced by fellow American poet Robert Lowell, whose collection *Life Studies* unabashedly documented his struggle with mental illness. Given that Plath was also interested in exploring her own battle with depression, it's no surprise that she considered *Life Studies* a major influence on the personal and (at times) troubling poems that would eventually make their way into *Ariel*.

Confessional poetry signaled a break from the poetic conventions that were popular in the 1950s and 1960s, largely leaving behind form and meter in favor of slightly more common, everyday language. By adopting this colloquial tone, poets like Lowell, Plath, Anne Sexton, and W.D. Snodgrass were able to more meaningfully capture elements of their personal lives and present them in relatable ways on the page. It is not an understatement to say that this poetic movement paved the way for the vast majority of contemporary poetry, which deals heavily in personal discovery.

However, not all of Confessional poets embraced the term "Confessionalism," and many critics argue to this day that the label is reductive when it comes to the work of people like Sylvia Plath. This is because the word "confessional" itself can sound dismissive and misleading, as if poets like Plath are doing little more than revealing their personal secrets (something anybody could do).

Plath's poetry draws on her life in ways that are much more complex, especially since it's rarely all that clear whether she's actually referencing something in her own life. More importantly, her highly personal poems often highlight society's sexism or its cruelty toward people dealing with mental illness, meaning that her work goes far beyond the mere act of "confessing" her own struggles.

Historical Context

Sylvia Plath did the majority of her most famous writing in the 1950s and early 1960s, when she was in her late 20s. This a number of well-known female poets emerged during this era, the landscape of poetry was still dominated by men.

This is perhaps why the speaker of "Poppies in October" implies that the woman in the ambulance bleeds through her coat while men on the street pass by without even bothering to notice—an acknowledgment of the kind of apathy men often exhibited when it came to the struggles women faced in the 1950s and early '60s.

As mentioned elsewhere in this guide, "Poppies in October" also contains a possible allusion to the holiday known as Remembrance Day in the United Kingdom, when people display poppies to honor soldiers who have died in battle. This practice began at the end of World War I and continues to this day, taking place every year on November 11. It's unclear whether the speaker is looking at poppies displayed for Remembrance Day, but the historical association between the flower and the commemoration of fallen soldiers is enough to symbolically link the poppies with death.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Sylvia Plath Reads the Poem Out Loud — Listen to Sylvia Plath read "Poppies in October." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsqfBtDZQJ0)
- The Poet's Life — To learn more about Sylvia Plath, check out this brief overview of her life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath)
- Confessionalism — This article takes a look at Confessionalism, a branch of poetry often associated with Sylvia Plath's work (though some people think the term is reductive when it comes to Plath's poetry). (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/151109/an-introduction-to-confessional-poetry)
- The Sylvia Plath Movie — Check out this trailer for "Sylvia," the 2003 film starring Gwyneth Paltrow as Plath and Daniel Craig as her lover Ted Hughes. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9S60Cn8Ia4)
- An Interview With Sylvia Plath — This recording documents an interview with Sylvia Plath that took place in 1962, around the time she most likely wrote "Poppies in October." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2IMsVpRh5c)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SYLVIA PLATH POEMS

- Daddy
- Fever 103°
- Lady Lazarus
- Mad Girl's Love Song
- Nick and the Candlestick
- The Applicant
- The Arrival of the Bee Box
- The Moon and the Yew Tree

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