Poppies

SUMMARY

It was three days before the anniversary of the end of World War I, and people had already put poppies on the graves of people who died in the war. Before you went off, I pinned one of the poppies onto the front fold of your jacket, its red petals made of creased paper covering up the strip of yellow fabric that ran along the border of your suit jacket.

I wrapped some clear tape wrapped around my hand in order to pick as many white cat hairs off of you as I could, turned your shirt collar down, and stopped faced from looking too sad and emotional. I wanted to gently rub the tip of my nose against yours, pretending to give Eskimos kisses like we did when you were a small child. I wanted to run my fingers through your black, gelled curls, but I resisted. Everything I said came out wrong, like fabric coming apart.

But I was brave and walked with you to the front door, and even swung it open it for you. To you, the world outside seemed full of wonder and opportunity, like a treasure chest. You were gone in a fraction of a second, drunk with the possibilities. After you left, I went to your bedroom and released a singing bird from its cage. Later I saw a single dove fly out of a pear tree and I followed it here, along the walls of the churchyard. My stomach was rumbling with anxiety and I wasn't dressed for the cold weather—I didn't have a hat, warm coat, scarf, or gloves.

At the top of the hill, I traced the writing on the war monument with my fingers. I leaned against the monument, making it look like it and I were two halves of a wishbone (the forked bird bone that people snap and make wishes on at meals). The dove soared freely through the air, as if it were stitching decorative embroidery across the sky. And I listened, hoping to hear your voice coming up from the playground on the wind.

THEMES

WAR, PARENTHOOD, AND GRIEF

"Poppies" addresses the anxieties and grief that parents face as they send their children to fight in war. It does so through an extended metaphor, comparing going to war to a more mundane kind of departure: a mother sending her child to school. Though the child is full of energy and enthusiasm—a metaphor for the patriotic fervor that soldiers feel as they go to fight for their country—the mother is decidedly less enthusiastic. Instead of celebrating the glory, bravery, and sacrifice of soldiers, the poem thus focuses on how war affects those who stay behind, specifically exploring the anxiety and grief parents may feel knowing they can no longer protect, and in fact may forever lose, their children.

Though the poem never *explicitly* states that it is about war, it is implied throughout. For one thing, it takes place before "Armistice Sunday"—seemingly a combination of Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday, both of which commemorate the end of WWI. And the poem begins with the speaker pinning a poppy to her child's jacket. These flowers are used in the United Kingdom to memorialize the soldiers who died in WWI, and they thus serve as symbols for violence and war—and for the grief and mourning that parents experience when their children are killed in battle.

The child's "blazer," meanwhile, could be part of a military dress uniform—in which case the poem can be read as being about the speaker's child *literally* getting ready to go to war. But the blazer could just as easily be interpreted as part of a school uniform—in which case, the speaker is simply helping her younger child get ready for school, and the poem should be taken more metaphorically. This ambiguity helps ground and universalize the experience being described. Essentially, the poem makes the experience of sending a child to war feel all the more recognizable by comparing it to something pretty much everyone has gone through (going to school).

In either case, the child greets the prospect of leaving and home and heading out into the world with enthusiasm and wonder. For the child, the world is "overflowing / like a treasure chest." In other words, it is a place full of riches and delights that the child is just about to discover and enjoy. As a result, the child is "intoxicated"—almost drunk with joy upon heading off. Read figuratively, the child's enthusiasm represents the patriotic fervor that young soldiers bring to battle.

The speaker does not share her child's sense of enthusiasm, of course; instead she is so anxious about her child's future that she feels physically ill. And where the child seems captivated by war's opportunity for glory, the speaker is focused on the grief that war creates for loved ones left behind. When the speaker herself goes outside after her child has left, she finds herself at a "war memorial." Like the "poppies" earlier the poem, the "war memorial" is a reminder of the violence and trauma that accompanies war. And the speaker seems almost irresistibly drawn to these reminders: wherever she turns, she sees evidence of the damage that war leaves in its wake.

The poem ends with the suggestion that the speaker's child dies in battle: all that's left of the child at the end of the poem is the child's "playground voice." This, combined with the poem's earlier reference to shows of affection between the speaker and her child when that child was still "little," suggests that the speaker longs to return to a time when she could protect her child from the world—that is, to a time before that child grew

up. In a way, then, the poem broadens its image of parenthood and grief. Children becoming adults and leaving home is always accompanied by an element of fear and anxiety on the part of their parents, the poem suggests, though this is magnified when a child's leaving home also means going to war.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-35

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

Three days before ...
... around your blazer.

The poem opens by declaring that it is "three days before Armistice Sunday." This seems to be a combination of two public holidays in England honoring soldiers who died in World War I: Armistice Day (which actually falls on a Monday), and Remembrance Sunday. Right from the poem's opening line, then, war hovers in the background.

The poppy is also part of these holidays: since 1921, people have used paper poppies—also called "remembrance poppies"—to honor fallen soldiers, either by leaving poppies on soldiers graves and wearing them on their clothes. The flower symbolizes the war—and, more broadly, the death and grief that war creates.

Meanwhile, pinning a flower to someone's lapel—the folded front part of a suit coat or jacket—is a tender act that a parent might do for a child on a big day (or, perhaps, that a person might do for a lover—though, as the poem continues, it'll become clear that this is not a romantic relationship). This clues the reader in as to who this poem is about, but it is not clear yet exactly how old this child is—whether this child is an adult going off to war, or simply a younger child going off to school. Part of the confusion comes from the word "blazer," which could refer to a child's school uniform or to a military uniform.

Both interpretations are valid, and the speaker uses references to school as an extended metaphor: sending a child to school is like sending a child off to war. It is a much smaller version of the same thing, and produces similar anxiety and grief in parents who are no longer able to shield their children from the dangers of the world. So even if the child's "blazer" is part of a school uniform, it is *also* a metaphor for a soldier's uniform. (Of course, sending a child to school comes with the assumption that a child will return home; parents sending a child to war do not have such certainty.)

The speaker also takes an unusual perspective on war. Instead of focusing on the bravery of the soldiers or the glory they win in battle, she is concerned with the grief of those who stay behind—especially the parents of soldiers.

In the poem's opening stanza, the speaker provides a couple of hints that help the reader get a handle on the poem's extended metaphor. Note, for instance, the way the speaker describes the paper poppy. It's a tightly folded paper flower, with petals overlapping each other—potentially something very beautiful. But the speaker describes it almost as a wound, using a series of metaphors. Its folds are like "spasms," involuntary and painful contractions of the muscles. It "disrupt[s] a blockade / of yellow bias binding." Literally, the speaker is just saying that it covers up the yellow border of her child's blazer. But the word "blockade" is a military term: it often describes a flotilla of ships blocking off an enemy port, so they can't bring supplies or troops in. The metaphor makes it sound like the paper flower has broken through the lines, causing death and destruction.

An alliterative /p/ sound also runs through the passage, linking together "poppies," "placed," and "pinned." The alliteration suggests that "pinn[ing]" a poppy on the child's jacket is like placing one on a grave: the speaker feels like this is an act of memorial and grief for the child. In this sense, the alliteration reinforces the extended metaphor: the child is not just heading to school but, metaphorically, to war.

The first six lines of the poem establish its formal pattern. It's written in free verse: it doesn't have any meter or rhyme. The tone is direct and conversational. But the poem still betrays the speaker's anxiety and grief. Note, for instance, how heavily enjambed these opening lines are. Despite the matter-of-fact tone, the speaker is anxious and rushing, the poem spilling urgently down the page.

LINES 7-11

Sellotape bandaged around ...
... of my face.

The speaker continues to help her child get ready—for school or for war. With tape wrapped around her hand, she plucks "white cat hairs" off of the child's blazer (essentially using the tape like a kind of lint brush). She folds down the child's "upturned collar." As in the first stanza, these actions constitute mundane, everyday acts—something one might see in any household as parents help their kids get ready for school.

But, again, the speaker infuses these acts with a sense of underlying danger and violence. Note, for instance, that she describes the tape as being "bandaged around [her] hand." This is a metaphor: the tape isn't *literally* serving as a bandage. But it suggests that these acts—preparing her child to go to school, to go to war—are damaging for the speaker. They injure her, and so she has to bandage herself to complete them.

Similarly, in lines 10-11, the speaker describes her face "softening": her anxiety and sadness is starting to show, so she has "steeled" her face. She suppresses her emotions and doesn't let her child see that she's upset. But there's something

revealing about the metaphor she chooses to describe her hardened face: steel is often used to make weapons. It's almost like she makes her own face into a weapon as she tries to hide her emotion from her child. The two metaphors in lines 7-11 thus start to suggest the costs of war for the people who remain at home: they too are injured, and their peaceful lives are invaded by the instruments of violence.

Like the first six lines, lines 7-11 are in free verse. They are almost all enjambed. Once again, these enjambments underscore the speaker's anxiety: her language tumbles and rushes down the page.

But compared to other free verse poems, "Poppies" is relatively contained. Though its lines often have different numbers of syllables, the differences aren't radical and disruptive. This suggests something important about the speaker: just as she "steel[s]" her face to hide her emotions, so too she "steel[s]" her poem. It *looks* more composed, regular, and controlled than it actually is. This makes the poem's enjambments all the more important: they underline and amplify the speaker's anxiety, even as she tries to hide it in smooth, controlled lines.

LINES 11-16

I wanted to ...
... of your hair.

The speaker tries to control and suppress her anxiety and sadness, but in lines 11-14, that sadness breaks through. The speaker expresses a poignant desire to return to an earlier moment. She wants to "play / being Eskimos" with her child: to "graze my nose / across the tip of your nose." This is a sweet and affectionate gesture, a gesture that brings the speaker back to an earlier, more innocent time: using a simile, she notes that it would be "like we did when / you were little." The simile underlines the key point of these lines: the speaker doesn't just want to express affection for her child, she wants to go back in time, to a time when the child was safe from war and violence, a time when the speaker could protect her child.

But the speaker doesn't rub her nose against her child's. And she doesn't "run [her] fingers" through the child's hair either—another affectionate gesture. She doesn't want to upset the careful styling of the child's hair: it's been "gelled" into "blackthorns." There's a quiet metaphor here: the speaker compares the child's hair to thorns, sharp and pointy things. (And one might push the metaphor even farther: perhaps the "blackthorns" are barbed wire, which was widely used on battlefields during World War I to slow the advance of enemy troops.)

In other words, the speaker subtly suggests that the child's body has already become sharp, violent, even militarized. The child has transformed—no longer soft and affectionate, the child is prickly, possibly dangerous. The caesura in line 14 emphasizes the transformation—and the break between the affectionate past the speaker remembers and the difficulties of the present. It cuts off the speaker's fantasy about retreating into the past, creating a firm distinction between then and now. As much as the speaker wants to return to a safer, more affectionate past, she can't.

These lines are all enjambed, again echoing the speaker's anxiety about her child's safety: they spill down the page, an expression of uncontrolled, uncontrollable, emotion.

LINES 16-18

All my words ...
... slowly melting.

In lines 11-16, the speaker wants to express her love for her child physically: by rubbing her nose against the child's, tousling the child's hair. But she doesn't do either of these things—and so she has to resort to language to convey her affection and her anxiety. The assonant /a/ sound that appears in "blackthorns" and "flattened" suggests why. Linking the two words together, the assonance implies a cause and effect relationship between them: the speaker has to use her words because she can't engage physically with her child

But the speaker's words fail. Using a metaphor drawn from felt-making, she describes her words as a kind of fabric that falls apart, goes to tatters: it eventually becomes "felt," a fabric made by pressing together waste fibers from other fabrics. In other words, her words don't hang together: her attempts to express her affection to her child fall apart. Or, as the speaker notes in line 18, they "slowly melt." Mother and child fail to connect. And the caesura that appears at the center of line 16 emphasizes the distance between the speaker and her child.

This sense of failure, of decay and decomposition, is emphasized by the way that the sentiment of line 17 spills across the stanza break. "Stanza" is Italian for "little room": the word itself suggests that a stanza should be a solid and contained space. To run a line *across* two stanzas suggests that something serious has broken down. It underlines the extent to which the speaker's words fail and fall apart: indeed, the poem itself seems to come apart in these lines.

LINES 18-22

I was brave, ...
... were away, intoxicated.

Despite her anxiety and sadness, the speaker continues to be stoic. Just as she "steeled the softening / of [her] face" in lines 10-11, she is "brave" in line 18 as she walks with her child to the door. She doesn't show the child her fear and anxiety. Instead, she throws the door open, almost as if inviting the child to go.

And the child is excited and enthusiastic about going out in the world. The child doesn't share any of the speaker's sadness or anxiety. Instead, to the child, the world seems "like a treasure chest." For the child, the simile suggests, life is an adventure; the world is full of riches and delights. Indeed, the child almost

seems drunk with pleasure and possibility. The speaker describes the child as "intoxicated" upon leaving the house. These are important lines for the poem's extended metaphor. If the child is not going to school, but off to war, then these lines capture the enthusiasm and patriotic fervor that soldiers feel as they prepare to fight for the country.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are written in free verse. They are all enjambed as well, and only in line 22 does the reader finally encounter an end-stop. End-stopped lines often convey confidence and certainty. Here, the end-stop suggests that the child's decision is firm, permanent, irreversible. In this way, it underlines the speaker's anxiety: once her child leaves the house to head off for war, she fears, she can't get her child back.

LINES 23-24

After you'd gone ...
... from its cage.

Through its first 22 lines, "Poppies" has been a fairly straightforward, conversational poem. It doesn't use a lot of fancy metaphors or pretentious language. Though it employs an extended metaphor, it remains grounded in the mundane, routine details of everyday life. That shifts suddenly in lines 23-24. After the child leaves, the speaker goes up to the child's "bedroom" and "release[s] a song bird from its cage." This is a surprising and strange act—the reader didn't even know until now that the child had a "song bird." And one might wonder why the speaker is suddenly setting it free.

These lines become a bit clearer when one realizes that the "song bird" is a symbol. Traditionally, songbirds are symbols for poets: the beautiful music they make is like the music of a poem. The symbol suggests that the speaker turns to poetry after her child goes off to war. She is looking for solace and comfort; she finds it in poetry. In turn, the symbol might be understood to suggest something about the poem as a whole. It subtly argues that poetry is a way of coping with the anxiety and grief that the parents of soldiers experience.

These lines are both end-stopped. These end-stops suggest a degree of confidence and certainty after all the rushing, highly enjambed free verse lines that come before. The end-stops in these lines seem to suggest that poetry works: it does offer her some rest, some confidence, some certainty, even as she agonizes about her child's fate.

LINES 25-29

Later a single ...
... of scarf, gloves.

In lines 23-24, the speaker finds solace in poetry, symbolized by a "song bird." In line 25-29, another bird appears, offering a different kind of hope. The speaker sees a "single dove" fly out of a pear tree and she follows it to a "church yard"—in other words a graveyard. The dove is a symbol of peace. Its sudden appearance in the poem suggests to the speaker that the war might end, that her child might come home safely. So she pursues it with wild abandon, going out in the could without a coat, scarf, or gloves. Once again, the speaker's diction subtly suggests how war affects her too—even though she isn't a soldier. Note that she calls her "scarf, gloves" "reinforcements": back up soldiers. Even everyday objects like scarves and gloves remind the speaker of war: it's invaded every part of her life.

As she pursues the dove, the speaker is anxious and unsettled. She describes this as a physical sensation: her stomach is "busy / making tucks, darts, pleats." In other words, she's so nervous that it feels like her stomach is moving around rapidly, folding in on itself. The speaker employs a couple of poetic devices to underline this feeling. For instance, the enjambment at the end of line 27 feels like a sudden lurch (especially since the last few lines have been end-stopped). And the consonance in the line mimics the folds (or "pleats") in the speaker's stomach:

making tucks, darts, pleats...

The /k/ and /t/ sounds alternate, folding on top of each other. The sound of the line and its enjambment thus give the reader a direct, immediate sense of the anxiety the speaker feels.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are in free verse. They are less enjambed than the earlier sections of the poem: lines 25, 26, and 29 are all end-stopped. And they also flirt with more traditional kinds of poetry: line 26 is a pretty good example of iambic tetrameter and lines 25-26 rhyme with each other. That rhyme continues into line 27, though it doesn't line up rhythmically: where "tree" and "me" rhyme on stressed syllables, the /ee/ sound in "busy" shows up in an unstressed syllable. This gives the line a syncopated feeling. It feels a little off rhythmically—and that contributes to the sense that the enjambment is like lurch, a falling sensation in the speaker (and the reader's) stomach.

LINES 30-35

On reaching the ...
... on the wind.

In lines 25-29, the speaker follows a "single dove" to a "church yard." In lines 30-35, she continues to pursue it, climbing up to the top of a hill, where there's a war memorial. She leans against the memorial "like a wishbone." The simile suggests that she is fragile and breakable, like a wishbone. And the alliterative /w/ sound in "wishbone" and "war memorial" link the two things together, suggesting that the speaker has become a kind of living war memorial.

Despite everything, the dove—and the peace it symbolizes—remains out of reach, circling in the sky above the speaker. The speaker describes it as an "ornamental stitch." In other words, it's beautiful, but it doesn't serve a purpose, doesn't change the structure of the speaker's reality. Peace

remains a distant and unpromising possibility in the poem: it's not a meaningful part of the speaker's world.

As the poem closes, the speaker stands on top of the hill, listening. She's hoping to hear her child's "playground voice" on the wind. The poem doesn't reveal whether she does or not—but it strongly suggests that she doesn't. After all, she ends the poem "hoping" to hear her child's voice; there's no indication that she actually does. And the assonant /i/ sound in "listened" and "wind" binds the two words together, suggesting that all the speaker hears is the wind. In the extended metaphor that runs through the poem, these final lines thus suggest that the speaker's child has died: the child's voice has become a memory. It's no longer something the speaker can hear in everyday life: it exists only in memory and in her hopes.

SYMBOLS

POPPIES

Poppies symbolize the devastating violence of World War I. They also symbolize the collective acts of grieving that followed the war, the rituals that people created to mourn and to remember its destruction. Finally, for the speaker, the poppies remind her that her child is potentially the target of such violence.

A poppy is a bright red flower. Beginning in 1921, two years after the end of World War I, people started using paper poppies—also called "remembrance poppies"—to commemorate the soldiers who died in World War I. They were inspired by the poem "In Flanders Field" by John McCrae, which describes a World War I graveyard with red poppies growing between the crosses that mark each grave.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "poppies"

SONG BIRD

Songbirds are traditionally symbols of poets: the beautiful songs they sing are like poems. After the speaker's child leaves home, the speaker goes into the kid's "bedroom" and releases a "song bird from its cage." This is a strange and inexplicable act—until one realizes that the songbird is primarily a symbol. In this moment, then, the speaker seems to be freeing poetry itself, releasing it from its cage. In other words, the speaker's response to her anxiety about her child leaving home (and, in the extended metaphor that runs through the poem, going to fight in a war) is to turn to poetry. The speaker turns to poetry for solace—but that comfort doesn't seem to last long: after all, only a few lines later, the speaker is out in the cold, full of anxiety. The poem thus subtly suggests that poetry itself has only limited powers to help mothers assuage their anxiety about their children's fate—in war or in the world more broadly.

Alternatively, the bird can be taken as a representation of the speaker's child—now released from the safe "cage" of home and set off into the world, for better or for worse.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 24:** "song bird"

DOVE

Traditionally, doves are symbols of peace. In line 25, the speaker sees a "single dove" fly out of a "pear tree." The speaker follows the dove to a "church yard"—in other words, a graveyard. The appearance of a "dove" is particularly striking because the poem is so interested in war—indeed, the poem is an extended metaphor for the anxiety and grief that parents feel as their children fight and die in war. The dove is an alternative to this world of war and destruction, which the speaker chases. It offers hope and relief, even as the poem meditates on the costs of war—a symbol that something else, something better, remains possible.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 25:** "dove"
- **Line 33:** "dove"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

"Poppies" contains very few end-stops, and many of these are quite soft and subtle. The first really strong end-stop falls in line 6. Lines 3 ("on ... left,"), 4 ("I ... petals,"), 7 ("Sellotape ... hand,"), and 17 ("flattened ... felt,") are all *technically* end-stopped, but they hardly count, since the sentences continue with power and energy after the line break; the commas offer only the slightest pause. There's thus not another strongly felt end-stop until line 22. In a sense, this is fitting. End-stops feel certain and sure; they often express confidence and control on the part of a speaker. The speaker of "Poppies" experiences no such confidence or certainty: instead, she is consumed by anxiety about her child's safety as that child goes off to fight in a war.

And even when the speaker does use end-stop, it does not express confidence or certainty. More often, the end-stops that appear in "Poppies" express doubt, disappointment, and concern. Note for instance, the end-stop in line 21-22:

... A split second

and you were away, intoxicated.

The speaker is describing here how her child—excited and enthusiastic—runs out the door. This is a key moment in the poem's extended metaphor: it describes the way young soldiers go out into battle with energy and patriotic fervor. The speaker doesn't share that fervor: instead, she is anxious about her child's safety. The end-stop conveys that anxiety: it is sudden, sharp, and final. It suggests that the child has made an irreversible decision. The choice to go to war can't be undone: the speaker has to live with the consequences of her child's decision. Far from feeling certain and confidence, the end-stop instead amplifies the speaker's anxious energy, by underlining the limits of her power: she cannot protect her child once that child is "away."

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "left,"
- **Line 4:** "petals,"
- **Line 6:** "blazer."
- **Line 7:** "hand,"
- **Line 17:** "felt,"
- **Line 22:** "intoxicated."
- **Line 23:** "bedroom,"
- **Line 24:** "cage."
- **Line 25:** "tree,"
- **Line 26:** "me,"
- **Line 29:** "gloves."
- **Line 31:** "memorial,"
- **Line 32:** "wishbone."
- **Line 33:** "sky,"
- **Line 35:** "wind."

ENJAMBMENT

"Poppies" uses a whole lot of enjambment, and gets its energy in part from its sharp, surprising line breaks. In fact, a majority of the poem's lines are enjambed; at points it goes for more than 9 lines at a time without using any end-stop at all. This gives the poem a sense of speed and inevitability; the speaker's thoughts rush down the page, unable to be contained any more than the speaker can contain her child. To that end, often these enjambments directly capture the speaker's anxiety about her child's safety. Note the enjambments in line 27-29:

> ... my stomach busy
> making tucks, darts, pleats, hat-less without
> a winter coat or reinforcements of scarf, gloves.

The enjambments here imitate the speaker's feelings. Like her stomach, the lines are folded into tucks and pleats. This passage is especially direct: there's almost a one-to-one correlation between the speaker's anxiety and the enjambments that run through it. But this passage also suggests the broader function that enjambment serves throughout the poem. They consistently reflect the speaker's anxiety: registering the discomfort, grief, and nervousness she feels as her child heads off to war.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Sunday / and"
- **Lines 2-3:** "placed / on"
- **Lines 5-6:** "blockade / of"
- **Lines 8-9:** "hairs / as"
- **Lines 9-10:** "shirt's / upturned"
- **Lines 10-11:** "softening / of"
- **Lines 11-12:** "nose / across"
- **Lines 12-13:** "at / being"
- **Lines 13-14:** "when / you"
- **Lines 14-15:** "impulse / to"
- **Lines 15-16:** "gelled / blackthorns"
- **Lines 16-17:** "words / flattened"
- **Lines 18-19:** "walked / with"
- **Lines 19-20:** "threw / it"
- **Lines 20-21:** "overflowing / like"
- **Lines 21-22:** "second / and"
- **Lines 27-28:** "busy / making"
- **Lines 28-29:** "without / a"
- **Lines 30-31:** "traced / the"
- **Lines 34-35:** "hear / your"

CAESURA

The speaker of "Poppies" deals with some heart-wrenching conflicts over the course of the poem: she wants to be "brave" as her child goes off to fight, but at the same time she is deeply anxious about his or her safety. She wants to go back to a time when her child was "little"—and therefore under her protection—but she also knows that she can't, that she has to let her child go.

These conflicts are often echoed by the poem's caesuras. The breaks and pauses in the lines reflect the divisions that the speaker struggles with: between the past and the present, between herself and her child. Note, for instance, the caesura that appears in line 14, after the speaker talks about wanting to "play at being Eskimos":

> you were little. I resisted the impulse

The caesura is a strong, powerful break that separates the past that the speaker fantasizes about from the present. In this way, it underlines one of the things the speaker struggles with: the fact that she can't go back in time, to a moment when she could protect her child.

The next caesura emphasizes the distance between the speaker and her child:

... I resisted the impulse
to run my fingers through the gelled
blackthorns of your hair. All my words

The speaker wants to tousle her child's hair, like she did when the child was younger—but she's afraid to upset the child's carefully styled and gelled hair. So she doesn't: she doesn't interfere with her child's choices. The caesura in line 16 thus underlines the distance that's developed between mother and child as the child has grown up. The poem's caesuras thus consistently reflect the speaker's sad and anxiety as she negotiates a series of heartbreaking conflicts.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "graves. Before"
- **Line 4:** "lapel, crimped"
- **Line 5:** "red, disrupting"
- **Line 9:** "could, smoothed"
- **Line 10:** "collar, steeled"
- **Line 11:** "face. I"
- **Line 12:** "nose, play"
- **Line 14:** "little. I"
- **Line 16:** "hair. All"
- **Line 17:** "flattened, rolled, turned"
- **Line 18:** "melting. I," "brave, as"
- **Line 19:** "you, to," "door, threw"
- **Line 20:** "open, the"
- **Line 21:** "chest. A"
- **Line 22:** "away, intoxicated"
- **Line 27:** "walls, my"
- **Line 28:** "tucks, darts, pleats, hat-less, without"
- **Line 29:** "scarf, gloves"
- **Line 34:** "stitch, I listened, hoping"

ALLITERATION

"Poppies" uses alliteration frequently. Many times, this underlines the speaker's anxiety as her child heads off to war. Take a look, for example, at the alliterative /p/ sound that appears in the first stanza:

... **p**oppies had already been **p**laced
....
I **p**inned one onto your lapel, crimped **p**etals,
spasms of **p**aper red,

The /p/ sound also rings out more clearly through consonance here, in "lapel," "crimped," and "spasms." Poppies are traditionally used to memorialize the soldiers who died in World War I. On Armistice Day in England, people wear paper poppies—also called "remembrance poppies"—and put them on soldiers' graves to express gratitude for their sacrifice and to mourn their deaths.

The /p/ sound helps to bring this act of mourning for a historical war into the present. It links together two separate acts: "plac[ing]" the "poppies" on the "individual war graves" and "pinn[ing]" a poppy to the child's uniform. In other words, it suggests that the speaker feels like she's putting a poppy on a grave when she pins it on her child's blazer. The alliteration expresses the speaker's fear that the child will die in a war, just like the soldiers in World War I. Indeed, it suggests that, for the speaker, the child is already dead.

Something similar happens later in the poem, when the speaker climbs up to the "war memorial" on a hill outside town. She leans against—and compares herself to a "wishbone." The alliterative /w/ sound in "**w**ar" and "**w**ishbone" link the two things together. It suggests that the speaker is not just like a "wishbone." She's also like the war memorial—indeed, she has become a kind of living war memorial. In both cases, the alliteration subtly reinforces the speaker's sense of anxiety about her child going off to war, hinting at the violence the child will encounter and the grief the speaker feels after the child's death.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "p," "p"
- **Line 3:** "l"
- **Line 4:** "p," "l," "p"
- **Line 5:** "p," "b"
- **Line 6:** "b," "b," "b"
- **Line 7:** "b," "h"
- **Line 8:** "h"
- **Line 9:** "s"
- **Line 10:** "s," "s"
- **Line 13:** "w"
- **Lines 13-13:** "w / h"
- **Line 14:** "w," "r"
- **Line 15:** "r," "f"
- **Line 17:** "f," "f"
- **Line 18:** "w," "w"
- **Line 19:** "w"
- **Line 20:** "o," "o"
- **Line 21:** "s," "s"
- **Line 23:** "b"
- **Line 24:** "b"
- **Line 27:** "s," "s"
- **Line 28:** "w"
- **Line 29:** "w"
- **Line 30:** "t," "t"
- **Line 31:** "w"
- **Line 32:** "w"
- **Line 33:** "s"
- **Line 34:** "s," "h," "h"

ASSONANCE

"Poppies" uses a lot of assonance throughout. Sometimes this is done primarily to imbue the free verse poem with a sense of musicality; it still feels poetic despite not having a clearcut rhyme scheme. Take the shared long /i/ sounds of "bias binding" in line 6, the internal rhyme created by the long /o/ in "nose" and "Eskimos" in lines 12-13, and the melody of alternating /o/ and /eh/ sounds in "rolled, turned into felt, // slowly melting."

Often, the speaker also uses these shared sounds to connect words that reinforce the sense of isolation and loss that she feels and her child goes off to war. Note, for instance the thin /ah/ sound in lines 16 and 17:

> … blackthorns of your hair. All my words
> flattened …

The speaker is describing here how she has a hard time expressing affection for her newly adult child. She wants to tousle the child's hair—but she's afraid of messing up the carefully gelled curls. Her words fall flat: they don't convey the depth of her affection or her concern. The /ah/ sound in this passage links the two things together, suggesting an underlying cause and effect connection between them. Because the speaker can't tousle her child's hair, she has to use her words to express her affection—but her words fall short. The assonance thus underlines a sad truth about the relationship between the speaker and her child: the distance between them is unbridgeable, permanent.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ay," "i," "i," "ay"
- **Line 2:** "a"
- **Line 3:** "i," "i," "i," "a"
- **Line 4:** "a," "e," "e," "a"
- **Line 5:** "a," "e," "a"
- **Line 6:** "i," "i," "a"
- **Line 7:** "a," "a"
- **Line 8:** "a"
- **Line 9:** "a"
- **Line 11:** "a," "a," "o"
- **Line 12:** "os"
- **Line 13:** "o"
- **Line 14:** "i," "i," "i," "u"
- **Line 15:** "u," "i"
- **Line 16:** "a," "o," "ou"
- **Line 17:** "a," "o," "e"
- **Line 18:** "o," "e"
- **Line 19:** "ou," "o," "e"
- **Line 20:** "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 21:** "ea," "e," "e"
- **Line 22:** "a," "a"
- **Line 23:** "ou," "o," "oo"
- **Line 24:** "a"
- **Line 25:** "a," "o," "o"
- **Line 29:** "o," "o"
- **Line 30:** "O," "o," "o"
- **Line 31:** "i," "i," "a," "o"
- **Line 34:** "i," "i"

CONSONANCE

"Poppies" uses consonance throughout the poem. It helps to give the poem a tough, percussive sound. Even though the poem is loose and conversational, one feels in its consonance the tension and violence that the poem addresses pulsing beneath its surface. As noted in our discussion of alliteration, the percussive /p/ sound is especially common, filling the first stanza in particular with pops of emotion. But there are other strong consonant sounds here too—namely the /l/, /m/, /r/, /n/, and /b/. The stanza is simply *overflowing* with repeated sounds, and the thick consonance suggests how overwhelmed the speaker is with emotion:

> poppies had already been placed
> on individual war graves. Before you left,
> pinned one onto your lapel, crimped petals,
> spasms of paper red, disrupting a blockade
> of yellow bias binding around your blazer.

The speaker keeps returning to the same sounds, perhaps to comfort herself, or perhaps this represents the way she cannot stop thinking about the potential violence of war—the sounds of which keep repeating. Note how the literal *sound* of the word "poppies"—a symbol of wartime grief—echoes throughout the poem. Consonance also draws readers' attention to specific phrases. The shared sounds of "crimped petals / spasms of paper red" make the phrase itself feel constricted or crimped, the same letters squished and folded over one another. The /b/ and /l/ in this stanza, meanwhile, again draw the readers' attention to symbols of the military—a "blockade," the "blazer" of a uniform. The word "binding" here might also evoke the idea of being "bound" into service.

Later in the poem, the speaker again uses consonance to underline the force of her anxiety. Note, for instance, the /t/ and /k/ sounds in line 28:

> making tucks, darts, pleats…

The speaker is describing here how her stomach feels upset: she's so anxious it feels like it's folded on itself, rolling and moving around. The /k/ and /t/ sounds similarly fold over each other: in "making tucks, darts," /k/ and /t/ sounds alternate. The sound of the line thus mimics the feeling of the speaker's stomach—reinforcing the visceral power of her anxiety.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "s," "c," "S"
- **Line 2:** "p," "pp," "d," "d," "p," "l," "d"
- **Line 3:** "d," "d," "l," "r," "r," "r," "l"
- **Line 4:** "p," "nn," "n," "n," "l," "p," "l," "m," "p," "p," "t," "l," "s"
- **Line 5:** "s," "p," "sms," "p," "p," "r," "r," "d," "r," "p," "bl," "d"
- **Line 6:** "ll," "b," "b," "n," "d," "r," "n," "d," "r," "bl," "r"
- **Line 7:** "b," "n," "d," "d," "n," "d," "h," "n," "d"
- **Line 8:** "n," "d," "d," "t," "c," "t"
- **Line 9:** "c," "d," "s," "d," "d," "r," "r"
- **Line 10:** "t," "r," "c," "ll," "r," "s," "t," "l," "s," "f," "t"
- **Line 11:** "f," "c," "z," "s"
- **Line 12:** "c," "p," "s," "p"
- **Line 13:** "k," "s," "k," "w," "w"
- **Line 14:** "w," "r," "l," "ttl," "r," "s," "s," "t," "l," "s"
- **Line 15:** "r," "r," "r," "ll"
- **Line 16:** "l," "r," "r," "r," "ll," "r"
- **Line 17:** "f," "l," "tt," "n," "d," "r," "ll," "d," "t," "r," "d," "nt," "f," "lt"
- **Line 18:** "l," "l," "lt," "w," "w"
- **Line 19:** "w," "r," "r," "r," "w"
- **Line 20:** "w," "r," "r," "w"
- **Line 21:** "t," "r," "s," "r," "s," "t," "s," "t," "s"
- **Line 22:** "w," "w," "t," "t"
- **Line 23:** "t," "r," "n," "t," "nt," "r," "b," "r"
- **Line 24:** "r," "s," "d," "s," "b," "d," "r"
- **Line 25:** "L," "t," "r," "l," "fl," "fr," "r," "tr"
- **Line 26:** "s," "s," "s," "l"
- **Line 27:** "s," "r," "t," "ch," "rch," "r," "s," "s," "t," "s"
- **Line 28:** "k," "t," "ck," "s," "ts," "ts," "t," "ss," "w," "t"
- **Line 29:** "w," "t," "c," "t," "r," "r," "r," "ts," "s," "c," "r," "s"
- **Line 30:** "r," "t," "t," "r"
- **Line 31:** "r," "w," "r," "m," "m," "r"
- **Line 32:** "n," "n," "t," "t," "w," "n"
- **Line 33:** "ll," "l," "s"
- **Line 34:** "r," "t," "s," "t," "t," "st," "h," "t," "h," "r"
- **Line 35:** "r," "r"

METAPHOR

The speaker of "Poppies" turns to metaphor throughout the poem, using the device to describe her interactions with her child—and to emphasize the anxiety she feels as her child heads off to war. Take a look at the metaphor in lines 7-9, for example:

> Sellotape bandaged around my hand,
> I rounded up as many white car hairs
> as I could ...

These lines describe a relatively routine act: the speaker is cleaning the cat hair off her child's uniform with tape wrapped around her hand. But she describes the tape as a "bandage"—something that people use to cover a wound. The metaphor suggests that the speaker has been injured, perhaps violently. In this way, it also suggests that the violence of war stretches beyond the battlefield and effects the parents who send their children off to war.

Similarly, the speaker turns to metaphor in lines 27-28 to describe the way her "stomach" feels:

> ... busy
> making tucks, darts, pleats ...

Her stomach isn't *literally* darting around or folding up: it just feels that way because she's so nervous about what will happen to her child. By comparing her stomach to something that darts or folds, the speaker conveys to the reader how much anxiety she feels. The poem's metaphors thus help convey the stakes of the poem: the fear and grief that pursues the parents of soldiers; the way that even routine acts of parental devotion become fraught and difficult when children are preparing to head off to war.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "spasms of paper red"
- **Lines 5-6:** "disrupting a blockade / of yellow bias binding around your blazer."
- **Line 7:** "Sellotape bandaged around my hand"
- **Lines 10-11:** " steeled the softening / of my face"
- **Lines 15-16:** "the gelled / blackthorns of your hair"
- **Lines 16-18:** "All my words / flattened, rolled, turned into felt, / slowly melting"
- **Lines 21-22:** "A split second / and you were away, intoxicated"
- **Lines 27-28:** "my stomach busy / making tucks, darts, pleats"
- **Lines 33-34:** "The dove pulled freely against the sky, / an ornamental stitch"

SIMILE

"Poppies" contains two similes. The first appears in lines 11-14. The speaker is anxious about her child going off to fight in a war. She fears for the child's safety, so she longs nostalgically for an earlier moment—when the child was younger, more affectionate, and most importantly, safe:

> ... I wanted to graze my nose
> across the tip of your nose, play at
> being Eskimos like we did when
> you were little.

The simile underlines the speaker's fundamental desire: she doesn't just want to express affection for her child, she wants to return to an earlier moment in time when she could protect and shield her child from the world. In this way, the simile also underlines the dangers of the present—which are so severe

that the only escape the speaker sees is to retreat into the past.

The poem's second simile appears in lines 30-32. When the speaker reaches the "war memorial" on the "top of the hill," she leans against it "like a wishbone." A wishbone is a small bone in the neck of birds. Traditionally, one breaks it and makes a wish—hence its name. In comparing herself to a "wishbone," the speaker suggests several things at once. First, it suggests that she is frail and fragile: a wishbone is delicate and easily broken. Second, the speaker suggests that she *wants* to be broken, like a wishbone: if she could sacrifice herself to bring home her child, she would. The poem's two similes thus both express the depth of the speaker's anxiety and grief as her child goes off to war. And both express her limited options to make the situation better: after all, she can't retreat into the past, and even if she were broken like a wishbone, it wouldn't bring her child back.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-14:** "I wanted to graze my nose / across the tip of your nose, play at / being Eskimos like we did when / you were little."
- **Line 32:** "like a wishbone."

EXTENDED METAPHOR

At the heart of "Poppies" is an extended metaphor. In one reading, the poem describes a fairly mundane scene: a mother sends her child off to school. But the speaker offers hints throughout the poem that the reader shouldn't understand this as a literal event. Rather, it is an extended metaphor for a child leaving to fight in a war. (Of course, on another reading, the poem *literally* describes sending the child off to war. The two readings are not incompatible, and in fact reinforce each other.)

The speaker offers a number of subtle clues to help the reader put this together. For instance, the poem begins with the speaker pinning a remembrance poppy on her child's uniform. The remembrance poppy is a symbol of World War I—and, more broadly, it represents the rituals that people use to deal with the grief and mourning that follows war.

This sense is reinforced in the following lines. For instance, the speaker describes her child's hair as "blackthorns": it looks like barbed wire. The child seems to be absorbing war and its instruments; the child's own body becomes a battlefield, scarred with barbed wire. And in line 18, the speaker describes herself as "brave" as she lets her child go—which suggests that she is making a grand and difficult sacrifice.

With this extended metaphor in mind, several of the poem's other details come into focus. For instance, when the speaker describes her child as "intoxicated" in line 22, she's referring to the patriotic fervor that soldiers feel as they head off to war. And when the speaker herself ends up at the "war memorial" at the end of line 31, it seems that she is there not simply on a day hike, but as a mourner, grieving for her child who died in battle.

The extended metaphor thus clarifies the stakes of the poem: however one interprets its literal events, it's about the grief and anxiety that parents face as they send their children to fight—and die—in war.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-35

VOCABULARY

Armistice Sunday (Line 1) - This appears to be a combination of Armistice Day, which falls every year on November 11, and Remembrance Sunday, which takes place on the second Sunday of November. Both are public holidays in the United Kingdom that honor the soldiers who died fighting in World War I. (In the United States, it is celebrated as Veteran's Day).

Poppies (Line 2) - Bright red flowers. Traditionally, poppies are used for mourning. Since 1921, paper poppies—also called remembrance poppies—have been used to commemorate the dead from World War I. In England, they are laid on the graves of soldiers who died in the war and school children pin them to their school uniforms.

War Graves (Line 3) - The graves of those who died fighting in war. Though the mentions of poppies and "Armistice Sunday" specifically evoke World War I, these graves could belong to soldiers who perished in any number of wars.

Lapel (Line 4) - The folded front flap of a suit coat or jacket.

Spasms (Line 5) - Sudden shudders or an involuntary contraction of the muscles. The speaker uses the word metaphorically. The petals of the paper poppy are tightly folded and ridged.

Blockade (Line 5) - A solid block, a continuous line. Usually the word refers to military maneuver, in which a fleet of ships blocks access to a port or city. The speaker uses the word metaphorically here: the yellow "bias binding" is like a blockade because it is continuous, unbroken as it runs around the lapels and edges of the speaker's child's blazer.

Yellow Bias Binding (Line 6) - A strip of decorative yellow cloth that runs along the lapels and edges of the "blazer."

Sellotape (Line 7) - Clear tape.

Eskimos (Line 13) - An obsolete word for the Inuit peoples who live in Alaska and Northern Canada. The speaker is referring to "Eskimo Kissing," in which two people rub their noses together. The name comes from European explorers, who witnessed Inuit peoples rubbing their noses together as a greeting.

Blackthorns (Line 16) - Black curls. The speaker's child has curly, black hair, which has been fixed in place by hair gel.

Intoxicated (Line 22) - Drunk, dizzy, or delirious.

Tucks (Line 28) - Folds in on itself. The speaker is anxious and her stomach is upset: it feels like it has folded up or tied itself in knots.

Darts (Line 28) - Moves around quickly and unpredictably.

Pleats (Line 28) - Collapses into tight folds, like the pleats on a pair of pants.

Reinforcements (Line 29) - The word usually appears in military contexts, where it describes back-up troops. Here, the speaker uses it metaphorically to describe articles of winter clothing that would protect her against the cold.

Wishbone (Line 32) - A two-pronged bone found in some birds. People often snap the bone in half while making a wish.

Pulled (Line 33) - Flew back and forth.

Ornamental Stitch (Line 34) - Embroidery. In other words, the dove is like thread that someone sews into a garment to make it look good—not to serve any function or purpose.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Poppies" is made up of four stanzas written in free verse. In other words, it doesn't have a meter or rhyme scheme, and the stanzas are different lengths as well—some of them are as short as 6 lines, some as long as 11. This gives the poem a conversational, intimate feeling. Instead of adhering to a specific pattern, the poem shifts in accordance with the speaker's emotions: sometimes it feels expansive and full of energy, sometimes quiet and restrained. In a way, this is fitting: the poem describes a speaker struggling with her child growing up and going off to war. That struggle is reflected in the poem's form. Where a strict, regular form might suggest that the speaker is confident and collected, the poem's variations and shifts echo the anxiety and insecurity that the speaker feels as she watches her child venture out into a dangerous, threatening world.

Compared to some free verse poems, though, "Poppies" is relatively controlled. It has variations in line and stanza length, but those variations are small compared to a poem like Langston Hughes's "I, Too" or T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," both of which use very short lines—sometimes only one syllable—and very long lines right next to each other. The formal variations in "Poppies" suggest that the speaker is struggling to control her emotions. But, they also suggest that the speaker *is* managing to do so, at least publicly. As the speaker says in line 18, "I was brave." Though the speaker experiences a lot of turmoil and anxiety about her child going out to fight, she puts a good face on things.

METER

"Poppies" is written in free verse, which means it doesn't have a set meter. Like many free verse poems, its rhythms shift with the speaker's emotions—and so do the number of syllables in each line. Some lines approach regular meter, like line 26:

> and this is where it has led me…

This is a pretty good, though not perfect, line of iambic tetrameter, a meter with a da DUM rhythm and four poetic feet per line. It makes sense that this line would exhibit some metrical regularity: the speaker is describing being led to the "church yard walls" almost against her will. Meter similarly leads the poet, governing how the poem sounds. But the next line is in a totally different:

> skirting the church yard, my stomach busy

This line has 10 syllables, with an uneven and unpredictable mix of iambs (unstressed-stressed) and trochees (stressed-unstressed). The line feels as anxious and unsettled as the speaker's stomach. Even though the poem does occasionally have metrically regular lines, it thus uses shifts in its rhythm—like this one—to give the reader an immediate, visceral sense of the speaker's discomfort and anxiety.

RHYME SCHEME

"Poppies" is written in free verse, so it doesn't have a set rhyme scheme. The poem relies on other devices—like alliteration and enjambment—to help it feel rhythmical and musical. Indeed, the poem only uses rhyme once, in lines 25-27:

> 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

The /ee/ sound in "tree" lines up with "me": a perfect rhyme. That makes a certain kind of sense: the speaker is describing how he or she follows the "single dove" almost involuntarily, going wherever it goes. As the rhyme runs from one line to the next, it feels like the speaker wandering around her village, following the dove where it leads. The next rhyme, though, is a bit off. Where "tree" and "me" both rhyme stressed syllables, but in "busy," the /ee/ sound falls on an unstressed syllable. After the strong rhythm established in lines 25-26, line 27 thus feels syncopated. It mimics the speaker's "busy" "stomach": it is unsteady and unsettled, anxious and off. The poem's only instance of rhyme thus carefully tracks the speaker's emotions as she deals with the anxiety that comes from her child metaphorically heading off to war.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Poppies" is a parent seeing a child off

(depending on how you read the poem, either to school or to war). Although the speaker never explicitly mentions her gender, it is safe to assume that the speaker is a woman. In interviews, the poet, Jane Weir, has stressed that the speaker is a mother, and that few war poems are written from the perspectives of mothers. The poem is thus an innovative and forceful intervention in the tradition of war poetry, asking its readers to empathize with those who stay home during violent conflicts.

Of course, especially in today's day and age, a father could certainly be the one seeing a child off as well! The child here is not given a gender either; though soldiers in WWI would have been men, the poem is not tied to a specific conflict and this child could also easily be a young woman.

In any case, part of the poem's power comes from the contrast between the way the speaker and her child feel. The speaker's child is full of enthusiasm and ready to go to war. In lines 20-21, the speaker notes that the "world" seems to this child "like a treasure chest overflowing." But the speaker doesn't share her child's enthusiasm. She focuses on the loss of life, the early deaths, the grief and mourning that come from war.

As such, the speaker wants to retreat to an earlier moment—when she could protect her child from the violence of the world. She dreams about playing affectionate games with her child when the child was "little." The speaker's mood in the poem is thus complicated. She is nostalgic for an earlier time, and is also deeply anxious and unsettled about the present. And, as the poem ends, it suggests that the speaker's child has died in battle—so the speaker's nostalgia turns to grief and mourning.

SETTING

"Poppies" describes a November morning in an English village. The speaker pins a paper poppy on her child's uniform, before sending the child off, either to school or to war. After the child leaves, the speaker follows a "single dove" to the graveyard of the local church and then up a hill, where there's a "war memorial." The speaker doesn't describe these different locations: the reader never gets a sense of what the village looks like or how far the walk is from house to church to hill—even though, as Weir has acknowledged in interviews about the poem, the village is based on her own home village, a place she knows well. Her decision to withhold details about the village itself is thus intentional and important to the poem: the speaker is focused on her anxiety, her memories, and the dangers she foresees for her child. The outside world falls away as the speaker wrestles with these fears and anxieties.

The poem was first published in 2005 and it seems to be set in the present: indeed, Jane Weir has described writing the poem in response to the deaths of British soldiers in the modern wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The references to "Armistice Sunday" and "remembrance poppies" also imply that it is set in England. Its message about the nature of grief, however, can be applied to any number of conflicts throughout history—or to anytime a parent must let their child head off to fend for themselves.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Jane Weir was born in Manchester, England, in 1963 to an English mother and an Italian father. She is the author of several collections of poetry, including *The Way I Dressed During the Revolution*, published in 2005—which contains "Poppies." Like many poems published in English toward the end of the 20th century and the start of the 21st, "Poppies" is a relatively relaxed poem in terms of formal. It's written in free verse, and it uses the sharp enjambments and variable rhythms that traditionally characterize such poems. But it's not engaged in any radical formal experiments, nor is it trying to break with tradition or generate wild poetic innovations (unlike the poets who developed free verse at the turn of the 20th century).

Instead, Weir's poem is focused on personal experience, which it renders in vivid detail. This places it in a tradition of contemporary poetry sometimes called "lyric narrative." Lyric narrative poems are written in free verse, but they don't get too crazy in terms of playing with form and structure. They are concerned with the precise, intimate details of everyday life, and they use those details to reflect on larger themes, problems, and ideas. Thus, in "Poppies," the speaker's anxieties about her child serve as an extended metaphor for the anxieties and grief that parents feel as their children go off to fight in wars.

Though Weir approaches war from a unique perspective—that of a parent—war poetry is not a new genre, and poets have long expressed the glory and horrors of war in verse. Take, for example, the many graphic anti-war poems of WWI soldier Wilfred Owen ("Futility," "Exposure," "Dulce et Decorum Est," "Anthem for Doomed Youth"), which focus on the visceral terror and meaninglessness of such conflicts. Other modern British poets have also tackled the lasting trauma of warfare, as can been seen in Owen Sheers's "Mametz Wood," Simon Armitage's "Remains," and Carol Ann Duffy's "War Photographer."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Poppies" was first published in 2005, and it is set in present day England. It was written in response to a call from Carol Ann Duffy for more poems about the deaths of British soldiers in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Those wars began in 2001 and 2004, in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. They were led by the United States, but British

troops fought in both.

However, the speaker of the poem does not explicitly mention these conflicts. Instead, she alludes to World War I, which represents the violence, war, and trauma that threatens her child. World War I (19014-1919) was one of the defining conflicts of the 20th century. It involved most of the countries in Europe. Although many Europeans initially celebrated the start of the war—imagining a brief, glorious conflict—the war quickly bogged down. On the Western Front, French and English troops fought German soldiers from fixed trenches—and in huge battles, like Verdun, hundreds of thousands of soldiers died for gains of a few inches.

The war finally ended on November 11th, 1919, a date celebrated as Armistice Day in England and Veteran's Day in the United States. In 1921, people started using red poppies to commemorate the soldiers who died in the war, wearing them on their coats and jackets and laying them on memorials and graves. Many of the battlefields in eastern France where the war was fought are planted with poppies now. Although the war ended 80 years before "Poppies" was written, it remains a potent reminder of the capacity of human beings to cause unspeakable pain and suffering for their fellow creatures.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Remembrance Poppies — An article from the British Legion about the history of the Remembrance Poppy. (https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/get-involved/remembrance/about-remembrance/the-poppy)
- Jane Weir's Life Story — A brief biography of Jane Weir from the British-based Poetry Archive, with links to some of her other poems. (https://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/jane-weir)
- Jane Weir Discusses and Reads "Poppies" — The poet walks around her village in the north of England, showing off the key places in the poem and discussing her thinking behind it. At the 6:30 mark she reads the poem aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8QIcYdJPG0)
- World War I — A brief history of World War I from Britannica. (https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I)
- "Exit Wounds" — An article on the British poet Carol Ann Duffy's decision to commission war poems in response to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which lead to Jane Weir writing "Poppies." (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jul/25/war-poetry-carol-ann-duffy)

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