Context – Poppies was written by Jane Weir, and was published in The Guardian in 2009.

Poppies – Poppies are a type of flowering plant that have become known as a symbol of remembrance for military personnel killed serving the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand in war. Artificial poppies are traditionally worn in these countries in the lead up to Remembrance/Armistice Day. The poppy as a symbol of remembrance was first inspired by the WWI poem in Flanders Fields, which describes how poppies were the first flowers to grow in the fields churned up by soldiers’ graves.

Armidice Day – Armistice Day is celebrated every year on the 11th of November in order to celebrate the Armistice signed by the Allies of World War I at the end of the First World War, which ended the hostilities on November 11, 1918.

The Iraq/ Afghan Conflicts – The War in Afghanistan began in 2001 after the attacks on the Twin Towers. The USA and its allies invaded Afghanistan in order to rid the country of Al-Qaeda, removing the Taliban from power. The war continued after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 when the United States-led government invaded Iraq in order to overthrow Saddam Hussein. In both wars, the loss of life and injury for those involved has been enormous.

Imagery – Weir uses imagery to accentuate the contrast between the horrific manner in which the son has assumed, and the comforts of life. For example, the use of the term “Selotape Bandaged” causes the reader to consider a battlefield injury, whilst on another level give a more comforting image of the way in which life had developed off her son’s blazer. The same is true of her pinning the poppy on her son’s lapel, a nurturing image which is contrasted with the words ‘spasm’, and ‘red’, presenting the idea of a horrific, violent death.

Quote: “I pinned one on your lapel, crimped petals, spams of paper red, disrupting a bloodeace”

Varied Verbs – A wide range of verbs are used to demonstrate the manner in which actions are carried out – this helps to carry the theme and key messages of the poem. For example, the narrator reminisces about fond memories from the past, using positive verbs such as ‘play’ and ‘smoother’. Verbs used to describe interactions in the present all offer connotations of pain and discomfort, e.g. ‘flattened’, ‘pinned’, and ‘graze’. The variation in these verbs helps to form the sharp contrasts that shape the poem.

Quote: “After you’d gone I went into your bedroom, released a song bird from its cage.”

Interesting Adjectives – Weir uses few adjectives throughout the poem only in keeping with its simple and sombre tone but those that are included are hugely descriptive. For example, the use of the adjective ‘intoxicated’ gives the reader a depth of understanding about both the son’s mindset heading into war (enthusiastic) and the narrator’s trepidation regarding the son’s mindset.

Quote: “If you were little I resisted the impulse to rub fingers through hair, etching stories in brain.”

Form/Structure – The line length appears to have a strong, regular form. There are four stanzas – the first and last have 5 lines, whilst the middle stanzas have 11 and 12. But, a closer look reveals that 19 of the 35 lines in the poem have breaks in the middle. This is suggestive of a narrator that is trying to keep calm, but is breaking down inside.

Quote: “play or being Eileanora we did when you were little I resisted the impulse”

Narrative Structure – The time sequence throughout the poem changes along with the narrator’s emotions. The reader is led through the time sequence from ‘three days before’ (line 1), ‘before you left’ (3), ‘after you’d gone’ (22), ‘to this is where it has led me’ (26). At the end of the poem, the narrator finds themselves caught between the past and the present.

Quote: “and this is where it has led me, skirting the churchyard walls, my stomach busy...”

Poems for Comparison

Poppies can be compared and contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of remembrance.

Oxymorons

Weir uses oxymorons to create a sense of tension between the narrator’s feelings and the harsh realities of war. For example, the phrase “suddenly the机械ical” suggests that the narrator cannot touch, since the son is no longer a child.

Exposure

Weir’s use of exposure is typical of those exhibited between a parent and their child (in this case likely a mother and son). The speaker describes the narrator’s feelings of guilt as they wonder about the impact of their actions on the son. The poem is full of imagery showing the violence and horror of war (red, spasm) which is incompatible with the tone of the poem. The narrator has led to the son’s death, but it had not led to his... Nightingale is said to be the poet’s perspective on letting the children go, the GCC and the impact of war.

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Remembrance – The theme of remembrance is particularly eminated through the poem – as expected from the title (poppies are a symbol of remembrance) and the 1st line (Armistice Day is a day in which people lost in war are remembered). The narrator in this poem recalls with fondness memories from her son’s childhood.

Loss and Suffering – This poem deals with the loss and suffering. However, in this case, the poem is told from a unique perspective: not from those who are present or are reporting on war, but the sense of loss and suffering felt by those left behind – the secondary victims of war.

ANALYSIS

Line/Line Analysis

STANZA | LINE | POEM
----- | ----- | -----
1 | 1 | Three days before Armistice Sunday
2 | 3 | and poppies had already been placed
3 | 5 | on individual war graves.
4 | 7 | Before you left,
5 | 10 | I pinned one on your lapel,
6 | 12 | cramped petals,
7 | 14 | spams of paper red,
8 | 16 | disrupting a bloodeace
9 | 18 | of yellow bias bounding around your blazer.

The poem starts with the speaker’s close relative (assumed to be a son) leaving. Armistice Sunday is associated with remembrance/Armistice Day in the first line sets the tone of the poem. The description of the poppy provides a powerful piece of imagery – the red, spams of paper red could just as easily symbolise a soldier who has been brutally killed. The speaker see’s the poppy as a comfort to run through using the symbol of remembrance as a token of goodbye.

The behaviour of the other speakers are of typical of those exhibited between a parent and their child (in this case likely a mother and son). The speaker describes the narrator’s feelings of guilt as they wonder about the impact of their actions on the son. The poem is full of imagery showing the violence and horror of war (red, spams) which is incompatible with the tone of the poem. The narrator has led to the son’s death, but it had not led to his... Nightingale is said to be the poet’s perspective on letting the children go, the GCC and the impact of war.

Another metaphor is used to describe the narrator as ‘spasm’, referencing the fact that they feel as though they are following spasm inside through the despair of the parting moment. The verb ‘throw’ suggests that the narrator wants this desperate moment to be over, her servant is ‘intoxicated’ by the weighing of the songbird’s weight which is used to describe the narrator ‘letting go’ of something that has brought them joy. Doves are often seen as symbols of peace, leading the narrator to follow it – giving the idea of them hoping for peace, but also representing the idea that they have little to do with their son’s fate.

The speaker is led by the dove to a war memorial. Here the bird departs – thus suggesting that its sole purpose was to lead the speaker there. We can imply from this that the son has died in the war – the memory of him is gone as a box. As the note on the son will ever have with him. Even in the final stanzas, the narrator introduces the idea of a ‘memorial clothes’ (stitch as there is earlier in the poem (blazer, scarf, gloves) is representative of domestic comfort, in contrast to language showing the violence and horror of war (red, spams). Ending the poem, the narrator reaches for memories but only hears silence.