



Poppies in July

Sylvia Plath

Little poppies, little hell flames,
Do you do no harm?

You flicker. I cannot touch you.
I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns

And it exhausts me to watch you
Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth.

A mouth just bloodied.
Little bloody skirts!

There are fumes I cannot touch.
Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules?

If I could bleed, or sleep! -
If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!

Or your liquors seep to me, in this glass capsule,
Dulling and stilling.

But colorless. Colorless

Vocabulary

Exhausts - tires, drains

Hell Flames - Christian tradition suggests that hell is a place of flame and torment

Opiates - drugs, some derived from poppies that deaden feelings and make the user sleepy

Nauseous - make feel sick or unwell

Pre-reading task

- What feelings and emotions would you associate with the words Poppies and July?
- What expectations did the title create when you first read it?

Questions

1. To whom does the poet address the poem?
2. Why does the poet want to touch the flowers?
3. Do you find her desire to put her hands 'amongst the flames' unsettling?
4. What does the fact that 'nothing burns' tell us about the poet's mental state?
5. Plath describes the petals of the poppies as being 'wrinkly and clear red', with what does she compare them?
6. How could a mouth be 'bloodied'? Do you think this injury is caused by someone else or could it be self inflicted?
7. Why do you think the poet wishes she 'could bleed or sleep'?
8. The poet refers to 'opiates', 'nauseous capsules' and 'liquors'. What do you think she wants from these substances?
9. What do you think the line 'Dulling and stilling' means?
10. The poem starts with a description of red poppies but ends 'But colorless. Colorless'. Why do you think this is? What is the effect of the repetition of the word 'Colorless'?

Overview

The poet address a field of 'Poppies in July'. What would ordinarily be seen as a beautiful and positive image has darker connotations for Plath. The flowers are compared to 'hell flames', sources of torment. Plath puts her hands amongst the flame, perhaps to feel pain, but feels nothing.

She speaks of how the poppies 'exhaust' her, perhaps indicating depression or emotional turmoil. Her description of the poppies is again unsettling, using violent imagery of 'a mouth just bloodied' and 'Little bloody skirts'.

She seems drawn to the drug connotations of the poppies, speaking of 'opiates', 'nauseous capsules' and 'liquors'. Perhaps she is seeking relief from her mental turmoil, perhaps permanently?

The poem ends with a bleak depiction of mental exhaustion and dullness. The poet wishes to 'bleed, or sleep!'. Any form of relief.

The final line ends with the repetition of the word 'Colorless'. A depiction of the poet's mental state or her desire for an escape from pain?

Key Points

- Deeply Personal
- Violent Imagery
- Unsettling
- Anguish
- Depression
- Self-Harm

Word Bank

- Create a bank of words you might use when writing about the poet's work.
- Some are provided for you.
- Add your own.
- You can write definitions of words that you don't know.
- You can pick out suitable quotes to go with the words.

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Past Questions

Honours

2019

4. **Sylvia Plath**

Discuss how effectively Plath uses a range of images to develop her themes and add drama to her poetry. Develop your response with reference to the poems by Sylvia Plath on your course.

2014

4. **Sylvia Plath**

“Plath makes effective use of language to explore her personal experiences of suffering and to provide occasional glimpses of the redemptive power of love.”

Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to both the themes and language found in the poetry of Sylvia Plath on your course.

2013

4. **Sylvia Plath**

“Plath’s provocative imagery serves to highlight the intense emotions expressed in her poetry.”

To what extent do you agree or disagree with this assessment of her poetry? Support your answer with suitable reference to the poetry of Sylvia Plath on your course.

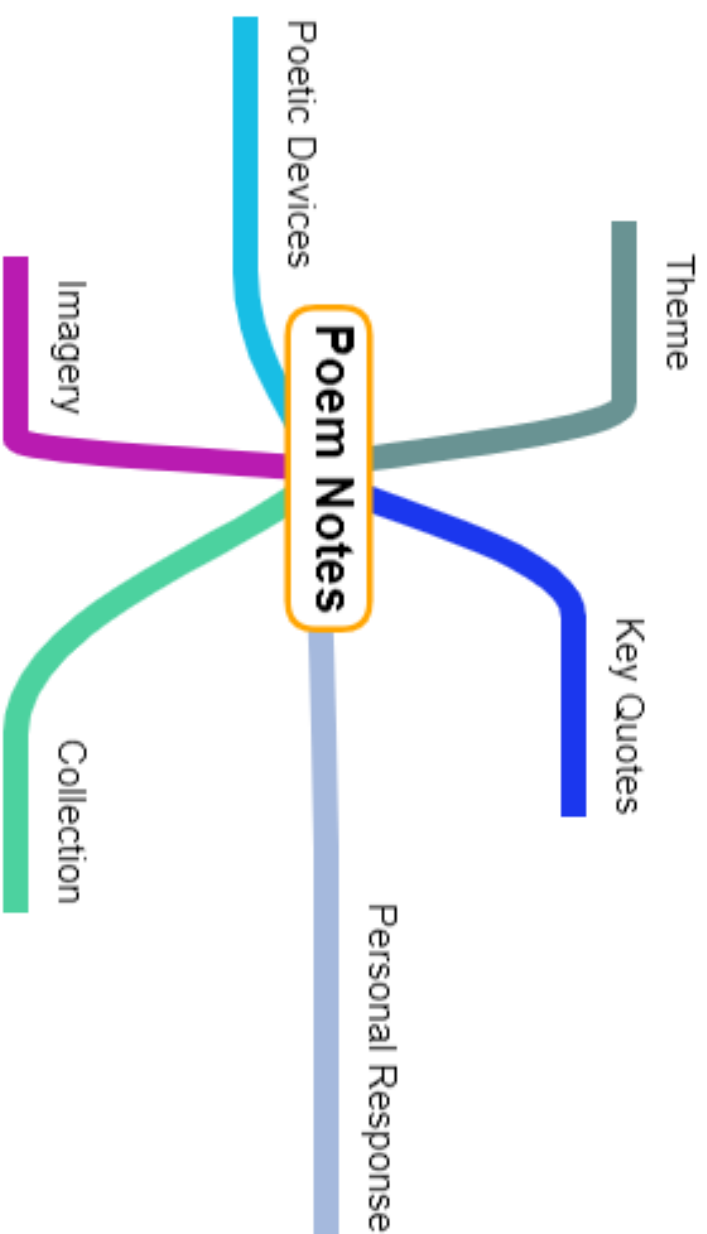
2007

4. **“The poetry of Sylvia Plath is intense, deeply personal, and quite disturbing.”**

Do you agree with this assessment of her poetry? Write a response, supporting your points with the aid of suitable reference to the poems you have studied.

2003

3. If you were asked to give a public reading of a small selection of Sylvia Plath’s poems, which ones would you choose to read? Give reasons for your choices supporting them by reference to the poems on your course.



Mind Map