

To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaja, married in Dublin on 9 September 2009

When you look out across the fields
And you both see the same star
Pitching its tent on the point of the steeple —
That is the time to set out on your journey,
With half a loaf and your mother's blessing. [5]

Leave behind the places that you knew:
All that you leave behind you will find once more,
You will find it in the stories;
The sleeping beauty in her high tower
With her talking cat asleep [10]
Solid beside her feet — you will see her again.

When the cat wakes up he will speak in Irish and Russian
And every night he will tell you a different tale
About the firebird that stole the golden apples,
Gone every morning out of the emperor's garden, [15]
And about the King of Ireland's Son and the Enchanter's Daughter.

The story the cat does not know is the Book of Ruth
And I have not time to tell you how she fared
When she went out at night and she was afraid,
In the beginning of the barley harvest, [20]
Or how she trusted to strangers and stood by her word:
You will have to trust me, she lived happily ever after.

Annotations

Niall Woods: the poet's son

Xenya Ostrovskaja: the poet's daughter-in-law

[5] **With half a loaf and your mother's blessing:** reference to the English folktale 'The Red Ettin'

[14] **firebird that stole the golden apples:** reference to the Russian fairy tale 'Tsarevitch Ivan, the Firebird and the Grey Wolf'

[16] **King of Ireland's Son and the Enchanter's Daughter:** reference to the Irish folktale 'Fedelma, the Enchanter's Daughter'

[17] **Book of Ruth:** The Book of Ruth features in the Old Testament of the Bible. Ruth lived in the land of Moab. When her husband died, she made the following promise to her mother-in-law Naomi: 'Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.' Naomi decided to return to her native land of Israel. Ruth, true to word, went with her. They settled near Bethlehem, where Ruth found work helping with the harvest. At first Ruth found Israel to be a strange and alienating environment. But she eventually found love and happiness in her new home.

[19] **When she went out at night:** One evening Ruth ventured out to the household of a man named Boaz in the hope that he would take her as his wife. After a number of complications, she and Boaz were happily married.

Tease It Out

- The poem tells the story of two lovers who set out to find one another:
 - The lovers set out at the same time, each from his or her community. What signals that their respective journeys must commence?
 - Do you get the impression that the lovers have met before?
 - Do you get the impression that their communities are close together or far apart? Give a reason for your answer.
 - Do their mothers approve or disapprove of these journeys?
- Each of the lovers takes ‘half a loaf’ on his or her journey. Why do think they do this? Rank the following in order of plausibility:
 - Both couples came from very poor households and half a loaf of bread was the only provisions they could afford for their journey.
 - They knew their journey would be a short one and that they didn’t need much food.
 - The two half-loaves symbolise how the lovers are destined to be together. It’s only by combining with one another that they can be truly whole.
- What phrase indicates that the lovers, once they find each other, will set up home in a new community, somewhere in between their respective homelands?
- What role, according to the poet, will stories play for the lovers as they begin their new life together?
- Where, according to the poet, does Sleeping Beauty lie as she slumbers?
- What is unusual about Sleeping Beauty’s cat?
- Class Discussion:** ‘You will see her again’. What does this suggest about the couple’s relationship to the tale of Sleeping Beauty? Can you suggest when the couple might have seen Sleeping Beauty for the first time?
- The talking cat steps out of the lovers’ storybook and into their real lives. How do you think the couple responded to this extraordinary event? Suggest three adjectives that might describe their reaction.
- What two languages does the talking cat speak?
- What will the talking cat do for the lovers every evening?
- Group Discussion:** Research the story of the ‘Emperor and the Firebird’, as well as the story of the ‘King of Ireland’s Son and the Enchanter’s Daughter’.
 - Working as a group, write a paragraph for each story in which you summarise its main events.
 - Can you identify one similarity and one difference between the two stories?
 - The talking cat will tell the couple many stories. Why do you think the poet chose to focus on these two?
 - How do they relate to the couple’s situation?

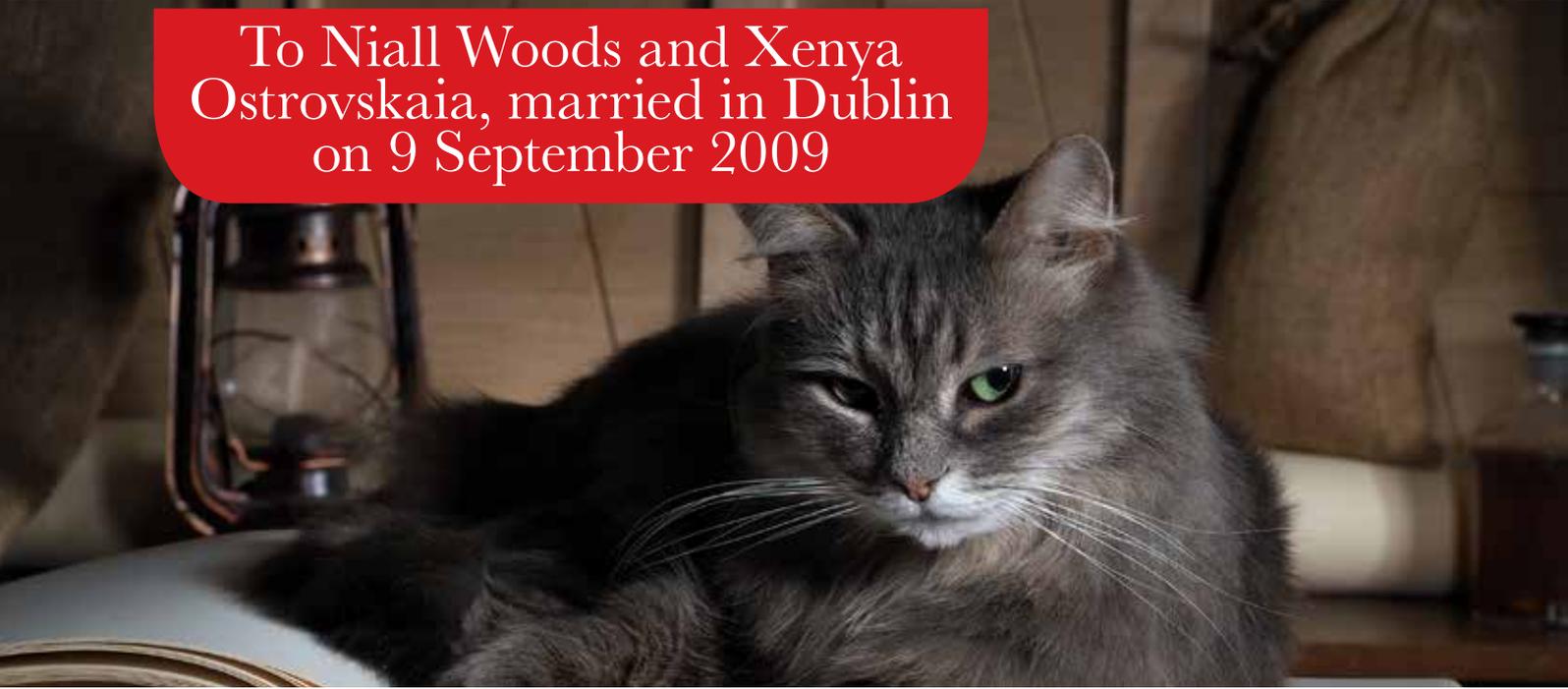
Exam Prep

- Personal Response:** ‘This poem highlights the excitement but also the challenges of leaving one’s family and homeland in order to start a new life elsewhere. It also emphasises how stories allow us to retain a link to our homelands even when we are far away.’ Write a paragraph in response to this statement.
- Class Discussion:** ‘You will have to trust me’. How would you characterise the poet’s response to the fact that her son is embarking on a new life? Discuss this question as a class.
- Exam Prep:** ‘Like Ruth, lovers must not only keep their word, but also learn to trust the word of others.’ Write a paragraph in response to this statement.
- Exam Prep:** Pick out a couple of your favourite lines or images from the poem and explain why you like them.

Language Lab

- The poet steps into her story and addresses its characters directly. What biblical story does she tell them?
- Class Discussion:** According to the poet, the story of Ruth is the only story unknown to the talking cat. Can you suggest why this might be the case? Does it tell us something about the special nature of this particular tale? Or is the cat’s ignorance of this story simply a quirky detail?
- What phrase indicates that Ruth found Israel’s people strange and unsettling at first? Did she manage to overcome these feelings?
- To what extent are the couple in the poet’s skillfully woven fairy story the same as the real-life Niall and Xenya? Can you identify one similarity between the real couple and the fictional one? Can you identify one major difference? How do you think Niall and Xenya must have felt when they read this poem?

To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaia, married in Dublin on 9 September 2009



FIRST ENCOUNTER

I This poem is set in a fantastical, magical version of Europe, one that resembles a land of fairytale. The poem describes a couple who live on opposite sides of the continent: a boy who lives in Ireland and a girl who lives in Russia. Both, it seems, live in rural environments, in villages surrounded by fields.

The boy and girl have never met. But each has heard, somehow, about the other. And they know that it's their destiny to be together. Perhaps they were both visited by a magical bird, who informed each about the other's existence. Or perhaps they experienced some strange shared dream.

In any event, both the boy and the girl have heard the same prophecy and have received the same set of mystical instructions. They must wait until they see a particular star in the night sky. Then they must set out to find one another: 'That is the time to set out on your journey'. The boy will depart from Ireland and the girl will depart from Russia. They will meet somewhere in the middle of Europe and start a new life together.

The mothers of the boy and girl will experience mixed feelings when this moment of departure comes. They will be sad, of course, to see their children leave and start a new life in a foreign land. But they will understand, too, that their children must find happiness and fulfil their destiny. Their mothers, then, will offer the boy and girl support and encouragement, giving them their 'blessing' as they set out on their extraordinary journey.

The boy and girl, like many fairytale figures, come from extremely humble origins. They receive no gold coins, no

jewellery or fine clothes as they set out on their respective journeys. Their mothers, alas, can offer them nothing but a 'blessing'. Indeed, they are both so poor that they set out with only the most meagre of provisions, each carrying 'half loaf' of bread.

But the bread also serves a symbolic function. They both set out with half a loaf, symbolising how they are both half of a greater unity, one that will only be complete when they finally come together in the middle of the European continent.

II In order to be together, the boy and girl must 'leave behind the places that [they] knew'. They must leave behind the only homes they've ever known – the characters and landscapes they've been familiar with all their lives – and set up home in some foreign land. They will both, therefore, experience a great deal of homesickness as they embark on their new life together.

But stories, she suggests, will allow the boy and girl to rediscover the lives they'll have left behind: 'All that you leave behind you will find once more,/ You will find it in the stories':

- When the boy and girl were children, they 'saw' Sleeping Beauty. Their parents would have read them this ancient tale, the words and illustrations bringing the princess vividly to life in their imaginations.
- The boy and the girl, as they start their new life together, will once again 'see' Sleeping Beauty: 'you will see her again'. They will re-read this old tale together, no doubt in some old story book, and the words and illustrations will once again bring the princess vividly to life.
- Re-reading Sleeping Beauty, and other fairy stories they first heard when they were children, will allow them to reconnect with their childhoods and the homelands they have left behind.

III

The boy and girl, according to the poet, will find themselves captivated by one illustration in particular: a picture of Sleeping Beauty asleep in her 'high tower' with her companion – a magical talking cat – curled up sleeping 'beside her feet'. Then, according to the poet, the boy and girl will experience something extraordinary. They will see the illustration of the talking cat magically come to life. The cat will 'wake up' and leap from the pages of the story book into their lives.

This strange being will live with the girl and boy. It will 'speak in Russian and Irish', their native languages (though this magical creature, we sense, will be fluent in every human language). It will tell them a 'different tale' every evening. Some of these tales will come from Russia, such as 'Tsarevitch Ivan and the Fire Bird'. Others will be Irish in origin, such as 'the King of Ireland's Son and the Enchanter's Daughter'.

The cat's stories, then, will allow the boy and girl to foster a connection with their native lands. These stories will allow them – in an imaginative or metaphorical sense – to revisit the countries in which they were born and spent their childhoods.

IV

We get the impression that the magical cat, will be like a living encyclopaedia of stories, that it will know folk tales from every country in the world. In fact the only story 'the cat does not know' is that of Ruth, which appears in the Old Testament of the Bible.

Ruth was from the land of Moab. When her husband died, she made the following promise to her mother-in-law Naomi: 'Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God'. Naomi decided to return to her native land of Israel. Ruth 'stood by her word' and went with her. Ruth and Naomi settled near Bethlehem, where Ruth found work helping with the 'barley harvest'.

At first Ruth found Israel to be a strange and alienating environment. But gradually she 'trusted to strangers', coming to understand and appreciate the people of her new home. The poet describes how Ruth 'went out at night' to visit the home of a man called Boaz, with the hope that he might marry her. Ruth, perhaps understandably, was 'afraid' as she made her way to Boaz's house, uncertain of how things would turn out. But eventually, after several complications, she and Boaz were married and lived happily together.

The poet would like to share the story of Ruth with the boy and girl. But she finds herself unable to do so: 'I have not time to tell you how she fared'. All she can do is mention the key aspects of the story. Ruth, the poet emphasises 'stood by her word' when she followed Naomi. And she 'trusted to strangers' when she found herself in a strange kingdom where she knew no-one.

A CLOSER READING

FAMILY

This poem is a wonderful example of an 'epithalamium', which is a poem written to celebrate a wedding day. The poet, in this instance, is celebrating the marriage of her son Niall Woods to his Russian bride Xenya Ostrovskaia. We can imagine how the poem might have been presented to the bride and groom on the day of their wedding, or perhaps even recited at the reception or the ceremony.

The poet, then, draws several parallels between Niall and Xenya's situation and that of the boy and girl:

- She suggests that Niall and Xenya, like the boy and girl, are destined to be together.
- She suggests that Niall and Xenya, like the boy and girl in the story, must 'Leave behind the places that [they] knew'. Niall and Xenya, once married, would neither be setting up home in Russia nor in Ireland, but in a third country unfamiliar to both of them.
- She suggests that Niall and Xenya, like the boy and girl, can use stories to reconnect with their respective homelands.

She suggests that Niall and Xenya, like the boy and girl, should look to the story of Ruth for guidance and inspiration. They, like Ruth, must keep their word, remaining faithful and true to one another. They, like Ruth, must learn to trust in strangers as they make their new home in a foreign land. If they can manage to do so then they – like Ruth – will live 'happily ever after'.

LOVE

This poem offers a moving portrayal of love, capturing both the excitement at the beginning of a relationship as well as the ups and downs that come with long-term commitment.

Perhaps the most moving line in the poem is the poet's simple declaration that 'You will have to trust me'. Here we sense the poet, as a mother, attempting to reassure her son and her new daughter-in-law as they embark on their new life together. The poet herself has lived and loved. She knows the challenges that Niall and Xenya will face as they navigate the ups and downs of married life together. She also knows that her son and daughter-in-law have what it takes to overcome those challenges. But, of course, she cannot prove to them that they will be all right. They will simply have to take her word for it.

Poppies in July

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 [5]
Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth.

A mouth just bloodied.
Little bloody skirts!
There are fumes that I cannot touch.

Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules? [10]
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. [15]

Annotations

[10] **opiates**: a family of highly addictive drugs derived from opium, which is in turn derived from the opium poppy

[10] **nauseous**: causing nausea

[10] **capsules**: refers to the poppy's seed pods; the milky fluid that seeps from these pods is used to produce opium

[13] **liquors**: intoxicating drinks

Tease It Out

- Class Discussion:** What would you expect from a poem titled 'Poppies in July'? What sort of imagery and atmosphere does the title suggest to you?
- The poet addresses the flowers, speaking directly to them. How would you characterise or describe her tone in the first two lines. Consider the following and say which seems most accurate:
 - She is being humorous
 - She is angry and upset
 - She is being objective and factual
 - She is being hysterical
- The poet compares the flowers to 'little hell flames'?
 - What does this suggest about the colour of the poppies?
 - What does it suggest about the manner in which the flowers move?
 - What does the comparison suggest about the poet's state of mind?
- 'I cannot touch you.' What is the poet trying to touch here? Is it the flowers or is she trying to touch the flames that she associates with the flowers? Give a reason for your answer.
- 'Nothing burns.' Do you think the poet is relieved or disappointed that this is the case? Give a reason for your answer.
- What effect does looking at the poppies have upon the poet?
- What simile does the poet use to describe the poppies in lines 6 to 7? What metaphor does she use in line 8?
- The poet would like to indulge in narcotics that are derived from poppies. What lines indicate this?
- What does the term 'liquors' suggest about the poet's attitude towards these narcotics?
- What does the term 'seeps' suggest about the manner in which they will enter her body?
- What effect will these 'liquors' have on her, according to line 14?
- Does the term 'colorless' refer to a) the opiates b) the poet herself or c) the manner in which the poet will perceive the world once the opiates have taken effect?
- What does this desire for colourlessness suggest about the poet's state of mind?

Exam Prep

- Personal Response:** Based on your reading of the poem, what do you think is causing the poet the greatest amount of distress? Rank the following in the order you consider most relevant:
 - She feels numb and exhausted.
 - She feels that her relationship with her husband is not working.
 - She feels overwhelmed by the demands of her life and the world around her.
- Class Discussion:** 'The poet is trapped in a state of unfeeling numbness and can see only two ways out: a narcotic slumber or intense physical pain!' Discuss this statement as a class. Does it fit with the class's reading of the poem?
- Exam Prep:** 'The poetry of Sylvia Plath is intense, deeply personal and quite disturbing.' Write a short essay in response to this statement, making reference to 'Poppies in July' and the two other poems on the course.
- Exam Prep:** Imagine that you have been asked to make a short YouTube video to accompany a reading of this poem. Describe some of the images, colours, music, sound effects, etc. that you would use as a background to the reading, and explain your choices, based on your knowledge of the poem.

Language Lab

- Poppies have long been used as a symbol of sleep, peace and death. How are these symbolic associations evident in Plath's poem?
- The poem features a number of instances of euphony and cacophony. Identify two instances of each and say how they contribute to the poem's mood and atmosphere.
- The poet uses the term 'marry' when she describes being hit in the mouth. What does this suggest about her personal life?
- The poet imagines herself being placed inside a 'glass capsule'. What fairy tale does this call to mind? What does it suggest about the poet's state of mind?
- Class Discussion:** 'In this poem, Plath exhibits an almost masochistic desire to experience pain!' Discuss this statement as a class. Identify two lines or phrases in the poem that support this statement and two lines or phrases that can be used against it.

Poppies in July



Plath with her husband and poet, Ted Hughes

FIRST ENCOUNTER

In 1962 Plath was living in rural Devon with her husband, poet Ted Hughes. In July of that year she discovered that Hughes was having an affair with another woman. 'Poppies in July' captures the great anguish, rage and pain that the poet experienced around this time, as she struggled to cope with the end of the relationship that had been so central to her life.

I

The poet is walking through the Devon countryside when she encounters a field of poppies. She imagines that these vivid red flowers are the flames of hell. Each 'little' flower resembles an individual tongue of flame. The poet describes how the poppies 'flicker', suggesting their slight, quick movements in the summer breeze. The term also suggests the flickering or unsteady movement of flames.

The poet expects these flames to be harmful. We get the impression, in fact, that she longs for them to burn her: 'I put my hands among the flames'. She is surprised and disappointed when 'Nothing burns', asking the poppies why they have failed to harm her: 'Do you do no harm?'

II

The poppies have a blood-red colour, which causes the poet to associate them with violence:

- She likens them to mouths that have been beaten and bloodied.
- She likens them to the skirts of women who are bleeding after some violent episode: 'Little bloody skirts!'

The poet, it seems, longs to experience such violence herself. She wants to be assaulted so that she bleeds: 'If I could bleed'.

She wants her own mouth to be beaten and bloodied: 'If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!'

III

The poet thinks of the 'opiates', drugs such as morphine, codeine and heroin that are obtained from the unripe seedpods of the poppy. These can be used as sedatives, inducing a deep slumber in those who take them. The poet longs to take such 'opiates' to dull the anguish she's experiencing.

She imagines that opiates are rising in 'fumes' from the flowers. But these are useless to her for she 'cannot touch' them. She longs, therefore, to harvest the seedpods or 'capsules' from which she will squeeze opiates in liquid form. This liquid is described as the poppies 'liquors', the flowers' potent, mind-altering beverage. It is also described as 'nauseous', reminding us that stomach upset is a common side-effect of such opiates.

The poet imagines drinking these 'liquors' and entering a state that can only be described as suspended animation. She imagines the drug working its way through her system. She imagines it would have a 'Dulling and stilling' effect. The anguish that she has been experiencing would start to dull and fade. Her agitated, highly strung body would gradually relax until she entered a state of oblivion.

The poet imagines her sedated body being placed in a 'glass capsule'. This capsule calls to mind the story of Snow White, where the title character, having eaten the enchanted apple, enters into a similar state of suspended animation and is placed in a glass coffin.

In the poem's final line, Plath repeats the word 'colorless'.

- This might refer to the liquid opiate, the greyish, milky sap or fluid drawn from the poppy seeds.
- Perhaps this repetition indicates the poet's desire to stop perceiving, at least for a little while. She wants to enter a deep slumber where she will no longer be exposed to the world's colours, shapes and sounds.
- But it might also be her own body that she wishes to become 'colorless'. As she enters a state of oblivion, she imagines the colour draining from her features, lending her a death-like hue.

FOCUS ON STYLE

Psychic Landscapes

Plath's use of seascapes and landscapes to represent or illustrate her inner feelings and psychological condition is one of the defining features of her poetry. 'Poppies in July', as we've outlined above, is less a portrait of an English summer landscape than a vivid representation of the poet's mental turmoil and anguish at this particular moment in her life.

Vivid and Unsettling Imagery

Like many of Plath's poems, 'Poppies in July' is rich in vivid and unsettling imagery. The flowers take on a disturbing and sinister appearance, resembling flames and bloodied faces. They seem to antagonise the poet, flickering endlessly before her in a manner that she finds exhausting.

Verbal Music

The poem consists of a series of short, snappy declarations that move from topic to topic in a jerking, almost unsettling manner, powerfully suggesting the poet's restless, agitated state of mind. This anguished state of mind is also suggested by the poet's use of cacophony. We see this in the 'r' and 'k' sounds in line 6 and the 'n' and 'p' sounds in line 10, where the hard, clashing vowel sounds create a grating verbal music.

Metaphor, Simile, Figures of Speech

This poem is a powerful example of apostrophe, which occurs when the speaker of a poem addresses an inanimate object. The poem is also distinguished by several memorable comparisons:

- The poem opens with a metaphor comparing each flower to a tongue of flame.
- Another metaphor compares the flowers to 'skirts'. We can imagine how the cup-like arrangement of each flower's petals might be said to resemble a skirt.
- A fine simile, meanwhile, compares the individual petals to flaps of bloodied, wrinkled skin, such that we might find at the edge of a gash or wound.

MENTAL ANGUISH

The poet's agitated, anguished state of mind is evident in her response to the poppies. To most people, the sight of a field of poppies in summer would be a thing of great joy, a scene of beauty and inspiration. But to the poet, the flowers conjure up highly disturbing images of hellish fire and of mouths that have been beaten and bloodied.

The poet longs for two seemingly very different things: she wants to 'bleed' or she wants to 'sleep'. We can understand her desire to sleep, to ingest some sedative that would plunge her into a deep slumber that would allow her to escape her anguished state of mind.

But the poet's masochistic longing to experience pain, to be beaten and to 'bleed' is harder to fathom.

- Perhaps she feels that pain, like some form of shock therapy, might jolt her out of her anguished state of mind (Plath would have been familiar with such treatments, having undergone electroconvulsive therapy in 1953).
- Perhaps she feels that physical pain would be a welcome distraction from the mental pain she is currently experiencing.
- Or perhaps this desire comes from low self-esteem and feelings of self-loathing.

We can imagine how this particular July would have been a low point in Plath's life. Her marriage to Hughes, after all, had been central to her existence: 'My marriage is the center of my being. I have given everything to it without reserve'. Her discovery that he was having an affair, therefore, left her feeling worthless and rejected. Hughes, according to one of her letters, told her 'he was just waiting for a chance to get out, that he was bored and stifled by me, a hag in a world of beautiful women'.



Raymond Carver

Raymond Carver (1938 to 1988) was an American short story writer and poet. The son of a mill-worker, Carver was born in Clatskanie, Oregon. He married when he was 19, and his first child was born the following year. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, he pursued writing while drinking heavily and attempting to hold down jobs as a delivery man, a janitor and a sawmill labourer, among others. In 1977, after the collapse of his first marriage, Carver finally quit drinking and began what he described as his 'second life'. His collection of short stories *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* appeared in 1981 to critical and popular acclaim. Carver is now considered one of the most talented and influential American writers of his generation.

The Juggler at Heaven's Gate

Behind the dirty table where Kristofferson is having
breakfast, there's a window that looks onto a nineteenth-
century street in Sweetwater, Wyoming. A juggler
is at work out there, wearing a top hat and a frock coat,
a little reed of a fellow keeping three sticks [5]
in the air. Think about this for a minute.
This juggler. This amazing act of the mind and hands.
A man who juggles for a living.
Everyone in his time has known a star,
or a gunfighter. Somebody, anyway, who pushes somebody [10]
around. But a juggler! Blue smoke hangs inside
this awful café, and over that dirty table where two
grownup men talk about a woman's future. And something,
something about the Cattlemen's Association.
But the eye keeps going back to that juggler. [15]
That tiny spectacle. At this minute, Ella's plight
or the fate of the emigrants
is not nearly so important as this juggler's exploits.
How'd he get into the act, anyway? What's his story?
That's the story I want to know. Anybody [20]
can wear a gun and swagger around. Or fall in love
with somebody who loves somebody else. But to juggle
for God's sake! To give your life to that.
To go with that. Juggling.

Annotations

Heaven's Gate: a 1980 American epic Western film written and directed by Michael Cimino. The film is set in the fictional town of Sweetwater, Wyoming. It stars Kris Kristofferson as James Averill and Christopher Walken as Nathan D. Champion. It centres on a conflict between the Cattlemen's Association, a powerful body of farmers and ranchers that run the town, and a group of recently arrived emigrants from Europe. The film also features a love triangle between Averill, Champion and a woman named Ella, played by Isabelle Huppert.

[1-2] **Kristofferson is having/ breakfast:** The poet is watching a scene where Averill, played by Kris Kristofferson, is having breakfast in the café on Sweetwater's main street.

[3-4] **A juggler/ is at work out there:** The window behind Averill looks out onto Sweetwater's main street. The poet notices that a juggler can be seen performing on the street.

[12-13] **two/ grownup men talk about a woman's future:** Averill is joined in the café by Champion and they discuss their rivalry for Ella's affections

[18] **exploits:** feats, achievements, escapades

[21] **swagger:** walk or behave in a very confident and arrogant or self-important way

Tease It Out

1. The poet is watching the film *Heaven's Gate*:
 - Which actor features in this particular scene?
 - The actor in question is playing the role of James Averill, a US Marshall. Where does Averill find himself in this particular scene?
 - What is Averill doing in this location?
 - Does it strike the poet as a pleasant environment? Give a reason for your answer.
 - True or false: The window behind Averill looks out onto the desert.
2. The poet notices a juggler outside:
 - True or false: The juggler is filmed so that he is in the foreground of the scene.
 - What phrases indicate that the juggler hopes to earn money through his efforts?
 - Suggest why the juggler might choose to dress in a rather formal and elaborate fashion.
 - The juggler is slender and small. What phrase indicates this?
 - The poet is moved by the juggler's mental and physical skill. What phrase indicates this?
3. Averill is joined by his rival Nathan D. Champion:
 - Describe in your own words what we learn about the two men's conversation.
 - What phrase indicates that the poet finds it difficult to focus on what the two characters are saying?
 - True or false: For the poet, 'at this minute', the juggler seems more important than the overall plot of the movie.
 - The poet seems surprised that the film's director, Michael Cimino, chose to include the juggler. What phrase indicates this?
 - Class Discussion: 'The poet wishes he was watching a different film'. Discuss this statement as a class.

Exam Focus

1. Class Discussion: 'To give your life to that. To go with that. Juggling'. Discuss these phrases as a class. Does the poet think that devoting your life to juggling is a good idea?
2. Theme Talk: 'To the poet, jugglers are more worthy of respect than fighters or lovers'. Write a paragraph in response to this statement in which you reference the poem.
3. Exam Prep: Based on your reading of the poem, what do you think was important to the poet Raymond Carver?
4. Exam Prep: 'This poem wonderfully illustrates how we overvalue certain people and professions in society while undervaluing others'. Write a paragraph in response to the statement, making reference to the poem in your answer.

Language Lab

1. The poem's final line consists of two brief sentence fragments. What does this choice suggest about the poet's attitude to juggling? Rank the following in order of plausibility:
 - He is so bored by the subject that he can't be bothered to form proper sentences.
 - He is so awestruck by the thought of juggling that he can't organise his thoughts into proper sentences.
 - He finds the prospect of juggling so confusing that he can't express himself properly.
2. Identify one line in the poem where Carver addresses the reader directly. Identify one line where he appears to correct himself as he is speaking. Would you agree that these choices add to the immediacy of the poem?
3. This poem captures how we can find ourselves distracted by a small and seemingly unimportant detail from what we're supposed to be focusing on. Can you think of an occasion when you found yourself distracted in this way? It might have been during a film, during a match or in the classroom. Write a paragraph describing your experience.

The Juggler At Heaven's Gate



Kris Kristofferson and Michael Cimino on the set of *Heaven's Gate*

FIRST ENCOUNTER

The poet is watching *Heaven's Gate*, the epic Western film released in 1980. The film is set in 1890 and takes place in Sweetwater, a fictional town in the state of Wyoming.

The poem focuses on a particular scene that takes place in Sweetwater's cafe. The lead character James Averill has stopped in for some breakfast. The table he sits at is 'dirty', reminding us that this is a rough and ready establishment, one of the dusty unruly saloons familiar from a thousand westerns. Behind the table is a window that looks out on Sweetwater's main street. This is described as a 'nineteenth-/ century street', suggesting that it features wooden buildings, a dusty unpaved surface, horses and horse-drawn carriages.

Also visible through the window is a juggler who is busking on the street, hoping to entertain passers-by in return for a few coins: 'A juggler is at work out there'. The poet is struck by the juggler's rather skinny physique, describing him as 'a little reed of a fellow'. He notes how the juggler is wearing a 'top hat and a frock coat' as if he was on his way to some fancy ball.

This highly formal attire, of course, looks out of place on the dusty street. But it will help the juggler attract the attention of the passers-by.

The poet, of course, realises that he's watching a cinematic illusion. Everything on screen was filmed in 1980 rather than 1890. James Averill is merely a fictional character, one played by actor and musician Kris Kristofferson. Nathan Champion, meanwhile, is played by Christopher Walken. The cafe and the street outside are part of the famously elaborate set that was specially constructed for the film.

The poet wonders what the juggler is doing in this scene: 'How'd he get into the act anyway?' Why did Michael Cimino, the film's director, decide to have a juggler performing in the background behind his two main characters? It seems a bizarre film-making decision. The presence of the juggler outside the window, after all, adds nothing to the story. If anything, as we've seen, it distracts the viewer from the crucial conversation between Averill and Champion.

Averill continues eating inside the 'awful cafe'. After a while he is joined by Nathan Champion, a local man with whom he has a rather tense relationship. The two of them sit 'over that dirty table' while 'blue smoke' issues from the kitchen of the cafe.

Averill and Champion discuss a conflict that has recently broken out in town. On one side of this row is the Cattleman's Association, an organisation of powerful ranchers and farmers. On the other side is a group of recently arrived emigrants from Europe. They also discuss the 'future' of Ella, a local woman with whom both of them are in love.

The poet, however, finds himself unable to focus on their conversation. Instead his attention is seized by the juggler on the street outside: 'the eye keeps going back to that juggler'. He is too distracted by this 'tiny spectacle', by this minor detail in the background of the scene, to really listen to Averill and Champion's conversation. The phrase 'something/ something about the Cattleman's Association' wittily captures how the poet hears their tense discussion without really taking it in.

For the poet, at 'this minute', the juggler's efforts seem far more important than the movie's broader plot. He isn't concerned about 'Ella's plight'; as she finds herself torn between two dangerous and powerful men. He isn't concerned about 'the fate of the emigrants' in their struggle with the Cattleman's Association. He is utterly taken by the juggler's 'exploits', by his feat of grace concentration as he keeps 'three sticks/ in the air'.

Averill and Champion are epic figures, two gun-slingers who compete over the fate of an entire community and the love of a beautiful woman. The juggler, on the other hand, is only a background character. But the poet, however, playfully reverses the significance of these characters. He suggests that anybody could do what Averill and Champion do: 'Anybody/ can wear a gun and swagger around'. But not everybody can juggle.

The poet finds himself wondering about this fictional 19th century juggler: 'What's his story?' The poet, then, wishes he was watching a different movie, one that focused not on the struggle between Averill and Champion, not on the battle between the emigrants and the Cattleman's Association, but on this seemingly inconsequential background character. He wishes he were watching a film that told the juggler's story: 'That's the story I want to know'. Such a film, perhaps, might tell us how the juggler learned the art of juggling and what led him to the town of Sweetwater.

A CLOSER READING

THE ART OF JUGGLING

The art of juggling, the poet suggests, is something we are inclined to overlook or look down on. We are inclined to regard juggling as a kind of novelty act, as a form of clownish entertainment, rather than as a serious discipline. The poet, however, urges us to re-evaluate the art of juggling: 'Think about this for a minute/ This juggler'. Juggling, the poet reminds us, is an 'amazing act of the mind and hands', one that involves both physical dexterity and mental concentration.

The poet mentions three types of people who are held in high esteem:

- The gunfighters of the old West, like Jesse James and Billy the Kid.
- The modern stars of Hollywood and the music industry.
- People with strong, dominant personalities who can 'push someone around'.

But jugglers, the poet suggests, ought to be held in higher esteem than these gunfighters, stars or dominant personalities. Having a juggler in your life, the poet suggests, would be more remarkable than knowing Jesse James or Brad Pitt. It would be better than knowing someone who could push someone around on your behalf: 'But a juggler!' This is because juggling involves not only artistic beauty but also an olympic level of focus and coordination.

The poet also admires and envies the level of dedication jugglers display. Learning to juggle properly involves a lifetime of practice and improvement. The poet, we sense, wishes that he too could display such devotion: 'To give your life to that/ To go with that'. The poet wants to find something to which he can devote his life, to which he can dedicate all his time, energy and ambition. And he wants to be utterly devoted to this pursuit, just as a juggler is devoted to the art of 'keeping three sticks/ in the air'.

FOCUS ON STYLE

This poem is notable for its highly conversational language. There are several instances where the poet addresses the reader directly, lending the poem a sense of urgency and immediacy. We see this when he urges the reader to 'Think about this for a minute'. This conversational tone is also evident in the two questions which form line 19, where the poet seems to be almost sharing his bemusement with the reader. We also see it in the poet's use of sentence fragments: 'This juggler ... But to juggle/ for God's sake ... Juggling!'. It's as if the poet is so mesmerised by the juggler's performance that he can't even form proper sentences.