

Pascale Petit

'My Mother's Perfume'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Pascale Petit was born in Paris in 1953 to a French father and a Welsh mother, although she was brought up mainly in south Wales. She studied sculpture at the Royal College of Art in London, and it was not until her mid-40s that she published the first collection of her poetry: *Heart of a Deer* (1998). This collection contained many features that frequently recur in Petit’s subsequent poems, such as hybrid human/animal characters, as well as her attempts to work through, in poetry, the difficult family environment she experienced growing up, particularly her abusive father and her mother’s mental illness.

Petit’s second collection *The Zoo Father* (2001) was followed by *The Huntress* (2005), both continuing her use of the natural world as a source of poetic inspiration and allegory. *The Wounded Deer* (2005) and *What the Water Gave Me* (2010) were written in response to the life and art of Frida Kahlo (1907–1954). Petit’s travels through the Amazonian jungle in Peru and Venezuela provided much material for *Fauverie* (2014) and *Mama Amazonica* (2017), in which she imagines her mother’s treatment ‘not in the psychiatric ward, but inside pristine primary deep jungle’.¹ Petit’s most recent collection *Tiger Girl* (2020) shifts its focus onto her Indian grandmother and draws on the jungles of India to connect poaching, species extinction and childhood trauma.

Among many awards and honours Petit has received for her work, *Mama Amazonica* won the 2020 Laurel Prize, which is for poetry collections that have ‘nature and the environment at their heart’; her poem ‘Indian Paradise Flycatcher’ won the 2020 Keats-Shelley Prize for Poetry; and in 2018 she was made a Fellow of the Royal Society for Literature.²

(1) Pascale Petit, ‘Pascale Petit’s Blog’, *Blog Spot*, n.d, pascalepetit.blogspot.com

(2) Simon Armitage, ‘The Laurel Prize 2020 – Winners!’, *Simon Armitage The Official Website*, 2020, simonarmitage.com/the-laurel-prize-shortlist
Keats-Shelley Memorial Association, ‘KEATS-SHELLEY PRIZE 2020’, *Keats-Shelley Memorial Association*, n.d, keats-shelley.org/prizes/keats_shelley_prize_2020
The Royal Society of Literature, ‘Pascale Petit’, *The Royal Society of Literature*, n.d, rsliterature.org/fellow/pascale-petit

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The title suggests very strongly that the poem will have a first-person speaker and be about their family. **'My Mother's Perfume'** could refer to the smell of the mother herself, when she is present, or the liquid scent in a bottle, when she is absent. In either case, the importance of the sense of smell to the poem, rather than, for instance, the sense of sight or touch, is foregrounded by the title. This could indicate a physical absence of maternal contact but it is also worth considering the intricate and intimate relationship between the olfactory senses (smell), memory, and emotion.³ Smells enter the limbic system very quickly, which is the part of the brain that deals with emotional responses. In this way, smells can be the longest lasting of human memories, as well as the most emotive, and Petit utilises this connection throughout the poem to create the emotional power of the speaker's recollections and thoughts of their mother.

Form.

The poem's form contains internal conflicts despite its very regular appearance on the page. It is one stanza of 28 lines, composed of alternating long lines (between 12 and 19 syllables) and shorter indented lines (between 3 and 9 syllables). Only one of the longer lines (line 3) and four of the shorter lines (lines 8, 20, 26, and 28) are also the end of a sentence (end-stopped). Most of the poem's sentences run over the line ends (enjambment) which suggests that the form and the content are not in unison. The poem is free verse. The definition of free verse poetry is a poem that does not follow any pattern, metre or formal structure. This style of poetry is often closely associated with a conversational tone or characteristics of speech.

(3) Colleen Walsh, 'What the nose knows', *The Harvard Gazette*, 2020,

news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/02/how-scent-emotion-and-memory-are-intertwined-and-exploited

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-3.

A personal, possibly intimate, tone is established by the poem opening '**Strange how**', rather than the more grammatically correct '*It was **strange how***'. This informality is reinforced by the use of '**I'd**' in line 4, rather than '*I would*' and is characteristic of the conversational and confessional tone of Petit's poetry. It certainly is far beyond the realms of probability that the speaker, inside a house, can smell their mother '**long before**' her taxi arrives outside. Therefore, this indicates that memory, emotion, and imagination are causing an olfactory hallucination. This is supported by the description of the mother's scent as '**a jade cloud**', showing it has taken on a visible, green form to the speaker. Jade is a valuable and rare mineral mostly found in South-East Asia; it has no noticeable smell to the human nose and is not used in the manufacture of perfumes. Therefore, the associations formed by the speaker between their mother and jade must have significances other than scent, which could include being exotic and attractive, yet cold and hard. The intense colouring of jade makes it something out of the ordinary, and it seems to enter the speaker's world only for brief moments, like the mother. The thought of the mother's imminent arrival makes the speaker visit the '**loo**', which is more informal language, possibly reflecting the speaker's vocabulary as a child. Despite the lack of further detail here, the fear regarding the mother's arrival revealed later in the poem suggests that this visit to the toilet is to relieve a sudden pressure on bladder or bowel, rather than to wash their face or brush their teeth.

Lines 4-6.

The idea that the mother's return will not result in a warm, natural reunion is further advanced by the speaker having to '**prepare**' for it by '**trying to remember her face, without feeling afraid.**' This fear could stem from the effort of trying to recall the mother's face, or simply from the image of the face itself and therefore the impending arrival of the mother. Either way, it shows how visual memory is less powerful to the speaker than olfactory memory. The concerted attempts appear to be successful as the speaker gets '**braver**' the '**nearer**' the mother comes to arriving at the house.

Lines 7-9.

However, the speaker's memory of the mother is still linked more strongly with smell than sight as the efforts at remembering the mother's face evoke instead '**her scent**' as the '**taste**' of '**coins in the bottom / of her handbag.**' Like the jade mentioned previously, coins have a value but are cold and hard. That they seem to be loose in her handbag also points to an internal and hidden disordering as the coins are not carefully kept in a purse where they should be but are possibly sticky and/or dirty from the detritus of the bottom of a handbag. In any case, the coins would have a metallic and unpalatable taste. There is a jump in perspective as the speaker moves from her childhood recollections to the present day '**forty years on**' and the idea the mother might appear lingers. The statement that the speaker is only '**half-expecting**' the mother to arrive indicates she is estranged or dead.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 10-12.

The speaker can summon the presence of the mother by smelling the '**expensive**' perfume she used to wear – '**Shalimar**'. Possessing a bottle of this can be seen as an attempt to reconnect with the mother. Although control of the scent is now in the adult speaker's hands, it still requires '**daring**' as the smell remains so powerful that '**only a whiff**' is enough to dredge up their painful childhood memories.

Lines 13-15.

Shalimar was created by Guerlain in 1925 and is described as an 'oriental fragrance'.⁴ This south-east Asian connection provides a link to the jade mentioned in line 2. The '**vanilla orchid vine**', which does not grow in Wales, further underlines, with alliteration for emphasis, the exotic, therefore distant, nature of the mother's perfume and, by association, the mother herself. The speaker's visual memory is now stimulated by this direct access to the scent and the mother's '**ghostly face**' – inferring she is dead – is imagined as if it '**might shiver like Christ's face on Veronica's veil**'. This veil was an icon of the Christian church in the Middle Ages and was said to bear an image of Christ after Veronica used it to wipe the sweat and blood from his face as he carried his cross to the crucifixion. This simile connects, in the speaker's mind, the mother with persecution, execution, and resurrection, although '**might**' is an important verb here as it indicates the speaker is thinking of possible, not definite, images. The image of Christ's face on the veil is also pictured as '**a green-gold blossom**'. Green has a mix of connotations, ranging from healthy plants to sick people, while gold is a hard and cold form of wealth. These colours also recall the jade cloud and the coins in the mother's handbag.

Lines 16-19.

The poem's narrative does not stay long in the speaker's present as the scent of the perfume transports them '**back to / to the first day of the school holidays**'. The speaker discloses how they would kiss the '**glass**' to prepare for kissing the mother's cheek. The '**glass**' could refer to a window or be the old-fashioned term for a mirror (like Alice and *Through the Looking-Glass*⁵) but in either case the same inference can be drawn – that the mother's cheek is hard and cold, rather than soft and warm, subverting conventional expectations of maternal love and care. The only difference would be that the mirror as a mother-substitute throws a reflection of the speaker back on themselves while the window as a mother-substitute allows the speaker to observe the world outside. In addition, glass is brittle and fragile, reflecting the mother's psychological state.

(4) Guerlain Paris, 'Shalimar', Guerlain, n.d, guerlain.com/uk/en-uk/fragrance/woman/collections/shalimar

(5) Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (London: Penguin Publishing Ltd, 1994).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 20–21.

Still in the speaker's childhood memories, '**the air turned amber**', as they looked for their mother's taxi. Amber is the orange-coloured resin of trees and is used in Shalimar. This again shows the power of memory and the imagination to conjure scents at emotional times, as there would not be a real source of this smell prior to the mother's arrival. The mother is described as a '**speck**', as if she were tiny and not human. The time switches rapidly again to the speaker's present as they say '**Even now**' how the smell of vanilla physically hurts them, expressed in the language of old-fashioned child discipline: the '**cane**'. Sight and smell mix in the speaker's mind to indicate how childhood traumas endure in their adult life.

Lines 22–24.

The use of '**But**' shows that the scent of '**roses and jasmine**' have a counteracting, positive effect on the speaker compared to the pain caused by the smell of vanilla. These '**top notes**' from the perfume are, unlike vanilla and amber, also found in '**Grandmother's garden**' as they walk towards the taxi when it arrives. Therefore, these scents are not exclusively connected to the mother's perfume. The use of '**wading**' gives a dream-like impression that the garden is overflowing with roses and jasmine, which are '**fragrant**', invariably meaning a pleasant smell. This could suggest a hope that this reunion with their mother might be better. However, the '**gloved hand**', a barrier that prevents the warmth of human contact, and the taxi being '**black**', suggest the speaker's hopes will be dashed once more. Alternatively, this scene could be read as one where the speaker feels safe in her grandmother's garden and the mother's arrival is unwelcome and threatening.

Lines 25–28.

The tense now changes from past (line 19: '**scanned**') to present, even though this event is still the speaker's childhood memory: '**And for a / moment I think I am safe.**' This present tense continues to the end of the poem as '**Maman turns to me**'. The exotic and distant associations that the poem has created around the mother are emphasised here by the French word for 'mom', in contrast with the grandmother who is named in the English way. This is the moment the speaker realises they are not '**safe**' as the look on the mother's face is enough to show that her mental illness still afflicts her. The role of the perfume as a representation of the mother is reinforced by the simile of her '**smile**' being like '**a dropped / perfume bottle**'. It is difficult to picture exactly how a dropped bottle could look like a smile; perhaps the facial responses one might make to such an accident could include a grimace, or the liquid could streak across the floor in a smile-like semi-circle. The overall image is one of an unintended waste of a valuable substance, and this is further underlined by the mother's '**essence**' being '**spilt**' by her mental illness.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

As the title indicates, the sense of smell is central to the poem. However, the reader will not be able to smell anything from the poem itself, of course, and so the poet's choice of words, the images they create, and the reader's own imagination and memories need to perform a certain amount of interpretative work for the poem to have impact. Part of the poem's success is how the other senses, particularly sight and touch, are brought into the equation as, ultimately, all our senses can be combined in memories.

The difficulty in establishing boundaries and cordoning off areas is reflected by the poem's form. Despite its regular appearance at first glance, the sentences overflow beyond the line ends and past and present are blurred. While the two types of lines could reflect the two viewpoints – the child's experiences at the time and the adult's thoughts when reflecting on the past – the merging of the perspectives and the changing of the tenses show how this trauma lives on in the speaker's present and has not been successfully resolved. The regular form appears an attempt by the adult to establish order over the madness their younger self experienced, in the same way that owning a bottle of Shalimar is an attempt to control those memories. However, these feelings overwhelm the rigid, recurring form, which is incapable of sectioning the poem into neat and self-contained lines. While there is no rhyme and minimal use of metaphor, the poem's intensity is achieved through vivid and evocative imagery, with a devastatingly powerful simile to end the piece.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

- How simple or complicated is the language that the poem uses?
- How does the form of the poem on the page play a part in the poem's meaning?
- How reliable do you find the speaker's version of events?
- What level of sympathy do you have for the speaker and the mother?

SECTION 5

PHOTOGRAPHS



Credit to Pascale Petit
(pascalpetit.co.uk).

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Information about *The Huntress* (2005), the collection from which 'My Mother's Perfume' is taken:
serenbooks.com/productdisplay/huntress

Petit Pascale's blog: pascalepetit.blogspot.com

BIBLIOGRAPHY: FURTHER READING

'Pascale Petit's Workshop' (*Guardian*): theguardian.com/books/2006/jun/08/poetry2

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