

PERCEPTIONS OF HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIPS IN JOY HARJO'S *AMERICAN INDIAN POEMS*

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Abstract

The connection between nature and Joy Harjo's American Indian poems is worth discussing because nature impacts human existence. To confirm and consider ideas about the environment, particularly the environment's vulnerability to human activity and exploitation, this study examines metaphorical language in some of Harjo's works. By examining the complex interactions between the environment and humans, this study advances our knowledge of how issues of ecology are portrayed in literature to promote environmental awareness. This research examines ecological themes in two American Indian poems by Joy Harjo, *Talking with the Sun* and *Once the World Was Perfect*, using Garrard's ecocritical theory and qualitative methodology. The research shows how Harjo's works demonstrate the detrimental effects of human activities on ecosystems and, as a result, criticize anthropocentrism through qualitative ecocritical analysis. *Talking with the Sun* explores the spiritual bond between humans and nature, while *Once the World Was Perfect* highlights the damages caused by environmental degradation and human exploitation. This research contributed to the discourse of ecocriticism by highlighting how literature can highlight issues of the environment.

Keywords: *ecocriticism; figurative language; human nature; poetry*

1. Introduction

The study of nature in literature involves analyzing how the natural world is depicted in literary works, focusing on how the human-nature relationship is perceived in Joy Harjo's Native American poems. It looks at how nature is portrayed in all of its forms and how important it is to character development and narrative. This research can reveal how authors communicate ideas, feelings, and cultural values through natural settings, landscapes, and environmental aspects. Literature generally concerns the relationship between society and individuals, individuals, and events that take place within the individual circle. Literary work is a unique discourse in which expression uses language by utilizing all available possibilities (Klarer, 2004). The issue in literary work also shows nature themes. Nature refers to landscape, wilderness, countryside, rurality, animals, the physical body in space, and raw materials (Sharma, 2020). In Joy Harjo's poetry, nature is not only the setting but also the main character involved in the story and shaping it.

Her work vividly depicts the connection between humans and nature, especially in the context of Native American Spirituality and environmental stewardship. Nature in literary issues is usually linked with ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature (Tosic, 2006). Glotfelty & Fromm 1996 fittingly comments: Literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter, and ideas interact in a perpetual dance. Ecocriticism explores the ways in which we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and the environment in all areas of cultural production (Garrard, 2004, p.5). This theory examines the use of images that depict natural settings and landscapes, as well as people's attitudes, concerns, and care for the environment, both positively and negatively.

Many people ask about Joy Harjo's work, why are so many of her poems nature-themed? The relationship between Native Americans and nature is deeply spiritual, a long-held belief that explains why many of Harjo's poems reflect her appreciation of the outdoors. This represents resistance to colonialism that deprived Native people of their land and natural resources, even as her work addresses environmental issues through an ecocritical framework As Canby (2015) explains, spiritual ties to the natural world have been destroyed by the US government's historic persecution of native peoples through laws such as the Indian Removal Act. Many commercial laws were enacted over time, classifying Native American tribes based on different critiques and drawing boundaries between tribal and non-tribal areas (Kempf, Olson et al., 2023). These steps enabled the utilization of natural resources and selectively limited tribal Autonomy. Through her poetry, Harjo affirms cultural identity and advances an environmental consciousness, transforming nature into a potent spiritual and cultural expression center.

Finally, the study of ecocriticism on these two poems *Talking with the Sun* and *Once the World Was Perfect* is particularly important given the increasing environmental concerns of today. Here, the description of nature's wisdom can be seen to analyze Joy Harjo's poems. Therefore, to analyze the ecological or natural aspects in Joy Harjo's poems, this study focuses on the issue how perceptions of human-nature relationships in Joy Harjo's American Indian poems. Although the natural world has always been friendly to humans, it is now degrading due to our bad deeds and exacting its revenge by showing its strength. Rahman, Haque, Arafat, Bhattacharya, and Akter, (2022) explain that this indicates an unbalanced state between nature and humans, where the former has failed to show the latter. As a living being, nature responds to human behavior and demonstrates its capacity to tolerate and respond to abuse.

2. Literature Review

The investigation of ecocriticism in Joy Harjo's poetry has sparked important discussions regarding the relationship between humanity and nature. Although several studies have addressed ecocriticism broadly, few have specifically focused on Harjo's work. For example, Eukora and Okolo (2022) investigate the synergy between botanical imagination and ecocriticism, but their findings must be directly linked to Harjo's themes. Hanna (2023) provides a detailed analysis of Harjo's poems *Resolving the Conflict of Sacred Creatures* and *American Sunrise*, highlighting how both poems vividly depict a journey towards healing from a historical wound. This analysis reveals the depth of Harjo's ecological themes and their connection to indigenous spirituality. Faiz (2023) enriches the discourse by uncovering ecological themes in Romantic poetry;

however, his focus is not directly applied to Harjo's work, which may confuse readers unless it is clearly explained in relation to the central argument of his unique approach to nature. In addition, Mishra (2012) offers insights into ecocritical perspectives across different cultural landscapes, but the relevance of his contribution to Harjo's poetry still needs to be clarified. This research specifically examines how the relationship between humans and nature is depicted in Harjo's two poems, setting it apart from existing studies.

The ecocritical approach that analyzes the interrelationship between humans and nature in literary works emphasizes the need for this lens in understanding Harjo's poetry (Garrard, 2004). This interdisciplinary study combines insights from different fields to explore literature and the environment, seeking to understand the complex interrelationships between literature, culture and ecological issues (Borlik, 2011). Ecocriticism challenges traditional literary analysis by incorporating ecological perspectives, thus enabling a deeper understanding of human interaction with nature (Siwi, et al., 2022). Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) state that, like feminist and Marxist criticism, ecocriticism adopts an earth-centered approach in literary studies, focusing on the representation of the environment in literary texts.

In this case, figurative language plays an essential role in conveying the interaction between humans and nature in Joy Harjo's poems. The use of metaphor, simile, and personification not only highlights environmental challenges, but also evokes emotional depth and vivid imagery. Sinaga and Marpaung (2023) note that figurative language, defined as non-literal meaning, enhances the emotional impact of poetic expression (Klarer, 2004). Instead of a listing of definitions, this review instead focuses on how Harjo uses this tool to articulate the connection between humans and nature, supported by specific examples from his poetry.

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Type of Figurative Language	Use in Joy Harjo's Poetry
Metaphor	In <i>Talking with the Sun</i> , the sun is metaphorically depicted as a speaker, symbolizing the power and wisdom of nature, which emphasizes the spiritual connection between humans and nature.
Personification	In <i>Once the World Was Perfect</i> , nature is personified as an entity that responds to human action, such as the earth <i>crying</i> when it is tampered with, indicating nature as an active subject.
Simile	Harjo employs similes to contrast the strength of nature with human characteristics, such as <i>strong as a storm</i> , reinforcing the relationship between humans and nature.
Symbolism	The symbols such as the sun, moon, and animals often represent spiritual strength and the lost connections between human beings and nature, such as how the sun symbolizes wisdom in <i>Talking with the Sun</i> .

3. Research Method

This research employs a qualitative method to analyze ecocritical themes in Joy Harjo's poetry, focusing on her depiction of the relationship between humans and nature. The analysis emphasizes key literary devices—such as personification, metaphor, simile, and symbolism—that are instrumental in conveying ecological concerns throughout her work. Discussion addresses how these devices uniquely contribute to illuminating environmental themes in Harjo's poetry. To provide a focused analysis, this study concentrates on a select number of her poems, chosen specifically for their vivid portrayal of human-nature interactions. These poems are analyzed for recurring patterns and elements that connect to broader ecocritical issues.

In addition to literary analysis, historical, cultural, and social factors are essential to understanding the content of Harjo's poems. These contextual elements are incorporated into the interpretation, especially in relation to Native American spiritual beliefs, environmental stewardship, and resistance to colonialism—common themes in Harjo's work. Analysis of these external factors is closely linked to textual elements to

clarify their influence on the ecological themes present in the poems. As noted by Moran (2024), the methodology of this study also acknowledges the importance of researcher subjectivity and reflexivity, recognizing that a researcher’s perspective can shape the interpretation of the text. This awareness ensures a transparent and reflective engagement with the material (Yin, 2011). An inductive approach allows themes and patterns to emerge through close reading, situating these findings within a broader ecocritical framework.

The analysis proceeds by selecting key passages from the poems to explore how literary devices convey deeper ecological meanings. The goal is to identify the environmental concerns Harjo addresses and explain how her poetic techniques reflect and engage with these issues. This interpretation provides insight into the interconnectedness of humans and nature, focusing on how Harjo’s work portrays ecological balance, disharmony, and resilience.

4. Discussion

The study of Joy Harjo's poems *Talking with the Sun* and *Once the World Was Perfect* offers a deeper understanding of the complex interactions that occur between nature and humans, which is a central issue in ecocriticism. Through the lens of ecocriticism, this discussion seeks to investigate how these poems represent ecological concerns and human interaction with the environment. The discussion begins with the signification of the figurative language of the two poems.

4.1 The Signification of Figurative Language in Two Poems by Joy Harjo

Figurative language carries a literal meaning but is often employed to create comparisons or associations between different ideas or objects. It allows a word or phrase to convey a message indirectly, implying rather than explicitly illustrating the intended meaning (Mentari, 2023). In this analysis, the authors explore the use of figurative language in two poems by Joy Harjo, starting with *Talking to the Sun* and followed by *Once the World Was Perfect*, both of which are central to the themes examined in this research.

Data Findings	Kind of Figurative Language
<i>In the tangle of human failures of fear, greed, and forgetfulness, the sun gives me clarity.</i>	Metaphor
<i>When explorers first encountered my people, they called us heathens, sun worshippers.</i>	Irony
<i>They didn't understand that the sun is a relative, and illuminates our path on this earth.</i>	Metaphor
<i>After dancing all night in a circle we realize that we are a part of a larger sense of stars and planets dancing with us overhead.</i>	Personification
<i>When the sun rises at the apex of the ceremony, we are renewed.</i>	Symbolism
<i>Humans are vulnerable and rely on the kindnesses of the earth and the sun; we exist together in a sacred field of meaning.</i>	Personification
<i>Our earth is shifting. We can all see it.</i>	Metaphor
<i>I hear from my Inuit and Yupik relatives up north that everything has changed.</i>	Symbolism

<i>It's so hot; there is not enough winter.</i>	Hyperbole
<i>Animals are confused. Ice is melting.</i>	Personification

In Joy Harjo's poem, *Talking with the Sun*, the line “the sun gives me clarity” metaphorically illustrates how the sun offers insight and understanding amid human flaws like fear, greed, and ignorance. Irony surfaces in “they called us heathens, sun worshippers,” emphasizing how outsiders misinterpreted and dismissed Indigenous reverence for the sun, failing to grasp its deeper spiritual meaning. The line “the sun is a relative, and illuminates our path on this earth” metaphorically portrays the sun as a guiding light, suggesting a close and essential connection between humans and this life-sustaining force. Personification is evident in stars and planets “dancing” with humans, symbolizing a harmonious relationship between the universe and human life. Symbolism shines through as the sun rises “at the top of the ceremonies,” representing renewal and reincarnation. Personification also appears when the ground and sun are depicted as entities capable of showing kindness to humans, illustrating human dependence on nature.

In the following stanza, a metaphor describing the earth's shifting highlights the significant changes climate change is causing. Symbolism appears in the reference to these changes being “felt by Inuit and Yupik kin in the north,” representing the real impact of a warming climate on Indigenous communities. Hyperbole is used to emphasize the effects of global warming, portraying increasingly rare winter seasons. Finally, the personification of “disoriented animals” and “melting ice” underscores the impact of climate change on nature and wildlife. Through this layered use of figurative language, Harjo conveys a powerful message about the interconnectedness between humans and nature, and the existential threat posed by climate change. Her skillful use of figurative language underscores complex insights about humanity's relationship with the natural world and the urgency of addressing environmental challenges.

Data Findings	Kind of Figurative Language
<i>The quantum physicists have it right; they are beginning to think like Indians.</i>	Metaphor
<i>When you remember this, then the current wobble of the earth makes sense. How much more oil can be drained.</i>	Personification
<i>I walked out of a hotel room just off Times Square at dawn to find the sun.</i>	Metaphor
<i>It was the fourth morning since the birth of my fourth granddaughter.</i>	Symbolism
<i>I stood beneath a twenty-first century totem pole of symbols of multinational corporations, made of flash and neon.</i>	Personification
<i>I carried this newborn girl within the cradleboard of my heart.</i>	Symbolism
<i>I held her up and presented her to the sun, so she would be recognized as a relative, So that she won't forget this connection, this promise.</i>	Imagery

Joy Harjo’s poetry employs figurative language to convey layered meanings. The metaphor, “The quantum physicists have it right; they are beginning to think like Indians,” juxtaposes the emerging scientific understanding of interconnectedness with an Indigenous worldview. In “the current wobble of the earth makes sense,” personification assigns the earth a relatable, human-like quality. Similarly, “I walked out of a hotel room just off Times Square at dawn to find the sun” metaphorically suggests a search for spiritual clarity amidst the chaos of modern life.

Symbolism appears in “it was the fourth morning since the birth of my fourth granddaughter,” marking a moment of ritual significance. The “twenty-first-century totem pole of symbols of multinational corporations” personifies corporate logos as cultural totems, while “the cradleboard of my heart” evokes a deep emotional bond. Imagery of bringing her granddaughter into the sunlight evokes a ceremonial gesture of spiritual connection, with the dedication to the sun underscoring the importance of honoring ancestors and one’s connection to the land. In the poem *Once the World Was Perfect*, Harjo deepens her exploration of metaphorical language to critique modern human relationships with nature.

Data Findings	Kind of Figurative Language
<i>Discontent began a small rumble in the earthly mind</i>	Personification
<i>Then Doubt pushed through with its spiked head</i>	Personification
<i>All manner of demon thoughts, Jumped through</i>	Hyperbolic
<i>Each stone of jealousy, each stone Of fear, greed, envy, and hatred, put out the light.</i>	Metaphor
<i>No one was without a stone in his or her hand.</i>	Symbolism
<i>Right back where we had started.</i>	Irony

In the poem above, Joy Harjo uses figurative language such as personification, to describe abstract emotions. As seen in the line *Discontent began a small rumble in the earthly mind*, where discontent is given human-like characteristics, making it seem like a living entity within the world’s consciousness. This is further illustrated with the line *Then Doubt pushed through with its spiked head*, where doubt is personified with a menacing *spiked head*, transforming it into a dangerous creature. Additionally, hyperbole is used in the line *All manner of demon thoughts jumped through*, exaggerating the number and intensity of destructive thoughts to emphasize the chaos that ensues.

Moving to the next line, Harjo uses metaphor to liken negative emotions such as *jealousy, fear, greed, envy, and hatred* to *stones* that extinguish the light, symbolizing life or hope. The symbolism continues with the line *No one was without a stone in his or her hand*, where the *stone* represents the burden or weapon that everyone carries, highlighting the universal participation in the destruction. Finally, irony is present in the conclusion of the line *There we were, Right back where we had started*, reflecting the tragic cycle of destruction and the inevitable return to the beginning, despite all the suffering and damage caused by these negative emotions. These metaphorical elements collectively underscore the themes of the human folly cycle in the poem. The next

section goes into greater depth about these metaphors and their implications in the understanding of human relationships and interrelationships.

Data Findings	Kind of Figurative Language
<i>We were bumping into each other</i>	Metaphor
<i>A spark of kindness made a light.</i>	Metaphor
<i>The light made an opening in the darkness.</i>	Metaphor
<i>Everyone worked together to make a ladder.</i>	Metaphor
<i>A Wind Clan person climbed out first into the next world,</i>	Symbolic

The metaphors and figurative language in Joy Harjo’s poems are essential, enabling us to envision intangible concepts like human relationships and collective unity—ideas that cannot be captured as plans or budgets but come alive through art, poetry, and music. In the metaphor, “We were bumping into each other in the dark,” darkness symbolizes the complexity and ambiguity of human relationships, suggesting a lack of clear direction yet enriched by layers of meaning. Light, sparked by an act of kindness—such as the Whos' care for Horton—demonstrates that even a small gesture of compassion can ignite hope and foster connection.

The metaphor extends as *the light made an opening in the darkness*, hinting that hope and comprehension can pierce through trials and ambiguities. This description of the *Everyone worked together to make a ladder* is a parable for teamwork, and how working together to come up with questions can lead you higher into achievement or understanding. Moreover, the symbolism in *a Wind Clan person climbed out first into the next world* mirrors a pioneer group or an individual breakthrough for new dawn or future. In general, figures of speech highlight themes like community spirit and empathetic outreach against darkness being synonymous with hardship, woven through the commentary on solidarity under struggle as well.

4.2. Human Nature Relation: Analysis Anthropocentric in the Two Poems

In this section the main topic is anthropocentric, Anthropocentrism refers to man being the main object of everything in man's relationship with nature (Syafitri & Ulfah, S. M. 2024). The poems *Talking with the Sun* and *Once the World Was Perfect* reflect the relationship between humans and nature from an anthropocentric perspective, although from different perspectives and time contexts. *Talking with the Sun* is a poem that provides a deeply spiritual relationship to the sun. Nature, represented by the sun, is regarded as part of the human family indicating a relationship of respect and emotional connectedness. Although this approach appears more spiritual, it still represents anthropocentrism as nature is being evaluated based on how it is serving humans. The sun is not just a natural phenomenon but also serves as a symbol and reflection for human experiences, suggesting that this perspective remains centered on human needs and point of view.

The idea behind the second poem *Once the World Was Perfect*, is to focus on humanity that has damaged nature in selfish and destructive ways. Harjo states that this is the result of humanity's destructive jealousy, greed and sins. In contrast, nature is

depicted as suffering from human influence and behavior, showing an Anthropocentric view that considers nature only as a resource to be exploited. This shows that the condition of human interaction with nature is portrayed as something bad due to human actions.

A more developed interpretation of *Talking with the Sun* suggests that humans rely upon nature for contemplation and spiritual understanding. Despite its respect, nature still has a human-centered function as it offers insight and guidance. This can be seen as an ecocentric standpoint, or perhaps as respectful anthropocentrism, where the spiritual relationship with nature acknowledges its importance beyond practical utility. This connection still puts human need at the top of the register. A scathing indictment of man's worship of nature, *Once the World Was Perfect* shows how, despite the destruction, humans are still at the center of everything, with nature portrayed as a helpless victim. This serves to endorse an anthropocentric worldview in which nature is both exploited and subservient to human desires.

The anthropocentrism seen in both poems is how humans turn to nature to reveal their weaknesses and failures (Amorim, J. P., & Teixeira, L. 2023). From the poem *Talking with the Sun* Although humans' relationship with nature reveals a spiritual dimension, an overtly anthropocentric view is seen in how humans use nature to understand and control their experiences. The sun is where humans get their light and is a symbol in the human world, and that is why nature is still seen from a human-centered perspective. In the poem *When Nature is Still Perfect*. There is a clear anthropocentrism in this poem in the form of criticism of humans. Harjo equates human vices such as envy and fear with the destruction of the natural environment. Nature becomes a victim of human evil which shows that when we see nature as a resource that we can utilize, the pressure of destruction will be greater. That both poems show changes in how humans view nature over time.

In comparison, *Talking with the Sun* stresses a more spiritual and relational expression of nature as a meaningful and emotionally connected entity to humans, nature being more than a companion to humans before the damage was done. On the other hand, *Once the World Was Perfect* explains how a more anthropocentric view has resulted in disastrous consequences for the Earth. This contrast shows that humans are getting farther and farther away from a harmonious and spiritual relationship with nature, humans are the cause of nature's destruction which leads to exploitation and domination which results in the environmental and social breakdown that is so chaotic right now. This kind of contrast demonstrates how, over time, human beings have moved away from a spiritually balanced relationship with nature, toward dominance and utilization.

These two poems illustrate the tension between the spiritual needs of humans and their destructive actions toward nature. In *Talking with the Sun*, even though humans seem to value nature spiritually, an anthropocentric view is still dominating as nature is valued based on the benefits it provides to humans. This mirrors the modern dilemma where humans feel spiritually linked to nature but remain entangled in its unavoidable exploitation. Harjo also uses powerful symbolism to illustrate the human condition. The sun in *Talking with the Sun* is not just an element of the natural world, but also a symbol of human enlightenment and direction, showing humanity's dependence on nature for significance.

On the contrary, *Once the World Was Perfect* stresses the destruction brought about by human exploitation and avarice while depicting nature as an apparent victim of

human activity. The anthropocentrism of both poems and modern environmental issues such as deforestation, climatic changes, and loss of biological variety are interrelated. Although environmental damage is increasing, many people still regard nature as an unlimited resource. This research gains relevance and persuasive power for modern audiences by linking the viewpoints revealed in these poems to current environmental challenges.

Furthermore, these poems not only present differing perspectives on the human-nature relationship but also illustrate the evolving human views over time. *Talking with the Sun* depicts an older, more spiritual connection, while *Once the World Was Perfect* reflects the gradual loss of communion with nature in the modern world. This shift from a balanced relationship to one characterized by exploitation and domination has led to the degradation of both the environment and society. The contrast between these perspectives deepens the analysis by demonstrating that nature is perceived not as an independent entity, but as a mirror of human needs (Samways, 2023).

It can be concluded that Harjo's use of figurative language, including metaphor and personification, reinforces the anthropocentric concept in her poetry. In *Talking to the Sun*, the sun is portrayed as an entity capable of communicating with humans, symbolizing nature's voice—one that is frequently silenced to satisfy human needs and desires. In contrast, *Once the World Was Perfect* illustrates nature as a passive victim of human actions, rendered helpless in the face of environmental destruction. Through such figurative expressions, Harjo deepens the critique of humanity's anthropocentric view of nature, highlighting its impact in tangible terms.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of Joy Harjo's poems, *Talking with the Sun* and *Once the World Was Perfect*, unveils a profound portrayal of the interdependent, yet often anthropocentric, relationship between humanity and nature. Through her intricate use of figurative language, Harjo captures the delicate balance between reverence for nature and the human inclination to place themselves at the center of the ecological order. Metaphors, personification, and symbolism craft vivid images that highlight humanity's reliance on the natural world not just for survival but also for spiritual insight and guidance. The recurring anthropocentric themes underscore how human attitudes shape the interpretation of natural elements—often viewing them as resources for personal or collective growth. In *Talking with the Sun*, nature is shown as a compassionate relative, guiding humans toward clarity. This view implies respect but is ultimately centered on the sun's role in fulfilling human needs. Similarly, *Once the World Was Perfect* laments humanity's moral failings, portraying nature as a passive entity suffering from human exploitation. This reinforces the notion of nature as subordinate to human actions, revealing a complex but often exploitative dynamic that mirrors broader environmental concerns in ecocriticism. Both poems suggest that, while humans may approach nature with reverence or critique, their perceptions are fundamentally shaped by an anthropocentric worldview. Harjo's work thus serves as a poetic reflection on the need to transcend self-centeredness to achieve true ecological balance, hinting at a potential shift towards an ecocentric ethic—one that values nature beyond its utility to humanity. Through her poetic vision, Harjo invites readers to reconsider humanity's place within the ecosystem, advocating for a more harmonious and respectful relationship with the natural world.

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