Anniversary Study Guide

Anniversary by Joy Harjo

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Introduction

Joy Harjo's "Anniversary" is a "creation" poem that is, it attempts to recount how the world began and when humankind came to be. It is included in the aptly titled collection *Map to the Next World*, but it differs from many other poems in this book in that its themes and language are not as pessimistic and they do not center on human cruelty. Published in 2000, on the brink of a new millennium, and subtitled "Poetry and Tales," *Map to the Next World* takes readers through stories, in both prose and verse, of America's brutal history, the long suffering of Indians, and memories of the poet's own bitter past. However, some of the poems in this collection offer hope for a better future and describe the miracles of human nature instead of its brutality. "Anniversary" is one of these.

The title of this poem is indicative of its celebratory premise, for anniversaries are typically considered happy occasions. Yes, humans also mark the sad dates of the deaths of loved ones or of national tragedies with the same word the anniversary of the assassination of John Lennon, for instance but more often an anniversary is a measurement of time for a pleasant event. Harjo, of course, cannot specify exactly which anniversary this is for the human race. That debate has been going on among theologians and scientists for centuries. She treats the number, no matter what it is, as relatively insignificant. The last line of the poem reads simply, "And it's been years." But the rest of the poem with descriptions of flames and crows, smoke and "a spiral of gods," fish and "waving grass" makes it very clear that there is nothing insignificant at all about the story the poem tells.

Author Biography

Joy Harjo was born in May 1951 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She is typically considered a Native American poet, and this is the part of her ancestry with which she identifies most closely. Harjo's birth name, however, was Joy Foster, and between her mother and father, she can claim Creek and Cherokee Indian, African American, Irish, and French heritage. She is an official member of the Muscogee tribe of the Creek Nation, and much of her poetry derives themes from growing up with a mixed ancestry, never feeling that she was fully accepted by any race or ethnicity. Her paternal great-great-grandfather led the Creek Indians in battles against Andrew Jackson's soldiers in the early nineteenth century, but his daughter, Harjo's great-grandmother, married a Baptist minister who was half African. Harjo's paternal grandmother, Naomi Harjo, was of mixed Cherokee and French blood, and this is the woman from whom Joy would take her own surname at the age of nineteen. On her mother's side of the family, Harjo's grandmother was half Cherokee and half Irish, adding another level to an already complicated heritage.

Harjo's childhood was tumultuous, as her father was both physically and emotionally abusive to the family. A full Creek Indian, he worked as a mechanic for a major airline and spent his free time drinking heavily and having extramarital affairs. Harjo recalls episodes when her father beat her mother severely and even brought home his lovers. When her parents finally divorced, however, the nightmare was far from over. Her mother remarried, and the stepfather was even more abusive than her real father had been. When Harjo was sixteen, he threw her out of the house, and she wound up doing odd jobs to stay alive, including touring with an all-Indian dance troupe founded by the Institute of American Indian Arts where she was enrolled. At seventeen, Harjo gave birth to her first child, a result of her romance with a fellow student in the dance troupe, and she eventually returned to Santa Fe where she enrolled at the University of New Mexico. Here, she was exposed to contemporary writers of high caliber, one of whom was Native American poet Simon Ortiz. Harjo and Ortiz became romantically involved, resulting in a second child, but the couple split not long after their daughter's birth. Finally, Harjo received her bachelor's degree from New Mexico and then completed a master of fine arts at the University of Iowa. By that time, she was writing and publishing poetry with some success.

Harjo spent her career teaching at various universities out West before accepting tenure at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. To date, she has published six volumes of poetry, including the recent *Map to the Next World*, which contains the poem "Anniversary." A versatile artist, she also plays saxophone in her band, "Poetic Justice." Harjo now makes her home in Hawaii, but she still travels frequently to the American mainland to spend time with her children, grandchildren, and other relatives, all of whom figure heavily into her poetry.

Poem Text

When the world was created wasn't it like this?
A little flame illuminating a rough sea, a question
of attraction, something fermented, something
sweet?

And then a bird or two were added, the crow of
course to
joke about humanity, and then another kind so
beautiful
we had to hear them first, before our eyes could be
imagined.

And it was, we were then□and there was no
separation.
The cries of a planet formed our becoming.
We peered through the smoke as our shoulders,
lips,
emerged from new terrain.

The question mark of creation attracts more
questions
until the mind is a spiral of gods strung out way
over
our heads, traveling toward the invention of sky.

Move over and let us sleep until the dust settles,
until we can figure this thing out.

What was created next is open to speculation or
awe.
The shy fish who had known lonely water
walked out of the ocean onto dry land,
just like that, to another life.

Frog imagined meals of flying things and creatures
in flight imagined hills
of daubed dirt and grass in which to settle and
make others
to follow in their knowledge which they were
building
as sure as houses on the tangled web.

And in that manner we became□elegance of fire,

the waving grass.
And it's been years.

Plot Summary

Line 1

The first line of "Anniversary" asks a question that the remainder of the poem answers. The last word, "this," refers to what is about to be described. Notice that the speaker—Harjo herself, it is safe to assume—does not imply that she can explain *how* the world began nor *why*, but only what it was like as it developed.

Lines 2-3

These lines contain description that serves both as pure poetics and as an allusion to scientific theory. Harjo describes the origin of the universe as "A little flame illuminating a rough sea." This is not only poetical, but also refers to the big bang theory, which contends that all the matter and energy in the universe today was once condensed in an extremely small, infinitely hot mass. Line 3, which is just as poetic when read as is, is also an allusion to this theory. When the big bang explosion occurred, it sent the condensed matter and energy expanding in all directions, eventually collecting into clouds that began to condense and rotate, forming the forerunners of galaxies. Harjo depicts this agitation of the universe's ingredients as "something fermented." The "question / of attraction" she mentions alludes to the big bang theory's explanation of how stars were formed. According to the big bang theory, changes in pressure within the newly formed galaxies caused gas and dust to form distinct clouds. If there was sufficient mass and adequate force within the clouds, gravitational attraction would have caused some of them to collapse. If the mass of material was sufficiently compressed, a star would form from the resulting nuclear reactions. While "something sweet" may not figure into the scientific explanation of the universe, it does add an optimistic flare for the poetic explanation.

Lines 4-6

Poetic license allows writers to fudge a bit on reality without being held accountable for scientific accuracy. In these lines, Harjo jumps ahead in the evolution of the universe, saying that at this point "a bird or two were added," including "the crow of course to / joke about humanity," and another bird not specifically identified, but that must be one most people would consider "beautiful." The description of the crows is an allusion to the legendary reputation of the black birds—often interchangeable with ravens, in folklore—which portrays them as evil-filled beasts who enjoy the suffering of human beings. In some Native American myths, crows have the supernatural power to predict death, and myth has it that if the shadow of the black bird crosses you while it is in flight, you will soon die. The hapless crow was probably destined for such a dubious distinction in human terms simply because of its caw. The high-pitched cry often sounds

like a person's shrill laugh, and when a group of them call out from the branches of trees, the noise resembles a cacophony of mad laughter.

The imagery in line 6 is worth noting. Apparently the beauty of the second type of bird was so great that human sight is indebted to it. Just the songs of these magnificent creatures paved the way for "our eyes [to] be imagined."

Lines 7-8

Line 7 implies that by this time, at least the seeds of what would become the human race were planted in the story of the universe. Simply stated: "we were then." But originally nothing existed as a free, individual entity, and, so, "there was no separation" between humans and the stars, planets, galaxies, or any matter that spun together in space. Only after the Earth itself came into being, giving birth to marvelous vegetation, oceans and rivers, and mountains and canyons formed from the furious throes of her survival□all together, the "cries of a planet"□could "our becoming" be possible.

Lines 9-10

Line 9 follows from line 6, confirming the creation of human eyes. As the Earth settled down after its chaotic growing pains, "We peered through the smoke" now sporting at least shoulders and lips, or perhaps that is all that was visible as humans "emerged from new terrain."

Lines 11-13

Here the poem becomes more philosophical than descriptive. This stanza returns to the notion of "attraction," but now it comments on the ongoing, unanswerable questions of creation that, when asked, only lead to more questions instead of solutions. Lines 12 and 13 contain the first mention of a deity's presence in the origins of the universe, but note that Harjo does not refer to "God" but to "gods." This is in keeping with the belief system of many Native American tribes (as well as other ethnic groups) that there are different gods for different things. When the human mind ponders too long the mysteries of the universe and human life, it can become confused or turn into "a spiral," going round and round with the debate between creation and evolution. Perhaps the agitated intellect travels "toward the invention of sky" because that is where many deities, including the fundamental Christian God, is thought to live.

Lines 14-15

These two lines are probably the most ambiguous, if not unexplainable, in the poem. Just who it is that is supposed to "Move over" is not identified, but perhaps it is the aforementioned gods who, presumably, already know the answers to the questions that humans continue to wrestle with. Then again, perhaps the speaker is telling the fretful

humans to give it a rest, so to speak□to allow the rest of "us" to wait until "the dust settles" before taking on worries that cannot be resolved anyway. Whatever the interpretation here, the sentiment seems to support a more relaxed approach to deep questions, as opposed to heated arguments and fruitless speculation.

Lines 16-19

Harjo, of course, recognizes that relaxation seldom goes hand in hand with such a controversial subject, and line 16 testifies to it. Here she admits that whatever was next in line for creation "is open to speculation or awe." Alluding to the argument that every animal, including man, derived from aquatic creatures that ventured from the sea to dry land, the poet describes a "shy fish who had known only water" before leaving the ocean to evolve into earth-dwelling mammals. Line 19 intentionally downplays the millions of years actually necessary for such evolutionary transformations to take place. Perhaps to emphasize the human inability to comprehend such vast amounts of time, Harjo infers that the fish's sprouting legs, learning to walk, and essentially growing into every subsequent being known today happened "just like that."

Lines 20-21

These two lines refer to the familiar food chain of living beings. As evolution developed, so developed one species's dependence upon another. Here, frogs dream of eating flying insects and the insects dream of mounds of dirt in which to build nests and create more insects.

Lines 22-23

Lines 22 and 23 draw a connection between the primitive food chain and human life. As frogs and insects grew in number and in intelligence, relatively speaking, they paved the way for human intelligence, which would eventually provide a network of human inventions, such as houses. Note that the network here, or the "web," is "tangled," an allusion to the saying, "Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!" from Sir Walter Scott's *Marmion*, canto vi, stanza 17.

Lines 24-25

"Anniversary" ends on a purely poetic note, summing up the "manner" in which "we became" the human race. One may not usually think of fire as elegant, but here it suggests that the explosive beginnings of the universe resulted in the remarkable creation of humankind. On a gentler note, "we" also derived from "the waving grass"□ perhaps only a soft metaphor to portray the human connection to all living things, including plants as well as planets. Line 25 seems somewhat anticlimactic after a poem full of scientific, historic, and poetic description, but actually the understatement is quite effective. Sometimes when the *real* amount of something is too vast to be

comprehensible whether it is the number of years since the universe began or the distance of its expansion one is left only with a humble admission of the greatness. "And it's been years" acknowledges the human inability to understand, but to appreciate nonetheless.

Themes

Remembrance and Transcendence

As a poet who identifies herself most significantly with her Native American heritage, Harjo's themes often reflect the essence of Indian mythology and beliefs in the human connection to the entire world of matter. Much of her work is based on the premise that even as an individual person living in the present day, she is still a part of the history of the human race, the history of animals and vegetation, even the history of planets and stars. Only by realizing and accepting this philosophy of interconnectedness can one both salute the past simply by remembering it and, at the same time, allow the mind to transcend the natural world without dispelling its beauty and importance.

In "Anniversary," one may view the entire piece as a work of remembrance. From the very first phrase□"When the world was created"□to the poem's final line□"And it's been years"□ Harjo takes the reader on a fanciful trip through time. Mixing scientific allusions with intriguing metaphors, she celebrates the creation of the world from a positive perspective, with only one little cynical remark thrown in about the purpose of crows: "to / joke about humanity." The poem is consistent throughout with descriptions of how the natural world developed, from stars and galaxies to birds and fish to, finally, humankind. But nature does not exist in a vacuum here. Rather, the human mind developed an ability to go beyond the physical world□to imagine, to dream, to *think*□and, so, the act of transcendence is also celebrated in the poem.

While there is a hint of speculation in nearly every depiction of the universe's unfolding, the most obvious display of the human mind transcending nature is in the fourth stanza. Here, the poet asserts that "The question mark of creation attracts more questions / until the mind is a spiral of gods strung out way over / our heads." In the next stanza, she acknowledges that humankind may not yet fully understand the makings of the world but there is at least a chance that "we can figure this thing out." Note that there is no apparent stress or frustration in the mind's search for answers, and there is no friction between the intellectual transcendence beyond nature and nature itself. Instead, they work in harmony, confirming the notion that the human being is always a part of everything that has ever existed and that everything that has ever existed is a part of the human being.

The World in Motion

Another theme common in Harjo's poetry and prose is the idea of a world that is constantly in motion. The universe is always moving outward, stars and planets continue to spin, oceans come and go with the tide, rivers never stop flowing, vegetation sprouts up and grows all over the earth, animals stay mobile to survive, and humans have created a world for themselves that frowns upon idle time and stopping to smell the roses, so to speak. "Anniversary" reflects this world-in-flux notion as the settings

and subjects shift throughout, sometimes subtly, sometimes abruptly, but always exhibiting movement.

Between the first and second stanzas, the scene shifts from the initial explosion of "A little flame illuminating a rough sea" beginning the universe to the presence of birds in the world. Just as quickly, the third stanza reverts to the "cries of a planet" and then jumps to the formation of human shoulders and lips. As the poem moves into and out of its more philosophical mid-section, it emerges into "The shy fish who had known only water" which, in turn, emerges from the ocean onto dry land "just like that, to another life." From the first sea creature that sprouted legs and became earth-dwelling, the poem moves to a close as frogs and insects populate the world alongside humans and all their possessions, including "houses on the tangled web." Just as remembrance and transcendence work harmoniously together, so do all the wheels spinning continuously throughout the physical universe and within human minds. Harjo seems not to see a need to *stop* the motion of the world, but to recognize it, celebrate it, and move on.

Style

Harjo's "Anniversary" is written in a very relaxed, contemporary style of free verse. There is no intentional rhyme or set meter, and there is very little alliteration (like-sounding consonants and vowels placed close together to create a rhythmic sound). One may expect the simplicity of the language to conflict with the complexity of the subject matter, and, yet, just the opposite is true. An attempt to record the creation of the universe and humankind in a twenty-five-line poem seems daunting anyway, but should it not at least require profound descriptions and even esoteric wording to complement the issue? Not necessarily. The simple, direct language actually enhances the idea that this is a celebration poem, not a scientific treatise on the formation of matter and energy. Harjo's story is uncluttered and natural, innocent in its presentation. She does not avoid the almost childlike depictions of "A little flame," "something sweet," "a bird or two," "The shy fish," "meals of flying things," and the final, anticlimactic line, "And it's been years." The guileless, unpretentious language discloses the poet's take on something as huge, complex, and mind-boggling as the origin of life: it can be pondered, appreciated, and enjoyed by everyone on earth, not just astronomers, physicists, and geniuses.

The most visible aspect of the poem's construction, of course, is the extra spacing between lines, giving it a loose, open feel and perhaps reflecting the unconstrained meandering of the subject. On the other hand, the skipped lines may emulate the poem's constant shift from one time period to another, one world to another, even one consciousness to another. Whatever Harjo had in mind with its presentation on the page, "Anniversary" *looks* as clean, clear, and unhindered as the language it contains.

Historical Context

Throughout the documented history of mankind, human beings have handed down creation stories from generation to generation, from the writings of what would become major religions to the lesser-known mythologies and legends passed through small sects of ethnic groups and tribes of native peoples. How much the story of the universe told in "Anniversary" was influenced by Harjo's Creek Indian heritage is not readily apparent, but it is likely that the Native American connection to nature and to the past, as well as the present and future, play a key role in the poem's composition.

Creek Indians belong to any of nineteen tribal groups that once occupied what are now Alabama and Georgia. Today, there are around 20,000 Creeks, most of whom live in Oklahoma, where Harjo was born. Like other Indian tribes in the early days of American history, the Creeks wound up in a region different from the one in which they had settled because of force, not choice. Since at least the mid-1500s, they had been successful farmers, dividing their land and members into about fifty settlements in the deep south, called Creek Towns. Eventually, a Creek Confederacy was formed, and it began to grow in power as Indian tribes that had been chased from their homelands by Europeans joined the Creeks. During the early 1800s, the Creeks battled Andrew Jackson's troops but were outnumbered and worn down over the years. In the 1830s, the government forced the Creeks to move to Indian territory in what is now Oklahoma. There, they faced poverty and starvation as they struggled to develop crops and farming methods that agreed with their new land and climate. It was a struggle that many of their descendants still live with today.

The population of Native Americans in the United States has increased by more than 40 percent in the past twenty years, although this group still comprises less than 1 percent of the total U.S. population. More than half all of Native Americans live in major cities, particularly New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, but most reside in the poor sections of those towns. Traditionally, many Native Americans travel back to their reservations each year and some return permanently. All too often, they find the natural environment of the reservation disrupted by industrialization. From oil well drilling and natural gas extraction to coal mines and hydroelectric plants, once sacred grounds now bear the resource burdens of energy-seeking consumers and corporations.

Despite the intrusion of industry onto Indian reservations, recent years have seen an increase in sympathy for Native American causes from both the general population and the government. In the late 1970s, the American Indian Policy Review Commission campaigned for greater Native American sovereignty in the United States and for the past two decades that sovereignty has been growing. The number of federally recognized tribes reached 547 by the mid 1990s and more than 100 other tribes were petitioning for recognition.

Although the increase in self-governance and a greater support for Indian issues have been beneficial to this population in general, Native Americans are still the poorest ethnic group in America. In the early 1990s, 31 percent lived at the poverty level, and,

on reservations, the typical yearly income for a household was $13,000, with unemployment sometimes reaching as high as 80 percent. The establishment of gambling casinos on many reservations has helped bring capital to the participating tribes, and there are now more than seventy Indian nations running casinos on their land. Today, the Native American gaming industry is worth some six billion dollars. It is a mistake, however, to think that gambling is the only form of economic enterprise occurring on Indian reservations. Other endeavors include building and selling mobile homes, growing cotton, assembling parts for automobiles, and maintaining resorts, to name just a few.

While many Indian students attend high schools and colleges among the general population, there are now more than twenty-five Native- American-run colleges and junior colleges, most in the northern Great Plains states. Over 13,000 students attend these tribal colleges where the emphasis is on Indian traditions and values, as well as training for jobs in today's world of technology, industry, and communications. Of course, a young Indian does not have to attend classes to learn about or to appreciate his or her own heritage, for respecting one's origins is a built-in part of Native American culture. Harjo was schooled at both the Institute of American Indian Arts and at public universities, but her work consistently reflects the values of Native- American culture. The origins she addresses in "Anniversary" are not personal, but universal - an issue that has likely caused greater upheaval in non-Indian populations than within tribes whose belief systems can account for spirituality and naturalism without turmoil and controversy.

The old rift between creationists and evolutionists has closed slightly in recent years. Many proponents on each side have begun to accept that the two seemingly polar-opposite ideologies may not be so far apart after all. Often called "scientific creationists," these folks in the middle of the road tend to agree that there is a supreme being responsible for the very beginning of energy, matter, and life, and they also agree on two points concerning evolution: 1) there has been "change through time" in certain lines of organisms, and 2) organisms do undergo changes during their lifetimes. But there is disagreement among scientific creationists concerning major groups of organisms giving rise to other groups, known as "macroevolution." Some claim that macroevolution violates the Biblical notion of "kinds," which has been loosely interpreted as "species."

Questions regarding the origins of the universe and life itself will likely remain unresolved, but that does not mean the human mind will stop pondering them. For even though "The question mark of creation attracts more questions," it seems inevitable that human beings were made - by whatever means - to keep asking.

Critical Overview

Harjo's poetry has been warmly received by both scholars and general readers alike. Most praise her ability to convey rich traditions of Native American culture and history□the horrible alongside the beautiful□in such honest, yet elegant, language. Her themes of nature, of interconnectedness, and of movement may not be considered original, but how she deals with them in poetic form is always admirable. In the introduction to Harjo's collection of interviews called *The Spiral of Memory*, fellow Native American poet Laura Coltelli writes that in Harjo's poetry

> the sense of the perennial movement from one place to the other . . . is not the senseless wandering of the uprooted, but instead traces an itinerary that bears a deep identification with the land, a geography of the remembered earth.

In her brief biography of the poet simply titled *Joy Harjo*, Rhonda Pettit describes Harjo's frequent and well-done use of mysticism in some of her poems: "Characteristics of Native American spirituality and orature feed this mysticism□ boundaries between the physical and spiritual world dissolve; animate and inanimate objects are interconnected and sacred; time ceases to be linear." Although this comment was published two years before Harjo's book containing "Anniversary," it is easy to see how well Pettit's description applies to this poem as well.

Further testament to Harjo's acceptance into both Native American and mainstream literary circles is the number of awards and honors she has received over the past twenty-five years. Appropriately, just over twenty-five, including an Academy of American Poetry Award and a first-place poetry award from the University of New Mexico, both in 1976; an American Indian Distinguished Achievement Award in 1990; an American Book Award in 1991; and a presidential appointment to the National Council on the Arts in 1998.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill suggests that Harjo's poem stops short of describing a totally pantheistic view of the universe, leaving room for theism and even atheism.

Not everyone who claims to follow the tenets of *pantheism* would describe the principles of this "religion" in the same way. Not all of them would even call it a religion. In general, however, pantheism holds that the universe is the ultimate reality and the ultimate object of reverence, as opposed to the belief in a personal God found in most traditional theistic religions. As such, the universe represents a unity of all things - a *totality* of which everything in nature is an inseparable part, including human beings. Most pantheists do not consider themselves either theists or atheists. Theism not only acknowledges a personal God who is separate from the natural world, but also contends that God is similar to a human being but with supernatural powers and an omniscient presence. Pantheists do not believe in a deity that is in any way like a person, but they are still not atheists because the godlike principles they attribute to the universe contradict a belief in no God, or gods, at all. Today, however, a new faction of pantheism has cropped up called "scientific" or "natural" pantheism. In this modern form, followers still revere the universe and nature but they do not attribute deistic powers to it.

So how does all this figure into Joy Harjo's "Anniversary" poem, which seems very simple, even sweet, in its subject matter and presentation? Because her background is Native American and because many Indian principles and beliefs center around a tremendous respect for nature and a human connection to all natural things, some readers may be tempted to tag the poem pantheistic and let it go at that. Truly, Harjo employs many of the facets of pantheism in "Anniversary," but she leaves open the door to other religions, or non-religions, denying the poem any single category of philosophical thought.

First, consider the descriptions that seem most pantheistic in nature. After opening with a metaphor reflecting evolution theory, the big bang in particular, the poem shifts quickly to the origins of humankind. But even though the seeds of humanity are present ("we were then"), the interconnectedness of all living matter is so strong that "there was no separation" between the stuff of galaxies and stars and the stuff of human beings. As a gradual detachment begins to take place, people, or people-like creatures, emerge "from new terrain," but the transformation into distinct living beings - whether birds, fish, flowers, insects, or humans - does not imply that a complete split ever occurs. Instead, the connection is still very vibrant, and the sense of sacredness that pantheists feel for nature and the universe derives from the inseparable bond among all living matter.

In its entirety, "Anniversary" could be viewed as primarily pantheistic. But one must be careful when attempting to categorize something that is not wholly in keeping with a specific doctrine or belief system. The notion of "a spiral of gods strung out way over /

our heads" could simply be a metaphor for stars, planets, galaxies, and so forth that reside high above the Earth and that have godlike qualities for the pantheist. But, considering that this phrase directly follows the acknowledgment that "The question mark of creation attracts more questions," one may also view it as an acceptance that the "gods" are separate from the universe as well as from humankind. There is a clear admission that neither the poet nor anyone else has the answers to the questions of creation, and, so, pantheism is not necessarily the end-all belief in this poem. Perhaps the most telling words here are "way over / our heads," for, figuratively speaking, that may be the best way to explain the inability of the human mind to comprehend the world's beginnings.

Another example of the ambivalence of religious theory in "Anniversary" is the admission in the fifth stanza that the human race is still trying to "figure this thing out." This makes it clear that confusion continues and that there are still questions that need to be answered. This, in turn, means that no one belief system has yet satisfied the storyteller in the poem. Indeed, the "story" is still just that - a tale of possibilities, sometimes following the tenets of pantheism and sometimes contradicting it.

Probably the most revealing line in this poem regarding its religious, and non-religious, nature is at the beginning of the sixth stanza: "What was created next is open to speculation or awe." If one *speculates* or reflects on a topic, it is the human mind that is at work - pondering, questioning, reasoning, and so on. No religious thought is necessary to think rationally about something and to reach a conclusion, even one based on inconclusive evidence. Therefore, one part of this line seems to be saying that the evolutionary transformation of water creatures into land creatures is just an idea that anyone may consider - theists, pantheists, or atheists. But when the word "awe" comes into the picture, so does the notion of God or gods. In its literal sense, "awe" means a feeling of reverence and wonder, even fear, inspired by something mighty and authoritative or extremely beautiful and gifted. For theists, God is awesome; for pantheists, the universe is awesome. So this part of the line suggests that the transformations that took place in the beginnings of life had a connection to some supernatural power, regardless of whether that power is separate from or an intrinsic part of the universe. In short, Harjo leaves open the door for all kinds of thought: religious fundamentalist, religious pantheist, and non-religious or atheist.

While strict adherents to any one of these belief systems have argued their cases fervently over countless years, even to the point of violence, the poem "Anniversary" is neither argumentative nor provocative. Its tone is one of soft conciliation to the beauty of nature and the wonders of its creation. It is likely a work that can be appreciated by readers tied to any philosophy because it is easy to *read into it* whatever one wants to see there. This does not mean that Harjo's poem is frivolous or vulnerable to misinterpretation. Rather, it seems to welcome *all* into the celebration of life - a joy that can be shared regardless of where anyone believes humans came from.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Anniversary," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Ketteler has taught literature and composition. In this essay, Ketteler discusses the way in which Joy Harjo departs from a Western way of thinking about the beginning of time and human thought and writes out of a developing Native American tradition.

The poem "Anniversary" by Joy Harjo is a creation story, and an alternative way of thinking about the beginning of time and human existence. It is "alternative" in that it takes a non-Western approach in its world view. As a Native American writer, and more specifically, a member of the Creek tribe, Joy Harjo writes from a marginalized place in American society, and her voice fills in a gap in American history. But she is not alone: Harjo is working out of a rich Native American literary tradition. She taps into the common thread of memory, which is central to the survival of Creek culture. "Anniversary" tells the story of the beginning of time, including the creation of all species, animal and human. This poem also theorizes about the human mind itself - how the human mind conceives of memory, and how human beings and their memories are rooted in the natural world. In an interview with literary scholar Laura Coltelli, Harjo speaks about memory: "I also see memory as not just associated with past history, past events, past stories, but nonlinear, as in future and ongoing history, events, and stories. And it changes."

Storytelling is very important in Native American cultures, and the oral tradition has kept the stories, myths, and poems of native peoples vibrant. In the essay, "An Art of Saying: Joy Harjo's Poetry and the Survival of Storytelling," literary critic Mary Leen remarks: "In oral cultures, storytelling maintains and preserves traditions. It takes listeners on a journey toward a renewal of life, a common survival theme in Native rituals and ceremonies." "Anniversary" is very much about a journey toward a renewal of life, one that celebrates the past, the road already traveled.

"Anniversary" is one of Harjo's more recent poems, from the book *A Map to the Next World*, published in 2000. This collection of poems and essays is very much concerned with ancestry, history, and creating a bridge between the past and the present. The poem "Anniversary" takes up this theme as well: it is the story of the past, as it revisits itself upon the future. The title "Anniversary" suggests a celebration, and this celebration is habitual, not a day long ago in history forgotten, but a living memory to be celebrated. The story is still alive.

The notion that the past recurs is a main tenet of most Native-American philosophy. Many Native American cultures organize themselves in a circular way, rather than a linear one. Instead of envisioning a straight line with the past at one end and the future at the other - which is how the Western world operates - many non-Western cultures view history as a circle: the past is revisited on the present, and the spirits of ancestors are ever-present. Each time a story is told, the memory is recreated. Mary Leen explains:

Sacred stories were considered factual, and the idea of history, of past and present and future for indigenous people before contact, was quite different from the linear, chronological way events are organized in the Western world.

"Before contact" is generally defined as pre- Columbus and pre-colonization. Before Western influence forced itself on indigenous people, there were hundreds, possibly thousands, of different cultural traditions. While these cultures were varied, each highly valued their ancestors, and believed the past to be alive in the present.

The very first line of the poem acts as a sort of "topic sentence" for the rest of the poem. The speaker begins with a rhetorical question: "When the world was created, wasn't it like this?" The reader can imagine a storyteller, telling this story in a communal atmosphere. The tone is very matter- of-fact, almost understated: "A little flame illuminating a rough sea, a question / of attraction, something fermented, something sweet?" The question mark suggests the speaker's inflection is one of slight uncertainty, as if she wants a response or an affirmation from her group. The main actor in this creation drama is nature; the speaker uses images from the natural world: flame, sea, and earth - the basic elements. "Fermented" suggests a long process of preparation and waiting to make until the perfect moment, the way grapes ferment to make wine. "Ferment" is also somewhat harsh - the taste of fermented yeast is harsh to the tongue. "Something sweet" is thrown in to offset this. The beginning of the world is not a rushed process; it is all of the elements working together to bring life into being at precisely the right moment.

The story continues with the next stanza. More actors are introduced into the drama. "And then a bird or two were added, the crow of course to / joke about humanity." Another characteristic of Native American literature is anthropomorphism - or animals taking on human characteristics. Animals often have special powers and human characteristics in Native American literature. Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz speak about this in their book, *American Indian Myths and Legends*: "Animals are a swarming, talkative presence in the folklore of every Indian tribe. The number of tales in which they figure should not be surprising, given their major role in Indian mythology and religion." Different animals hold different significance - the coyote, for example, is often a trickster figure. It's no surprise that animals appear in Harjo's creation story. Erdoes and Ortiz explain: "We have seen a number of animals depicted as the creators of the universe and of the human race, and they freely move in and out of stories now as tricksters, now as cultural bringers." Clearly, animals are on the level with humans; the crow "jokes" about humanity, suggesting not only that humans are imperfect, but that animals have as much right to inhabit the earth as humans and have an important role to play in keeping humans balanced.

The first line of the third stanza solidifies this relationship: "And it was, we were then - and there was no separation." This suggests a level of spirituality and connection to the earth and to all living creatures. People are not masters of the universe, they are simply part of it. Feminist critic and historian Paula Gunn Allen discusses the recurrence of

connectedness in Native American literature in her book, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Allen says: "The sense of connectedness of all things, of the spiritness of all things, of the intelligent consciousness of all things, is the identifying characteristic of American Indian tribal poetry." It is as if all of the species of the earth - plants, animals, and humans - are in partnership with one another. The Earth itself, and the seas and elements are all crucial participants in the partnership as well. This creation story is different from the Christian creation story as told in Genesis. There is no main actor, no one single hand who sets the world into motion, as God does in Genesis. Rather, all of the life forces come together to create the world.

Harjo also uses images of the Earth as mother in the third stanza of "Anniversary": "The cries of a planet formed our becoming. / We peered through the smoke as our shoulders, lips, / emerged from new terrain." The reader can imagine a birth taking place: a baby pushing itself out of its mother, crying as it enters the world, taking its first breaths. So it is that humans are born out of the Earth, their flesh and bone made up of all of the elements. In the interview with Coltelli, Harjo speaks about the physical and spiritual connection she feels with the Earth, and the way in which the Earth is perceived in feminine terms, as a mother force. An Oklahoma native, she relates this feeling to her home state. She says: "I always see Oklahoma as my mother, my motherland. I am connected psychically; there is a birth cord that connects me." While she is speaking of a specific place - in this case, her homeland of Oklahoma - this statement can be extended to the land in general - the land that each tribe holds sacred. The roots of the tribe are located both physically and spiritually on that land. Harjo also addresses the idea of roots in her interview with Coltelli: "When I speak of roots, I often mean more than what's usually conjectured. I consider the place we all came from, since the very beginning."

The fourth stanza shifts in tone somewhat. Each tribe, each culture has its own creation story - its own system of belief that it uses to explain how the world began and humanity's relationship to the world. Harjo recognizes this, and calls attention to human curiosity: "The question mark of creation attracts more questions / until the mind is a spiral of gods strung out way over / our heads, traveling toward the invention of sky." It's as if the speaker is suggesting that to tackle the creation story, to understand cognitively and rationally, is more than the human mind is capable of. It "spirals" out of control because we cannot come to any firm conclusion if we try to think scientifically. Yet we are drawn to think in such a manner, to dissect and theorize and test. This is not a bad thing. It just requires energy, as the fifth stanza suggests: "Move over and let us sleep until the dust settles, / until we can figure this thing out." Understanding how the world came into being isn't an overnight thing. People need time to develop their belief systems. "Why rush?" is the implied rhetorical question. Harjo again uses the same patient, matter-of-fact tone she began the poem with.

The reader is brought back into storytelling mode with the sixth stanza. The world is not yet complete; there is still more wonder to behold, and also an uncertainty: "What was created next is open to speculation or awe." The reader gets the sense that this story is not set in stone. It evolves with each telling. Throughout "Anniversary," many transformations are described: humans are transformed from dust out of the earth into

creatures; the earth and seas are transformed as well. Animals - who often take on human characteristics - also undergo transformations. "The shy fish" suddenly becomes a creature of the land. He walks "out of the ocean onto dry land, / just like that, to another life." Life is changeable, malleable. The animals in the seventh stanza are much the same: "Frog imagined meals of flying things and creatures in flight imagined hills." It's as if the species are still figuring out their places. Animals, humans, and plants all seem to be testing out different identities until they find the one that suits them best. But no one single species seems elevated above the others: all are free to create and recreate themselves. Creation is all part of the "tangled web" - the powerful image that sits at the end of the seventh stanza.

"Anniversary" concludes in a very simple, almost nonchalant way: "And in that manner we became - elegance of fire, the waving of grass. / And it's been years." The poem is very much following the circular narrative style described earlier. Instead of following the traditional pattern of storytelling, with a conflict and a resolution, "Anniversary" circles around itself, not prioritizing the end over the beginning, or vice versa. Events happen as they happen. Paula Gunn Allen says:

> American Indian literature does not rely on conflict, crisis and resolution for organization . . . Rather, its significance is determined by its relation to creative empowerment, its reflection of tribal understanding, and its relation to the unitary nature of reality.

For Harjo, reality is determined by the past, by the stories her culture has preserved. In this poem, people were not put on the earth to dominate and categorize the species. There is no one main event that leads up to the moment of creation. Rather, things happen in relation to one another: there is a sense of connectedness and interdependence. People are not at the center of the story, and are not positioned at the center of the world. As such, Native American cultures have a different relationship to the Earth: the Earth is alive, and in many cases, it is thought of as female (as is the case in this poem with the childbirth imagery in the third stanza). In writing "Anniversary," Harjo is working within an established literary tradition that values oral storytelling, the preservation of memories, and a living relationship with the Earth.

Source: Judi Ketteler, Critical Essay on "Anniversary," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

Harjo recorded her poetry collection *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* in 1994. It is available on cassette from audiobooks.com and from www.amazon.com, as of this writing.

Topics for Further Study

Write an essay defending your idea of how the universe began. Tell how you arrived at your conclusion and how you feel about the "other side."

Are there any popular legends or myths associated with your culture, ethnic group, or religion? Describe one in an essay and tell how you think it originated and why it has lasted over the years.

Choose another Native American poet, male or female, and compare his or her work to Harjo's. Are there similar themes or subjects? How are the styles alike and how do they differ? If you have a preference for one over the other, tell why and give examples from the poems.

Joy Harjo has sometimes called the English language her "enemy." What do you think she means by this and how do you think it affects the poetry she writes, if at all?

What Do I Read Next?

Joy Harjo's 1990 collection *In Mad Love and War* won both the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Award and the Mountains and Plains Booksellers Award. Some of these poems first appeared in the *Anthology of Contemporary Arizona Indian Literature*, and they are some of her most "musical" lyrics, while the subjects are some of her darkest.

American Indian Myths and Legends, edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz, first appeared in 1984 and is still one of the most enjoyable, easily read collections of Native American folklore. It is divided into chapters covering topics from the origins of the planet and people, through social structure, love, war, and, finally, death and the afterlife. (The legends have not been edited and some contain sexually explicit material.)

Internationally respected cosmologist John D. Barrow's recent publication *The Book of Nothing: Vacuums, Voids, and the Latest Ideas about the Origins of the Universe* (2001) is a must for anyone interested in keeping current with ideas in physics and astronomy. In it, Barrow explores the idea that there is no such thing as "nothing." A strong science background is helpful in reading this book.

From Sand Creek, published in 2000, is the latest poetry and prose collection by Simon Ortiz, Native American writer and the father of Joy Harjo's daughter. His subjects include the violent history of Native Americans as well as personal tragedies combined with hope for a better life. Throughout the book, Ortiz pairs poems on one page with historical vignettes, personal notes, and political comments on the facing page, making for a very interesting presentation as well as a good reading.

Further Study

Bruchac, Joseph, and Janet Witalec, eds., *Smoke Rising: The Native North American Literary Companion*, Visible Ink Press, 1995.

This collection of poetry and prose by and about Native Americans is a comprehensive resource for anyone interested in Indian culture. It runs over 400 pages and includes four of Joy Harjo's poems.

Harjo, Joy, *She Had Some Horses*, Thunder's Mouth Press, 1983.

This early poetry collection by Harjo is one of her most popular. The title poem is often anthologized, and the book as a whole is a good introduction to the Native American themes that run throughout subsequent collections.

□, *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1996.

The title of this collection refers to the Iroquoian creation myth about a goddess who falls from the sky. In Harjo's poem, however, the goddess becomes a "strange beauty in heels" who drops through a plate glass grocery window. It is interesting to compare this creation story to the one she tells in "Anniversary."

Harjo, Joy, and Gloria Bird, eds., *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native American Women's Writings of North America*, W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1997.

This is an anthology of work of over eighty Native American women writers who have recorded their experiences in poetry, fiction, prayer, and memoir. It is considered one of the most important contributions to Native American women's literature and historical documentation.

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Leen, Mary, "An Art of Saying: Joy Harjo's Poetry and the Survival of Storytelling," in *American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Winter 1995, pp. 1-16.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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