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Joy Harjo: Poet, Musician, and Activist

Biography

Joy Harjo was born on May 9, 1951 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She is a member of the Msvkoke Creek Nation, and is a poet, activist, and musician. From a young age, art has played an important role in her life—particularly inspiring were the female members of her family. Her mother was a singer, and her grandmother and aunt were visual artists. Art was how Harjo responded to personal and family struggles—seeing her father’s violent behavior induced by alcoholism, her parents’ divorce, and the abusive behavior of her mother’s second husband made her afraid to speak up out loud, both inside and outside the classroom. So, she turned to painting as a form of creative expression. At the same time, she explored a different form of creative expression, a form that she had no role models for in her life—poetry. In 8th grade, she wrote her very first poem (Alexander).

Harjo’s deep connection to the arts and social justice began to form when she attended the Institute of American Indian Arts in New Mexico at 16 years old. Here, she met a community of Native artists—visual artists, performing artists, writers, and more. As part of this community, Harjo contributed to what she refers to as the “renaissance of contemporary native art” in which she worked to combat stereotypical American views of Native American lives presented in the media (Alexander). Later, Harjo attended the University of New Mexico, where she began on a pre-med track but then decided to shift to the arts, where she explored music and writing. She finally decided to major in creative writing. In this space, she became heavily influenced by the Native rights movements in the university and found other Natives who also wrote poetry (Alexander).

Joy Harjo is the 23rd Poet Laureate of the United States, the first Native American Poet Laureate, and only the second poet to be appointed a third term as laureate. Harjo published her first poetry collection, *The Last Song*, in 1975. One of her most widely acclaimed volumes is *She Had Some Horses*, published in 1982. In addition to publishing poetry collections, Harjo is also a musician—she plays the saxophone, flutes, and other jazz and Native instruments to create interesting hybrid music. Notable albums of hers include *Red Dreams*, *A Trail Beyond Tears*, and *I Pray for my Enemies*. She has garnered numerous awards for her music, including the First Americans in the Arts, First Native American Music Awards, American Indian Film Festival, and New Mexico Music Awards. She won the Native American Music Award (NAMMY) for Best Female Artist of the Year for her album *Winding Through the Milky Way* (Alexander).

Joy Harjo uses poetry and music as a form of activism. In an interview with NPR, she says, “If my work does nothing else, when I get to the end of my life, I want Native peoples to be seen as human beings” (Gross). Harjo explains how she works so that people, not just humans but animals, insects and the earth, can gain respect (Gross). In an interview with Poets.org, Harjo emphasizes how her goal is to promote and publish not just her own poetry but other Native poetry in order to combat stereotypes that portray Native Americans as a homogenous group (Poets.org).

In an interview with the University of Washington, Harjo reflects on lessons she has learned from poetry—most importantly, poetry, and art more broadly, have taught her to listen. Harjo reflects on the importance of creating “safe spaces” in poetry—not “feel-good” spaces but places where differences and diversity are allowed and encouraged (Humienik). Harjo emphasizes how poetry is a key component of healing—she says, “healing is not always a pretty thing, you have to go through the wound,” and poetry helps individuals through this difficult process (Humienik).

Close Reading of 3 Works

Joy Harjo is an artist who has explored multiple genres. This essay will focus on her poetry, which is written in free verse and sometimes recited with musical accompaniment. Her works will be analyzed to understand similarities in theme, central ideas, and style, and how these elements have evolved over the course of her career.

She Had Some Horses

Joy Harjo published her poetry book *She Had Some Horses* in 1983. This is one of her earliest books, and is, in her words, “a powerful exploration of womanhood’s most intimate moments” (Harjo and Momaday). This book has been well-regarded by literary critics and fellow Native American author N. Scott Momaday (Harjo and Momaday).

Key central ideas in this book are change, identity, generational trauma, and nature. A powerful motif in this book is horses. Horses appear in the bodies and titles of multiple poems. Horses come in various forms, and the symbol of the horse can be interpreted in multiple ways. Ways in which I interpreted the symbol of the diversity of horses are the complexity of an individual’s identity and the heterogeneity of human experience.

Another stylistic choice across Harjo’s poems is that many of them refer to this unnamed woman referred to as “she.” This feature delivers an ambiguous quality to the subject of the poem, which both gives mystery to the subject as well as highlights the solidarity of experience of Native American women in dealing with struggles such as trauma passed on from generations, abuse, motherhood, and reclamation of self.

The central ideas and stylistic choices of *She Had Some Horses* will be explored through case studies of specific poems—“The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window,” “She Had Some Horses,” and “I Give You Back.”

“The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window” describes a Native woman hanging, literally, from the thirteenth floor of a building in Chicago, and details the thoughts going through her head as she holds on by “her own thread of indecision” (Harjo 14). The suspense in the poem builds up, ending in a binary choice—either she “climbs back up to claim herself again” or she “falls from the 13th floor window on the east side of Chicago” (Harjo 15). The reader does not know what “she” ultimately decides, which leaves them wondering long after they finish reading the poem. Instead of ending the reader’s suspense by stating the final outcome, which would leave the reader feeling either relief over the subject’s safety or grief over the subject’s death, Harjo crafts an ambiguous ending to leave the reader with a lasting impression of the power of choice in circumstances one has not chosen to be in but rather were forced upon them.

In this poem, Harjo uses vivid imagery. Examples include “She hangs from the 13th floor window in east Chicago, with a swirl of birds over her head. They could be a halo, or a storm of glass waiting to crush her” (Harjo 13) and “In some places Lake Michigan speaks softly, here, it just sputters and butts itself against the asphalt” (Harjo 13). This imagery vividly situates the reader in the subject’s physical position. The surroundings themselves are ominous and foreboding, which builds the poem’s suspenseful mood.

Furthermore, Harjo uses an alternating pattern to structure the poem. She alternates between the woman’s memories of the past and descriptions of the present physical scenery. For example, following a stanza describing the woman physically hanging onto the building and the reactions she garners from onlookers is a stanza full of the woman’s thoughts in the moment—of her children, her parents, her past husbands, and her identity. This alternating structure mimics the scattered nature of the woman’s thoughts in this moment. Her mind goes back and forth between processing her physical situation, including the reactions and judgment from onlookers, and significant memories, both traumatic and joyful. Furthermore, this structure gives depth to the unnamed speaker by helping the reader understand the backstory—what motivated the woman to throw her body off the windowsill and hang on to the side of the building.

Finally, Harjo uses anaphora throughout the poem. An example is in the tenth stanza, when she begins each line with “She thinks” (Harjo 14). This repetition emphasizes the multiple aspects of the woman’s identity, including herself as a mother, herself as a child, and herself as a wife, and thus reinforces a larger theme of the poetry collection, which is the complexity of identity.

In the poem “She Had Some Horses,” Harjo describes again the unnamed woman referred to as “she” who owns many different horses, and she lists the attributes of each horse. Harjo uses anaphora throughout the poem. In each stanza, each line begins with “She had horses who” followed by a description of the horse (Harjo 61). This repetition delivers a regular, ordered structure to the poem, giving it a rhythmic quality.

Furthermore, Harjo uses chremamorphism, giving inanimate characteristics to the horses, and personification, giving the horses human attributes. An example of chremamorphism is “She had horses who were bodies of sand,” and an example of personification is “She had horses who waltzed nightly on the moon” (Harjo 61).

The personification and chremamorphism evolve the symbol of the horses from inanimate beast to human-like being to sentient human over the course of the poem. In the first stanza, the horses are described in terms of the beauties of the natural world—“bodies of sand,” “blue air of sky,” and “splintered red cliff” (Harjo 61). In the next stanza, the horses are given female characteristics and are objectified—the horses have “long, pointed breasts” and “full, brown thighs” (Harjo 61). In the following stanza, the horses have feelings and personalities—they “danced in their mother’s arms” or “were much too shy” (Harjo 61). In the next stanza, the horses become self-aware—they are able to identify themselves as “horse,” “spirit,” or “no names” (Harjo 62). Finally, the horses develop the ability to appeal to higher powers like established religion and to understand abstract concepts like salvation. This evolution of the symbol of the horse over the course of the poem highlights one of the central ideas of the poetry collection—change, both at the individual and population levels. This evolution illustrates how humans change over the course of their lives, and how human needs and characteristics have evolved over the course of history.

Throughout the poetry book, Harjo discusses intimate and challenging moments that Indigenous women face over the course of their lives. She ends the book with the poem “I Give You Back.” This final poem is structured like a prayer, which is an intentional choice that is observed in Harjo’s poetry book *An American Sunrise* as well. The poem reads like a prayer due to the repetition of phrases such as “I release you” and “I am not afraid,” (Harjo 71), which create a chant-like feeling. Through this repetition, Harjo emphasizes how speaking aloud is a technique of affirmation to regain control over one’s emotions, in this case, reclaiming oneself from the debilitating nature of fear.

In discussing the horrors of fear, Harjo alludes to historical events like “the soldiers who burned down my home” (Harjo 71), referencing the colonization of Native land and the unprecedented genocide of Native Americans that has occurred over the course of American history. These vivid pictures illustrate how generational trauma functions—ancestors who experience pain and suffering project that pain and suffering onto their children, and the pain continues to be transmitted until a concerted effort is made to break down the pain at its source. Harjo shows this effort to break down the pain at its source in the poem “I Give You Back” as the speaker’s relationship to fear evolves—the speaker attains a position of power over fear, such that by the end of the poem, the story comes full circle—the speaker is no longer afraid, fear is afraid of her. Overall, the prayer-like nature of the poem, which is established through chants and repetition, as well as the evolution of ownership over oneself in the face of fear, leaves the reader with a note of hope and strength that they, too, can take this challenging step to examine their negative emotions at the root and to break them down from the source in order to move on from the darkness of the past, not just for themselves but for their children.

A key theme that emerges from the poems in *She Had Some Horses* is that identity is multifaceted, dynamic in nature, and influenced both by elements that one can and cannot control. By starting with the woman hanging from the 13th floor window, circumstances that have been imposed upon her, to explaining the multiple facets of identity and humanity through the symbol of the horse, to ending on the note of reclaiming oneself from the pains of generations, Harjo highlights the fluid, complex nature

of identity and how one can take steps to regain mental autonomy in order to break the cycle of trauma for themselves and future generations.

An American Sunrise

Joy Harjo published her poetry book *An American Sunrise* in 2019. Key central ideas explored in this collection are memory, history, family, and nature. This collection consists of poems of varying lengths, with short poems punctuating larger ones. Harjo intentionally includes poems that draw on for multiple pages to emphasize the importance of listening to the entire story, complete with its details, because the point cannot be summarized in a line but rather resides in the story in its entirety.

These ideas will be explored through case studies of specific poems—“Washing My Mother’s Body,” “How to Write a Poem in a Time of War,” and “Bless This Land.”

In the poem “Washing My Mother’s Body,” Harjo explores what it means to revisit memories through poetry and what symbolic function actions have in connecting to memory, especially when things were left unfinished. Harjo begins by alternating between long and short statements. These introductory lines establish the theme of the poem—how Harjo finds solace in action to “complete” unfinished chapters of the past. Alternating between long and short sentences establishes a rhythmic quality to the poem, a tool that Harjo uses in many of her works to draw the reader into the subject matter of the poem.

Furthermore, Harjo structures the poem itself as an alternating pattern of concrete action and vague memory—a few lines of action are followed by a few lines of memory, and this stylistic choice repeats throughout the entire poem. For example, at the beginning of the second stanza, Harjo describes the action of finding the correct pan to wash her mother’s body, and then describes how her mother used that pan to bathe her and her siblings when they were babies. This alternating structure creates two parallel threads in the poem—how Harjo responds to the past in the present, and the actual stories of the past. By creating these parallel threads, Harjo emphasizes to the reader the disconnect between these two narratives occupying different spaces in time, which is key in symbolizing how actions in the present cannot change those in the past, even if they may deliver emotional reassurance. Even though Harjo

washes her mother's body in memory, she can never go back into the past and do the things that were left undone. By highlighting this disconnect, Harjo guides the reader toward the idea that they must focus on moving into the present and not going back into the past.

Another stylistic choice that Harjo uses is portraying her mother's body as a vessel of story. As she washes her mother's body in memory, each part of the body symbolizes a different part of her mother's story. Her face represents the beginning of the story—her youth. Her arms and legs represent the long days of work and domestic abuse she endured. Her body represents the vessel that carried her children into birth through the violence she experienced. Her heart represents the love she had for her children. And finally, Harjo ends the poem by describing her mother's feet—the feet that never stopped moving—as she proceeds to cover her mother's body and say her last goodbye. Harjo uses her mother's body to structure the poem to emphasize how bodies carry stories, and how these stories, both joyful and painful, are transmitted across generations.

Harjo's poem "How to Write a Poem in a Time of War" contains irregular spacings and jumps back and forth chronologically. These stylistic choices create a rapid pace to highlight the discord of war and the fast pace of destruction. The spacings creates a zig-zag pattern which physically distorts the viewer's eye as they jump back and forth between different details of war, which are vividly described—"shrapnel and the eye / Of a house" (Harjo 47), "the torn pockets of your daughter's hand-sewn dress" (Harjo 49), and "the baby's delicately beaded moccasin still connected to the foot" (Harjo 49). This vivid imagery, along with the irregular spacings and sudden time jumps, builds a scenery of confusion such that the reader struggles to keep up with all of the destruction that is happening in so many different places all at once.

This poem explores the central question: how can one find a place to begin a poem during a time of war? Following each description of the state of war at a specific time point are italicized lines representing Harjo's thoughts, which indicate whether or not that is the best place to start. Harjo decides not to start the poem when colonizers started "teaching our [Native] children their god's story," or when "Everyone was asleep, despite the distant bombs," unaware that war was about to happen (Harjo 48-49).

Harjo finds the place to start at the end of the poem—when the grandfather “blew his most powerful song into the hearts of the children” so that they may survive and one day come back home to discover all that was lost (Harjo 49). Harjo’s struggle to find a place to start the poem highlights one of the key challenges in unpacking past horrors, especially when many pieces of the story are unknown but the pains transmitted from generations of ancestors are concrete—finding a way to frame the story to be able to make sense of what happened and how it relates to the present day. Harjo describes the mental gymnastics needed in order to string together discrete stories from the past in order to build a cohesive picture. This struggle to find the beginning of the story is one that many Native Americans today experience as they attempt to reconnect with their heritage, understand the stories of their ancestors, and find their ancestral lands.

Harjo ends *An American Sunrise* with the poem “Bless this Land.” Harjo structures this poem like a prayer through repetition of “bless” followed by a characteristic of the land followed by an italicized elaboration of how nature will become revitalized. Harjo prays that, out of the repeated human destruction of nature through the ages, nature will be revived.

Throughout the poem, Harjo uses imagery to illustrate how the destruction of nature is the precursor to its rejuvenation. For example, Harjo writes, “Luminous forests, oceans, and rock cliff sold for the trash glut of / gold, uranium, or oil bust rush yet there are new stories to be made, / little ones coming up over the horizon” (Harjo 106). This descriptive language paints a vivid picture of how nature will be reborn from its present state of destruction.

Furthermore, Harjo personifies the land—she gives it human features like eyes, ears, mouth, lips, arms, hands, and heart. Harjo uses personification in order to help the reader view the land not as a resource to be exploited but as a loved one that must be nurtured, protected, and appreciated. Harjo describes the land as a keeper of time and provider of life that is a living and breathing entity, and she emphasizes our moral responsibility to look after the land.

Harjo ends this poem with a powerful summative thought: “These lands aren’t our / lands. These lands aren’t your lands. We are this land” (Harjo 108). Over the course of the poem, Harjo presents the

land as a being with human characteristics, feelings, and qualities and ends with this powerful line to emphasize how we humans are one with this land, despite our history being full of conflicts over ownership of land. We are simply a part of a larger whole, the land, and we have a duty to remember it and take care of it.

Harjo's central project in *An American Sunrise* is to convey how the pains inflicted on one's ancestors continue on through the centuries in the form of generational trauma, how the body can be a vessel of this story, and how connecting with and remembering the land is the first step to building a positive path forward.

I Pray for My Enemies

Joy Harjo released her music album *I Pray for My Enemies* in 2021 (Harjo). The majority of the pieces in this album are structured as free verse poetry recited against a backdrop of music. Common central ideas across these songs include nature, memory, time, and pain.

The album will be explored through case studies of specific songs—"Calling the Spirit Back," "Earth House," and "We Emerged from Night in Clothes of Sunrise."

A common stylistic element across these pieces is the fusion of Native melodies and beats with jazz. In "Calling the Spirit Back," Native beats play regularly in the background, creating a rhythmic quality that immerses the listener into the song, and a Native stringed instrument provides the central melody and has a solo piece at the end. These musical elements are juxtaposed against modern, electronic sounds throughout the piece.

In "Earth House," there is a more clear separation between modern and Native melodies—the song starts out with electronic music that plays softly, allowing the listener's focus to be on Harjo's words. In the middle, there is a long pause in music in which Harjo continues speaking. After this pause, Harjo chants in her Native language, and Native beats play in the background.

"We Emerged from Night in Clothes of Sunrise" begins with the saxophone, which is followed by the addition of piano, and finally ends with a hint of traditional beats.

These pieces illustrate how Harjo combines modern and Native musical elements to create a backdrop for her poetry recitation, showing how the words of her poems live in a continuum of time—they are not tied to the past, they are not tied to the present, they exist in a changing world.

Thematically, “Calling the Spirit Back” addresses the importance of turning off one’s devices and technology to be in tune with and express gratitude towards nature during a time of ecological destruction, social turmoil, and the heavy weight of historical wrongdoing. “Earth House” explores the idea of visiting familiar sites in memory through one’s imagination—Harjo travels to a Native village to visit a woman—perhaps her mother—who remains unnamed. Finally, “We Emerged from Night in Clothes of Sunrise” is a fully instrumental piece. The musical elements in this piece create a mysterious, suspenseful atmosphere, which mimics the scene suggested by the title—the transition from night to day and the accompanying anticipation of what the day will bring.

Overall, through her album *I Pray for My Enemies*, Harjo conveys the importance of connecting with one’s inner self and the natural world around them through song. Building this connection allows the individual to acknowledge their past, revive their spirit, and move forward.

Analysis of Style

A common stylistic element that Harjo uses across her works is the establishment of rhythmic, musical qualities in her poetry. Harjo creates this rhythmic, musical quality through techniques like anaphora, punctuation of large stanzas with short sentences, and repetition of certain phrases in succession. These intentional choices create a reading experience of prayer recitation. Prayers often feature chanting as a way of increasing the speaker’s conviction in their words and the power of their wishes to be heard and granted by a higher being. Furthermore, rhythmic, musical qualities solidify the message in the reader’s mind—repetition is a tool of retention and affirmation, which allows the reader to gradually believe and retain Harjo’s message.

Particularly strong examples in which Harjo establishes rhythmic qualities to her poems are in “I Give You Back” and “Bless this Land.” These poems end her collections *She Had Some Horses* and *An American Sunrise*, respectively.

In “I Give You Back,” Harjo repeats the phrase “I release you” in succession as she affirms how she is releasing fear from her mind. She goes on to repeat “I am not afraid” at the beginning of each line in the sixth stanza as she reclaims herself from fear. Similarly, in “Bless this Land,” Harjo repeats “Bless the” followed by the name of a body part of the land, followed by a short phrase detailing what the land has had to endure over the years. This anaphora establishes a clear prayer-like read to the poem as Harjo ends her collection *An American Sunrise* on a note of hope for the future.

Beyond establishing rhythmic qualities to her written poetry, Harjo goes even further to read her poems to music in her album *I Pray for My Enemies*, where musical elements like electronic and Native drums droning in the background give structure to her spoken words. The juxtaposition of ordered beats against spoken word allows Harjo to give structure to her thoughts, especially when describing long stories that jump back and forth in time and are nonlinear in nature. Harjo uses rhythm as way of maintaining the listener’s attention to the song when it is easy to get lost in the details of the story.

Another stylistic choice that Harjo employs across her works is the use of vivid imagery, personification, and chremamorphism to establish the reader’s intimate connection with nature.

Harjo uses personification and chremamorphism when she likens humans to horses. At the beginning of her poem “She Had Some Horses,” Harjo writes, “She had horses who were bodies of sand. / ... She had horses who were skins of ocean water” (Harjo 61). The horses represent humans, and Harjo describes these elemental horses with inanimate properties to show the original purity and innocence of man. As the poem proceeds and the descriptions of the horses become more human-like, Harjo emphasizes how humans have degraded over time as man has learned to exploit nature for his own gain.

Additionally, Harjo uses imagery to describe both the original beauty of nature and its destruction caused by mankind in order to awaken a sense of moral responsibility in the reader, if not to work for the revival of nature but to at least take a moment to be in tune with it.

For example, in Harjo's song "Calling the Spirit Back," she urges the reader: "Take a breath offered by friendly winds. They travel the earth gathering essences of plants to clean. Give it back with gratitude" (Harjo). These lines serve as a gentle plea to the reader to take a moment to express gratitude toward nature for all that they have.

Furthermore, Harjo uses vivid language to describe how scenes of natural beauty degraded into scenes of destruction. In "How to write a poem during a time of war," Harjo writes, "We used to see woodpeckers / the size of the sun, and were greeted / by chickadees with their good morning songs," highlighting how Native communities lived in harmony with nature prior to colonization (Harjo 61). Then, she uses vivid language to describe how these scenes of peace and tranquility evolved into scenes of destruction: "shrapnel and the eye / Of a house," "the torn pockets of your daughter's hand-sewn dress," and "the baby's delicately beaded moccasin still connected to the foot" (Harjo 47-48). Through these contrasting descriptions, Harjo helps the reader see how the state of nature has evolved over time, from a state of harmonious existence with humans into genocide, destruction, and exploitation brought on by colonizers.

Finally, in her poem "Bless this Land," Harjo artfully blends descriptions of natural beauty with exploitation to illustrate how in the future, the natural world will be revived from its current state of exploitation: "Bless the destruction of this land, for new shoots will rise up from fire, floods, earthquakes, and fierce winds to make new this land" (Harjo 106).

Through these examples, we can see how Harjo uses imagery to paint vivid pictures of the nature of the past, the nature of the present, and hopes for the rejuvenation of nature in the future.

Ultimately, what makes Joy Harjo's work hers is her use of vivid imagery and incorporation of musical, lyrical elements into her poems. Harjo's vivid imagery builds connections between humans and their surroundings, and her use of lyrical element brings structure to stories that are nonlinear in nature.

Analysis of Themes, Central Ideas, Concerns, or Projects

Over her career, Joy Harjo has explored a wide range of topics that have helped her establish a profound connection with the human experience. Common central ideas across her works include nature, memory, generational trauma, home, family, change, identity, unity, diversity, and ownership.

Joy Harjo's three central projects are to explore the complex nature of identity, to illustrate generational trauma, and to communicate how to live one's life in a rapidly changing world that constantly feels the heavy weight of history.

The three works analyzed here—*She Had Some Horses* (1983), *An American Sunrise* (2019), and *I Pray for my Enemies* (2021)—together show the journey of understanding the different facets of identity. *She Had Some Horses* explores Harjo's identity as a woman, *An American Sunrise* explores Harjo's identity as a member of an Indigenous tribe that was displaced, and *I Pray for my Enemies* explores Harjo's identity as a musician. Furthermore, within each book, Harjo makes sure to emphasize how these different components of her identity are not homogeneous—there exist different experiences, sometimes contradictory, within each facet of her identity and within each community she belongs to. By focusing each book on a different aspect of her identity, we can see how one of Harjo's central projects is to explore the multiple facets that make up her identity.

Harjo illustrates generational trauma throughout her works. Examples include in *An American Sunrise*, where she shows how the lack of a motherly figure in her grandmother's life resulted in her grandma not knowing how to mother Harjo's mother, and how Harjo's mother's experiences with domestic abuse affected Harjo's life. In *She Had Some Horses*, Harjo explores how a mother hanging onto the edge of a building to commit suicide thinks of her children and how their future lies in her decision. In *I Pray for My Enemies*, Harjo discusses pains inflicted on her ancestors and how those pains have transmitted to her through the accumulation of scenes she has witnessed and experienced over the course of her life.

Finally, Harjo communicates her thoughts on how to live one's life in a rapidly changing world that has a heavy history of injustice, pain, and trauma. By doing so, she ends on a note of hope for the future. In each of her works, Harjo points out the destruction and devastation caused by humans, whether it is the mass genocide of Native Americans who lived in harmony with nature or the present-day exploitation of natural resources that is contributing to climate change. Harjo communicates how we must first learn and acknowledge this history. Once we have acknowledged and understood the past, we can begin to carve out a positive path forward. This journey begins with the simple steps—in *I Pray for my Enemies*, Harjo emphasizes how individuals should make the simple effort to turn off all devices to express gratitude toward nature for what they have in the present. After doing this, one must take the courageous step of breaking down the pain at its source. In *She Had Some Horses*, Harjo discusses emotional healing of self—acknowledging one's fears and giving them back to the ones who caused them. Finally, one must let go of negative emotions. Harjo emphasizes this in *An American Sunrise*, where she leaves the reader with lasting images of her letting go of her mother's body and the pains it encapsulates in order to let go of her grief. Thus, Harjo imparts to the reader the message that it is possible for us to break the cycle of trauma. She does not say that it is easy—she acknowledges the difficulty of this task. However, she emphasizes that individuals must first acknowledge the trauma and pains of history, then take simple steps to express gratitude for the present, then dig deeper into themselves in order to take the courageous steps necessary to break down the trauma and finally let go.

Resonance

I am inspired by how Harjo uses poetry as a form of activism. In alluding to historical wrongs committed against Native Americans and sharing intimate moments of vulnerability, Harjo shows us that sharing one's story is in itself a form of activism. Her poetry seamlessly ties together elements of the past, present, and future to show how poetry is always relevant in a changing world. As Harjo alludes to traumatic events like the Wounded Knee Massacre and the Trail of Tears, she connects these historical

examples to events happening in the present, such as the crisis at the Southern border and destruction of nature. Thus, Harjo's poems hold lessons for us all as we grapple with the immense change occurring in our world to be advocates for positive rebuilding.

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