

Deanna Stevens's

English 1102M Barnett essay is a comparison-and-contrast between two poems that approach the same cultural problem –

Native Americans' alienation from city culture – in different ways. Michelle does a fine job of organizing the essay around the ideas she wants to discuss, which makes the argument flow smoothly. Impressive also is the way in which her argument analyzes the poetic form of Joy Harjo's famously experimental verse, as well as the poems' themes. Her instructor writes: "I especially love that she took her interests in art and photography and multimedia, met them in Joy Harjo's unique style, and then went a step further and really became curious about the literature itself."

ENGL 1102M

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Considering the Physical and Symbolic in Joy Harjo's "The Myth of Blackbirds" and "Hieroglyphic"

Joy Harjo is not only an author, but also a professor, playwright, filmmaker, painter, and successful musician. She is a creative force, capable of wielding any outlet of expression to articulate her experiences and memories, yet she chooses to put the ideas seen in the poems "The Myth of Blackbirds" and "Hieroglyphic" in verse. She writes about the concealed and spiritual worlds as if they were continuous with the secular world, which leaves the audience reading both a cryptic poem full of symbolism and a poem that is simultaneously natural to our understanding. In both of Harjo's poems, "The Myth of Blackbirds" and "Hieroglyphic," the consistent duality of symbolism and environment in her writing style creates a powerful appeal for the reader to experience her memories and realms of consciousness.

To grasp the transcendent significance of these works, the reader must first look at the choices Harjo makes concerning the physical structure of the poems. The first environment the reader encounters is the presentation of the verse, its aesthetic appearance, and the elements that strike us on first impression. Both works are short poems; neither exceeds more than fifty lines. The reader should also keep in mind that Harjo performs her poems in spoken verse and that she formats the written record of the poems to maintain the cadence of the work as it is originally intended to be experienced. Harjo claims to be inspired by music rather than the works of other poets and "that when she writes poetry she does not start with an image but rather a sound" (Scarry 286). The lines are non-rhyming and are not organized into typical

stanzas. “The Myth of Blackbirds” and “Hieroglyphic” use free verse, a style that emphasizes the melodic quality of the spoken word without internal rhyming or a regular meter. By using free verse in all her poetry, Harjo enables the structure to emphasize word choice and natural inflections in the reading.

At the beginning of “Blackbirds,” Harjo has written four quatrains, but without an obvious reason, follows these four with six more stanzas comprised of varying lengths. “Blackbirds” lacks regular meter, which creates the impression of an unorganized stream of consciousness. This choice in structure could lead the reader to look for meaning in other features of the composition. Perhaps a deeper take on this poem begins with the interpretation of the numbers she has chosen to use in the structure. Upon closer investigation, one notices that the number of lines in each stanza and the ordering of stanzas make a palindrome — 5, 3, 4, 3, 5 — followed by a sestet. This last stanza may be a sestet to reinforce the number six, as the last six lines of the poem are not in keeping with the first four. If noticed, the subtle use of numbers in the organization adds to the mythic value of the poetry.

The structure of “Hieroglyphic” relies mainly on the use of quatrains, with the exception of two tercets that Harjo interjects as the fifth and thirteenth of thirteen total stanzas. The poem uses free verse and organizes itself using sentences that do not correlate with the lines. Harjo writes the poem in fifty lines comprised of twenty sentences that bridge the lines in a manner that adds emphasis to the cadence of the verse. She makes heavy use of dropped lines in every stanza, using them on every even numbered line, with the exception of the tercet stanzas. The dropped lines not only make the poem visually striking, but also add emphasis to the last couple of words in each stanza. As a result, the last line of each stanza stands out dramatically and adds a sort of cryptic element to the composition of the piece. If one were to read only the dropped lines in the poem, the selected text would not align with the entire poem, but instead provide groupings of words that are striking and enigmatic, like hieroglyphs. For example, in the third stanza — “Crossing Fifth / Avenue was a trick of the imagination. It wasn’t that. By / the time I had / forgiven the stolen pyramidal gateway my heart had / become a phoenix of / swallowed myths” (lines 8-12) — the words “time,” “gateway,” and “phoenix” are striking because the sentence structure does not fit within the stanza. In highlighting the words in the dropped lines, Harjo elicits close attention to the words she chooses to complete each quatrain and again reinforces the sound of the poem.

In “Hieroglyphic,” Harjo writes of a phoenix, skeleton horses, a crocodile, and a snake as she describes her spiritual experiences in the Egyptian room and spontaneously remembers a dream from her childhood. In realizing the correlation between present moment and memory as a spiritual revelation, Harjo attempts to describe the gravity of her realization through the use of verse and symbolic writing. In creating an atmosphere that welcomes the reader into a layering of consciousness, she writes in lines 44-50:

be born on paper. It goes something like this: when the
mythic spiral of time
turned its beaded head and understood what was going
on, it snapped. All

these years I had been sleeping in the mind of the snake,
June. I have to tell
this to someone.

The snake has been seen as a symbol of rebirth, self-reflexivity, and eternal cyclic change. In "Hieroglyphic," Harjo reflects on the timeline of her life as a serpentine entity that snaps at the moment of her realization. By weaving together these dream-like images that refer to folk tales and creation myths, she references Jung's abstract archetypes, seamlessly blended within the present moment and memory. In a review of Jung's principles of symbols in religious and unconscious archetypes, Carlsson addresses this type of revelation specifically, saying, "A man [or woman] dreams about a snake, and in Jungian theory, the snake is a symbol for something the unconscious is trying to say to the individual. What the unconscious wishes to communicate depends upon the state of the individual's inner condition" (38). Harjo introduces the concept of time as a snake in "Hieroglyphic"; she reflects upon the symbolic nature of the messages from her dream world. The reader is never more involved than in the moment of realization when Harjo puts together her memory and present experience and denies the reader any sense of linear time by combining both past and future in the present. Through myth, her most extensively used instrument, Harjo takes the reader "into the realm where anything is possible, where meaning is exploded" (Scarry 286).

In Native American tradition, animals, physical features, and elements are incorporated into folk tales as characters with human attributes. Folk tales are based on oral tradition, and "out of the earth and ancestral lands and peoples comes memory, out of memory comes the present, and the resulting interplay of tensions fuses together into story and life" (Lang 46). As in other ancient cultures such as those of the Egyptians, Greeks, and Mayans, historical symbolism follows the image of an animal and, depending on the culture, is immediately associated with a tale of spiritual significance. As seen in the fifth stanza of "The Myth of Blackbirds,"

This is the world in which we undressed together. Within it white deer
intersect with the wisdom of the hunter of grace. Horses wheel toward the
morning star. Memory was always more than paper and cannot be broken by
violent history or stolen by thieves of childhood. We cannot be separated in the
loop of mystery between blackbirds and the memory of blackbirds. (lines 17-21)

Harjo incorporates blackbirds, white deer, and horses with the imagery of the metropolitan development of Washington, DC and draws a comparison to the natural physical features of the land of her ancestors. Blackbirds have a particularly heavy connotation throughout history in various cultures. Because of their role as scavengers and pests to farmers, they traditionally have negative and sometimes evil associations in folktales and legends. They are seen as tricksters, messengers of the gods, and omens of illness and death. Harjo describes her role as an earthly mediator between image and idea, plays with Jung's concept of archetypes, and

writes, "We cannot be separated in / the loop of mystery between blackbirds and the memory of blackbirds" (line 21).

This loop of mystery cannot exist without the human as the mediator between the idea of a blackbird and the physical manifestation of this creature on earth. Carlsson defines the concept of archetypes most clearly when he states that "in the collective unconscious, that great unknown shared by all humanity, are the archetypes, the inherited forms of psychic behavior common to all men" (32). In other words, as humans, we are predisposed to think in a certain manner and associate what we perceive with names, symbols, and memories. Harjo is aware of the thin divisions between what we see, think, and feel in reality and what we remember in our unconscious states of dreaming and creative thought. Carlsson goes further to say that the rational, conscious side of our humanity is only a small portion of our awareness and that what drives us in our conscious thought is more than just the pursuit of science and knowledge, but also the desire to contact the unknown, the mysterious: the unconscious (29).

Harjo layers symbols, memories, and narratives in her poetry not only to develop the reader's interest in her experiences, but also to create an environment that could not exist without memory. In "Twin Gods Bending Over," Lang defines Harjo's poetry as "ongoing circularities of memory, story, history, and ancestral voices that work together to create and explain natural cycles underlying human existence" (46). All of these elements combine to give the audience an environment to understand Harjo's relation to the unconscious, her perception of time and her relative position in both the physical and dream realms. In "The Myth of Blackbirds," Harjo writes, "And in the predawn when we had slept for centuries in a drenching sweet / rain" (lines 22-23), giving the audience a sensuous glimpse of how she views time and location mythically. It seems that the person to whom this poem is written holds less importance than the physical and spiritual locales of which Harjo writes so tenderly. Lang continues to interpret how "landscape and story often merge into an individual voice tied simultaneously to memories of a traditional past, as well as to the life of the present" (46). In this way, the earth Harjo remembers is as much a character as the human to whom she writes.

In both "Hieroglyphic" and "The Myth of Blackbirds," Harjo creates a portal that the audience may enter through the use of symbolism and abstraction of physical and temporal space. To hear or read her poetry requires the audience to let go of preconceived notions of time-consciousness and to accept archetypal and symbolic concepts regarding myth and folklore. Harjo keeps alive the tradition of storytelling by weaving narratives within spoken word poetry and reminds us that "one has no authentic voice without memory; and without an authentic voice, one is speechless, hardly human, and unable to survive for very long" (Lang 49).

Works Cited

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