

Pain in Permanence: Anger and Loss in “Ah, Ah”

In “Ah, Ah” by Joy Harjo, the poem’s speaker observes their surroundings with lyrical simplicity, yet the poem reveals deep undertones of anger and loss within Native society regarding industrialization in postcolonial America. Additionally, the allocentrism and deep respect for the environment intrinsic to Native American culture and society is illustrated through the specific manner that the speaker observes the world around them.

Each stanza begins with an active verb relating to the onomatopoeia of “Ah, Ah” from which the poem derives its name. These verbs relate to different parts of the environment, from wind and water, to animals and people, yet they all share a similar tone: one of pain and violence. The verbs are as follows; the crow “cries”, the waves “slap”, the wind “cuts”, the crew “groan”, and their lungs “beat.” The words used are an intentional hint at the deeper collective feeling of hurt within the Native community on what otherwise seems like an uneventful day of fishing. This exemplifies how the pain of colonization and the damage it has caused Native people and their land is felt on a day to day basis rather than as something that happened to ancestors of the past. On the contrary, Harjo reveals it to be a part of every living moment.

Further, Harjo’s use of possessive determiners creates an understated “us vs. them” dynamic within the poem. As the speaker’s group of fishermen carry canoes down to the ocean, the speaker describes “our” lungs beating with the exertion. However collectivist this might seem upon first read, perhaps interpreted as a statement on the unified nature of the human animal as one being, what is really at play here is the dynamic of a higher Native consciousness in relation to the environment, and their opposition and intrinsic differences when compared to a much more damaging outsider group, that flies overhead in a plane.

The divisiveness is revealed more clearly in the ninth line of the poem, where Harjo writes: “Ah, ah tattoos the engines of your plane against the sky—away from these waters” (1.9). The verb “tattoos” fits with the other active verbs from the poem in the sense that it relates to pain, such as the pain of a tattoo needle. However, it differs from the other verbs not only in the indirect object it modifies being a machine and not a part of the environment, but that it indicates something permanent, something that changes the environment forever. Although the word tattoo doesn’t necessarily have a negative or positive connotation, in the context of this poem it is evident that Harjo is aware of the damaging aspects of industrialization; pollution in the chem trails from the plane being the specific damage discussed here.

Moving forward, the use of an em dash in the final stanza marks a shift in the simplistic style of the poem in terms of punctuation and subject matter. Here is the first time modern society and industrialization is mentioned (in the form of an airplane), and it is interrupted by the em dash before the speaker describes the plane as being “away from these waters” (1.9). This is the most obvious evidence of a clear separation between the “us” and “them” previously mentioned, whereas the “them” is revealed here to be the greater idea of industrialization and the environmental damage it causes rather than a specific group of people subjugating the native people, such as the European colonizers the ancestors of Native Americans faced.

This poem's facade as an observational ode dedicated to a day of fishing reveals much deeper and more painful complexities of what it means to be a Native American in post-colonial and industrialized America. Through simplicity in her lyricism, Harjo coveys complex history and emotion, and captures a perspective of a people too often unseen and unheard.

Excerpt from “Ah, Ah” by Joy Harjo (lines 1-10)

Ah, ah cries the crow arching toward the heavy sky over the marina.

Lands on the crown of the palm tree.

Ah, ah slaps the urgent cove of ocean swimming through the slips.

We carry canoes to the edge of the salt.

Ah, ah groans the crew with the weight, the winds cutting skin.

We claim our seats. Pelicans perch in the draft for fish.

Ah, ah beats our lungs and we are racing into the waves.

Though there are worlds below us and above us, we are straight ahead.

Ah, ah tattoos the engines of your plane against the sky—away from these waters.

Each paddle stroke follows the curve from reach to loss.

"Ah, Ah" from *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems:1975-2001*

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(W. W. Norton and Company Inc.,2002)