# Eagle Poem

## SUMMARY

The speaker states that prayer means opening your awareness to the entire world around you—everything from the earth to the moon—and recognizing this as a unified voice, or presence, that you're part of. The speaker adds that the world contains knowledge that human beings can't access through seeing or hearing: a knowledge that arrives in certain moments as a growing understanding, conveyed through movement and other means beyond traditional language. As an example, the speaker recalls seeing an eagle on a Sunday morning above the Salt River in Arizona. As the eagle circled around in the windy blue sky, it gave the people watching it a sense of being purified by something holy. Addressing the eagle, the speaker says that human beings see themselves in the bird, and thus understand the need to be as caring and kind as possible toward the world around them. The speaker invites readers to take a breath, knowing that they're deeply interconnected with the world they're breathing in. The speaker adds that "we" (the speaker and readers alike) are blessed to be part of the circle of life, in which our brief journey resembles the eagle's circular flight. The speaker prays that this journey will contain beauty.

## THEMES

### THE PRECIOUSNESS OF AND CONNECTION BETWEEN ALL LIVING THINGS

A lyric of prayer and praise, "Eagle Poem" encourages deep spiritual respect for the world outside oneself. The speaker portrays human beings as only one small part of a huge, beautiful, interconnected universe. "To pray," in the speaker's mind, means to acknowledge that connection: to humbly open oneself to the beauty and mystery of that universe, and to show care and kindness toward one's fellow living things, aware that we're all temporary inhabitants of the same lovely world.

The speaker establishes that people are intimately linked to their surroundings and encourages an "open," welcoming attitude toward the world that exists outside the self ("to sky, to earth, to sun, to moon"). The speaker's instruction to "Breathe in, knowing we are made of all this" invites readers to feel, contemplate, and appreciate their connection with the world.

At the same time, the speaker describes that world as *part* of the self: as "one whole voice that is you." In other words, the poem celebrates *human beings* as part of the *universe* and the *universe* as part of *human beings*. Recognizing the interconnectedness of all things thus means feeling at one with the world *and* understanding that "[t]here is more" to the world than people—that is, that people are part of something greater than themselves.

Opening oneself to that sense of connection also means feeling a deep and sacred *responsibility* to everything else—essentially, remembering that we're all in this together. As such, when the speaker encounters a soaring eagle and reflects that when "We see you" (the eagle), "[we] see ourselves," the speaker is also inspired to say that "we must take the utmost care / and kindness in all things." Because we are connected to other living things, caring for the world beyond us is not only as important as caring for ourselves: *it's the same thing*.

Taking care of other lives is even more important, the poem suggests, because life is brief and fragile. The speaker compares the "circle" of life, which "soon" ends, to the eagle's flight, stating that "we" (humans) are "blessed" to experience this brief journey. Kindness is an imperative both because all life is connected and because life is short—and thus all the more precious.

Though it's a prayer poem, "Eagle Poem" doesn't refer to a specific deity or faith: its language is universal, in keeping with its message that we're all part of the same universe. With calm authority, it urges respect for the life and environments surrounding us, centered in an appreciation of our own fragile existence and our connection to everything that lives.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-26

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-3

*To pray you ...*
*... that is you.*

The poem begins on a note of gentle instruction as the speaker addresses a general "you" in a tone of familiarity, like that of a mentor encouraging a student. Without mentioning a specific god or faith, the speaker explains how to pray. Prayer, here, is not a request for forgiveness or favors but a meditative practice in which "you open your whole self" to the universe.

In paying close attention to that universe, the speaker suggests, you will hear "one whole voice that is you." In other words, by extending your focus beyond the narrow boundaries of your *self*, you'll discover that your self is deeply connected with everything that surrounds it: with the "sky," "earth," "sun," "moon," and so on. The repetition of "whole" (lines 1 and 3)

emphasizes that people's inner and outer worlds—self and universe—are part of the same, inseparable entity:

> To pray you open your whole self
> [...]
> To one whole voice that is you.

The poem is written in free verse, but line 2 ("To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon") features a steady iambic rhythm. Iambic meter is sometimes compared to the *ba-bum* of a heartbeat. Here, it might evoke the heartbeat of some who's praying, meditatively listening to the rhythms of their body and the surrounding world.

Also notice that the list in lines 2-3 omits a connecting "and," in a device known as asyndeton. Even the comma after "moon" is missing:

> To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
> To [...]

These omissions make the items in the list seem all the more closely joined together, reinforcing the speaker's point that everything in the universe is connected.

## LINES 4-9

*And know there ...*
*... Circles of motion.*

The speaker continues to instruct the reader on how to pray, now offering a mystical or philosophical statement about knowledge. The speaker claims that there are forms of knowledge that human beings can't access through "see[ing]" and "[hear]ing"—the usual senses people rely on for learning—and "Can't know" at all "except in moments / Steadily growing."

This last phrase implies a slowly growing awareness as opposed to a direct, immediately understood perception. And, according to the speaker, this knowledge is accessible through "languages / That aren't always sound but other / Circles of motion." In other words, it may not be communicable through ordinary, human, verbal language (the kind expressed in *sound* waves that *circulate* through the air). Instead, it may communicate itself through a more symbolic "language," such as "motion." (In the next lines, the speaker will provide an example of such meaningful motion: the eagle's flight.)

The phrase "can't see, can't hear, / Can't know" falls into the same iambic rhythm as line 2. It, too, leaves out a connecting "and," in another example of asyndeton. Again, these effects create a calm, heartbeat-like rhythm that suits the poem's meditative quality.

Though not necessarily an allusion, the idea of finding wisdom in "know[ing]" what you "Can't know" echoes a famous paradox attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates. According to his disciple Plato, Socrates stated that he was wise because "what I do not know, I do not think I know."

## LINES 10-13

*Like eagle that ...*
*... With sacred wings.*

Lines 10-13 present an example of the "Circles of motion" (line 9) that, according to the speaker, hold special significance—that act as a kind of nonhuman "language" that can impart "[s]teadily growing" knowledge. The speaker describes an eagle flying in circles over the Salt River (a long river in Arizona) on a clear, windy Sunday morning. This sight of the eagle filled onlookers with a sense of holiness and purification. Watching the eagle's circular flight, they felt that it "swept our hearts clean / With sacred wings." It's as if the bird's feathers were a broom sweeping across these people's inner selves, leaving them feeling clean and renewed.

Though the poem is not specifically Christian, the "Sunday morning" setting, along with the images of "sacred[ness]" and prayer, evokes the Christian tradition of Sunday morning worship. The clean "blue sky," as well as the "wind" sweeping the eagle along, adds to the image of cleansing, purity, and holiness. The detail of the river—a body of water flowing through a desert—also carries associations of cleansing and refreshment.

Notice how many words in these lines start with /s/ and /w/ sounds:

> Like eagle that Sunday morning
> Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
> In wind, swept our hearts clean
> With sacred wings.

This soft alliteration (and more specific sibilance, the repetition of /s/ sounds) mimics the sighing and whistling of the wind. It gives the verse a gentle sound, well suited to this comforting, uplifting image.

## LINES 14-16

*We see you, ...*
*... in all things.*

Lines 14-16 express the poem's central theme, or lesson. (The word *lesson* might not apply to some poems, but it does here: the speaker explicitly aims to teach readers something.)

For a brief moment, the speaker addresses the eagle directly, using a device called apostrophe. The speaker expresses a sense of deep connection with the bird: "We see you, see ourselves." Seemingly acting as a spokesperson for humankind, the speaker acknowledges human qualities in the animal world and vice versa. The eagle is a striking reminder that there's more to the world than people—and, at the same time, that

people are deeply interconnected with other life.

This recognition brings the kind of "know[ledge]" that, according to lines 6-13, arises only from special "moments" and "motion" (such as the eagle's flight). The speaker says that in recognizing ourselves in the life around us, we humans "know / That we must take the utmost care / And kindness in all things." In other words, we grasp the need to act kindly and responsibly toward the life we share the planet with, as well as the planet itself. The memory of the beautiful eagle prompts this epiphany (or flash of insight), which the speaker passes on to the reader.

The alliteration on /s/ and /w/ sounds, prominent in lines 10-13, carries over into line 14: "We see you, see ourselves." These soft sounds suit the gentle, humane spirit of the line. Alliteration also links "care / And kindness," adding extra emphasis to this crucial phrase.

## LINES 17-21

*Breathe in, knowing ...*
*... circle of motion,*

In lines 17-21, the speaker shifts back to addressing the reader directly. Calming, repetitive breathing instructions reinforce the idea that the poem is a guided prayer or meditation. They also reinforce the poem's message about connecting with the wider world. "Breathe in, knowing we are made of / All this," the speaker instructs, as if inhaling were a way to bring "All this" (the external universe) inside the body.

The speaker then suggests that one thing that links human beings with other life is mortality. Like all other creatures, we're here on earth for a brief time as part of the "circle" of life. The speaker portrays this brief journey as a blessing: something to appreciate and make the most of. Alliteration links "breathe," "blessed," "because," and "born," reinforcing the idea that human beings are blessed *because* we are alive—that life itself (being born, drawing breath) is a blessing.

The word "True" in line 21 also suggests multiple meanings. The speaker describes the journey from birth to death as a "True circle of motion," invoking the concept of the "circle of life." When describing a shape, "true" can mean "geometrically perfect." So, on one level, the speaker means that life's path traces a perfect circle. But "True" also connotes "authentic" or "containing truth," suggesting that there is deeper truth to be found in the beautiful, symmetrical shape of life's journey. In this way, "True" echoes the earlier phrase "truly blessed," where "truly" means "authentically."

Also notice that "circle of motion" in line 21 echoes "Circles of motion" in line 9. One of several repeated line endings in the poem (see also "morning" in lines 10 and 22 and "beauty" in lines 25 and 26), this echo suggests that the poem itself is tracing a circular motion, looping back on itself as part of a calm, repetitive meditation.

## LINES 22-26

*Like eagle rounding ...*
*... In beauty.*

Lines 22-26 complete the simile that began in lines 19-21, then close the poem with a prayer.

The speaker compares the "circle of motion" from birth to death—a.k.a. the life cycle—to "eagle rounding out the morning / Inside us." In other words, the life cycle is as brief, yet "true" (perfect and/or full of truth) as the eagle's circling flight. "Inside us" might mean that the memory of the flight is playing out in our minds, that the life cycle itself is occurring within our bodies, or both.

Again speaking on behalf of human beings in general, the speaker concludes that "We pray that it will be done / In beauty. / In beauty." The pronoun "it" might refer to the completion of the life cycle (dying) or to the life cycle as a whole. Either way, the speaker hopes that the process will be beautiful, like the eagle's majestic, wheeling flight.

To sum up: having acknowledged human beings' connection with all other living things, our duty to respect that life as we would our own, and the preciousness of our own lives, the speaker prays that we'll live and die as gracefully as the eagle flies.

Line 22 ("Like eagle rounding out the morning") begins and ends the same way as line 10 ("Like eagle that Sunday morning"), as if the poem itself has circled back around to this central image. The repetition (technically epizeuxis) of "In beauty" creates a sense of calm and closure, like a mantra spoken at the end of a meditation or prayer. Once again, the speaker does not pray to a specific god or on behalf of a specific faith. This is a universal prayer, seemingly offered on behalf of all humanity and addressed to the world at large.

# SYMBOLS

## THE EAGLE

The eagle is the central image of "Eagle Poem," and it carries many symbolic connotations. On a basic level, the eagle seems to stand in for "other life" in general: for the natural world to which humans remain connected and to which we owe "care / And kindness." The eagle's circling flight also comes to represent the life cycle that binds all creatures, human beings included.

The way the speaker refers to the bird as simply "eagle" (lines 10 and 22), rather than "the eagle" or "an eagle," may also hint that this bird is a broad stand-in for all eagles—and for all that human beings associate with eagles. Eagles—majestic birds that tend to hunt alone—can represent strength, majesty, courage, and freedom, and the bird evokes all of those connotations in

the poem. In some Indigenous cultures, the eagle is also viewed as a sacred protector spirit. In general, many Indigenous cultures treat wild creatures with reverence. Harjo nods to these traditions, including those of her own Muscogee (Creek) Nation, by calling the bird "sacred" and linking it with human beings' duty to honor and protect other life.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 10-13:** "Like eagle that Sunday morning / Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky / In wind, swept our hearts clean / With sacred wings."
- **Lines 22-23:** "Like eagle rounding out the morning / Inside us."

### CIRCLES

Circles play an important symbolic role in the poem, representing the connection between all things as well as the cycle of life.

In general, circles are linked with recurrence and completion, particularly the completion of life (which goes "full circle" from nonexistence before birth to nonexistence after death). The poem draws on this idea when it mentions the eagle's circular flight path. The speaker compares this path to the life cycle, or journey from birth to death ("We / Were born, and die soon within a / True circle of motion"). The eagle "rounding out the morning" suggests the end of this cycle—the completion of this loop.

Notice that the "sky," "earth," "sun," and "moon" mentioned in line 2 are also circular, and also revolve in circles (think of the day-night cycle, weather cycles, and orbits in outer space). Their presence in the poem subtly reinforces the poem's point that everything is connected: birds, lives, weather, planets, moons, and stars all move cyclically as part of the same universe. Overall, then, the poem associates circles with natural cycles of change.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon"
- **Line 9:** "Circles of motion"
- **Line 11:** "Circled"
- **Lines 21-23:** "True circle of motion, / Like eagle rounding out the morning / Inside us."

## POETIC DEVICES

### REPETITION

This is a very repetitive poem, which is part of what makes it feel so meditative—that is, like a prayer. And one of the most obvious kinds of repetition here is parallelism (and more specifically anaphora). Broadly speaking, this parallelism gives certain lines a steady rhythm suggestive of chanting and meditation. As an example, takes lines 2 and 3, where the word "to" repeats at the start of five consecutive clauses:

> To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
> To one whole voice that is you.

Repetition works like this throughout the poem to create a calm, chant-like rhythm, reminiscent of the body's own natural rhythms (the heartbeat, breath, etc.). Similar examples of parallelism include "can't see, can't hear, / Can't know"; "see you, see ourselves"; and "Breathe in, knowing [...] breathe, knowing."

The poem also contains a number of identical or nearly identical words/phrases that repeat throughout. For example, there's "Circles of motion" in line 9 and "circle of motion" in line 21; "Like eagle [...] morning" in lines 10 and 22; "know" and "knowing" in lines 14 and 18 (which is specifically something called polyptoton); and "In beauty" in the final two lines.

Whether they're set far apart or close together, all these repetitions lend the poem a loosely cyclical structure in which key phrases "come back around." (However, they don't reappear in any predictable pattern, like a refrain would.) This effect lends a touch of structure to an otherwise freewheeling free verse poem. It also seems appropriate to a poem full of circles and cycles: the orbiting bodies mentioned in line 2, the eagle's circling flight, and the circle of life. The epizeuxis at the end of the poem, meanwhile (that quick repetition of "In beauty") is like a chant closing out the prayer.

The most frequently repeated word in the poem is "know"/"knowing," which occurs five times (lines 4, 6, 14, 17, and 18). This frequency underscores the poem's emphasis on *knowledge*, particularly the wisdom that the eagle teaches the speaker and that the speaker hopes to share with the reader.

**Where Repetition appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "To"
- **Lines 2-3:** "To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon / To one whole voice that is you."
- **Line 4:** "know"
- **Lines 5-6:** "can't see, can't hear, / Can't know"
- **Line 9:** "Circles of motion"
- **Line 10:** "Like eagle," "morning"
- **Line 14:** "know"
- **Line 17:** "Breathe," "knowing"
- **Line 18:** "breathe," "knowing"
- **Line 21:** "circle of motion"
- **Line 22:** "Like eagle," "morning"
- **Lines 25-26:** "In beauty. / In beauty."

## APOSTROPHE

The poems uses apostrophe in lines 14-16, when the speaker addresses the eagle at Salt River:

> We see you, see ourselves and know
> That we must take the utmost care
> And kindness in all things.

Of course, the eagle can't *literally* hear or read these lines. But by talking to it anyway, the speaker reinforces the poem's main message: that human beings are deeply connected with other life in the world, even life that seems distant and unrelated. In "see[ing]" a creature like the eagle, the speaker says, we are really "see[ing] ourselves."

Alternatively, it might be argued that the "you" in line 14 actually does not refer to the *eagle* but instead to the *reader*—the "you" addressed elsewhere in the poem. However, this interpretation would make line 14 rather confusing. (The speaker has been talking about "see[ing]" an eagle, not seeing the reader!) Most likely, the pronoun "you" briefly changes meaning here, addressing the eagle rather than the reader, just as "our/we" changes meaning between line 12 (where it refers to the group of people who saw the bird) and lines 14-15 (where it refers to humanity in general). The slippery pronouns may be another way of suggesting that we're all interconnected, that we share a common identity as part of the same universe.

**Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 14-16:** "We see you, see ourselves and know / That we must take the utmost care / And kindness in all things."

## ALLITERATION

Alliteration serves multiple purposes in "Eagle Poem." It draws attention to the poem's imagery, for example, adding music and emphasis to the speaker's language. Shared sounds also connect words in ways that underscore the poem's message that all life is connected.

Take the alliteration of "self," "sky," and "sun" in lines 1-2, which immediately gives the poem a soft, gentle sound. This is technically an example of sibilance, and it lends the lines a hushed, soothing quality that's in keeping with the speaker's humane, reassuring message. The "self"/"sky"/"sun" connection also reinforces the meaning of lines 1-3, which involve the deep connection between the inner self and the outer universe.

Sibilance becomes especially noticeable in lines 8-14, as in "sound," "Circles," "Sunday," "Salt," "Circled," "sky," "swept," "sacred," and "see." Many initial /w/ sounds cluster around this same passage, especially in lines 12-15: "wind," "With," "wings," and "we." These also soften the sound of the verse ("w" is a muted consonant), while evoking the whistling of the wind.

Another alliterative cluster appears in lines 17-20: "Breathe," "breathe," "blessed," "because," "born." Here, alliteration ties these words together into a conceptual whole, reinforcing the idea that we are blessed *because* we are born and breathe: in other words, that life is a blessing.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "self"
- **Line 2:** "sky," "sun"
- **Line 8:** "sound"
- **Line 9:** "Circles"
- **Line 10:** "Sunday"
- **Line 11:** "Salt," "Circled," "sky"
- **Line 12:** "wind," "swept"
- **Line 13:** "With," "sacred," "wings"
- **Line 14:** "We," "see," "see," "ourselves"
- **Line 15:** "we," "care"
- **Line 16:** "kindness"
- **Line 17:** "Breathe"
- **Line 18:** "breathe"
- **Line 19:** "blessed," "because"
- **Line 20:** "born"

## ASSONANCE

Assonance elevates the speaker's language and builds momentum in the poem. For example, note how many long /o/ sounds pile up in the first 9 lines: "open," "whole," "know," "moments," "growing," and "motion." The repetition of these sounds, extended over many lines, helps reinforce the sense of something (knowledge) that's gradually "growing." It also adds to the sense of "motion," as the sound travels from line to line.

Midway through the poem, assonance has an effect that's close to onomatopoeia. Along with the alliterative /w/ sounds, the short /i/ sounds of "in," "wind," "With," and "wings" (lines 11-13) seem to mimic the whispering or whistling of the wind. They also add emphasis, drawing the reader's attention to the key image of the poem and providing sonic pleasure that's appropriate to an image of beauty and grandeur.

Finally, as with alliteration, the assonance in these lines creates noticeable connections between words. This seems particularly fitting in a poem that's all about connection—between human and animal life, the inner self and the outer world, the speaker and the reader, and so on. A similar, though subtler, connection occurs in the rhyme between "wings" (line 13) and "things" (line 16), which links the eagle—one creature—with all the other things in the universe.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "open," "whole"

- **Line 3:** "whole"
- **Line 4:** "know"
- **Line 6:** "know," "moments"
- **Line 7:** "growing"
- **Line 9:** "motion"
- **Line 11:** "in"
- **Line 12:** "In," "wind"
- **Line 13:** "With," "wings"
- **Line 22:** "rounding," "out"

## METAPHOR

The metaphors in "Eagle Poem" have a mystical, ambiguous quality: it's not always clear just how figuratively readers are meant to take them.

A good example is "voice" in line 3. It *sounds* metaphorical to compare the whole universe to a voice—one that's heard by, and inseparable from, praying individuals. It seems like a figurative way of saying that the inner self and outer universe share a common identity (since voice is a marker of identity). But the statement may also (or instead) have a literal meaning: some religious traditions describe the universe being spoken into existence by a god or gods.

In lines 12-13, the speaker says that the flying eagle "swept our hearts clean / With sacred wings." This metaphor compares the eagle's feathers, sweeping through the air, to a broom that spiritually cleanses the hearts of those watching. Again, the metaphor reaches beyond ordinary, literal language to capture a spiritual experience—the way that the sight of the majestic eagle is spiritually cleansing.

In line 21, "True circle of motion" suggests the circle of life, which is itself an old metaphor representing the biological life cycle. The speaker believes that people are "made of" everything around them, and thus they return to where they came from upon death; this is the "circle" of life.

**Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "To one whole voice that is you"
- **Lines 12-13:** "swept our hearts clean / With sacred wings"
- **Line 21:** "True circle of motion"

## SIMILE

The speaker uses a simile in lines 19-23, comparing the circle of life to an eagle's flight as the bird circles around in the sky. There's actually a metaphor within this simile. People are born and die, the speaker says, "within a / True circle of motion." Remember that the speaker believes people are "made of" their surroundings; in death, then, they return to those surroundings—to where they come from, in a sense. And this cycle is like that of an "eagle rounding out the morning / Inside us."

"Morning" is a time of day symbolically linked to light and possibility. If the eagle is "rounding out" this morning, then it's finishing its loop and bringing the morning to a close. The speaker is figuratively describing the completion of human lives, which brings the darkness of death and the end of possibility.

Also note how the actual language of this simile is also very close to that of lines 7-11, when the speaker describes "languages" that are:

> Circles of motion.
> Like eagle that Sunday morning
> Over Salt River.

This parallel structure adds to the sense that the poem is circling back on itself—just as the eagle does in flight, and just as human lives do in progressing from birth to death.

**Where Simile appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 20-23:** "Were born, and die soon within a / True circle of motion, / Like eagle rounding out the morning / Inside us."

## ASYNDETON

Asyndeton occurs in lines 2-3 ("To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon / To one whole voice that is you") and lines 5-6 ("can't see, can't hear, / Can't know"). Both sets of parallel clauses would normally include at least one connecting "and." In both cases, the missing "and" helps preserve an iambic rhythm (recall that an iamb is a poetic foot with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern):

> To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
> To one [...]

And later:

> [...] can't see, can't hear,
> Can't know except in moments

Again, this is a free verse poem, but one that sometimes falls into an iambic pattern suggestive of bodily rhythms (heartbeat, breath) and meditative chanting. Asyndeton adds to that effect.

Asyndeton also pops up in lines 11-13:

> [...] Circled in blue sky
> In wind, swept our hearts clean
> With sacred wings.

The speaker omits the "and" that would normally fall between

"wind" and "swept." The omitted "and," combined with the omitted "It" before "Circled," makes the sentence (actually a sentence fragment) more concise, taut, and dramatic. This dramatic effect—heightened by alliteration and assonance in the same lines—draws extra attention to the important image of the eagle.

**Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 2-3:** "To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon / To one whole voice that is you."
- **Lines 5-6:** "can't see, can't hear, / Can't know"
- **Lines 11-13:** "Circled in blue sky / In wind, swept our hearts clean / With sacred wings."

## VOCABULARY

**Circles of motion** (Line 9, Line 21) - When this phrase first appears, it's in relation to language. The speaker says that some languages "aren't always sound but other / Circles of motion." This evokes the image of sound waves or sonic echoes moving through the air, and also the eagle's flight as it moves around in the sky (such "motion" is a kind of "language" in the sense that it imparts its own form of knowledge—the knowledge that people are connected to all living things). Later, the phrase "True circle of motion" in line 21 seems to refer both to the circle of life and, again, the eagle's flight path in the sky.

**Utmost** (Line 15) - "Utmost" means "absolute most," "most possible," or "maximum." In stating that "we must take the utmost care / And kindness in all things," the speaker means that human beings must behave with maximum care and kindness in their dealings with the world around them.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Eagle Poem" is a 26-line, free verse poem that does not follow a traditional form. However, it contains some noteworthy formal features.

It's a *stichic* poem, meaning that it consists of a single stanza. (Traditionally, the word "stichic" also implies the use of meter or regular line length. But in contemporary poetry, it's often used to describe single-stanza poems of any kind.) The lack of stanza breaks allows the poem to flow smoothly, without jarring transitions, from one thought to the next. This fluidity and unity is appropriate for a calming meditation on the unity of "all things." So is the use of free verse, which makes the poem feel relaxed and unconstrained.

The poem's many repetitions are also characteristic of meditation. The repetition of key phrases, such as "circle[s] of motion," at spaced-out intervals suggests that the poem itself is circling back to important images and ideas.

In other words, the verse is free but with elements of rhythm, and the poem's structure is loose but with elements of pattern and order. These formal qualities make "Eagle Poem" somewhat like improvisational music—and, in fact, when performing it for audiences, Joy Harjo has sometimes played flute music before and after!

### METER

As a free verse poem, "Eagle Poem" doesn't use a consistent meter. However, its verse does have elements of regularity. The line lengths vary, but no line is shorter than three syllables or longer than ten, and most fall in the middle of that range. Moreover, the poem sometimes falls into a noticeably iambic (or unstressed-stressed) rhythm. Take line 2:

> To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon

Other brief moments of iambic meter appear throughout the poem, though never in a steady pattern. In this way, the poem essentially splits the difference between free verse and meter. The verse is generally relaxed and loose, but keeps a steady beat at times and never becomes jarringly irregular. This effect is well suited to a poem of prayer and meditation: it evokes both the free flow of thought and the calm rhythms of a resting body.

### RHYME SCHEME

"Eagle Poem" is written in free verse and does not contain a rhyme scheme. It does contain one end rhyme, between "wings" (line 13) and "things" (line 16). This rhyme lands very subtly and may be incidental (*i.e.*, the poet may not intend the reader to notice it), since it doesn't occur as part of a regular pattern or rhythm.

The poem also repeats certain words at the ends of lines. Notice how "Circles of motion" in line 9 returns as the nearly identical "circle of motion" in line 21. Both line 10 and line 22 end with "morning," and lines 25 and 26 are identical ("In beauty"). Lines 14 and 18 also end similarly ("know" and "knowing"). While not as organized or noticeable as a rhyme scheme, these repetitions create the sense that the poem is circling back to important words and images, much as the eagle circles in the air (or human lives "circle" through time).

## SPEAKER

The speaker of "Eagle Poem" takes on the role of teacher or spiritual guide. The poem is an example of *didactic* literature (literature that provides instruction, especially moral instructions), but unlike many didactic speakers, this one isn't stern, aloof, or attached to a particular dogma. This speaker values "care," "kindness," and universal connection, and

demonstrates these values by addressing readers in gentle tones.

The speaker claims some degree of special "know[ledge]" (referenced in lines 4-9: "And know there is [...] Circles of motion"), but communicates this knowledge in a mellow, non-judgmental way. In offering a lesson on prayer, the speaker doesn't tell readers they *must* pray, or follow the rules of a particular faith. The instructions are more like suggestions. The closest the speaker comes to an imperative is: "we must take the utmost care / And kindness in all things." But this is an earnest appeal rather than a harsh command, and the message is universal. The speaker's breathing instructions and repetitions evoke the practice of meditation.

There is no evidence in the poem of a gap between poet and speaker. Joy Harjo's style as a poet ranges widely, but "Eagle Poem" accurately represents the attitudes and beliefs she has generally embraced in her writing and public life. These include her cultural/spiritual heritage and political concerns as an Indigenous poet, one who has spoken publicly on a range of environmental and human rights issues. The poem also speaks with a teacherly authority that draws on Harjo's long career as a professor, lecturer, and public poet.

## SETTING

The poem is addressed to the general reader and concerns the reader's connection with the universe. In that sense, its setting is anywhere and everywhere!

However, in the memory recounted midway through the poem, the setting gets more specific. The speaker saw an eagle on "Sunday morning," a day and time associated with worship and prayer in the Christian tradition. (Though the poem doesn't link its prayer with any particular faith, it seems to play deliberately on this association.) The eagle was flying above "Salt River," a roughly 200-mile-long river that flows through Arizona.

Joy Harjo studied and taught for many years in Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado, and her poetry often features locations in the Southwestern U.S. Her strong connection to this region, and to the American land in general (she's a member of the Muscogee Nation and a major figure in modern Indigenous/Native American literature), comes through in "Eagle Poem," which invites readers to contemplate their own connection to the natural world around them.

The image of water flowing through a desert landscape may also convey a sense of cooling or refreshment: an appropriate match for the purifying holiness of the eagle that "swept our hearts clean."

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

"Eagle Poem" appears in Joy Harjo's mid-career collection *In Mad Love and War* (1990). By the time of its publication, Harjo was an established poet, having published well-regarded books and taught creative writing in colleges and universities since the 1970s. This background may help explain the poem's calm, authoritative, teacher-like tone.

By 1990, Harjo was also a leading figure in a literary movement that some critics labeled the "Native American Renaissance." This label, which remains controversial and which some Indigenous writers have rejected, originated in response to a wave of acclaimed writing by Indigenous poets, playwrights, and novelists during the late 20th century. A key factor in this "Renaissance" was N. Scott Momaday's 1968 novel *House Made of Dawn*, which won the Pulitzer Prize and opened up new opportunities for Indigenous authors previously excluded by the American literary establishment.

Harjo began her poetry career in 1975, less than a decade after *House Made of Dawn*. She soon gained acclaim for lyric poems that explored American landscapes (particularly in the Southwest and Southeast), humanity's relationship with nature, contemporary social justice issues, and the complexities of Indigenous experience. Her political, cultural, and spiritual heritage as a member of the Muscogee (a.k.a. Mvskoke or Muscogee Creek) Nation forms a backdrop to much of her poetry. Her books often include elements of myth and folklore, drawn from a range of Indigenous cultures, along with personal and political material.

Though "Eagle Poem" doesn't allude to a specific myth, eagles played a variety of roles in the mythology and folklore of Muscogee Nation peoples. In some stories, the eagle was the king of birds, the chief of creatures present at the world's creation, or a being that dying souls must confront on the journey to the spirit world. Harjo's poem may be drawing on one or more of these stories, using the eagle as a stand-in for natural creatures in general and/or linking it with the completion of life's journey.

Chant and prayer are recurring elements of Harjo's poetry, including "Eagle Poem." A musician as well as a writer, she tends to employ free verse with strong rhythmic and lyrical qualities (also evidenced in "Eagle Poem"). She often incorporates both poetry and music into her public performances. As a three-term U.S. Poet Laureate, she is very much a public poet: a writer, teacher, and activist who strives to connect with a broad audience. This, too, is evident in "Eagle Poem," which establishes an immediate connection with the reader.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The "Native American Renaissance" with which some critics

associate Harjo didn't happen in a cultural vacuum. The growing, hard-won success of Indigenous authors in the U.S. paralleled a late-20th-century movement aimed at securing the rights and dignity of Indigenous peoples.

This "Red Power" or Native American rights movement emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, alongside other civil rights and social justice struggles of the period. Among the political victories it achieved was the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, which overturned bans on sacred ceremonies and rituals practiced by Indigenous peoples. Beyond specific political goals, activists sought to combat general prejudice against Native/Indigenous peoples, including widespread caricature and vilification in the pop culture of previous decades.

Although these events don't appear in "Eagle Poem," they form a crucial historical backdrop to the poem and to Harjo's literary career. They commanded increased respect for Indigenous peoples' history, cultures, and spiritual practices, and for Indigenous people themselves. "Eagle Poem" may not announce itself as belonging to a particular heritage (as some other Harjo poems do), but to the extent that it draws on Indigenous myth and spiritual traditions, it would have had a far more difficult time reaching a general audience in the 1950s of Harjo's childhood.

The poem also contains faint echoes of the environmentalist movement that gained momentum in the 1970s and 1980s. While it doesn't specifically advocate for eagle conservation or any other environmental goal, its message aligns with the "green" movement's emphasis on the interdependence of living things, as well as its call to "care" for the world around us.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Laureate's Signature Project — Explore “Living Nations, Living Words," a collection of work by Native Nations poets and Harjo's signature project as U.S. Poet Laureate. (https://www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/poet-laureate/poet-laureate-projects/living-nations-living-words/)
- Joy Harjo, Poet Laureate — Read about Harjo's work as U.S. Poet Laureate. (https://www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/poet-laureate/)
- Harjo at the Academy of American Poets — Watch more readings by, and an interview with, Joy Harjo at Poets.org. (https://poets.org/text/us-poet-laureate-joy-harjo-pop-interview-reading)
- The Poet's Biography — Read the Poetry Foundation's summary of Joy Harjo's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/joy-harjo)
- The Poet's Website — Explore Joy Harjo's books, music, and media appearances at her author website. (https://www.joyharjo.com/)
- A Reading of the Poem — Watch Harjo read "Eagle Poem" (and play flute before and after). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVYntracAwI)
- An Interview with the Laureate — Read an interview with U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo at the Library of Congress. (https://blogs.loc.gov/catbird/2020/03/a-larger-context-that-reveals-meaning-an-interview-with-poet-laureate-joy-harjo/)

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Allen, Austin. "*Eagle Poem.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Mar 2021. Web. 6 May 2021.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Allen, Austin. "*Eagle Poem.*" LitCharts LLC, March 28, 2021. Retrieved May 6, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/joy-harjo/eagle-poem.