Once the World Was Perfect

SUMMARY

The speaker says that, long ago, there was nothing wrong in the world and human beings lived together in happiness and harmony. But people eventually stopped appreciating this perfect world as they should have. Unhappiness and dissatisfaction began to shake the ground, then dangerous, destructive doubt pierced through. Doubt tore apart the delicate, intricate web of connections between all of humanity (and/or between humanity and the natural world), allowing all sorts of dark emotions to escape out into the world. People ruined the vibrant, inspiring world they'd been given. Jealousy, fear, envy, greed, and hatred were like stones people threw at each other, eventually shattering the light of human progress. Everyone cast these stones; no one was blameless. The light of progress snuffed out, humanity was thrust back into the darkness in which the world began, blindly bumping into each other. People were left with nowhere to go for shelter because they couldn't get along and didn't know how to live together peacefully. Finally, one of those people bumbling around in the dark felt bad for another person and shared their blanket with them. This small act of kindness caused a spark that grew into a light that eventually pierced the surrounding darkness. People joined together to build a ladder in order to climb through this new opening. The first person who climbed up this ladder and into a new, brighter world was someone from the Wind Clan. Soon enough, people from other clans followed suit; generation after generation did the same, leading all the way up to this very moment and, the speaker says, to you.

THEMES

THE DESTRUCTIVE NATURE OF JEALOUSY AND GREED

Joy Harjo's "Once the World Was Perfect" is a kind of creation myth that illustrates the corrupting influence of selfishness and ingratitude. Long ago, the speaker begins, "the world was perfect" and humankind was happy. However, in the poem's telling, this happiness didn't last; humanity failed to appreciate "the world we had been given," which was then quickly torn apart by negative emotions like "jealousy," "greed," "envy," and so forth. Failing to respect and appreciate both one another and the planet, the poem argues, thrusts humanity into isolating darkness.

Although the poem begins with the brief promise that long ago, "the world was perfect," its first images are ones of destruction. Unable to simply appreciate the happiness they'd been granted, the speaker says, people gave in to selfish desires for more. Discontent and Doubt, personified as demons, persuaded human beings to turn on one another, throwing stones labeled with a number of dark emotions: "jealousy [...] fear, greed, envy, and hatred."

In the process, these stones "ruptured the web"—the intricate yet delicate series of connections between all people (and perhaps, between people and nature). The implication is that human beings' tendency towards selfishness and distrust limited the capacity for peace and progress. The stones put out the metaphorical "light" of humanity, leaving people to "bump[] into each other / In the dark." The speaker makes a point of saying that "no one was without a stone in his or her hand," emphasizing that *everyone* has this capacity for cruelty; no one was blameless in this stone-throwing.

However, in describing Discontent and Doubt as *external* forces that bewitched people, convincing them to destroy one another, the poem offers some absolution. It suggests that humanity has never been *inherently* evil; after all, we did once live happily together. The poem concludes that people must learn to overcome their most base instincts if they ever are to "live with each other" again.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

UNITY, KINDNESS, AND HOPE

"Once the World Was Perfect" illustrates humankind's capacity for both immense cruelty and kindness. Though jealousy and hatred put out humanity's "light," this destruction granted the opportunity for people to take pity on and help one another. The poem closes with people working together, slowly and painstakingly, to "make a ladder" that led "into the next world." The poem thus offers hope for a better future built on cooperation, gratitude, and empathy.

The poem begins with humanity destroying itself through selfishness and greed, which tore apart the delicate web that bound all people together. Humanity was left with "no place to live," the speaker says, "since we didn't know / How to live with each other."

The speaker then relays how a single person's actions in such dark times provided the seed of hope for a better future. One person took pity on another and offered to share their blanket, creating a "spark of kindness" that then grew into the same light that humanity had previously snuffed out through its cruelty. The poem thus reiterates the power and importance of individual agency: just as every person participated in the

world's *destruction* by throwing stones, one person's act of kindness was enough to spur the world's *reconstruction*.

The "light" created by that spark of kindness burned "an opening in the darkness," suggesting that even small moments of compassion can snowball into something greater. Human beings eventually constructed a "ladder" into "the next world." This image implies that everyone can play a role in helping humanity build a brighter future. Indeed, the speaker takes care to mention various "clans" and their "children" climbing out of the darkness and into the light, emphasizing the importance of people coming together despite their differences. Each individual rung on the ladder matters, but only by working together can humanity reach a better world for all.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 19-27

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Once the world ...
... it for granted.

There was a time, the poem's speaker begins, when the world was "perfect" and human beings lived in peace and harmony.

The line's grammatical structure is a subtle example of chiasmus: the line begins and ends with the word "world," which sandwiches the similar concepts of perfection and happiness:

> Once the **world** was **perfect**, and we were **happy** in that **world**.

The structure of the line emphasizes the *relationship* between humanity and the world, implying that the two are mutually dependent: the *world's* perfection and *human* happiness go hand-in-hand. Humanity's happiness, the poem will go on to imply, is a direct *result* of their ability to take care of the world and each other.

Although the world described in the first line sounds idyllic, the use of the word "once" sets the poem firmly in the past and acts as a sort of warning. Through the addition of this word, it becomes clear that the utopia described in the first line no longer exists. Indeed, in the second line, the speaker declares that humanity soon enough took the world "for granted," failing to appreciate the gift they'd been given.

Note, too, how the speaker uses the plural first person, "we," to refer to humanity here and throughout the poem. This implicates the reader in the poem's action, inviting them to reflect upon how they, too, have perhaps taken the world "for granted."

LINES 3-5

Discontent began a ...
... ruptured the web,

The speaker elaborates on how, exactly, people "took" the world "for granted." Instead of simply appreciating the perfect world all around them, the speaker says, human beings soon began to feel "Discontent." The speaker compares these stirrings to "a small rumble in the earthly mind." Dissatisfaction rumbled beneath the surface like the early shakes of an earthquake, threatening to crack the peaceful surface above.

The phrase "earthly mind" further suggests that all of humanity is connected and shares a single mind; feelings like discontent spread easily from person to person. The word "earthly" also reiterates humanity's deep connection to the natural world; a disruption in *humanity*, the poem suggests, causes a disruption in the earth itself.

After Discontent weakened the earth's surface, Doubt, described as a being with a "spiked head," was able to push "through." Doubt, here, comes across as sharp and dangerous, its spikes tearing apart "the web": the delicate, intricate strings of connections between human beings, and between humanity and the earth.

The speaker personifies both Discontent and Doubt by capitalizing their names and depicting them as external, demon-like figures who infiltrate people's minds and interfere with humanity's natural state of contentment. In doing so, the speaker separates people from their negative emotions, to some extent absolving them of their blame for experiencing such dark thoughts.

Also note how the speaker shows the destruction of the world's perfection starting with relatively minor, mundane feelings rather than more extreme emotions like fear, envy, and hatred. These will pop up later in the poem, suggesting that dissatisfaction and ingratitude are *seeds* of destruction, capable of growing into other, far more serious issues if not nipped in the bud.

By now, readers also get a sense of the poem's form: the poem is written in free verse and does not adhere to any standard meter or rhyme scheme. That said, there is a rhyme between "head" and "web" in lines 4 and 5. This, combined with the alliteration of "Discontent" and "Doubt," grants this section of the poem a sing-song, nursery rhyme-like quality.

LINES 6-9

All manner of ...
... inspiration, for life—

Once the "web" of connections between humanity was ruptured, the speaker continues, "all manner of demon thoughts" were able to leap through and infiltrate people's

minds.

The speaker thus implies that the connections and sense of community between different people—that "web"— was a protective barrier, shielding humanity from its darker impulses. Once again, the poem personifies negative thoughts and emotions as demons: the poem implies that things such as envy and greed are external dangers that can be conquered rather than something innate to humanity. In this way, the speaker is able to demonstrate the danger of greed and envy while still affirming humanity's inherent goodness.

These demon thoughts, the speaker goes on to explain, led humanity to destroy the world they were given "for inspiration, for life." The speaker depicts the earth as a gift that humankind was charged with caring for. The speaker's repetition of the word "for," an example of anaphora, emphasizes the importance of that gift, showing that the world is both necessary to sustain life and can be a source of artistic or spiritual inspiration:

> For inspiration, for life—

LINES 10-14

Each stone of ...
... we had started.

The speaker introduces a new metaphor, comparing a number of strong negative emotions—"fear, greed, envy, and hatred"—to stones. People threw these figurative stones at one another, and in the process, accidentally put out humanity's "light."

In comparing negative emotions to stones, the speaker once again separates people from their darkest impulses, treating these as external forces. This time, however, the speaker focuses on the *damage* that these emotions can cause. Stones, in and of themselves, are not dangerous—but they can easily become weapons and cause harm when people throw them at one another.

Light, meanwhile, symbolizes knowledge, progress, and understanding—things that the poem argues "fear, greed, envy, and hatred" snuff out. Imagine gangs throwing rocks at each other and accidentally smashing a streetlamp, suddenly casting the street into darkness.

In the next line, the speaker emphasizes that "no one was without a stone in his or her hand." In other words, *everyone* was complicit in the destruction of the world. This line is also a biblical allusion, referencing a story in which Jesus prevents the stoning of a woman by telling the crowd that "he who is without sin" should "cast the first stone." As in the story, the poem's speaker condemns hypocrisy by firmly stating that no one is blameless in humanity's self-destruction.

This destruction, the speaker reveals, was also a reversal of progress. People ended up "right back where we started" once this light was put out.

LINES 15-20

We were bumping ...
... shared a blanket.

In the aftermath of humanity's destruction of the world, people were left stumbling "in the dark." This bold, three-word phrase is one of the poem's shortest lines, drawing attention to the desolation of a world without the light of kindness and human connection.

Listen to the speaker's repetitive language in these lines:

> We were bumping into each other
> In the dark.
> And now we had no place to live, since we didn't know
> How to live with each other.

The circular language, filled with diacope, emphasizes the connection between all of humanity. People were living together—metaphorically bumping into each other—yet didn't know how to make this situation work, fighting and bumbling around instead of living in peace and harmony. This image is meant to illustrate how lonely and dismal existence feels when humanity is plagued by greed, hatred, and so on.

The narrative continues with a small but profound gesture of hope and kindness: one of the "stumbling ones," or a person lost in the dark, "took pity on another" person and offered to share their own "blanket."

Earlier in the poem, the speaker pointed out that "No one was without a stone"—a phrase emphasizing the idea that every single person participated in humanity's destruction. But that individual responsibility comes full circle here: the speaker focuses on one person's small gesture towards another, implying that even small, individual acts—both good and bad—matter. For the first time since the poem's opening line, the poem's tone is hopeful again.

LINES 21-23

A spark of ...
... make a ladder.

The speaker returns to the metaphor of humanity's light. One person's small act of kindness—sharing a blanket with someone else—was enough to create a "spark" that grew into a "light."

The anadiplosis of this line creates a sense of building momentum, calling readers' attention to the way that one "spark" can bloom into a light strong enough to burn "an opening in the darkness":

> A spark of kindness made a light.
> The light made an opening in the darkness.

This repetition clearly demonstrates the cause-and-effect

relationship: because of one person's act of kindness, a spark emerged; because of this spark, a light grew. That the light of humanity was not lost for good, it seems; all it took was a simple gesture of kindness to offer humanity an escape from the darkness.

And once humanity's light was at least partially restored, the speaker continues, people started to work "together to make a ladder"—a means to climb out of the darkness. The speaker here highlights the importance of cooperation and human connection in the face of a task that might be otherwise overwhelming. Just as one small act of kindness is enough to restore humanity's light, each person's contribution is important to the task of climbing out of the darkness.

These lines also imply the power of hope: seeing even a glimpse of an escape, "an opening in the darkness," is enough to make people put aside their differences.

LINES 24-27

A Wind Clan ...
... light to you.

The poem closes with the image of all of humanity climbing, one by one, up the ladder that they worked together to build and out of the darkness, until they eventually reach "now" and "you."

The first person to climb up the ladder, the speaker says, was a "Wind Clan person." Clans are the most important social unit in the Muscogee Creek Nation and are typically based on shared ancestry; the Wind Clan refers to one of the very first of these clans.

The poem's closing lines are then rife with repetition: the speaker explains that other "clans" and their "children," and those children's children all climb up the ladder and into the "new world" created by humanity's light:

> And then the other clans, the children of those clans, their children,
> And their children [...]

This intense diacope emphasizes the connection between all of these people; each generation is like a link in a chain or a rung on that "ladder," building on the past in order to escape the darkness. The repetition in these lines also provides a sense of the passage of time, the poem speeding through the years until eventually reaching "now."

In the poem's final line, the speaker uses the second person to directly address the reader: eventually, the speaker says, this human ladder reaches all the way "into this morning light," and "to you."

Throughout the poem, the speaker has subtly reminded the reader that they are a part of humankind by using the plural first person, "we"; here, they explicitly express this message. This ending serves as a sort of call to action, inviting the reader to reflect upon their own role in humanity's destruction or restoration, and their own capacity for hatred or kindness.

SYMBOLS

THE WEB

The "web" mentioned in line 5 represents the intricate yet delicate strings of connections between all human beings. Like a spider's web, this network is at once essential and fragile, remarkable yet easily torn.

When personified Doubt ruptures "the web" with its "spiked head," this allows "all manner of demon thoughts" to break through. This implies that the web of social connection acts as a protective barrier around humanity, blocking some of humankind's darker thoughts and impulses. Only once it is ruptured, and the ties between people are broken, does humanity begin to self-destruct.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-7:** "Then Doubt pushed through with its spiked head. / And once Doubt ruptured the web, / All manner of demon thoughts / Jumped through—"

HUMANITY'S LIGHT

The speaker refers often to humanity's "light" throughout the poem. Light typically symbolizes understanding, knowledge, wisdom, and progress. Here, it also represents humanity's innate goodness, something the poem implies is fueled by kindness and connection.

In throwing metaphorical stones of "fear, greed, envy, and hatred" at one another, humankind accidentally puts out this light. Without it, the world becomes bleak and dark, and people are left "stumbling" in the cold. Although the speaker depicts this light as something that is easily destroyed, one individual's simple act of kindness—sharing a blanket—is enough to spark it back to life. Each person's individual actions, then, can contribute to humanity's light and create hope for a brighter future for all of humankind.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "put out the light."
- **Lines 15-16:** "We were bumping into each other / In the dark."
- **Lines 21-22:** "A spark of kindness made a light. / The light made an opening in the darkness."
- **Line 24:** "next world,"
- **Line 27:** "into this morning light "

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker of the poem personifies Discontent and Doubt, capitalizing their names and treating them as though they were independent beings.

Discontent begins as "a small rumble in the earthly mind"; like the early tremors of an earthquake, dissatisfaction shakes up humanity's peace. The ground then weakened, Doubt's "spiked head" pushes through, ultimately tearing apart the intricate "web" of connections that binds humanity together. Other "demon thoughts" then rush through this tear, ruining the once-perfect world.

All this personification dramatizes humanity's downfall, transforming it into an epic battle between human beings and the negative emotions that threaten to destroy us. The description of Doubt's "spiked head" makes this emotion seem downright monstrous, like a horned demon who can easily pierce through human harmony.

This personification also *separates* people from such negative emotions. Things like "Discontent" and "Doubt" *aren't* integral parts of human nature, the poem implies, but rather *external* forces that infiltrate people's minds. This absolves humanity of some of the blame for their darker impulses, reassuring the reader that they are more than their worst thoughts and feelings. It also implies that such impulses can be defeated.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Discontent began a small rumble in the earthly mind."
- **Line 4:** "Then Doubt pushed through with its spiked head."
- **Line 5:** "And once Doubt ruptured the web,"
- **Line 6:** "All manner of demon thoughts"
- **Line 7:** "Jumped through—"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration makes this poem more musical and memorable.

The poem's first line, for example, is brimming with /w/ sounds:

> Once the world was perfect, and we were happy in that world.

These soft sounds make the first line sound gentle and almost sleepy, conveying a sense of peace and contentment that mirrors humanity's tranquility in this "perfect" world.

Such soothing sounds get replaced by booming /d/ alliteration in the next few lines as humanity begins to self-destruct: "Discontent," "Doubt," "demon," "destroyed." The speaker's use of alliteration here draws attention to these negative words, making them feel all the more dramatic. The bold /d/ sounds also mimic the "rumble in the earthly mind."

Later, lilting /l/ sounds link "light" with "ladder," emphasizing the connection between human kindness (which sparked that warm light) and human progress (that ladder leading out of the darkness).

Finally, the end of the poem contains /cl/ alliteration in "clans" and "climbed." The intensely repetitive, alliterative language in the poem's closing moments makes it sound more rhythmic, creating a sense of building momentum as humanity escapes the darkness.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Once," "world," "was," "we," "were," "world"
- **Line 3:** "Discontent"
- **Line 4:** "Doubt"
- **Line 5:** "Doubt"
- **Line 6:** "demon"
- **Line 8:** "destroyed"
- **Line 12:** "his," "her hand"
- **Line 21:** "light"
- **Line 22:** "light"
- **Line 23:** "ladder"
- **Line 24:** "Clan," "climbed"
- **Line 25:** "clans," "clans"

METAPHOR

"Once the World Was Perfect" is filled with metaphorical language that dramatizes the destruction, and rebirth, of humankind. The entire poem can be read as a kind of extended metaphor or allegory, in fact, illustrating the dangers of greed and ingratitude.

As previously mentioned, the speaker personifies "Discontent," "Doubt," and "demon thoughts," treating negative emotions as external forces that invade the "earthly mind." This figurative language helps to dramatize the battle between humanity's impulses, and it suggests that our base instincts can be defeated; they aren't essential parts of who we are.

The speaker also metaphorically compares "fear, greed, envy, and hatred" to stones. In doing so, the speaker illustrates how dangerous such emotions can be. Like sharp, heavy rocks, they can shatter the "light" of humanity (a symbol of human progress, kindness, understanding, and so on).

The "darkness" the speaker mentions isn't literal, either; it's a *metaphorical* darkness meant to convey the terror, loneliness, and misery of a world filled with selfishness and cruelty. The "blanket" represents simple compassion and kindness, while the "ladder" represents all sorts of human beings building on one another's progress and lifting each other up rather than competing with each other.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-7
- Lines 10-12
- Lines 15-16
- Lines 19-22
- Line 23
- Lines 24-27

DIACOPE

The speaker uses different forms of repetition, most prominently diacope, to add rhythm and emphasis throughout the poem and also to highlight various connections between people and the world.

Take the poem's opening line, which is also a subtle example of chiasmus. The line conceptually follows a kind of A-B-B-A structure: it begins and ends with the word "world," between which are the similar concepts of perfection and happiness:

> Once the **world** was **perfect**, and we were **happy** in that **world**.

This structure emphasizes the strong connection between humanity's contentment and the world that they have been gifted; the two are dependent upon one another. The world's perfection makes people happy, and people's happiness helps maintain the world.

As the poem's plot advances, the speaker uses repetition to emphasize key points. Take the diacope of "Doubt" in lines 4-5, for example; "Doubt" asserts itself in the poem just as it pushes "through" the "earthly mind":

> Then **Doubt** pushed through with its spiked head.
> And once **Doubt** ruptured the web,

The repetition also creates a kind of logical structure, illustrating to readers how one event leads to another. Even a minor negative emotion like doubt, the poem implies, can open the door to "All manor of demon thoughts."

Diacope works similarly in lines 17-18, emphasizing the link between having the comfort of a shelter and living together:

> And now we had no place **to live**, since we didn't know
> How **to live** with each other.

Later, towards the end of the poem, the speaker uses a related device called anadiplosis:

> A spark of kindness made a **light**.
> The **light** made an opening in the darkness.

Repetition again demonstrates a cause-and-effect relationship: one person's act of kindness leads to humankind's escape from the darkness. The poem's language creates a kind of piling-up sensation, reflected in the poem's closing lines as well:

> A Wind **Clan** person climbed out first into the next world,
> **And** then the other **clans**, the **children** of those **clans**, **their children**,
> **And their children** [...]

The intensely repetitive language here mirrors the action: each repeated word is like another rung in the metaphorical "ladder" humanity is building "into the next world." The repetition also hammers home the *connections* between various generations, each of which, the speaker implies, stands on the shoulders of those who came before. Finally, the use of diacope makes the poem's closing lines sound a bit like the ticking of a clock as generations and generations pass by.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Once the world was perfect, and we were happy in that world."
- **Lines 4-5:** "Then Doubt pushed through with its spiked head. / And once Doubt ruptured the web,"
- **Lines 10-11:** "Each stone of jealousy, each stone / Of fear"
- **Line 12:** "No one was without a stone in his or her hand."
- **Lines 17-18:** "And now we had no place to live, since we didn't know / How to live with each other."
- **Lines 21-22:** "A spark of kindness made a light. / The light made an opening in the darkness."
- **Lines 24-26:** "A Wind Clan person climbed out first into the next world, / And then the other clans, the children of those clans, their children, / And their children"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora appears in lines 9-11:

> **For** inspiration, **for** life—
> **Each stone of** jealousy, **each stone**
> **Of** fear, greed, envy, and hatred, put out the light.

The anaphora of "for" encourages the reader to linger over each statement. The anaphora of "each stone," meanwhile, calls attention to just how many individual stones were thrown. The diacope in the next line adds to the effect, repeating the word "stone" once more:

> No one was without a **stone** in his or her hand.

The repetitive language underscores the idea that "each"

individual's actions contributed to humanity's self-destruction.

Note, too, that lines 9-10 are also examples of asyndeton. The lack of coordinating conjunctions between "For inspiration, for life" and between "Each stone of jealousy, each stone / Of fear" speeds up the poem, adding a sense of urgency. This makes sense, as the speaker is describing humanity's swift destruction of the "light" of humanity.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** "For inspiration, for life— / Each stone of jealousy, each stone / Of fear"

VOCABULARY

Earthly mind (Line 3) - Humanity's shared consciousness and/or humanity's connection to the natural world

spiked head (Line 4) - Horns; the speaker is personifying "Doubt" as a demon.

Demon thoughts (Lines 6-7) - Negative thoughts or emotions.

Wind Clan (Line 24) - A clan of the Muscogee Creek Nation.

Clans (Line 25) - A tight-knit group of people. Clan members are typically related and descended from a common lineage.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Once the World Was Perfect" consists of a single, 27-line stanza. The poem is written in free verse, without any regular meter or rhyme scheme.

The length of each line varies greatly, from punchy, three-word lines that drive home some of the poem's stronger messages ("In the dark."), to long, enjambed lines that convey more important life lessons:

> And now we had no place to live, since we didn't know
> How to live with each other.

There are also winding, repetitive lines that help to illustrate the slow, steady passage of time:

> And then the other clans, the children of those clans, their children,

The poem's sprawling form aligns with its content: the story is a kind of epic spanning generations, from the beginning of time all the way to "now." The fact that it is not written in rhyme and meter also adds to the feeling that the poem is an oral history of the world. It's conversational, meant to be read aloud.

METER

As a free verse poem, "Once the World Was Perfect" doesn't use a set meter. The poem's lines vary greatly in length. Some are just two or three syllables long, as is the case with line 7:

> Jumped through—

Line 13:

> There we were,

And line 16:

> In the dark.

Other lines are long and twisty, filled with circular language and/or marked by enjambments. Take line 1, which seems to fold in on itself thanks to subtle chiasmus:

> Once the world was perfect, and we were happy in that world.

Readers might notice that this line actually has what sounds like a steady meter to it:

> Once the world was perfect, and we were happy in that world.

The bouncy rhythm here is appropriately peaceful and pleasant, given that the speaker is describing a "perfect," peaceful world (the line falls mostly into familiar iambs, poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed pattern).

It makes sense that as the speaker veers from describing the perfect world, the poem's meter would become more irregular and discordant. The poem's final two lines then have a similarly (though not perfectly) iambic lilt:

> And their children, all the way through time—
> To now, into this morning light to you.

This subtly reflects the return to a harmonious existence.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Once the World Was Perfect" doesn't have a rhyme scheme. Instead, it creates rhythm and emphasis through frequent repetition and sonic devices like alliteration. The lack of a rhyme scheme keeps the poem's language feeling sprawling and lyrical rather than tightly controlled.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is, simply put, a human being reflecting on their own history. The fact that the reader receives so few details about the speaker allows them to become a universal stand-in for all of humankind. By using the plural first person, "we," to refer to themselves and the rest of humanity, the speaker ropes the reader into the poem's action, giving them an opportunity to reflect on and apply the poem's lessons to their own lives.

SETTING

The poem's setting is, broadly, the world. In the beginning, the speaker describes this world as "perfect," a place where all of humanity lives together harmoniously. This setting is short-lived, however. Once humankind turns on one another, the world becomes inhospitable to human life. People are left stumbling about in darkness, without any "place to live." The fact that the poem's setting changes in response to humanity's behavior suggests just how connected people are to the natural world; people can have a profound effect on their surroundings, and vice versa.

Towards the poem's end, humankind works together to climb out of this dark old world and into a bright new one: our own. This ending allows the reader to consider their own place in the world and among humanity.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Joy Harjo, born in 1951, served as the Poet Laureate of the U.S. from 2019 to 2022. As a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation, she is the first Native American to hold the title. Her poetry often draws inspiration from other contemporary Indigenous artists. Harjo's Poet Laureate project, for example, samples the work of 47 different Native Nations poets. She has also cited contemporary American poets Terrance Hayes, Layli Long Soldier, and Sherwin Bitsui as sources of inspiration.

Harjo often writes about political issues, including the lingering effects of colonialism, the rights of Indigenous people, and violence against women. Much of Harjo's work also often focuses on the relationships between people and the natural world, as well as the importance of human connection. Harjo is also a musician, a fact reflected by the lyricism of her poetry. Although she often writes in free verse, her poetry makes frequent use of repetition, rhyme, and alliteration to lend it a song-like quality.

Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings, the 2015 collection in which "Once the World Was Perfect" was published, begins with a poem set near the Tallapoosa River and ends with one set in Oklahoma, near the Arkansas River. In this way, the collection roughly follows the route of the Trail of Tears: the deadly path the U.S. government forced native peoples to march in 1834, following the earlier Indian Removal Act.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Once the World Was Perfect," like much of Harjo's other work, draws from Native American oral history. For example, Harjo references, in passing, the history of the Muscogee Creek Nation.

The Muscogee people, who trace their ancestry to the 1,200-year-old Mississippian culture, consisted of several tribes spanning what is now the southeastern United States; the tribes joined together to form the Muscogee Confederacy. Clans, which the poem also references, were the Muscogee's most important social units. The U.S. government forcibly removed the Muscogee people from their ancestral lands in the 1830s during the genocidal march west known as the Trail of Tears.

Though universal in scope, the poem's themes of unity and human connection were also particularly relevant to the year the poem was published: the buildup to the 2016 presidential election was a turbulent time in U.S. history, marked by intense political divisiveness as well as increasing nationalism and xenophobia.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Muscogee Creek History — Learn more about the history of the Muscogee Creek Nation, of which Joy Harjo is a member. (https://www.muscogeenation.com/culturehistory/)
- Joy Harjo's Biography — Learn more about the poet's life and work. (https://www.joyharjo.com/about)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a recording of "Once The World Was Perfect." (https://shows.acast.com/the-daily-poem/episodes/joy-harjos-once-the-world-was-perfect)
- An Introduction by the Poet — Joy Harjo reads the poem aloud and briefly discusses her inspiration for it. (https://vimeo.com/469007079)
- Joy Harjo's Poet Laureate Project — Explore Joy Harjo's Poet Laureate Project, which samples the work of 47 Native Nation poets. (https://www.loc.gov/ghe/cascade/index.html?appid=be31c5cfc7614d6680e6fa47be888dc3&bo

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOY HARJO POEMS

- Eagle Poem

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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CHICAGO MANUAL

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