

Love Beyond the Human in Robinson Jeffers' "Hurt Hawks" and "Carmel Point"

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Abstract

The study argues that Robinson Jeffers' poetry reconfigures the idea of love according to a new ontology, thereby undermining humanism's anthropocentric prejudices. In a close reading of "Hurt Hawks" and "Carmel Point," the present analysis seeks to examine Jeffers' redefinition of love as a new form of perception that transcends social and interpersonal bonds to reach a new level of cosmic selflessness. Jeffers' idea of love is not found in human sentimental relations; it is found in a detachment from the self that is necessary to grasp the objective reality of the world.

Using ecocriticism as a critical tool to read "Hurt Hawks," it is found that Jeffers' work offers a radical reversal of human-centred notions of mercy. Jeffers' work does not view the act of putting an end to a creature's pain as a form of human-centred pity; it is a recognition of the intrinsic autonomy of the hawk in a sublime ecological order. Jeffers' attack on humanism is continued in the analysis of "Carmel Point," where human experience is juxtaposed to geological time. Jeffers' work seeks to undermine human-centred experience by placing it in relation to a pristine cosmos.

The analysis argues that Jeffers' work represents a new ontology of selflessness—a new form of being that replaces humanism's anthropocentric pride with a new form of objective reverence for the external world. In Jeffers' work, love is redefined as a radical concern necessary to harmonize with the vast inhuman beauty of the cosmos.

Keywords: Ecological poetry, Anthropocentrism, Humanism, Inhumanism, Ecocriticism, Selflessness

Introduction

Robinson Jeffers, one of the most prominent voices in twentieth-century American poetry, articulates an inhumanist vision that decisively displaces human centrality and relocates value within the vast, impersonal order of the cosmos. In his poetry, love emerges as a form of awareness attuned to the greater rhythms of reality rather than being limited to human sentiment or interpersonal attachment. Although Jeffers is frequently mentioned in discussions of eco-consciousness, regionalism, or a certain kind of tragic vision, one doesn't always notice how thoroughly he reconfigures the notion of love. In "Hurt Hawks" and "Carmel Point," he takes apart the sentimental and humanistic conception of love and refigures it as an ontological procedure of self-centring. Love, in these poems, is not merely affection or moral superiority but a rigorous correspondence with the transhuman order of being. Jeffers' argument is that

the only way to truly be in awe of the world is to move away from the notion of human centrality. By locating human existence within the larger framework of ecology and the universe, Jeffers outlines a form of love that transcends humanity itself, one that is grounded in a perception that is at once clear-sighted and humble.

Jeffers' poetry is masterfully crafted and carries a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings. His words demand our attention and offer powerful insights into the world beyond just the human experience. His poetic legacy extends beyond conventional boundaries, showcasing an unwavering commitment to ecological consciousness and positioning him as a harbinger of a distinctive philosophical ethos—captured eloquently in the evocative term he coined, 'Inhumanism.' Embracing 'Inhumanism,' a philosophical standpoint deeply grounded in ecocentrism, Jeffers positions interdependence and continuity as the foundational elements of contingency. Max Oelschlager posits that Inhumanism emerges as the philosophical linchpin within Jeffers' poetic oeuvre, serving as the pivotal nexus guiding his artistic discourse (*IW* 248).

Jeffers viewed 'Inhumanism' as a pragmatic worldview that stood in stark contrast to the prevalent modern perspective. His alternative outlook rested upon an acknowledgment of the remarkable beauty inherent in the world and a rational acceptance of the idea that humanity holds neither a central nor significant position in the universe. According to Jeffers, our vices and abilities are inconsequential in the grander scheme, as is our pursuit of happiness. To quote Jeffers, 'Inhumanism' is:

a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence. It seems time that our race began to think as an adult does, rather than like an egocentric baby or insane person. This manner of thought and feeling is neither misanthropic nor pessimist, though two or three people have said so and may again. It involves no falsehoods, and is a means of maintaining sanity in slippery times; it has objective truth and human value. It offers a reasonable detachment as rule of conduct, instead of love, hate, and envy. It neutralizes fanaticism and wild hopes; but it provides magnificence for the religious instinct, and satisfies our need to admire greatness and rejoice in beauty. (*The Double Axe* xxi)

Inhumanism as a philosophy doesn't negate humanism; rather, it extends its values to encompass all entities, both human and nonhuman. This philosophy vehemently opposes the magnification of the human figure, both in reality and within the realm of literature. In the essay titled "The Inhumanism of Robinson Jeffers," Frederic I. Carpenter explores the concept of 'Inhumanism'. He asserts:

Inhumanism: the word sounds forbidding. The dictionary defines "inhuman" as "lacking in natural human feeling; brutal." But when Jeffers coined the "ism," he obviously did not intend this meaning. And when he described Inhumanism in the Preface to *The Double Axe*, ... asserting that the idea "has objective truth and human value. It offers a reasonable detachment as a rule of conduct." (Carpenter 19)

This paradigm shift in thinking has profound ripple effects in our understanding of love. In humanistic worldviews, love is typically understood as a closeness between human beings, moral care, or a form of redemptive solidarity. Jeffers critiques these notions by suggesting that the over-investment of all emotional resources in humanity can lead to fanaticism, narcissism, and short-sightedness in ecological terms. When we are overly in love with “our own species,” we can easily become a form of collective narcissism. Thus, Jeffers proposes the solution of detachment. Detachment is not the same thing as indifference. Rather, it is the recognition that humanity is but a small part of a vastly larger geological and cosmic timescale. Real love, according to Jeffers, happens when the self relinquishes its need to be at the centre of things. In this sense, Jeffers anticipates the later ecocritical and deep ecology movements, which extend the boundaries of moral concern beyond the limits of humanity. His poetry is not sentimental about nature; it seeks to realign our perception of everything. Both “Carmel Point” and “Hurt Hawks” illustrate this transition. The poems create a conflict between human knowledge and the nonhuman world, illustrating that love is contingent upon releasing the desire to possess or be comforted.

In “Carmel Point,” Jeffers locates himself in the California coastline, specifically in the Carmel area that he was so fond of, not as a source of personal reminiscence but as a topography in which the centrality of humanity is subtly disturbed. While the poem itself is the result of a personal familiarity with the land, the rocky coastline is placed on a scale that transcends possession, becoming instead the terrain on which a kind of love that is not human is figured.

In the introductory stanzas of “Carmel Point”, Jeffers unveils a perennial depiction of the scenic coastal area where he lived:

The extraordinary patience of things!
 This beautiful place defaced with a crop of suburban houses –
 How beautiful when we first beheld it,
 Unbroken fields of poppy and lupine walled with clean cliffs;
 (CP 3: 399)

The poem describes the serene beauty of the coastal landscape, emphasising the intricate relationship between the ocean, land, and human presence. However, beneath this tranquil setting, Jeffers conveys a sense of impending doom, suggesting that humanity’s actions could have irreversible consequences. He criticises the arrogance of human progress, contrasting it with the timeless magnificence of nature. Jeffers portrays the fragility of the natural world and warns against the short-sightedness of human endeavours. The aesthetic allure in the first lines is merely orchestrated to lay the foundation for the revelation of the speaker’s authentic perspective on nature:

Meanwhile the image of the pristine beauty
 Lives in the very grain of the granite,
 Safe as the endless ocean that climbs our cliff. -As for us:
 We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;
 We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident
 As the rock and ocean that we were made from. (CP 3: 399)

Jeffers expresses profound dissatisfaction with the elevated status of human beings in the world. He prefers a scenario where people attain equality with other beings and entities in the cycles of life and death, instead of perpetuating the privileged stance they currently hold.

Love, here, is not about safeguarding the landscape with human feeling. It is a change in mind, a release of our centre. The poet is encouraged to abandon the measurement of suburban dreams and to resonate with rock and sea—to things that transcend the mercurial tides of civilization. In this context, love that transcends humanity is not merely romantic or activist. It is a form of ontological humility—a willingness to be in the world without requiring it to conform to human desires. The poem's awe for granite and sea is a profound revaluing of priorities. It acknowledges a connection without claiming ownership. Love in this context is a decision to align with processes that transcend individual lives.

If “Carmel Point” extends love over geological time, “Hurt Hawks” investigates it within the confines of the personal encounter between human and animal. The poem is about a speaker caring for a hawk badly enough injured that there is no longer any hope of healing. The traditional moral narrative would see the last act, shooting the hawk, as tragic cruelty or reluctant mercy. Jeffers complicates this interpretation by portraying the hawk with an “implacable arrogance” that never wavers into subservience, even in pain. The ethical issue at stake is one of mercy. The humanistic impulse towards compassion tends to alleviate suffering in a way that reasserts human dominance. Feeding and caring for the hawk initially puts the speaker in this position. However, the suffering of the hawk complicates this act of care into an extension of human attachment rather than a genuine acknowledgment. In the second session of the poem, Jeffers says:

I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk; but the great
redtail
Had nothing left but unable misery
From the bones too shattered for mending, the wing that trailed under his
talons when he moved.
We had fed him six weeks, I gave him freedom,
He wandered over the foreland hill and returned in the evening, asking for
death,
Not like a beggar, still eyed with the old
Implacable arrogance. I gave him the lead gift in the twilight. What fell was
relaxed,
Owl-downy, soft feminine feathers; but what
Soared: the fierce rush: the night-herons by the flooded river cried fear at
its rising
Before it was quite unsheathed from reality. (sic) (*SP* 165-66)

Jeffers presents a vision of nature where rocks, birds, and humans are all integral parts of a larger ecosystem. He highlights the interwoven existence of these entities, suggesting that they are all related and dependent on each other. By doing so, Jeffers

challenges the human-centric view of the world and emphasises the importance of recognising the value of all living beings. The contemplation of death, coupled with the response of the night-herons, further emphasizes the intricate and interconnected web of life and mortality in Jeffers' ecological philosophy. The poet's perspective extends beyond individual creatures to embrace a broader understanding of the cyclical and transformative nature of existence within the natural order.

In this case, Jeffers subverts the human concept of mercy. Love is not about saving all life at all costs or succumbing to the desire for pity. Instead, it is about the recognition of the hawk's independence within an ecological system that extends beyond the simple survival of the individual. To destroy the hawk is to forgo possessive love and to celebrate the integrity of its existence despite the lack of human feeling. In this poem, non-human love manifests as a moral certainty that is founded upon ecological insight. The poet does not act for his own convenience but out of a serious respect for the hawk's integrity.

Across both poems, the human-focused love is deconstructed. In "Carmel Point," love requires a cognitive uncentering and a willingness to align oneself with the obstinate persistence of geology. In "Hurt Hawks," it involves a surrender from the sentimental pity to the recognition of nonhuman autonomy. In both cases, love and selflessness are intertwined. This selflessness has an ontological quality to it, rather than an ethical one. Jeffers suggests that the very notion of human identity must be revised. The self is not autonomous but relational, embedded within a vast web of rock, water, animal life, and cosmic processes. Thus, love becomes an attunement to reality as it is, independent of human appraisal.

Jeffers position is consistent with ecocritical and deep-ecology theory that resists human-centricity, but his voice remains resoundingly poetic. He does not present a clean philosophy but presents perception itself, challenging readers to do more than assent—to feel the disorienting move away from human centrality. This move also involves a tragic worldview. Humanity appears as fleeting, destructive, sometimes delusional. However, the tragedy is not despairing. It is qualified by a sense of awe. By situating humanity within the sublime currents of geological and cosmic time, Jeffers locates a beauty that transcends consolation. Love becomes a reverence for this beauty—a rejoicing in existence that exceeds any narrative of progress or salvation.

In "Hurt Hawks" and "Carmel Point," Jeffers presents a radical transformation of love that attacks the very centre of humanistic thought. Love loses its sentimental sheen and becomes instead an ontological discipline: a sharp, cold detachment that aligns the self with the great, nonhuman majesty of the universe. The obstinate ages of rock and the pain of mortal flesh both demonstrate that true piety consists in the relinquishment of human centrality.

Jeffers, therefore, is not advocating the abandonment of love but its transformation. Nonhuman love is not a matter of emotional indulgence or moralized protection but rather an objective, selfless engagement with the infinite cycles of creation, destruction, and recreation. In an era in which ecological disaster and human

assertiveness threaten to overshadow all else, Jeffers' inhumanist poetry continues to prod the reader toward a release from centrism and, through this release, toward a wider way of being.

Abbreviations

CP *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. Edited by Tim Hunt, Stanford University Press, 1988.

IW *Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*. Yale U.P., 1993.

SP *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. Edited by Tim Hunt, Stanford University Press, 2001.

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