

Nature and Civilization: Poems by Robinson Jeffers

Robinson Jeffers was a 20th-century American poet who was deeply concerned about the questionable value of “civilization” and “progress”—the consequences of modern life and humankind’s increasing alienation from the natural world. The two poems below take different approaches to exploring those concerns.

The Purse-Seine¹

Our sardine fishermen work at night in the dark of the moon; daylight or moonlight
They could not tell where to spread the net, unable to see the phosphorescence of the shoals of fish.
They work northward from Monterey, coasting Santa Cruz; off New Year’s Point or off Pigeon Point
The look-out man will see some lakes of milk-color light on the sea’s night-purple; he points, and the helmsman
5 Turns the dark prow, the motorboat circles the gleaming shoal and drifts out her seine-net. They close the circle
And purse the bottom of the net, then with great labor haul it in.

I cannot tell you
How beautiful the scene is, and a little terrible, then, when the crowded fish
Know they are caught, and wildly beat from one wall to the other of their closing destiny the phosphorescent
10 Water to a pool of flame, each beautiful slender body sheeted with flame, like a live rocket
A comet’s tail wake of clear yellow flame; while outside the narrowing
Floats and cordage of the net great sea-lions come up to watch, sighing in the dark; the vast walls of night
Stand erect to the stars.

Lately I was looking from a night mountain-top
15 On a wide city, the colored splendor, galaxies of light: how could I help but recall the seine-net
Gathering the luminous fish? I cannot tell you how beautiful the city appeared, and a little terrible.
I thought, We have geared the machines and locked all together into interdependence; we have built the great
cities; now
There is no escape. We have gathered vast populations incapable of free survival, insulated
From the strong earth, each person in himself helpless, on all dependent. The circle is closed, and the net
20 Is being hauled in. They hardly feel the cords drawing, yet they shine already. The inevitable mass-disasters
Will not come in our time nor in our children’s, but we and our children
Must watch the net draw narrower, government take all powers—or revolution, and the new government
Take more than all, add to kept bodies kept souls—or anarchy, the mass-disasters.

These things are Progress;
25 Do you marvel our verse is troubled or frowning, while it keeps its reason? Or it lets go, lets the mood flow
In the manner of the recent young men² into mere hysteria, splintered gleams, crackled laughter. But they are
quite wrong.
There is no reason for amazement: surely one always knew that cultures decay, and life’s end is death.

Questions for Discussion and Writing: “The Purse-Seine”

1. What is the **tone** of the poem? Discuss the aspects of the poem that help establish this tone: **structure, diction, style, imagery**, etc.
2. What is the primary **theme** of the poem? Discuss the aspects of the poem that help convey this theme: **imagery, metaphor**, direct commentary, **allusion**, etc.
3. What is unusual about the “beauty” of the fish and of the city? What literary devices does the phrase “a little terrible” (lines 8 and 16) contain?

¹ *seine*: a kind of net used in fishing

² *the recent young men*: perhaps a reference to jazz musicians or literature’s “Lost Generation”

4. In what ways are the people of our society like sardines? In what ways are they different? Given this comparison, what is **ironic** about the activity of sardine fishing? What is ironic about our society's "Progress," and why do you think that word is capitalized? What is the nature of the "purse-seine" in which we are caught?
5. Discuss the predictions the speaker makes about our society in lines 20-23. What do you think the speaker's comment that "they shine already" (line 20) refers to?
6. Interpret the question the speaker asks in line 25. What is the young men's "reason for amazement," and why are they wrong to be amazed? What literary devices does the phrase "mere hysteria" (line 26) contain?

Hurt Hawks

I

- The broken pillar of the wing jags from the clotted shoulder,
 The wing trails like a banner in defeat,
 No more to use the sky forever but live with famine
 And pain a few days: cat nor coyote
- 5 Will shorten the week of waiting for death, there is game without talons.
 He stands under the oak-bush and waits
 The lame feet of salvation; at night he remembers freedom
 And flies in a dream, the dawns ruin it.
 He is strong and pain is worse to the strong, incapacity is worse.
 - 10 The curs of the day come and torment him
 At distance, no one but death the redeemer will humble that head,
 The intrepid readiness, the terrible eyes.
 The wild God of the world is sometimes merciful to those
 That ask mercy, not often to the arrogant.
 - 15 You do not know him, you communal people, or you have forgotten him;
 Intemperate and savage, the hawk remembers him;
 Beautiful and wild, the hawks, and men that are dying, remember him.

II

- I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk; but the great redtail
 Had nothing left but unable misery
- 20 From the bone 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,
 - 25 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.

Questions for Discussion and Writing: "Hurt Hawks"

1. What is the **tone** of the poem? Discuss the aspects of the poem that help establish this tone: **structure, diction, style, imagery**, etc.

2. What is the primary **theme** of the poem? Discuss the aspects of the poem that help convey this theme: **imagery**, **figurative language**, direct commentary, etc.
3. Why does the speaker include the phrase “there is game without talons” (line 5), and what does it suggest about the hawk? What do you think the phrase “the curs of the day” (line 10) refers to, and what does the term “curs” imply?
4. Why do you think the speaker says that “pain is worse to the strong” (line 9)? What is “unable misery” (line 19)?
5. What is “the wild God of the world” (line 13), and what characteristics does it have? Why do “you communal people” (line 15) not know him? What does the speaker’s use of the word *you* in this phrase imply?
6. What are “the penalties” (line 18)? Why do you think the speaker would “sooner kill a man than a hawk”?
7. What does the phrase “intrepid readiness” (line 12) refer to? What is “the lead gift” (line 24), and why does the speaker give it to the hawk? How is the hawk “not like a beggar” (line 23)? What is the effect of the **paradox** in lines 24-26 and the term “unsheathed” (line 27)?
8. Discuss the similarities and differences between Part I and Part II. What is the effect of their **juxtaposition**?
9. What rhetorical devices are used to describe the hawks? Why are they “arrogant”?
10. Compare and contrast the natural world and the human world as characterized by Jeffers in these two poems.