



Joy Harjo, Poet The Power of Poetry

Lesson Introduction

Interview Log: Interviewed on January 22, 2024 by George Kunhardt

- ▣ Access *The Thread* episode of Joy Harjo on our [YouTube channel](#) or at [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)
- ▣ Access her long-form interview on [LifeStories.org](#)

Learning Objectives

Social Studies Focus

- ▣ Understand the impact of cultural traditions, including storytelling and rituals, on individual and community identity
- ▣ Explore the history of the Muscogee Creek Nation, their forced removal and experiences in Oklahoma, and their participation in The Battle of Horseshoe Bend
- ▣ Define systemic racism and its effect on Native American communities

English Language Arts Focus

- ▣ Examine perspective taking from the point of view of one poet
- ▣ Analyze the structure and purpose of a narrative, identify key themes in the episode, and synthesize information from a spoken text
- ▣ Analyze, reflect on, and discuss the title “The Power of Poetry” after watching the episode
- ▣ Write and read a poem and participate in a poetry competition as an elective activity

Episode Overview

Joy Harjo, the first Native American chosen to be our nation’s Poet Laureate and the 2024 recipient of the Frost Medal for distinguished lifetime achievement in poetry, is a dream weaver. In this mesmerizing conversation, she describes growing up in Oklahoma and learning the stories from elders of the Muscogee traditions and tragedies. In a gently lyrical voice as vivid and compelling as her poetry, Joy Harjo unspools the thread of her life and the universal truths she has learned from it in this episode of *The Thread*. And in the tradition of all the great storytellers, she paints pictures for the mind’s eye to behold: “What are we without wings becoming words?”



Biography

Joy Harjo, the 23rd U.S. Poet Laureate, is a poet, musician, and proud member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. Born Joy Foster in Tulsa, she later adopted the name “Harjo” to honor her grandmother’s Muscogee roots. A year before Harjo graduated from the University of New Mexico, she published her first poetry collection, *The Last Song*, in 1975. A year later, she graduated college, and then earned her MFA from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in 1978. Since then, she has released ten more books of poetry. In 2019, Harjo made history as the first Native American Poet Laureate, serving three consecutive terms. Her accolades include the Ruth Lilly Prize, a PEN USA Literary Award, and NEA Fellowships. As a founding board member and Chair of the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation, she’s been inducted into several Halls of Fame. Harjo also performs with her band, Arrow Dynamics, releasing seven albums and winning a NAMMY (Native American Music Awards) in 2009. Currently, she’s the inaugural Artist-in-Residence at the Bob Dylan Center in Tulsa.



Teaching Tip: First Take

A **First Take** is a warm-up writing or conversation exercise created uniquely for *The Thread* that strengthens media literacy skills. Like an opening song in a musical, the first stanza of a poem, or even the first impression one person makes on another, the First Take asks students to reflect and share their initial thoughts and feelings about the episode’s opening.

Suggested Steps

▣ **Watch and then read aloud** the opening of Joy Harjo’s episode with students:

“We’re here for a reason. And in Muscogee. Why? It is not because all the resources were given to us by God, it’s like we are here as citizens of a larger, of an incredible, diverse place of beings and ideas and thoughts and so on. So, storytelling is what we do.”



▣ **Ask and Discuss:** What do you learn about Joy Harjo and her cultural identity from her episode’s opening? What insights can you infer?

▣ **Next,** as a class, discuss the role of “the opening” in any form of storytelling – an interview, film, play, or song. What is their point of view on why the filmmakers chose this as the opening for the episode? What ideas, topics, or themes may the filmmakers be foreshadowing?

▣ **Last,** have students do a one-minute quick write reflecting on how the opening connects with the episode’s title, “The Power of Poetry.” Then, have students get into pairs and share their thoughts and feelings.



Photos: Reading at the Wheelwright. (Personal photograph from Joy Harjo) top; Family photograph. (Personal photograph from Joy Harjo) lower left; Family Wedding Photograph. (Personal photograph from Joy Harjo) lower right



Teaching Tip:

The Thread Up Close

Step One: Watch Joy Harjo's episode, "The Power of Poetry" here.

Next, have students discuss and debrief the episode using these suggested questions:

- ▣ How would you describe Joy Harjo's early memories, her upbringing, her understanding of her mother and her father, and her relationship to her family?
- ▣ Joy Harjo shares that at an early age she had an awareness that something was given to her to do, and it was not going to be easy. After listening to her interview, what do you think was given to her to do in her life?
- ▣ What stories stood out to you from this interview?
- ▣ What did you learn about Joy's relationship to her cultural history, her identity, and her community?
- ▣ Systemic racism is defined as ingrained racial biases and discriminatory practices based on historical injustices. When asked if her family ever spoke about race, Joy Harjo responded not the word but it was everywhere. How do you make sense of her point of view? What examples did she give that illustrated her experiences of systemic racism?
- ▣ What questions would you like to ask Joy Harjo if she was in the room?

Step Two: After discussing the questions in Step One, have students return to *The Thread* episode and engage in a close read and analysis of his interview using the transcript and video as a reference. Depending on the lesson, question, or theme you are aligning *The Thread* with, have students annotate the transcript, select passages that reflect the assignment, and explain their reasoning in class.

Here is an example of a *Thread* lesson connection: If you are introducing students to the power of poetry as a form of personal expression, discuss Joy Harjo's point of view on why she pursued poetry:

"There I was writing poetry and I remember we were all thinking about graduation and people were concerned, like 'Why are you taking poetry as a major? You should be taking education. You can write poetry anytime.' But something in me, something larger than myself knew I had to follow it. It's like knowing the truth of something and it may be a hard road to follow, you don't know, and it's not usual, but something that wiser self knows and if you go against it, you always suffer. I mean, I didn't go into poetry because I wanted to suffer. I went into poetry because it became using words, which is something I was never that good at in regular life, but using words in what I would call a sacred and powerful manner overtook me, and to use them even in situations that seemed impossible or dire became important to me."



Photo: Portrait Black and White with Journal. (Personal photograph from Joy Harjo)



Connections: *The Thread Up Close*

- ▣ Do you read, write, or listen to poetry?
- ▣ Who has influenced you to express yourself in art, writing, or poetry or through other mediums of expression?
- ▣ What does this quote suggest about the potential power of poetry in our lives?
- ▣ How do you understand the title after watching this episode? What new or surprising insights about the power of poetry did you learn as a result of Joy Harjo's career and point of view?
- ▣ How does Joy Harjo's relationship to her culture and the Muscogee Nation influence her poetry and her choice to be a writer?
- ▣ What new insight did you learn about (yourself, your community, your world) from her stories?

Activity: The Power of Poetry

Have students go to the [Poetry Foundation website](#), search for Joy Harjo, and spend time exploring the small collection of her poems (make sure students click on the Show More button to see the entire grid). Explain to students that they will be choosing one poem from this collection to analyze in more depth.

Activity: With the idea of the power of poetry in mind:

- ▣ Have students read several poems written by Joy Harjo. Select one that they want to discuss
- ▣ Organize students into pairs. Taking turns, have students share their selected poem and discuss their interpretation using prompts such as:
 - ▣ What did they choose this poem?
 - ▣ How did they understand her imagery, themes, title, or tempo, of the poem?
- ▣ After sharing, have students choose one line or stanza to analyze in their pair
- ▣ Return to a large class discussion and invite volunteers to share some of the insights they took away from this exercise

Extended Learning: Explore participating in the [Poetry Out Loud Competition](#) as a class. integrating media literacy into their k-12 education.



Additional Resources

- ▣ Explore [Joy Harjo](#) - official website
- ▣ Discover more of her poetry on the [Poetry Foundation](#) - official website
- ▣ Learn more about [The Muscogee Nation](#) and [Hickory Ground](#) - official website
- ▣ Read more about Joy Harjo's ancestor [Menawa](#) and [The Battle of Horseshoe Bend](#)

