From Solitude to Symbiosis: Robinson Jeffers and the Ethics of Inhumanism

Dr Revathy Menon

Assistant Professor, Department of English, College of Applied Science (IHRD), Kalanjoor, Kerala.

Abstract

Robinson Jeffers, a distinctive figure in twentieth-century American poetry, articulates a radical ecopoetic vision that challenges anthropocentric worldviews through his philosophy of 'inhumanism'. His work reimagines the human-nature relationship by displacing the human as the central measure of value and emphasizing interdependence within a vast cosmic and geological continuum. Through vivid poetic landscapes shaped by the Californian coast, Jeffers critiques modern humanism and aligns with deep ecological principles, advocating an ethic of humility, reverence, and detachment. His vision foregrounds the autonomy and agency of the nonhuman world, crafting a poetics that is at once tragic, philosophical, and urgently relevant in the context of contemporary ecological crisis.

Keywords: Inhumanism, Humanism, Ecopoetics, Anthropocentrism, Deep Ecology,

Robinson Jeffers emerges as one of the most radical and visionary figures in American poetry for his redefinition of the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Through a body of work marked by philosophical rigor and poetic force, Jeffers advances a worldview he termed 'Inhumanism', which calls for a fundamental reorientation of human thought—away from anthropocentric ideals and toward an ecological consciousness that recognizes the autonomy, magnitude, and inherent value of the nonhuman world. This article contends that Jeffers's Inhumanism is not a rejection of humanism per se, but a critical evolution of it—one that exposes the limitations of human self-centrality and advocates for a more inclusive, cosmically scaled ethical vision. By situating Jeffers within the broader frameworks of ecocriticism, deep ecology, and posthumanist theory, this study explores how his poetry dismantles the illusion of human supremacy and repositions the human as a part—rather than the measure—of a vast and indifferent universe.

His philosophical stance, which he called 'inhumanism', aims to decenter the human from the center of meaning and value. 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. Fundamentally, Jeffers' verses articulate his unwavering dedication to Inhumanism—a postmodern perspective that robustly engages with the profound ontological question: What is being? (*Idea* 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)

Tadeusz Slawek conducts a more extensive exploration, providing a thorough analysis of the concept of 'Inhumanism.' He highlights how humanism, as a philosophical perspective, confronts the inherent solitude of human existence by attempting to conceive an intricate partnership between humanity and the universe:

> If Jeffers's philosophy deserves the name of inhumanism we could claim that it does only because precisely it preserves and shelters the dearest of all humanist beliefs that man is the measure of all things. But while the traditional humanism would hold it as man's glory, Jeffers suggests that it is "hardly his advantage" (SP, 365), … Man as the measure of the universe necessarily reduces all knowledge to his form; man is at the beginning and end of man's episteme thus inflating the ego as a false center hopelessly involved in "the net of desire".
>
> Humanism is a philosophy of man's ineradicable loneliness. Inhumanism tries to think of man and universe as twisted together in a difficult partnership. It is inhumanism that unearthes [sic] the inherent loneliness deeply embedded in humanism but which humanism always concealed under the guise of the centrality of man's position. In short, Inhumanism is an advanced form of humanist reflection, of humanism reflecting upon itself. (*The Dark Glory* 76)

Furthermore, a more elaborate elucidation of this philosophy is available in Jeffers' letters:

> First: Man also is a part of nature, not a miraculous intrusion. And he is a very small part of a very big universe, that was here before he appeared, and will be here long after he has totally ceased to exist.
>
> Second: Man would be better, more sane and more happy, if he devoted less attention and less passion (love, hate, etc.) to his own species, and more to non-human nature. Extreme introversion in any single person is a kind of insanity; so it is in a race; and race has always and increasingly spent too much thought on itself and too little on the world outside.
>
> Third: It is easy to see that a tree, a rock, a star are beautiful; it is hard to see that people are beautiful unless you consider them as part of the universe- the divine whole. You cannot judge or value any part except in relationship to the whole that is part of [.] (*Selected Letters* 307)

Throughout his poetic works, Jeffers frequently depicts nature as a sublime and potent force, separate from human preoccupations. They also delve into the themes of human existence and the intricate, often tragic, relationship between humanity and the natural world. Jeffers vehemently rejected anthropocentrism, the notion that humans are the central focus and superior to all other beings. Instead,

he advocated for an ecological perspective that prompts humans to recognize their rightful place within the grand tapestry of the natural order, cultivating a profound sense of humility and reverence for all living entities. He crafts vivid portrayals of California's rugged coastlines, presenting them as timeless landscapes indifferent to human endeavours.

Jeffers' poems often explore the inherent conflict between the human desire for permanence, stability, and control, and the ever-changing, unpredictable nature of the world. 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; (*Collected Poetry* 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. (*Collected Poetry* 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.

Jeffers' poetry endeavours to convey that nature, inherently nurturing and life-sustaining, should not be perceived as fragile or reliant on human protection. Contrary to the outdated patriarchal metaphor that enabled the exploitation of nature, Jeffers challenges the notion that humanity must play a paternalistic role in safeguarding the natural world. His perspective advocates for a more symbiotic and respectful coexistence, recognizing nature's inherent resilience and ability to thrive autonomously. The focus shifts from positioning humans as the sole saviours of a seemingly vulnerable Mother Nature to appreciating and respecting the autonomy and strength that naturally exists within the environment. This shift in perspective is evident in "Continent's End," a poem by Jeffers that immerses itself in profound ecological themes. This poem, a testament to Jeffers' poetic brilliance, unfolds as a celebratory homage to the Pacific Ocean and the vast maritime expanse. In its verses, Jeffers skilfully portrays the Pacific as the very cradle of life, laying bare his deep ecological perspective with explicit clarity. This insightful recognition, wherein he regards the ocean as the womb of life, stands as a compelling testament to the depths of his ecological musings. Yet, within the depths of his profound inquiry, a revelation emerges:

> The tides are in our veins, we still mirror the stars, life is your child, but there is in me
> Older and harder than life and more impartial, the eye that watched before there was an ocean.
> ……..
> Mother, though my song's measure is like your surf-beat's ancient rhythm I

never learned it of you.
Before there was any water there were tides of fire, both our tones flow
from the older fountain. (*Selected Poetry* 24-25)

Jeffers refrains from regarding the ocean as an external entity, concluding instead that both humanity and the sea share a common origin, stating, "both our tones flow from the older fountain." Beyond portraying people merely as the offspring of the sea, he asserts a siblinghood with it, rejecting a human-centric perspective. Jeffers' stance calls for an appreciation of intuitive consciousness, emphasising the inherent harmony between nature and humanity. As he articulates a profound connection with the ocean, he rejects a hierarchical approach, advocating for a more interconnected relationship. In doing so, he aligns with the sentiment expressed by Eihei Dōgen, a zen Buddhist monk and philosopher, who noted, "Nature is no longer anything external but rather a contemplative field coterminous with the subjective realization of mind" (*Zen* 56). This echoes Jeffers' plea for a holistic understanding that transcends human-centric perspectives and embraces the intrinsic unity between human existence and the natural world.

In Jeffers' literary works, nature is not merely a backdrop or a resource to be exploited by humans; instead, it emerges as a sentient and formidable force, existing independently of human existence. Through his richly descriptive and vivid language, Jeffers imbues nature with a sense of power and agency, often portraying landscapes as majestic and primal entities that overshadow human endeavours. This portrayal serves to underscore the inherent value of nature, encouraging readers to acknowledge its worth beyond its utility to humans. Tim Hunt in the essay "Jeffers's "Roan Stallion" and the Narrative of Nature" explains:

> [Jeffers] images nature as both an ultimate material process" tides of fire and simultaneously as a unifying awareness" the eye that watched" produced by this flux, bound to it, yet comprehending and transcending it. Nature, that is, is more than matter and process; it is the energy behind them and an awareness emerging from them. As such it is (at least at this level of abstraction) both material and ideal. (66)

Jeffers explores the complex interplay between humans and nature, offering a nuanced examination of their relationship. Rather than emphasising domination or exploitation, he highlights the interconnectedness and interdependence between humans and the natural world. Jeffers challenges the prevailing anthropocentric worldview of his time, urging individuals to recognize their place within the broader ecological web and to embrace a more humble and harmonious coexistence with nature. Jeffers' ecological vision also prompts a profound reconsideration of ethics, calling on readers to adopt a broader perspective that prioritises the well-being of the entire ecosystem. He advocates for a shift from a human centred ethical framework to one that is eco-centric, where the welfare of all living beings and the integrity of the natural world are regarded as paramount. 'By emphasising the intrinsic value of non-human life and the interconnectedness of all ecological elements, Jeffers cultivates a sense of ecological responsibility, compelling readers to reassess their ethical obligations towards the environment' (Elder 33).

Jeffers' poetry consistently embodies a tragic sensibility, contemplating themes of human isolation, the detrimental tendencies of civilization, and the inescapable reality of death. He redefines tragedy by casting the setting or place as the protagonist in the cosmic theatre. In his narrative, Earth, humanity, and all non-humans assume the roles of actors. Rather than confining ecology to Earth's systems, Jeffers broadens its significance to encompass the entire cosmos. Here, every element and force are accorded equal importance, contributing collectively to an ever-expanding and inclusive whole. His works also possess a dark and sombre quality, illuminating the destructive potential of human actions and the dire consequences of disregarding the natural world. In his profoundly tragic poetry, one is prompted to perceive nature not as a looming threat, but as a prospective saviour for humanity and the world. This vision suggests a liberation for humans from the challenges they will inevitably confront in a post-industrial era.

Despite acknowledging humanity's significant transgressions against nature, the poet posits them as mere specks within the vast and formidable continuum of the natural world. This stance serves

as a foundation for critiquing anthropocentrism. Yet, amidst the inherent tragedy, Jeffers finds solace and beauty in the wildness and vitality of nature, offering glimpses of hope and redemption within the intricate fabric of existence. A good number of Jeffers' poems embody this vision, as they delve into untamed landscapes and the ferocity of nature, celebrating its uncontrolled aspects and highlighting the power and beauty found in the wild. By challenging traditional notions of order and stability, these poems encourage individuals to reconsider their place in the vastness of the universe and the enduring grandeur of the natural world.

In the poem "The Answer", Jeffers explores the destructive consequences of human exploitation of nature. He portrays nature as a source of wisdom and urges humanity to listen and learn from it. By suggesting that the exploitation of nature ultimately harms humanity itself, Jeffers highlights the intrinsic connection between humans and the larger ecological system. This ecological principle underscores the interconnectivity of all life forms and the necessity for a balanced and sustainable approach to resource utilization. In 'The Answer,' Jeffers articulates a comprehensive perspective on life:

> A severed hand
> Is an ugly thing, and man dissevered from the earth and stars and his
> History . . . for contemplation or in fact . . .
> Often appears atrociously ugly. Integrity is wholeness, the greatest beauty is
> Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of
> the universe. Love that, not man
> Apart from that, or else you will share man's pitiful confusions, or drown in
> despair when his days darken. (sic) (*Selected Poetry* 522)

The poem opens with a striking image, using a severed hand as a metaphor to illustrate the profound disconnection between man and the fundamental elements of existence—namely, the earth, stars, and his own history. Jeffers implies that when individuals detach themselves from these essential components, whether in thought or in reality, they undergo an unappealing fragmentation, losing a sense of wholeness and unity. The poem warns against isolating man from this holistic perspective. Jeffers cautions that focusing solely on individual human experiences, divorced from the broader context of the universe, leads to confusion and despair. The final lines underscore the importance of recognizing the interdependence of humanity with the cosmos, emphasizing that understanding and appreciating this connection is essential for navigating the challenges that may darken human existence.

In "Hurt Hawks," Jeffers goes beyond mere observation, using the poem to convey a profound empathy that reflects a deep emotional connection with the struggles and suffering within the natural world. The verses serve as a testament to Jeffers' overarching philosophy, emphasizing the interconnectedness of humanity and the environment. Through the poignant portrayal of the wounded hawk, the poet prompts one to acknowledge and understand the pain and resilience inherent in the natural order. By encouraging one to reflect on the consequences of his actions and advocating for a sense of responsibility and compassion toward all living beings, Jeffers underscores the necessity for people to prioritize the well-being of non-human species. The poet encourages a collective effort to foster a more harmonious coexistence with the natural world. In the second session of the poem, he 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) (*Selected Poetry* 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.

Jeffers's inhumanist vision dismantles the anthropocentric frameworks that have long defined Western thought, offering instead a poetics rooted in humility, detachment, and reverence for the nonhuman. By decentering the human and foregrounding the vast, impersonal forces of nature, his work unsettles the illusion of human supremacy and reintegrates humanity into a larger ecological and cosmic order. The wild landscapes of his poetry—inhabited by stone, hawk, wave, and mountain—become not merely settings but agents of meaning, revealing a world whose value exists independently of human judgment. In this reordered ethical universe, moral significance is no longer measured by human interests alone but by a deeper attunement to the integrity of all life. Jeffers does not advocate misanthropy but calls for a transformation of consciousness—an embrace of inhumanism as an ethical and poetic stance capable of fostering ecological awareness and existential clarity. In an era of escalating environmental crisis, his work remains strikingly prescient, reminding us that renewal begins not with mastery, but with the capacity to see ourselves as part of a larger, enduring whole.

References

Carpenter, Frederic I. "The Inhumanism of Robinson Jeffers." *Western American Literature*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1981, pp. 19–25, https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.1981.0014. Accessed 6Nov. 2020.

Dōgen, Eihei. *The Zen Poetry of DŌGEN: Verses from the Mountain of Eternal Peace*. Translated by Steven Heine, Tuttle Publishing, 1997.

Elder, John. *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.

Hunt, Tim. "Jeffers's "Roan Stallion" and the Narrative of Nature." *Robinson Jeffers: Dimensions of a Poet.* Edited by Robert J Brophy, Fordham University Press, 1995.

Jeffers, Robinson. *The Double Axe and Other Poems*. Liveright, 1977.

---. *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers: Volume Three: 1939-1962*. Edited by Tim Hunt, Stanford University Press, 1988.

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

---. *The Selected Letters of Robinson Jeffers, 1897-1962*. Edited by Ann N. Ridgeway, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968.

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

Sławek, Tadeusz. *The Dark Glory:Robinson Jeffers and His Philosophy of Earth Time & Things*. Uniwersytet Śląski, 1990.