

Native American Worldview in Paula Gunn Allen's Selected Poems

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Abstract

In this exploration of Paula Gunn Allen's literary legacy, an attempt has been made to navigate the profound tapestry of her Laguna Pueblo-Sioux heritage, uncovering the cultural and spiritual nuances woven into her poetry. Delving into the interconnected realms of nature, spirituality, and human experience, Allen's verses offer a unique Native American perspective that challenges and enriches the broader landscape of American literature. Her work becomes a symbolic beacon within a larger movement, reshaping literary discourse by embracing Indigenous voices and perspectives. Through the lens of ancestral wisdom and reverence for the natural world, Allen's poetry becomes a transformative journey, inviting readers to challenge assumptions, bridge cultural gaps, and embrace the vibrant tapestry of the Indigenous experience in America.

Keywords: Native worldview, Indigenous cultures, native identity, resilience of Indigenous cultures, native language

Paula Gunn Allen, a prominent Laguna Pueblo-Sioux writer, poet, and scholar, has left an indelible mark on American literature through her compelling exploration of the Native American worldview in her poetry. This research paper endeavours to delve deeply into the cultural and spiritual intricacies that underlie Allen's work, revealing her unique perspective on the interconnectedness of nature, spirituality, and human experience. By embarking on this literary journey, we aim to shed light on the profound Native American worldview embedded within her verses and the enduring significance it holds within the broader context of contemporary American literature.

Paula Gunn Allen's literary contributions are emblematic of a broader movement in American literature—one that seeks to redefine, reshape, and expand the boundaries of literary discourse by drawing inspiration from Indigenous cultures and worldviews. Her poetry serves as a poignant reminder of the diversity of perspectives within the American literary landscape and the intrinsic value of incorporating Indigenous voices into the ongoing narrative of the United States.

Allen's heritage, rooted in both Laguna Pueblo and Sioux traditions, provides a rich tapestry of cultural elements, linguistic expressions, and spiritual beliefs that inform her poetry. It is within this backdrop of ancestral wisdom, sacred connections to the land, and reverence for the natural world that her words come alive, resonating with readers and evoking a deep appreciation for the Native American worldview.

“American Indian people—even urban dwellers—live in the context of the land. Their literature thus must be understood in the context of both the land and the rituals through which they affirm their relationship to it” (Nixon 19). To understand the significance of Allen’s poetry is to embark on a journey through the heart of Indigenous culture and heritage—a journey that has the power to challenge preconceived notions, bridge cultural divides, and foster a greater understanding of the Indigenous experience in America.

Furthermore, by exploring Allen’s work, we gain insight into the broader context of contemporary Indigenous literature and the ways in which Native American writers contribute to the ongoing narrative of the United States. Her poetry reminds us that the Native American worldview is not a relic of the past but a living, breathing philosophy that continues to shape the experiences, identities, and stories of Indigenous peoples today. As we embark on this exploration of Paula Gunn Allen’s poetry, we are invited to appreciate the depth, wisdom, and resilience of Indigenous cultures, recognizing that their voices and worldviews remain as relevant and vital as ever in the complex tapestry of contemporary American society.

The Native American worldview, as encapsulated in Paula Gunn Allen’s poetry, is a profound and holistic perspective that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings and the natural world. This interconnectedness stands at the core of Indigenous cultures and has deep spiritual and cultural significance. It fosters an understanding that transcends the boundaries of individualism and ego, recognizing that humans are just one part of a vast web of life on Earth. Thomas C. Gannon has rightly observed, “The Euro-American worldview is one of belittlement, distance, difference; the Native attitude, one of kinship and positive regard” (201).

In this worldview, every element of the natural world, from animals and plants to rocks and rivers, is believed to possess a spirit or life force. Allen’s poetry beautifully articulates this belief, portraying the world as a tapestry of interconnected spirits, each with its unique role and significance. Through her verses, she invites readers to view the natural world with reverence, acknowledging the vital role it plays in the lives and spirituality of Indigenous peoples.

Moreover, this interconnectedness extends to the relationship between human beings and the land they inhabit. In Native American cultures, the land is often regarded as a living, breathing entity, not merely a resource to be exploited. It is a source of spiritual nourishment and wisdom, and the Native American worldview encourages stewardship and reciprocity. Allen’s poetry eloquently conveys the deep respect and gratitude that Indigenous peoples hold for the land, instilling in readers a sense of responsibility toward the environment.

The Native American worldview, as reflected in Paula Gunn Allen’s work, also emphasizes the interconnectedness of generations and the importance of ancestral wisdom. Indigenous cultures place a high value on oral traditions, stories, and rituals passed down through the ages. In her poetry, Allen frequently delves into these traditional stories and cultural elements, reinforcing the importance of preserving and celebrating the wisdom of ancestors.

Furthermore, this interconnected perspective extends to human relationships. Indigenous communities often place great importance on communal well-being and cooperation. Allen’s poetry portrays a sense of unity and interdependence, emphasizing the notion that the welfare of the individual is intricately tied to the welfare of the

community. Her verses reflect the Indigenous belief that individuals are bound to one another, and this communal ethos is a cornerstone of the Native American worldview.

In “Skunk Aesthetics,” Paula Gunn Allen invokes the spirit of the skunk, a creature often seen as lowly in Western culture. Through her words, she elevates the skunk to a place of honour, celebrating its unique qualities. The poem underscores the Native American perspective of interconnectedness, highlighting the significance of every living being in the natural world. This interconnectedness is exemplified in the poem’s ability to find beauty and value in an animal that is commonly dismissed. Allen’s poem “Kochinnenako in Academia” explores the idea of “Kochinnenako,” a Hopi term for a concept of female life and balance. This poem delves into the importance of reclaiming and preserving Indigenous knowledge, tradition, and stories. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of generations, where the wisdom of ancestors continues to guide and inform the lives of contemporary Indigenous peoples. Allen’s poetry serves as a testament to the cultural continuity and the enduring significance of ancestral wisdom. In “Grandmother I. Fishing,” Allen’s language is imbued with reverence for the natural world. The act of fishing becomes a spiritual experience, a connection with the water, fish, and the broader ecosystem. The poem underscores the Native American worldview’s belief that all elements of nature are interconnected and deserve respect. By portraying fishing as a profound act of communion with the environment, the poem elevates the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world.

“Song for Earth Wisdom” celebrates the Earth as a sacred entity and emphasizes humanity’s role as stewards of the land. It highlights the belief that humans are responsible for the well-being of the planet and its interconnected web of life. “Song for Earth Wisdom” reinforces the idea that in the Native American worldview, the land and its preservation are intricately tied to the spiritual and cultural identity of Indigenous peoples. In “Wing Woman,” Paula Gunn Allen explores themes of identity and the interconnectedness of all living beings. The poem delves into the concept of a “wing woman” as a guide and protector, highlighting the importance of interdependence in human relationships. Allen’s poetry showcases the Native American perspective that individuals are bound to one another and that mutual support and cooperation are essential for the well-being of the community and the world at large.

The Native American worldview is deeply rooted in a profound appreciation for ancestral wisdom. This wisdom is not merely a historical relic but a living repository of cultural knowledge and spiritual guidance. Ancestral wisdom is transmitted across generations through the oral tradition, encompassing traditional stories, rituals, and various cultural elements. Paula Gunn Allen’s poetry serves as a poignant vessel for preserving and celebrating these essential aspects of Indigenous culture.

In the Native American context, ancestral wisdom is seen as a collective inheritance that carries the insights, values, and experiences of past generations. It represents a connection to the roots of one’s culture and a source of guidance in navigating the complexities of the contemporary world. Allen’s poetry beautifully encapsulates the reverence that Indigenous peoples hold for this wisdom, emphasizing that it is not relegated to the past but is an enduring, dynamic force in the present.

Through her poetic works, Allen breathes life into traditional stories, infusing them with contemporary relevance. She demonstrates how these stories are not static, historical relics but living narratives that continue to inspire and guide. These stories often convey moral and cultural lessons that remain as pertinent today as they were when first shared around tribal campfires.

Moreover, Paula Gunn Allen’s poetry underscores the importance of rituals and cultural elements in the preservation of ancestral wisdom. These rituals are a means of actively engaging with the past and connecting with the spiritual and cultural heritage of Indigenous communities. Her verses provide a window into the spiritual practices and ceremonies that are central to the Native American worldview, highlighting their significance in perpetuating a sense of identity and continuity.

In a world that is rapidly changing, Paula Gunn Allen’s poetry serves as a testament to the enduring value of ancestral wisdom in Indigenous cultures. Her work encourages readers to recognize the living spirit of these traditions and the lessons they continue to offer. Through her verses, she celebrates the interconnectedness of generations and the richness of Indigenous cultures, emphasizing that the preservation and appreciation of ancestral wisdom are integral to the ongoing vitality of Indigenous communities

In “The Story of the Woman Who Loved All the Men,” Paula Gunn Allen delves into traditional stories and oral traditions, which are crucial components of the Native American worldview. The poem narrates a traditional tale of a woman who loved all the men but, in doing so, also loved the world. By weaving this story into her poetry, Allen not only preserves the wisdom of her ancestors but also demonstrates the enduring relevance of these stories. This exemplifies the Native American belief in the importance of passing down these narratives to future generations. In “The Woman Who Knew Everything,” Allen celebrates the wisdom and knowledge possessed by women in Indigenous cultures. It highlights the role of women as keepers of traditional knowledge and emphasizes their contributions to the preservation of cultural elements. The poem underlines the importance of ancestral wisdom, which is often conveyed through the teachings, stories, and rituals that are passed down from one generation to the next.

In “Coyote Gets His Feet Burned,” Coyote is a prominent figure in Native American folklore, often serving as a trickster character who imparts valuable life lessons through his misadventures. In this poem, Allen explores the traditional figure of Coyote, who gets his feet burned while trying to steal fire. Through this narrative, she underscores the importance of these traditional stories in imparting moral and practical lessons. The tale of Coyote has been passed down through generations, serving as a source of cultural and moral guidance. In “Of Earth, of Sky,” Allen weaves together elements of Native American spirituality and ritual. The poem invokes the power of the earth, the sky, and the ancestors, embodying the spiritual connection that is integral to Indigenous cultures. It reflects the belief that rituals and ceremonies passed down through generations hold the key to understanding the natural and spiritual world. These rituals are both a form of ancestral wisdom and a way to actively engage with the world. “Because of her maturity and breadth of experience Allen succeeds in giving us what no one else has, a highly intelligent yet personal critique of basic cultural assumptions from a Native American perspective” (qtd. in Ruppert 380).

Language occupies a central and revered position within the Native American worldview. It is not just a means of communication but a profound vessel that encapsulates the wisdom, history, and cultural richness of a community. The preservation and utilization of Indigenous languages are instrumental in safeguarding the heritage and identity of these communities. Paula Gunn Allen’s poetry is a testament to this, as it frequently incorporates Indigenous languages and linguistic

expressions, emphasizing the significance of language in conveying cultural identity and values.

In Indigenous cultures, language is a living repository of ancestral knowledge. It carries the stories of creation, the lessons of the past, and the traditions that have been passed down through generations. The Native American worldview recognizes that language is an embodiment of cultural memory, a thread that weaves through time, connecting the contemporary generation with its ancestors. Allen’s poetry beautifully underscores this understanding, illustrating how the use of Indigenous languages is a conscious act of cultural preservation. Joy Harzo has rightly observed: “I realize writing can help change the world. I’m aware of the power of language which isn’t meaningless words. . . . Sound is an extension of all, and sound is spirit, motion” (Bruchac 100).

Furthermore, Indigenous languages carry the unique nuances and worldviews of their respective communities. They are not mere tools of communication but repositories of distinct perspectives and values. Through her poetry, Paula Gunn Allen highlights that language is not just about conveying information; it is about transmitting a way of seeing the world. Each linguistic expression carries the essence of the culture that birthed it, emphasizing the importance of linguistic diversity in a world where Indigenous languages are increasingly endangered.

By incorporating Indigenous languages and linguistic expressions in her poetry, Allen reaffirms the importance of linguistic diversity and the urgency of language revitalization efforts. She underscores that the richness and depth of Indigenous cultures are intrinsically tied to their languages. As these languages are revitalized and preserved, so too are the cultural identity and values they convey. In this way, her poetry becomes a call to action, urging us to recognize the significance of language as a repository of wisdom and the cornerstone of cultural identity in the Native American worldview.

Language stands at the heart of the Native American worldview, serving as a vital and sacred component that binds communities and sustains their cultural heritage. Within the intricate tapestry of Indigenous cultures, language is not merely a medium for communication but a living repository of wisdom, history, and the cultural richness of a people. Paula Gunn Allen’s poetry masterfully weaves these linguistic elements into her verses, offering a profound reflection on the significance of language in conveying and preserving cultural identity and values.

In the Native American context, language is not just a tool for everyday conversation; it is a vessel that carries the collective memory of a community. It encapsulates the stories of creation, the struggles and triumphs of past generations, and the ancestral knowledge that has been passed down through the ages. Language serves as a bridge between the present and the past, enabling each new generation to access the profound wisdom of their ancestors. Paula Gunn Allen’s poetry serves as a tribute to this enduring connection between language and the cultural heritage of Indigenous communities.

Moreover, Indigenous languages are carriers of unique worldviews and perspectives. Each linguistic expression contains the essence of the culture that created it. By incorporating Indigenous languages and linguistic expressions in her poetry, Allen emphasizes the profound connection between language and the preservation of cultural identity. Language is not merely a means of communication; it is a reflection of a people’s way of understanding and relating to the world. In this sense, her poetry acts

as a testament to the rich tapestry of linguistic diversity within Indigenous communities.

Paula Gunn Allen's poetry serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of preserving and revitalizing Indigenous languages. These languages are not static artifacts of the past; they are living, dynamic components of contemporary Indigenous identity. The incorporation of Indigenous languages into her work becomes a call to action, urging us to recognize the essential role of language in sustaining cultural values and ensuring the continuity of Indigenous worldviews. Through her poetry, Allen underscores the enduring significance of language as a vessel for cultural identity and values, inviting us to celebrate and protect the linguistic richness of Indigenous cultures.

The poem, aptly titled "Language," underscores the multifaceted role of language in the Native American worldview. It portrays language as a tool that encapsulates a wide range of human experiences, from praise and study to truth and forgiveness. Language is not confined to a singular purpose but rather serves as a comprehensive reflection of human existence. Paula Gunn Allen beautifully illustrates the power of language to convey cultural values, the complexities of human emotion, and the multifaceted nature of the Indigenous experience.

"Language"

Language is the word
and the Word.
Language is for praise.
Language is for study.
Language is for thought.
Language is the most powerful instrument of war.
Language is the most powerful instrument of peace.
Language is for telling the truth.
Language is for lying.
Language is for honour.
Language is for shame.
Language is for vengeance.
Language is for forgiveness.
Language is for blasphemy.
Language is for respect.
Language is for loving.

Another poem, "Grandmother" delves into the importance of language, even when it is unspoken. The poem portrays the silence between generations, where a grandmother communicates with her granddaughter without using the spoken word. In this silence, the transmission of wisdom, cultural values, and a deep sense of connection occurs. Paula Gunn Allen highlights that language is not limited to verbal communication but extends to the profound connections and cultural transmissions that occur in non-verbal forms, reinforcing the importance of language in conveying cultural identity and values.

"Grandmother"

Languageless one,
always I listened
watched,
not speaking to me
in the tongue
of the Pimas.

But each day
we heard each other
whispering secrets
in the silence
of darkness.

These two poems by Paula Gunn Allen elegantly illustrate the Native American worldview’s emphasis on language as a vessel for cultural identity and values. They underscore that language is not confined to the spoken or written word alone but encompasses the full range of human experience and communication, including the unspoken connections that bind generations and communities together. Allen’s poetry serves as a testament to the rich tapestry of linguistic diversity within Indigenous cultures, celebrating the enduring significance of language in preserving cultural values and identities.

Paula Gunn Allen’s poetry is a compelling exploration of the multifaceted nature of identity for Native Americans in the context of a rapidly changing modern world. Through her verses, she delves into the intricate interplay between preserving traditional ways and navigating the complexities of contemporary society. Her work underscores the challenges and triumphs of Indigenous cultures in a world that is continually evolving, all while emphasizing the remarkable resilience and endurance of these communities.

In the modern world, Native Americans often find themselves at a crossroads, torn between the desire to maintain their cultural traditions and the necessity of adapting to the changing landscape. Paula Gunn Allen’s poetry captures this tension, portraying the struggle to balance ancestral customs and the demands of contemporary life. Her work acts as a reflection of the internal and external conflicts that Native Americans face, where they seek to retain their cultural heritage while simultaneously participating in the broader society.

Furthermore, Allen’s poetry serves as a testament to the enduring resilience of Indigenous cultures. Despite the challenges of historical and ongoing injustices, Native American communities have persevered. Her verses depict the strength, adaptability, and determination of Indigenous peoples as they navigate a world that is often indifferent or even hostile to their traditions. In her poetry, Allen celebrates the ability of Native American cultures to evolve, adapt, and thrive, emphasizing that these cultures are not static relics of the past but living, dynamic entities that continue to shape the experiences of their members.

The complexities of identity explored in Paula Gunn Allen’s work reveal the dynamic nature of Indigenous cultures. Her poetry encourages a broader understanding of Native American experiences, shedding light on the intricate process of reconciling tradition with modernity. In doing so, Allen’s work acts as a source of inspiration for Indigenous communities, offering a message of resilience and hope. It also serves as a reminder to the broader society of the importance of recognizing and respecting the diversity of perspectives within the modern world, where Indigenous identities are a vibrant and essential part of the global cultural mosaic.

In “We, Women,” Paula Gunn Allen paints a vivid picture of the enduring strength, resilience, and adaptability of Native American women. Through the act of weaving, a traditional and essential craft, the poem explores the multifaceted nature of identity. It reflects the persistence and stubbornness required to navigate the complexities of the modern world while holding onto cultural traditions.

The poem highlights the importance of passing down ancestral knowledge and the role of women as the keepers of this wisdom. It underscores the significance of preserving and honouring Indigenous customs and the resilience of Indigenous cultures, even in the face of adversity. John Mohawk’s belief, “European-Americans saw the world in such different terms, in terms of hierarchies, male force and control, that they were blind to the fact that Native cultures were, in fact, community and woman-oriented and non-abusive in nature” (quoted. in Hollrah 17). “We, women, are the weavers of life,” Allen proclaims, emphasizing the crucial role that Native American women play in preserving cultural identity and values in a contemporary society. This poem serves as a powerful illustration of the complex dynamics of identity for Native Americans, showcasing their ability to maintain their cultural heritage while adapting to the demands of the modern world.

In conclusion, Paula Gunn Allen’s poetry serves as an invaluable gateway into the rich tapestry of the Native American worldview, offering readers a deep and enlightening insight into the interconnectedness of nature, spirituality, and cultural heritage. Her work is a profound contribution to American literature, one that embraces and amplifies Indigenous perspectives that have long been underrepresented. Through her exploration of these fundamental themes, she illuminates the enduring importance of comprehending and preserving Native American worldviews within the context of the modern era.

Allen’s poetry is a vivid testament to the interconnectedness that defines the Native American worldview. Her verses beautifully encapsulate the intricate bonds that link all living beings to the natural world, emphasizing the spiritual essence that infuses every aspect of life. Through her words, she invites readers to perceive the world with a fresh and reverent perspective, one that fosters a deeper appreciation for the sanctity of the environment and the spiritual connections that unite humanity with the earth.

Moreover, Allen’s poetry acts as a bridge between the spiritual and the material, reflecting the deep spiritual connections that are integral to Indigenous cultures. Her verses offer readers a glimpse into the rituals, ceremonies, and spiritual practices that are central to the Native American experience. By sharing these sacred elements of culture, she underscores the significance of recognizing and respecting the spiritual foundations of Indigenous worldviews.

Furthermore, Paula Gunn Allen’s work serves as a powerful call to action. It encourages readers to not only appreciate the wisdom and beauty of Indigenous cultures but also to actively engage in preserving and revitalizing these worldviews. Her poetry challenges us to consider our roles as stewards of the environment, as participants in the ongoing narrative of Indigenous cultures, and as advocates for the recognition and respect of Indigenous perspectives.

In a world marked by diversity and interconnectedness, Paula Gunn Allen’s poetry invites us to embrace the wisdom, beauty, and resilience of Indigenous cultures. It acts as a reminder that these cultures are not relegated to the past but are dynamic, vibrant entities that continue to shape the contemporary experience. Her work fosters a deeper understanding of the world we inhabit, emphasizing the significance of preserving and celebrating Native American worldviews as an essential part of the broader cultural mosaic. In essence, Paula Gunn Allen’s poetry is a beacon that shines a light on the interconnectedness, spirituality, and cultural depth of Indigenous

worldviews, enriching not only American literature but also our collective appreciation of the intricate and profound connections that define our existence.

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