

## Study Material on the poem "A far Cry from Africa" by Derek Walcott , CC-11, 5th Semester, English Honours

### Author Biography

#### Derek Walcott(1930–2017)

Born on the island of Saint Lucia, a former British colony in the West Indies, poet and playwright Derek Walcott was trained as a painter but turned to writing as a young man. He published his first poem in the local newspaper at the age of 14. Five years later, he borrowed \$200 to print his first collection, *25 Poems*, which he distributed on street corners. Walcott's major breakthrough came with the collection *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960* (1962), a book which celebrates the Caribbean and its history as well as investigates the scars of colonialism. Throughout a long and distinguished career, Walcott returned to those same themes of language, power, and place. His later collections include *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000), *The Prodigal* (2004), *Selected Poems* (2007), *White Egrets* (2010), and *Morning, Paramin* (2016). In 1992, Walcott won the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Nobel committee described his work as "a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment."

Since the 1950s Walcott divided his time between Boston, New York, and Saint Lucia. His work resonates with Western canon and Island influences, shifting between Caribbean patois and English, and often addressing his English and West Indian ancestry. According to Los Angeles Times Book Review contributor Arthur Vogelsang, "These continuing polarities shoot an electricity to each other which is questioning and beautiful and which helps form a vision altogether Caribbean and international, personal (him to you, you to him), independent, and essential for readers of contemporary literature on all the continents." Known for his technical control, erudition, and large canvases, Walcott was, according to poet and critic Sean O'Brien, "one of the handful of poets currently at work in English who are capable of making a convincing attempt to write an epic ... His work is conceived on an oceanic scale and one of its fundamental concerns is to give an account of the simultaneous unity and division created by the ocean and by human dealings with it."

Many readers and critics point to "Omeros" (1990), an epic poem reimagining the Trojan War as a Caribbean fishermen's fight, as Walcott's major achievement. The book is "an effort to touch every aspect of Caribbean experience," according to O'Brien who also described it as an *ars poetica*, concerned "with art itself—its meaning and importance and the nature of an artistic vocation." In reviewing Walcott's *Selected Poems* (2007), poet Glyn Maxwell ascribes Walcott's power as a poet not so much to his themes as to his ear: "The verse is constantly trembling with a sense of the body in time, the self slung across metre, whether metre is steps, or nights, or breath, whether lines are days, or years, or tides."

Walcott was also a renowned playwright. In 1971 he won an Obie Award for his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, which the *New Yorker* described as "a poem in dramatic form." Walcott's plays generally treat aspects of the West Indian experience, often dealing with the socio-political and epistemological

implications of post-colonialism and drawing upon various genres such as the fable, allegory, folk, and morality play. With his twin brother, he cofounded the Trinidad Theater Workshop in 1950; in 1981, while teaching at Boston University, he founded the Boston Playwrights' Theatre. He also taught at Columbia University, Yale University, Rutgers University, and Essex University in England.

In addition to his Nobel Prize, Walcott's honors included a MacArthur Foundation "genius" award, a Royal Society of Literature Award, and, in 1988, the Queen's Medal for Poetry. He was an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. He died in 2017.

### Text of the poem "A far Cry from Africa" by Derek Walcott

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt  
Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies  
Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt.  
Corpses are scattered through a paradise.  
Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries:           5  
'Waste no compassion on these separate dead!'  
Statistics justify and scholars seize  
The salients of colonial policy,  
What is that to the white child hacked in bed?  
To savages, expendable as Jews?                   10  
  
Threshed out by beaters, the long rushes break  
In a white dust of ibises whose cries  
Have wheeled since civilization's dawn  
From the parched river or beast-teeming plain.  
The violence of beast on beast is read           15  
As natural law, but upright man

Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain.  
Delirious as these worried beasts, his wars  
Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum,  
While he calls courage still that native dread 20  
Of the white peace contracted by the dead.

Again brutish necessity wipes its hands  
Upon the napkins of a dirty cause, again  
A waste of our compassion, as with Spain,  
The gorilla wrestles with the superman. 25

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,  
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?  
I who have cursed  
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose  
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love? 30  
Betray them both, or give back what they give?  
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?  
How can I turn from Africa and live?

### Historical Context of the poem

Derek Walcott's "A Far Cry from Africa," published in 1962, is a painful and jarring depiction of ethnic conflict and divided loyalties. The opening images of the poem are drawn from accounts of the Mau Mau Uprising, an extended and bloody battle during the 1950s between European settlers and the native Kikuyu tribe in what is now the republic of Kenya. In the early twentieth century, the first white settlers arrived in the region, forcing the Kikuyu people off of their tribal lands. Europeans took control of farmland and the government, relegating the Kikuyu to a subservient position. One faction of the Kikuyu people formed Mau Mau, a terrorist organization intent on purging all European influence from

the country, but less strident Kikuyus attempted to either remain neutral or help the British defeat Mau Mau.

The ongoings in Kenya magnified an internal strife within the poet concerning his own mixed heritage. Walcott has both African and European roots; his grandmothers were both black, and both grandfathers were white. In addition, at the time the poem was written, the poet's country of birth, the island of St. Lucia, was still a colony of Great Britain. While Walcott opposes colonialism and would therefore seem to be sympathetic to a revolution with an anticolonial cause, he has passionate reservations about Mau Mau: they are, or are reported to be, extremely violent—to animals, whites, and Kikuyu perceived as traitors to the Mau Mau cause.

As Walcott is divided in two, so too is the poem. The first two stanzas refer to the Kenyan conflict, while the second two address the war within the poet-as-outsider/insider, between his roles as blood insider but geographical outsider to the Mau Mau Uprising. The Mau Mau Uprising, which began in 1952, was put down—some say in 1953, 1956, or 1960—without a treaty, yet the British did leave Kenya in 1963. Just as the uprising was never cleanly resolved, Walcott, at least within the poem, never resolves his conflict about whose side to take.

### Central Idea of "A Far Cry From Africa"

"A Far Cry from Africa" occurs in Derek Walcott's collection *In a Green Night*. The poem explains the conflicts of poet's European and African ancestry. The poem describes how violence and racial prejudice had spewed blood throughout the land. The poet remembers the Mau Mau uprising when he thinks of the incidents of the Kikuyu people. When he looks back at "the tawny pelt" of Africa, he remembers about the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya and he is unable to fully sympathize with any one side. He sees both enemies as murderers who have strewn dead bodies across a beautiful land and brought death to a veritable Eden.

### Form and Tone of the poem

The poem is written in free verse. It is presented in two stanzas one consisting of twenty one lines the other consisting eleven. It does not follow a strict rhyming pattern, although end rhymes feature prominently throughout the poem. The effect of this is that the poem has a stilted, disjointed feel which mirrors the feelings expressed within the poem. The rhythm is also inconsistent, although the line lengths are similar the beats in each line alter which again adds to the sense of discord. The poem is deeply rooted in Africa. The language used helps to make the poem feel culturally African.

### Poem Summary

#### Lines 1-3

The first three lines depict the poem's setting on the African plain, or veldt. The nation itself is compared to an animal (perhaps a lion) with a "tawny pelt." Tawny is a color described as light brown to brownish orange that is common color in the African landscape. The word "Kikuyu" serves as the name of a native tribe in Kenya. What seems an idyllic portrayal of the African plain quickly shifts; the Kikuyu are compared to flies (buzzing around the "animal" of Africa) who are feeding on blood, which is present in large enough amounts to create streams.

#### Lines 4-6

Walcott shatters the image of a paradise that many associate with Africa by describing a landscape littered with corpses. He adds a sickening detail by referring to a worm, or maggot, that reigns in this setting of decaying human flesh. The worm's admonishment to "Waste no compassion on these separate dead!" is puzzling in that it implies that the victims somehow got what they deserved.

#### Lines 7-10

The mention of the words "justify" and "colonial policy," when taken in context with the preceding six lines, finally clarifies the exact event that Walcott is describing—the Mau Mau Uprising against British colonists in Kenya during the 1950s. Where earlier the speaker seemed to blame the victims, he now blames those who forced the colonial system onto Kenya and polarized the population. They cannot justify their actions, because their reasons will never matter to the "white child" who has been murdered—merely because of his color—in retaliation by Mau Mau fighters or to the "savages," who—in as racist an attitude as was taken by Nazis against Jews—are deemed worthless, or expendable. ("Savages" is a controversial term that derives from the French word *sauvage* meaning wild, and is now wholly derogatory in English. Walcott's use of "savage" functions to present a British colonialist's racist point of view.)

#### Lines 11-14

Walcott shifts gears in these lines and returns to images of Africa's wildlife, in a reminder that the ibises (long-billed wading birds) and other beasts ruled this land long before African or European civilization existed. The poet also describes a centuries-old hunting custom of natives walking in a line through the long grass and beating it to flush out prey. Such killing for sustenance is set against the senseless and random death that native Africans and European settlers perpetrate upon each other.

#### Lines 15-21

These lines are simultaneously pro-nature and anticulture. Animals kill merely for food and survival, but humans, having perfected the skill of hunting for food, extend that violent act to other areas, using force to exert control—and prove superiority over—other people; they seek divinity by deciding who lives and who dies. Ironically, wars between people are described as following the beat of a drum—an instrument made of an animal hide stretched over a cylinder. Walcott also points out that for whites, historically, peace has not been the result a compromise with an opponent, but a situation arrived at because the opposition has been crushed and cannot resist anymore.

### Lines 22-25

These lines are difficult to interpret, but they appear to be aimed at those judging the Mau Mau uprising from a distance—observers who could somehow accept brutality as necessary and who are aware of a dire situation but wipe their hands, or refuse to become involved, in it. The poet appears to condemn such an attitude by comparing the Mau Mau Uprising to the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). Leaders of France and Great Britain wanted to avoid another war that would engulf all of Europe, so they introduced a nonintervention pact that was signed by twenty-seven nations. Nonetheless, the Insurgents, or Nationalists, (under the leadership of General Francisco Franco) were aided by and received military aid from Germany and Italy. The Loyalists, or Republicans, had no such backing; they fought valiantly but were outmanned, lost territory, and were eventually defeated in March of 1939. Line 25 presents a cynical view of the Mau Mau Uprising as just another colonial conflict where gorillas—negatively animalized Africans— fight with superman—a negative characterization of Europe.

### Lines 26-33

This stanza is a change of scene from primarily that of Africa, to that of the poet. Walcott, being a product of both African and English heritage, is torn, because he does not know how to feel about the Mau Mau struggle. He certainly is not satisfied with the stock response of those from the outside. Walcott is sickened by the behavior of Mau Mau just as he has been disgusted by the British. By the end, the poet's dilemma is not reconciled, but one gets the sense that Walcott will abandon neither Africa nor Britain.

### Analysis of the poem

Derek Walcott, a poet and Dramatist, was born in 1930 in Saint Lucia. As he belongs to both African and European roots he identifies himself as a mongrel. This mixed heritage makes him able to identify the post colonial situation more effectively and successfully. In the poem "A Far Cry from Africa" the poet ironically describes how he rejects the British culture and the colonial ideology.

The poem "A Far Cry from Africa" belongs to post colonial poetry. Mainly the poem discusses the events of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the early 1950s. It was a bloody battle during the 1950s between the European settlers and the native Kikuyu tribes in Kenya. Kikuyu was the largest and most educated tribe in Kenya. As the British people invaded more and more their land they outrageously reacted. The Kenyan tribes rebelled against the British who stole the motherland of them. The rebellion was under a secret organization called Mau Mau. It is estimated a large number of Kikuyu as well as whites were slaughtered during the process.

The poem starts with the painful jarring harsh experience of the rebellion that changed the tranquil peaceful setting of the country. The nation itself compared to an animal, as it indicates it is an animal like a lion. "tawny pelt" And how Kikuyu started the bloody battle. The Kikuyu are compared to flies who are feeding on blood. Next we are informed the aftermath of the rebellion. The poet describes that the country before the conflict was a 'paradise' and with an ironical comment he indicates the death, inhumanity and destruction occurred in the land. There is the juxtaposition of the conflict against

something divine with the image of corpses scattered through a paradise. The worms that can be seen as the ultimate emblem of stagnation and decay, cries at the worthless death. Sarcastically poet indicates how the humans are reduced to statistics. And at the same time though scholars justify the presence of white men in Africa and the process of civilizing the natives, the poet indicates the fact that it was a failure with the brutal death of the small white child and his family. People behave like animals 'savages' hints and remind us the persecution endured by the Jews. Jews were killed in millions due to their ethnicity during the time of Hitler. Though the time and the place is different the same kind of situations repeat in the world time to time. Next the poet creates a picture of white men in searching for natives who are hiding behind the bushes. The sound of 'ibises' hints a bad omen. Again the repetition is shown through the word 'wheeled'. The civilized men thrived on conquering others. This process of violence and conquering each other indicates the law of the jungle. The violence of 'beast on beast' can justify according to the law of nature, the law of jungle. Yet it cannot be applied to the 'upright man' who are stretching out themselves to reach the 'divinity'. Apart from the task of stretching themselves to reach 'divinity' they end up with 'inflicting pain' which is killing and which is the law of jungle; killing for prey. They call for the massacre they create by killing as war. Ironically, wars between people are described as following the beat of a drum — an instrument made of an animal hide stretched over a cylinder. Though the natives think the act of killing white men brings them 'courage' it ends up with fear. Moreover the poet emphasizes the fact that though the natives justify their task mentioning it as a 'brutish necessity' and considering it as a national cause they just clean their hands with 'the napkin of dirty cause'. So the poet suggests the fact that the natives' cause is dirty and ugly though they consider it as right and nationwide. He sees a comparison with the West Indians who had their share of harsh experiences with Spain. The fight is just as the gorilla wrestles with superman. The gorilla in this context is compared to natives and superman is compared to white men. The last two lines indicate the situation of the poet, as he belongs to both cultures how he feels inferiority regarding the situation. The mixed heritage of the poet makes him unable to decide to which he should be partial. The title itself too indicates the state of mind conflict of the poet, a cry from a great distance away and moreover it shows the alienation and the inferiority of the poet. The poem ends with a picture of violence and cruelty and with the idea of searching for identity.

**The theme of split identity and anxiety as reflected in "A Far Cry from Africa" by Derek Walcott( for 10 marks)**

A Far Cry from Africa by Derek Walcott deals with the theme of split identity and anxiety caused by it in the face of the struggle in which the poet could side with neither party. It is, in short, about the poet's ambivalent feelings towards the Kenyan terrorists and the counter-terrorist white colonial government, both of which were 'inhuman', during the independence struggle of the country in the 1950s. The persona, probably the poet himself, can take favor of none of them since both bloods circulate along his veins.

He has been given an English tongue which he loves on the one hand, and on the other, he cannot tolerate the brutal slaughter of Africans with whom he shares blood and some traditions. His conscience

forbids him to favour injustice. He is in the state of indecisiveness, troubled, wishing to see peace and harmony in the region. Beginning with a dramatic setting, the poem "A Far Cry from Africa" opens a horrible scene of bloodshed in African territory. 'Bloodstreams', 'scattered corpses,' 'worm' show ghastly sight of battle. Native blacks are being exterminated like Jews in holocaust following the killing of a white child in its bed by blacks.

The title of the poem involves an idiom: "a far cry" means an impossible thing. But the poet seems to use the words in other senses also; the title suggests in one sense that the poet is writing about an African subject from a distance. Writing from the island of St. Lucia, he feels that he is at a vast distance—both literally and metaphorically from Africa. "A Far Cry" may also have another meaning that the real state of the African 'paradise' is a far cry from the Africa that we have read about in descriptions of gorgeous fauna and flora and interesting village customs. And a third level of meaning to the title is the idea of Walcott hearing the poem as a far cry coming all the way across thousands of miles of ocean. He hears the cry coming to him on the wind. The animal imagery is another important feature of the poem. Walcott regards as acceptable violence the nature or "natural law" of animals killing each other to eat and survive; but human beings have been turned even the unseemly animal behavior into worse and meaningless violence. Beasts come out better than "upright man" since animals do what they must do, any do not seek divinity through inflicting pain. Walcott believes that human, unlike animals, have no excuse, no real rationale, for murdering non-combatants in the Kenyan conflict. Violence among them has turned into a nightmare of unacceptable atrocity based on color. So, we have the "Kikuyu" and violence in Kenya, violence in a "paradise", and we have "statistics" that don't mean anything and "scholar", who tends to throw their weight behind the colonial policy: Walcott's outrage is very just by the standards of the late 1960s, even restrained. More striking than the animal imagery is the image of the poet himself at the end of the poem. He is divided, and doesn't have any escape.

"I who am poisoned with the blood of both, where shall I turn, divided to the vein?" This sad ending illustrates a consequence of displacement and isolation. Walcott feels foreign in both cultures due to his mixed blood. An individual sense of identity arises from cultural influences, which define one's character according to a particular society's standards; the poet's hybrid heritage prevents him from identifying directly with one culture. Thus creates a feeling of isolation. Walcott depicts Africa and Britain in the standard roles of the vanquished and the conqueror, although he portrays the cruel imperialistic exploits of the British without creating sympathy for the African tribesmen. This objectively allows Walcott to contemplate the faults of each culture without reverting to the bias created by attention to moral considerations.

However, Walcott contradicts the savior image of the British through an unfavorable description in the ensuing lines. "Only the worm, colonel of carrion cries/ 'waste no compassion on their separated dead'." The word 'colonel' is a punning on 'colonial' also. The Africans associated with a primitive natural strength and the British portrayed as an artificially enhanced power remain equal in the contest for control over Africa and its people. Walcott's divided loyalties engender a sense of guilt as he wants to adopt the "civilized" culture of the British but cannot excuse their immoral treatment of the Africans. The poem reveals the extent of Walcott's consternation through the poet's inability to resolve the paradox of his hybrid inheritance.