

A Far Cry From Africa

By Derek Walcott (1930- 2017)

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:
"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?

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
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
Of the white peace contracted by the dead.

Again brutish necessity wipes its hands
Upon the napkin of a dirty cause, again

A waste of our compassion, as with Spain,
The gorilla wrestles with the superman.
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?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from

Derek Walcott: Walcott was born in 1930 in the town of Castries in Saint Lucia, one of the Windward Islands in the Lesser Antilles. The experience of growing up on the isolated volcanic island, an ex-British colony, has had a strong influence on Walcott's life and work. Both his grandmothers were said to have been the descendants of slaves. His father, a Bohemian watercolourist, died when Derek and his twin brother, Roderick, were only a few years old. His mother ran the town's Methodist school. After studying at St.

Mary's College in his native island and at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, Walcott moved in 1953 to Trinidad, where he has worked as theatre and art critic. At the age of 18, he made his debut with *25 Poems*, but his breakthrough came with the collection of poems, *In a Green Night* (1962). In 1959, he founded the Trinidad Theatre Workshop which produced many of his early plays.

Walcott has been an assiduous traveller to other countries but has always, not least in his efforts to create an indigenous drama, felt himself deeply-rooted in Caribbean society with its cultural fusion of African, Asiatic and European elements. For many years, he has divided his time between Trinidad, where he has his home as a writer, and Boston University, where he teaches literature and creative writing.

His first published poem, "1944" appeared in *The Voice of St. Lucia* when he was fourteen years old, and consisted of 44 lines of blank verse. By the age of nineteen, Walcott had self-published two volumes, *25 Poems* (1948) and *Epitaph for the Young: XII Cantos* (1949), exhibiting a wide range of influences, including William Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound.

He later attended the University of the West Indies, having received a Colonial Development and Welfare scholarship, and in 1951 published the volume *Poems*.

In 1957, he was awarded a fellowship by the Rockefeller Foundation to study the American theater. He published numerous collections of poetry in his lifetime, most recently *The Poetry of Derek Walcott 1948-2013* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), *White Egrets* (Farrar, Straus and

Giroux, 2010), *Selected Poems* (2007), *The Prodigal: A Poem* (2004), and *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000).

The founder of the Trinidad Theater Workshop, Walcott also wrote several plays produced throughout the United States: *The Odyssey: A Stage Version* (1992); *The Isle is Full of Noises* (1982); *Remembrance and Pantomime* (1980); *The Joker of Seville and O Babylon!* (1978); *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (1970); *Three Plays: The Last Carnival; Beef, No Chicken;* and *A Branch of the Blue Nile* (1969). His play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* won the Obie Award for distinguished foreign play of 1971. He founded Boston Playwrights' Theatre at Boston University in 1981.

His first collection of essays, *What the Twilight Says* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), was published in 1998.

About his work, the poet Joseph Brodsky said, "For almost forty years his throbbing and relentless lines kept arriving in the English language like tidal waves, coagulating into an archipelago of poems without which the map of modern literature would effectively match wallpaper. He gives us more than himself or 'a world'; he gives us a sense of infinity embodied in the language."

Walcott's honors include a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, the T. S. Eliot Prize, the Montale Prize, a Royal Society of Literature Award, and, in 1988, the Queen's Medal for Poetry. In 1992, Walcott became the first Caribbean writer to receive the 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature, and in 2015, he received the Griffin Trust for Excellence in Poetry's Lifetime Achievement Award. He was an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

Derek Walcott died on March 17, 2017, in Saint Lucia.

Summary of the Poem:

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:

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.

A Far Cry from Africa focuses on the racial and cultural tensions arising from colonial occupation of that continent and the subsequent dilemma for the speaker, Walcott himself, a black poet writing in English.

As he grew up he became aware of his mixed racial ancestry - he had both white and black grandparents - and this theme of roots divided became a rich source of material for some of his poetry.

A Far Cry from Africa, published in 1962, explores the history of a specific uprising in Kenya, occupied by the British, in the 1950s. Certain members of the local Kikuyu tribe, known as Mau Mau fighters, fought a violent 8 year long campaign against settlers, who they saw as illegal trespassers on their land.

In the first two stanzas of the poem, the speaker expands on the thorny issue of

colonial takeover and its bloody consequences before finally asking himself the awkward question - How can I face such slaughter and be cool?

He is caught between love of the English language, with which he expresses himself poetically, and the ancestral blood ties of his African family, who have been oppressed by the very people whose native language he needs, to survive as a poet.

- . The title is a little ambiguous. Is the author saying that because he lives on Santa Lucia, an island far away from Africa, his cry has a long distance to travel to reach African shores?
- . Or is he being ironic? The expression a far cry means that something is quite different from what you had expected. Had the author this ideal image of Africa and its

deep culture only to be disappointed by the current reality of the situation there?

A Far Cry from Africa is a powerful poem that sets out one person's divided viewpoint on the subject of British colonial takeover in Kenya, east Africa, and its horrifying consequences for local people and the poet himself.

Stanza 1

The first stanza is an overview of the situation, set in the present. It starts with a highly visual, movie-like opening - the wind ruffling the pelt of Africa - a country, a continent, likened to an animal.

Perhaps these are the winds of change come to disturb a once contented country.

The Kikuyu tribe are then seen as flies battenning on to the bloodstreams (to batten is to gorge, or to feed greedily at someone else's

expense) and the blood is on the veldt (grassland with trees and shrubs).

Dead bodies are scattered in this beautiful landscape, seen as a paradise, an irony not lost on the speaker. The personified worm, made military, has a cruel message for the world - What is the use of compassion for those already dead?

Officialdom backs up its policies with numbers. Academics point out the relevant facts and figures. But what do these mean when you consider the human cost? Where is the humanity in all of this?

The allusion to the Jews reflects the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis in WW2.

Stanza 2

The opening four lines of the next stanza paint a detailed picture of a typical hunt (for

big game) carried out by colonials and settlers. Beaters use sticks and shout as they scour the undergrowth (the rushes), driving out the animals into the open, where they will be shot.

The ibis is an iconic wading bird with a special call and has been a part of the African landscape since humans first used tools. Is this an ironic use of the word 'civilisation' (civilization in the USA)?

Lines 15 - 21 seem to reinforce this idea that, in the animal kingdom, evolution dictates who wins and loses, through a pure kind of violence.

But man uses the excuse of following a god, or becoming a god, by causing pain to other humans (and animals). There is an emphasis on the male of the species being responsible for war and pain, and war and peace.

Note the use of special language - *the tightened carcass* - *the native dread* - *contracted by the dead*.

Stanza 3

The opening four lines of the last stanza juxtapose historical reference with a visual here and now, embodied in gorilla and superman.

The personification of brutish necessity, as it wipes its hands on a napkin, is an interesting narrative device. Napkins are usually white, but the cause is dirty, that of colonial settlement alongside injustice.

By repeating what the worm cries in the first stanza - *a waste of our compassion* - the speaker is bringing extra weight to the idea of meaningless death. Compassion cannot alter the circumstances. By using *our*, is the

speaker implying the compassion of the world, or of those who are African or black?

And what has Spain to do with colonial Kenya? Well, it seems that violent struggle isn't just limited to the continent of Africa. It can happen in Europe too, as with the Spanish civil war (1936-39) which was fought between democratic Republicans and Fascists.

In line 26 the speaker declares a personal involvement for the first time, acknowledging the fact he is divided because of his blood ties to both camps. The use of the word poisoned suggests to the reader that the speaker isn't too happy with his situation, which he deems toxic.

He wants to side with the oppressed but cannot reconcile the fact that the language of the oppressor is the same one he uses to

speak, write and live by. The dramatic language heightens the tension:

*brutish...dirty...wrestles...poisoned..cursed...
drunken....betray...slaughter.*

A series of heart-wrenching questions are not, or cannot be, answered.

The bloody conflicts, the deaths, the subjugation, the cruelty, the need for domination, all reflect the dilemma for the speaker. He feels estranged yet a part of African heritage; he feels a love for the language of the British who are the cause of such strife in the tribal lands.

Perhaps the final irony is that, by the very act of writing and publishing such a poem and ending it with a question about turning away from Africa, the speaker somehow provides his own answer.

Form and Tone

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. 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.

A Far Cry From Africa' Title

The title is in itself fairly interesting. It certainly has a double meaning. The obvious meaning is that it is using the phrase which

means that the events are “far removed” from what you expect in Africa, but actually I think the title is subversive and is supposed to be taken very literally. Meaning that in Africa there are people crying.

Main theme:

Split identity, anxiety, isolation, cruelty, violence, religion and love are the major themes of the poem. Walcott belongs to both African and European roots and he identifies himself as a mongrel; both grandmothers were African and both grandfathers were European. Walcott’s hybrid heritage prevents him from identifying directly with one culture and creates a sense of anxiety and isolation. The wind “ruffling the tawny pelt of Africa” refers to the cruelty of Mau Mau insurrection against the violence of British colonialism.

The words “corpses, paradise, dead, Jews and cursed” create an atmosphere of religion in the poem. Walcott’s feeling of affection for Africa and fondness for English tongue propagate the theme of love.