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A Far Cry from Africa

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.

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Author Biography

Derek Walcott was born January 23, 1930, in the capital city of Castries on the eastern Caribbean island of St. Lucia, a territory at that time under the dominance of Britain. While the official language of St. Lucia was English, Walcott grew up also speaking a French-English patois. Both of his grandfathers were white and both grandmothers were black. From the beginning, Walcott was, in terms of St. Lucia, a bit of an outsider. In a poor, Catholic country, his parents were middle class and Protestant: his mother was a teacher at a Methodist grammar school who worked in local theater, and his father was a civil servant by vocation and a fine artist and poet by avocation. Walcott's father died shortly after Derek and his twin brother were born. The Walcott home was filled with books, paintings, and recorded music. Derek studied painting and published, at age fourteen, his first poem. At eighteen, Walcott borrowed two hundred dollars from his mother to publish his first book, *25 Poems*. To pay back his mother, he sold copies of the book to his friends.

In his early years, Walcott was schooled on St. Lucia, but in 1950, he attended the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, getting his degree in 1953 but staying on one more year to study education. From 1954 to 1957, Walcott taught in Grenada, St. Lucia, and Jamaica, and wrote and produced plays along with his brother, Roderick. In 1954, Walcott married. Since then he has been married three times and has had three children. In 1958, his play *Drums and Colours* earned him a Rockefeller grant to study theater in New York City. Alienated in the United States, Walcott returned

to Trinidad in 1959 to found, with his brother, The Trinidad Theater Workshop, a project that lasted until 1976. From 1960 to 1968, Walcott also wrote for the local newspaper, the *Trinidad Guardian*.

Walcott has taught in both America and the West Indies and has earned numerous awards. He has taught at New York University, Yale, Columbia, Harvard, and, since 1981, at Boston University. Walcott has won numerous awards: in 1965 he received the Royal Society of Literature Heine-mann Award for *The Castaway and Other Poems;* his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* earned the 1971 Obie for the most distinguished off-Broadway play; in 1977 he was awarded a Guggenheim and in 1981 a MacArthur Foundation Award. In 1992, however, Walcott received literature's highest honor, the Nobel Prize. The author of more than twenty books, Walcott continues to write, paint, and direct.

A Far cry From Africa

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Poem Text

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 napkins 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 Africa and live?

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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.