

A Far Cry from Africa

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 Africa and live?

'A Far Cry from Africa' Summary

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

Derek Walcott, teacher, playwright, poet, and artist, as well as Nobel prize winner, was born on the island of St Lucia in the British West Indies.

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.

Published in 1962, 'A Far Cry from Africa' 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 his love of the English language, with which he expresses himself poetically, and the ancestral blood ties to 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?

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Stanza by Stanza Analysis

'A Far Cry from Africa' is a powerful poem that sets out one person's divided viewpoint on the subject of the 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 that come to disturb a once contented country.

The Kikuyu tribe are then seen as flies battenning onto 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 the animals out 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 (1936–1939) 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 and the need for domination, all reflect the dilemma for the speaker. He feels estranged yet a part of African heritage; he feels love for the language of the British who are the cause of much 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.

Rhyme and Rhythm

'A Far Cry from Africa' is a 3-stanza poem, the first stanza containing 10 lines, the second 11 lines, and the third 12 lines. It is not a true free verse poem because it does have a rhyme scheme of sorts, best described as erratic.

Rhyme

There is no set regular rhyme scheme in this poem but there are certain lines that have full rhymes and others that have slant rhymes.

So for example:

- Stanza 1:

full rhymes include *pelt/veldt* and *flies/cries* and *dead/bed*.

slant rhymes include *flies/paradise* and *seize/Jews*.

Full rhymes tend to bond lines together and bring harmony, whilst slant rhymes are not quite a right fit and suggest tension.

- Stanza 2 also has full rhyme: *plain/pain* and *dread/dead*.
- Stanza 3 continues with full rhyme: *again/Spain/vein*.

The full rhymes are not regular, they're not part of a set scheme. But these lines, sometimes close together, or further apart, when read, end in full rhyme and give a fleeting, almost deceptive impression of a regular rhyming poem.

So, in the first stanza, you have *pelt/veldt* and *flies/cries*. In the second *plain/pain* and *dread/dead* and in the third *again/Spain* and *vein*.

Likewise, the slant or near rhymes occur at random, creating dissonance.

Rhythm

Whilst the dominant meter (metre in British English) is iambic pentameter, many lines are anything but steady and familiar iambic. They chop and change, altering in stress, as below:

A wind / is ruff / ling the taw / ny pelt (9 syllables, 3 iambs, 1 anapaest)

Of Af / rica. / Kiku / yu, quick / as flies, (10 syllables, 3 iambs, pyrrhic, trochee)

Batten / upon / the blood / streams of / the veldt. (10 syllables, Trochee, 4 iambs)

Line length is more or less constant, balanced on the 10 syllables, here and there expanding to twelve or shrinking, as in line 28, to just four, bringing a stark emphasis to the line *I who have cursed.*

Literary and Poetic Devices Used

Alliteration: the same consonant sounds in words close together

Batten upon the bloodstreams..

colonel of carrion, cries:

scholars seize

Betray them both...

Assonance: similar sounding vowels

worm/colonel

white child

white/ibises/cries

beast-teeming

Repetition: certain words repeated throughout the poem, helping to reinforce meaning

waste....cries...beast....white...again...

Enjambment: It should be noted that enjambment occurs throughout the poem, allowing a certain flow between certain lines, especially in the opening four lines of the second stanza.