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Our influences and experiences in life make up who we are and aids in our place in society. With these influences and experiences, it leads us to discover are own personal freedoms and independence, so that we can express who we are and where we came from to ourselves and those that surround us. On a personal level it has been my family and community that have impacted my existence, I feel a sense of identity with every tradition that we honor and celebrate. In this paper I will be addressing the Caribbean Islands but more specifically I will be illustrating how Derek Walcott with his internal conflicts, valiantly attempted through his writings to keep the heritage of the Caribbean people alive both on a historic level as well as a personal one.

Derek Walcott was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992. His work mirrors the struggles between the traditions of the European and West Indian cultures, the long way from slavery to freedom, and also reflects his personal passage between cultures. "Walcott is one, perhaps best, of a generation of writers born around 1930 who rapidly created new national literatures, brought their cultures to international attention, and who are viewed as the cultural side of decolonization the new nationalism which in turn led to 'post colonization'."¹ In his poems, he combined paradoxes and illusions to the English poetic traditions and symbolism, which were both personal and Caribbean. An example of his personal touch in his poetry is Makak from *Dream on Monkey Mountain*; it is drawn directly from his childhood. The main character was an old woodcutter, a degraded drunkard who terrorized children; but he had an elemental drive, a strong connection with the earth that Walcott says is like his people and their culture. He sees Makak as a warrior, held back by the slave society and he says all that the people

¹ Bruce Alvin King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life* (New York, 2001), 4.

have is the call of Africa and storyteller tradition filled with supernatural settings.

Walcott contends: "Whether you wanted to accept them or not, the earth emanated influences which you could either put down as folk superstition or, as a poet, accept as possible truth."²

Derek Walcott was born in 1930 at Castries, St. Lucia, a small island in the eastern Caribbean. He was the son of two educators; his parents were Protestants in a society of mainly poor Catholics. Mr. Walcott, who lived most of his life in Trinidad, has two distinct and opposite bloodlines; English and African and he often writes of his struggles within. He became entranced with the English language when he was a young boy, particularly with Shakespeare, which his mother often recited around the house. Walcott went to St Mary's College and received a scholarship to the University College of the West Indies in Kingston Jamaica, where he got the opportunity to study French, Latin, and Spanish. In 1953 Mr. Walcott moved to Trinidad, worked as a teacher in several Caribbean schools and in 1958-59 studied theater in New York. From 1959 to 1971 Walcott was the founding director of the Little Carib Theater (later known as The Trinidad Theatre Workshop). He wrote many plays for stage and radio. One was *Dream of Monkey Mountain* and this particular play was commissioned originally by the Royal Shakespeare Company, (a dream come true from his childhood); it was produced finally in the United States, and considered one of his best works. Walcott also collaborated on several musicals, one of which was the famous musical *Hair*. The Basement Theatre directed by Walcott, in 1967 was part of the Canada Centennial Celebration and it was the first West Indian drama company to perform outside the Caribbean.

²Walcott, "Meanings," *Savacou*, 1 No 2 (1970).51.

He started writing poems at eighteen when he financed the publication of his first collection of poetry titled *Twenty-Five Poems* and his work became recognized when in wrote *In Green Night* (1964). In this work he tried to bring reality and honesty about the West Indian life. Most of his work typified his personal struggles, for example; *The Fortunate Traveler* (1981) and *Midsummer* (1984), he wrote about his own issues as a black writer in America who had for a time distanced himself from his home in the Caribbean due to his feelings of isolation. His English and African roots both seem to be drawing him closer and he has trouble coming to terms with his divided ancestry. Walcott struggles with the problem of where to put his loyalty. His poems tell us that he wants desperately to be African, but he cannot because he is not. There is the blood of the Anglo-Saxon within him and he feels a certain amount of loyalty to that blood. Walcott seems to say, that he is alone and can only be alone. The black community does not totally accept him neither does the white community. Walcott felt growing up he was not black enough, not poor enough, a Methodist in a Catholic community, an intellectual, an artist but with this all, he felt that he had a calling to speak for the community he was raised in. A great many of his books referred to his feelings of not belonging or being accepted on any soil but most importantly, to him he felt isolation from his homeland. In the poem *The Bright Field*, Walcott uses a series of “comparisons, metaphors, and other analogies. Some themes concern similarities between England and the West Indies, between the colonials and the colonized, the futility of political history and the uselessness of anger about the past.” The following lines deal with the analogy

between the crowds in London underground and the harvesting of plantation crops as sugar cane and wheat.³

*Their sun that would not set was going down
On their flushed faces, brick work like kiln,
On pillar-box bright buses between trees, with the compassion of calendar art:*

Walcott calls himself “mulatto of style.” His most famous work is thought to be *Omeros* (1960), which the title was taken from the Greek word for ‘Homer’ and he gives the drama of the *Illiad* and *Odyssey* a Caribbean setting. His two main characters Achilles and Philocrete are suffering in exile in the Caribbean life. The feeling of isolationism and exile is prevalent in the lines:

*At noon, he climbed to the fort as his self-imposed Calvary; from it, the of
The man-o-war bird rose.*⁴

Again his struggles and conflicts are evident because in the same work *Osmeros* he shows his pride in his Caribbean homeland and this can be illustrated in the following lines:

*I sang our wide country, the Caribbean Sea
Who hated shoes, whose soles were as cracked as a stone,
who was gentle with ropes, who had one suit alone,
whom no man dared insult and who insulted no one,
Whose grin was a white breaker cresting, but whose frown
Was a growing thunderhead...*⁵

Dylan Thomas and Hart Crane who were English born writers were a strong influence on Derek Walcott but it is evident that he had his own unique style of writing.

³ Bruce King, *Derek Walcott A Caribbean Life*, (Oxford University Press, (2000), 334-35.

⁴ Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, Farrar, (Straus and Giroux, New York, 1990), 91.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 320.

Most of his works reflect the soul and times of the West Indies and the cultural division among the peoples within this area. Walcott also deals with the anger, hurt and resentment associated with colonialism and his personal experience has become part of the significance of being a West Indian. It makes it quite clear that, not only is there a cultural separation between the inhabitants of the Caribbean, but there is inner conflict within the people of these islands and in much of his poetry he reflects upon the anger within himself. The division is basically his conflict between his own beliefs and that of his ancestors, the division that often appears to be on a crash course and causes much pain that he expresses in his poetry.

Walcott's *A far Cry From Africa* is an example of his conflicts between his beliefs and his ancestors. This poem really illustrates his inner feeling and lets the reader experience them. One of the major elements that Walcott uses in *A Far Cry From Africa* is the division of man. "Walcott argues, is to try and resolve this conflict by dramatizing the relationship between those ancestral cultures in an imaginative return to an earlier phase in the history of their relationship. He does this by examining his own past."⁶ He seems emotionally upset and it appears he tries to come to terms with this situation. He points out the danger of getting wrapped up in historic sentimentality. His solution is to accept the past, not nurse it, but move on in life. He cannot accept the terrorism of the Kikuyu during the Mau Mau rebellion, even though he does not agree with the British colonialism against which the Kikuyu fight. He definitely identifies with black Africa but is distraught and disturbed that innocent blacks and whites have been killed and cannot comprehend why some people will not get emotionally involved at all. Through

⁶ Stewart Brown, *The Art of Derek Walcott*, (Seren Books, 1991), 160.

out the poem he attempts to maintain his objectivity and emphasizes the point that all life is precious not just one color or another and then leaves it up to the reader to form a decision. His obsession is with Africa, but at the same time he fears going against his English heritage and so in his writing he changes his obsession to symbolisms.

An example of his use of symbolism is in *Tiepolo's Hound* is considered one of his autobiographical works; it was about the painter Camille Pissarro, who was born in St. Thomas and lived and worked in France like Walcott himself. In the poem he focuses on the dog in the painting which to him becomes a symbol of making wonderful art from our ordinary world. This theme takes on reality when he comes across a sick and starving dog in the Caribbean and realizes that dog should be the object of his attention not the white dog in the painting. Another theme I have discovered in his work through *Tiepolo's Hound* is that often what we see is not always what we need, one must look deeper and I believe that was Derek Walcott's ongoing self-search.

Metaphor is another method that Walcott uses to create symbols that we as readers can paint in our minds. In his work there seems to be a permeating tension between simplicity and complexity. These two sets of ideas appear to be inseparable, similar to the truths that Derek Walcott seeks to discover for himself and appears that metaphors help him illustrate that tension. Walcott also shows the importance of place and background by packed complex and profusely metaphorical verse. It is almost as if he is painting on the canvas of his reader's imagination.⁷

⁷ Gregson Baugh, *The Poetics of Derek Walcott: Intertextual Perspectives*, (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1992), 54.

The history of the Caribbean islands has interested many writers. Authors have long sought to write about the history of their island and the process by which the history was created. The question is, why? In age when authors ignore the past to reflect the present, why has Caribbean writing consistently been infused with the issue of history?

The answer comes in studying both the legacy that history has left in the Caribbean as well as the way Caribbean history was written. Basically, the simple answer is that the Caribbean people live under the umbrella of the past.

The true natives of the island (if there were any) were the American Indians such as the Caribs or the Arawaks; they had been all but eradicated by the colonization of the 16th and 17th century. Their oral culture was not enough to allow for preservation and consequently left hardly any cultural mark for the new slave societies of black African (and South and East Asians) to hold onto. Although slavery ended in theory, in the late 1800's, the oppressive nature of Colonialism directed many to believe that the liberation of the slaves was not a reality. The whites remained powerful and that ensured that most blacks, though free, would still be living in conditions of poverty with low wages and little hope for advancement. For many countries independence began to come about in the late 1950's, as the foundation of the West Indian Federation (including nations such as Jamaica, Barbados, and St. Lucia) led a departure from the British influence. The organization broke up in 1962, while many countries received independence, some like Walcott' St. Lucia did not gain full independence until 1979 and until that time remained trapped under the colonial influence. These countries are still experiencing growing pains and are still trying to move out from the cloud of their only to recent departed

rulers, resulting in writers and naturally so, writing about the history and that has brought them to this point of understanding and enlightenment about the Caribbean people.

Another critical issue that tore at Walcott's very soul was the institution of slavery because it sadly produced another issue in the history of the Caribbean and its people. It literally cut people off from where they came from; they were people without a past. Slaves were torn from ancestral homes in Africa and brought across the sea to North America (this was called the Middle Passage). Once in the colonies, families were separated and slaves were often given new names according to what their master wanted and occasionally they changed their name several times because their owners changed numerous times. Consequently the remaining families lived thousands of miles across the ocean and had become impossible to trace due to the name changes and family break down, made the growth of pride in who they are and family traditions as we know them, impossible. Owners discouraged or forbade slaves from marrying, yet at the same time promoted children because they then took the children from their parents and sold them off or used them in other areas. So until slaves were truly granted freedom, a people without roots rather than lineage and traditions formed the main historical eulogy of the Caribbean people. One can see examples of this isolated mentality in such works as Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, in which both the narrator and the protagonist Achille must seek out their lineage across the sea, in Africa (and for the narrator examining his cultural influences) even in Greece, Italy, or America.

Derek Walcott was a powerful writer and a quiet leader, who I believe felt his lineage and that of his people more than he ever realized, he allowed his readers to feel

his life, his joys, and his pains. As a result of researching his life I will never look at the Caribbean Islands the same. The Caribbean islands are rich with heritage, rich with emotions, rich with pain but the important quality was that tied it all together was love! Walcott was a pioneer and a believer in his destiny, his history, his politics, and his faith in the Caribbean people and with that passion; he allowed his readers to paint the canvas of the West Indies culture. I know one is never the same after seeing the moon shine on the other side of the world and Derek Walcott has given me that opportunity to see the moon shine on the Caribbean which was islands that I was totally unaware of, at least in the true sense of the word. Walcott is a man of the Arts but importantly the soul!

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