

Student

EN201 Introduction to Literature

Literary Analysis

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A Far Cry from Africa... Shall I compare Thee to a Summer's Day

I watched a story on the news about world renowned chef Marcus Samuelsson. He was born in Ethiopia and grew up in Sweden. Originally he wanted to be a soccer player, but his path led to being a chef instead. He compared similarities between playing soccer and becoming a chef, and I realized that just about anything can be compared to each other if you look deep enough. His background and journey of ups and downs ironically led him to becoming a chef. In literature, whether it be the speaker's point of view or the audience's point of view, finding those things that work together to add more depth to pieces of literature is a matter of digging it out of the text. Likewise, it is just as far of a stretch when talking about the works of a younger black man writing about Africa in the 1900s and an old white man who lived in Britain in the 1600's...what ties them together? It requires looking deeper than the color of their skin and in fact, is a necessity. The poem *A Far Cry From Africa* is written by Derek Walcott while the sonnet, *Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day* is written by William Shakespeare. Both works have the ability to take the reader through a range of emotions and into a beautiful, yet sometimes scary world described beautifully. I would argue that these two works of literature work hand in hand when read together by showing the irony in a world of peace and violence.

Walcott's and Shakespeare's works display a harsh reality of events happening in Africa (Walcott) countered by soothing words from a spirit power (Shakespeare). Yet those who lived through those harsh times are what makes Africa live, or in other words, "give life to thee" (Shakespeare,14). Walcott's poem is the action and the dilemma, while Shakespeare's sonnet is

something that provides the soothing words of a “Spirit” that says it is the circle of life. When looking at these poems, it is interesting to look through the eyes of Walcott. In an interview with Simon Stanford in 2005, he was asked whether his ancestry was typical of the Caribbean. He replied, “Yes, a mixed African, Dutch, and English, which is probably typical of Caribbean, everybody’s got some mixture of something.” This is important because it has been said that those in the Caribbean have a different view of Africa than those who are actually there. In an article written by John McLeod from the University of Leeds, he states, “Derek Walcott’s anguished articulation of his ambivalent relationship with Africa, as he peers distantly at the violence of the Mau Mau rebellion...might be borrowed to frame a wider question for many anglophone Caribbean thinkers: “How can I turn from Africa and live?”” (McLeod, 331). There is an irony here that shows up in his work *A Far Cry From Africa* which is that he wants to bring attention to the plight of the African people, but it somehow misses that mark because it is just that...a far cry from a distant place. However, that is also ironic because while the Caribbean people with African decent are not in Africa, “it continues to transmit a stubbornly voluble ‘far cry’ heard on the distant shores of the Caribbean which speaks to the connecting pain of slavery and horrors of the Middle Passage, anti-colonial protest and post-independence violence” (McLeod, 331).

There is not a lot of literature that addresses Shakespeare’s attitude on slavery, but one can get an idea by the words in his story, *The Merchant of Venice*. The character Shylock says, “You have among you many a purchased slave, which, like your asses and your dogs and mules, you use in abject and in slavish parts because you bought them. Shall I say to you, ‘Let them be free, marry them to your heirs. Why sweat they under their burdens? Let their beds be made as soft as yours, and let their palates be seasoned with such viands.’” (Shakespeare). The irony is

that when Shakespeare wrote these words, it was relatively around the beginning of slaves and servants being brought to England. His view was in opposition to those who were in Africa and involved with profiting from the slave trade. His work, *Shall I compare Thee to a Summer's Day* was not written about Africa or the slave trade and ultimate colonialism and anti-colonialism, but it can be used when reading Walcott's poem in order to view the outcome it in a different way, with a possible positive outlook at the end.

So, how do these two works of literature work together for more in-depth value? The answer may be one that is found blowing in the wind. Derek Walcott's *A Far Cry From Africa*, pulls you into the landscape immediately by its descriptive words, the first ones saying, "A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt / of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies, / batten upon the bloodstream of the veldt" (1-3). You are right there in the middle of Africa with the fighters from the largest ethnic group in Kenya (Britannica, 2017). It also says, "Corpses are scattered through a paradise. / Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries: / 'Waste no compassion on these separate dead!'" (4-6). Shakespeare's sonnet seems to address each part of Walcott's poem as if it were a "Spirit" providing optimism to the speaker in Walcott's poem. The Spirit says, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? / Thou art more lovely and more temperate. / Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, / and summers lease hath all too short a date" (1-4). "Summers lease" sounds like it is addressing the corpses and how their lives were cut short. Also, in the first stanza of each work, there is immediately an ironic twist. The wind in Walcott's poem is a soothing wind that ruffles the African grasses, while in Shakespeare's sonnet, the wind is rough that shakes the buds of May. The works are setting the scenes in opposite ways than their ultimate messages reflect, meaning, Africa is thought to be rougher, yet the poem describes the wind as ruffling the pelt while the sonnet describes the wind as rough and shakes the buds.

The next lines from Walcott's poem are, "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?" (7-10). This is answered by the Spirit with, "Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, / and often is his gold complexion dimmed; / and every fair from fair sometimes declines" (5-7). This reference to the gold complexion dimmed can refer to both the "tawny pelt" of the first line in Walcott's poem, as well as to the complexion of the children as they lose life and the light of their lives grow dim and go out. What happened to the children is acknowledged as worse than what happened to the Jews. It is even less fair because the lesson was not learned from history. There is an ironic twist here in that the fighting of Africa was not just a problem for black people, but for all African people to include those that were white citizens. The irony is that black and white fighters fought against and perished by the hands of the oppressive forces of their freedom.

The second stanza of Walcott's poem is describing ibises, or the native birds, being flushed out. Their reference is a prelude of the things in African culture that have not changed despite everything that had happened to their land, as he described them, "In a white dust of ibises whose cries / have wheeled since civilization's dawn / from the parched river or beast-teeming plain" (12-14). It then describes, "The violence of beast on beast is read / as natural law, but upright man / seeks his divinity by inflicting pain" (15-17). The Spirit reveals, "By chance, or natures changing course, untrimmed;" (8) which is saying that everything is happening for a reason and that even what man is doing is a course plotted by nature. There is an ironic viewpoint here because while man is causing such destruction, so is nature as described with "parched river." Walcott writes, "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” (18-21). The Spirit says, “By thy eternal summer shall not fade, / nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st, / not death brag wand’rest in his shade...” (9-11). That is saying that even with the cruelty, Africa’s land will not lose its beauty and that the men who are causing all the death will have nothing to brag about when it is done because the beauty will shine through at the end of it all, at the end of the “eternal summer.” The people of Africa are courageous still, even as they worry about death, and their stories will live on past the “eternal summer.”

In the final stanza of Walcott’s poem, the people who have grown up in Africa with the teachings of both native Africa and the British are struggling with their feelings of love and hate. The person in Walcott’s poem asks, “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?” (27-31). The Spirit in Shakespeare’s sonnet says, “When in eternal lines to Time thou grow’st” (12) which addresses the dilemma of the man in Africa who speaks English and is saying that “Time” or his destiny, will make the final decision on what to do. That man, who is contemplating his path in life, needs to use all the tools at his disposal, not dispose of those tools, and be guided by what he loves. He should not discard anything good that was learned that makes him the man he has become. It is destiny.

Then the man asks, “How can I face such slaughter and be cool? / How can I turn from Africa and live?” (Walcott, 32-33). In a reassuring way to both man and, overall, to Africa as a country, the Spirit shows, “So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee” (Shakespeare, 13-14). As in all spiritual relays between man and a higher being, there are a lot of things that are inferred and presented for man to contemplate upon. The Spirit in Shakespeare’s sonnet is giving man hope for the future and for the ultimate legacy that

will endure about Africa in Walcott's poem. The irony in these perspectives is the life and death aspect...some people live and some people die, and those who live, sometimes do not want that distinction of living. They may feel guilty and would have rather died, or they wish they could be something they cannot. They love life and hate it at the same time, not really knowing what to do. In an article by Alison Donnell, he says, "Walcott's representation of a symmetry of cruelty does not finally lead to a symmetry of sympathy, 'the purportedly even balance and conflict of choice...remains somewhat uneasy and factitious.'" He also points out an irony, or as he calls it a contrast when he says, "Beyond the beauty of landscape, '[t]his Africa' is not realized in any way that establishes a vital blood-line between it and the poet. By contrast, the hold of the English is real" (Donnell, 47).

The overarching irony of these two works of literature may be to some that Shakespeare was white and from Britain in the 1600's while Wolcott is black and writing about people from Africa in the 1900's, yet he speaks English. When something has the ability to provide inspiration, it sometimes comes from unexpected sources. Works of literature have the ability on face value to be inspirational without outside prejudices interfering in the words written. The great thing about literature is that the same piece of work can have so many meanings depending on the audience. In the case of these two pieces of literature, their ironies have added value and depth to the worth of reading them together.

Works Cited

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