

A Far Cry from Africa |

Summary & Analysis

A summary of A Far Cry from Africa

"A Far Cry From Africa" is included in *Selected Poems*, a collection published in 2007. The poem exists simultaneously as a misanthropic assessment of violent human nature and an expression of the identity crisis that Walcott suffers as a colonized person of mixed heritage.

The poem is made up of three stanzas and is a commentary on the Mau Mau rebellion and the brutal British suppression of it. The poem is written in a kind of loose [iambic pentameter](#). The language used is natural and flows freely with frequent enjambment.

Stanza 1

The first stanza begins with a description of what appears to be a Kikuyu attack against White settlers and the African tribes allied with settlers. Walcott begins by setting the scene with the African landscape.

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt
Of Africa . . .

This is a mixed metaphor describing the grasslands that Kenya is famous for, where the grass of the Serengeti is described as the fur of an animal. Throughout the poem, the landscape is more than just a setting for a conflict between the Kenyan Mau Mau and British colonial officers, and instead comes to life or serves as an epic backdrop.

The poem goes on to describe Kikuyu as battering upon the "bloodstreams of the veldt." There is mention of corpses scattered through paradise, and the remarkable lines (Lines 5-6):

Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries:
"Waste no compassion on these separate dead!"

In Lines 6 to 10, Walcott appears to downplay the rational explanations of the politics behind the war and the atrocities taking place, focusing instead on the innocent lives being lost. This includes innocent civilian settlers, such as “the White child hacked in bed” and the Kikuyu, who are described as “savages, expendable as Jews.”

Now, there is a dichotomy here. A White child being hacked in bed is of course horrific. However, this does not compare to the thousands of native Kikuyu who were detained and killed. After all, by the end of the war, only 32 Europeans were killed, whereas close to 11,000 Mau Mau and other forces were killed.

The poet seems to be suggesting that it is not a numbers game and instead highlights the irrational brutality on both sides. In his mind, immorality and human cruelty cannot be measured in actual numbers but instead by the actual singular acts of crime and violence being committed against the innocent.

Stanza 2

This prepares us for the second stanza, where the poet moves away from the specific politics of the Mau Mau rebellion and tries to make a grand statement on the barbarity of human nature. Instead, by the second stanza, the poet transforms it into a scene where an ancient cosmic battle is being enacted. It is the battle of human nature versus animal nature: a war between human compassion and barbaric brutality, where brutality keeps winning.

Let us look at a few lines that exemplify this:

The violence of beast on beast is read
As natural law, but upright man
Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain.

The author is claiming more or less that humans can be less than animals in how they treat each other in times of war. “Violence of beast on beast” is done out of necessity. Animals kill to eat as part of “natural law.” However, man who is supposedly divine and above it all “inflicts pain” for the sheer hell of it.

Stanza 3

In the last stanza, the poet localizes the poem again by referring to the politics of the Mau Mau rebellion, but this time connects with other historical conflicts, namely, the Spanish Civil War. Striking imagery is used to illustrate this point. This is seen in Lines 22-23 where brutish necessity is described as wiping its hands on the "napkin of a dirty cause" or in the gorilla wrestling with Superman in Line 25.

The poet mentions the Spanish Civil War as an example of two sides committing atrocities against each other and who as a result, did not deserve our compassion. The Mau Mau rebellion at the time is seen in the same light.

The image of a gorilla wrestling with a superman invokes the image of one side with inferior weaponry going up against a modern and well-armed industrial power destined to win. That would be a fair assessment of the difference between the Kikuyu guerrilla forces and modern British military forces.

The author then moves from the politics of the Mau Mau conflict to the personal. Now, he uses language effectively to describe his divided loyalties between Britain and Africa. Africa is portrayed as a vital source of his heritage, whereas Britain is portrayed as the source of the language that has defined his life and career as a poet.

The poet refers to his condemnation of British colonial rule, which he personifies as an officer drunk with power in Line 29. However, they have given him the English tongue that "he loves." So the poem ends in ambiguity and with the poet at a loss.

The Persona or speaker

The [persona](#) or speaker in the poem is Derek Walcott himself. The subject of the poem is simply another opportunity for the poet to explore his dual identity and [internal conflict](#) as a colonized individual of African descent and inheritor of the language of the British Empire — English, which is a constant theme in the writer's work.

The poet is reacting to news coming out of Kenya in relation to the Mau Mau uprising, an uprising led by Kikuyu rebels against White British settlers and the African tribes allied with them. At the time, news reports accused both sides of atrocities and war crimes. In the poem, the poet expresses his disappointment and even disgust with both sides.

The poem is deeply misanthropic and sees the conflict as proof of just how barbaric humans can be in terms of their unnecessary cruelty to each other. This, the poet sees, as reason enough to disown both his African and British heritage. But he knows this is impossible and ends the poem in despair at the poisoned parts of his divided identity.

Themes in A Far Cry From Africa

There are two major themes in the poem. They can be summed up as:

1. The violence endemic to human nature
2. Divided colonial identities

These will be discussed in turn below.

1. Man's violent nature

We can see evidence of the poet's misanthropic view of all humans as being essentially violent in nature with phrases such as "upright man seeks his divinity by inflicting pain." He is saying that men are even below animals in their need to hurt each other.

He uses [rhetorical devices](#) in a stunning manner to get that point across. For example:

Delirious as these worried beasts, his wars
Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum

He uses the African background and landscape as the background for making his pronouncement on the violent nature of man. And this would seem appropriate as Kenya is often cited as one of the locations where our ancestors evolved into the humans that we are today.

He sets the scene through a train of images that connect the scenic African Serengeti landscape with the brutality of beasts on beasts and eventually upright man inflicting pain. So, although the poet might be commenting on either a current or recent historical event, the context is timeless and began "since civilization's dawn."

2. Divided colonial identities

Derek Walcott was born in 1930 on the island of Saint Lucia, when the country was still a colony at the time. In fact, St. Lucia was still a colony during the events of the Mau Mau Rebellion. The poet sees the English language upon which he has built his life and career as an inheritance from British colonial rule. Nonetheless, he is aware of just how violent and unjust this regime can be and has frequently spoken out against it.

We can tell as much in the lines "I who have cursed/The drunken officer of British rule . . ." The poet also sees Africa as part of his heritage and an essential part of himself, which he cannot do without. In the end, the poet is faced with the dilemma of coming to terms with the violence of the Britain that gave him the language he loves and the violence of an Africa that he cannot live without.

The title of the poem "A Far Cry from Africa" has a double meaning. It could simply mean the poet trying to make meaning of a horrific and complicated event taking place in faraway Africa as a member of the African diaspora. It could also mean that the romanticization of Africa that he has absorbed is being questioned and shaken as a result of these horrific events that implicate the Mau Mau, and by extension, Africa as a whole.

Historical-Biographical considerations: The Mau Mau Rebellion

The Mau Mau uprising started around 1952 when it was becoming obvious that the British would grant independence to Kenya. It was started by a Kenyan tribe known as the Kikuyu. It was a guerrilla campaign against European settlers and Africans deemed to be their allies and collaborators.

By the end of it in 1960, 32 European civilians and over 1,800 Africans were killed by the Mau Mau. However, the toll was far greater on the Mau Mau side. To win the war against the Mau Mau, the British colonial authorities resorted to widespread torture and arrests, as well as internment camps. These camps have been compared to concentration camps in NAZI Germany.

It has been only recently that the true scale of this suppression was brought to light. For example, the historian Caroline Elkins claimed that up to 1.5 million Kenyans were detained in a network of detention camps. However, official numbers claim that it was 71,046. By the end of the rebellion, 3,000 Mau Mau fighters were tried in special courts; 1,574 were convicted; and 1,090 were hanged.

Walcott was born and grew up on the island of Saint Lucia, while it was a colony of Great Britain. Therefore, you can say that he had a fully colonial English education. It was during that colonial education that he gained an appreciation of "the English tongue I love." Nonetheless, the poet has always felt a sense of loyalty to Africa and frequently speaks against colonial oppression. These two things come to a head in the face of the atrocities committed on both sides.

Rhetorical devices used in the poem

The poem makes frequent use of [rhetorical devices](#). However, the main literary devices used in the poem are imagery and metaphor, as well as alliteration and other sound effects. Let's take a look at each element in turn.

1. Metaphor and imagery

Each stanza of the poem begins with a stunning image and [metaphor](#). Walcott seeks to begin every stanza like a movie with a string or train of images.

For example, the first stanza begins with an image of "wind . . . ruffling the tawny pelt/Of Africa" a concise description of the Savannah grasslands of Africa. This is followed by alliteration such as "only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries."

In the second stanza, rushes shift into a "white dust of ibises whose cries/Have wheeled since civilization's dawn." Immediately after this line, we see "the camera" move from "the parched river" to the "beast-teeming plain."

In the last stanza, we cut from all this nature imagery and shift to "brutish necessity" wiping its hands on "the napkin of a dirty cause." Each stanza besides this imagery is loaded with brilliant metaphors or personification. In the last stanza, British colonial rule is personified as "The drunken officer of British rule." In the second stanza, wars dance to the tightened carcass of a drum.

As is characteristic of Walcott, several complicated metaphors are used directly after each other and somehow all seem appropriate and fall right into place. For example, "dancing to the tightened carcass of a drum" describes the image of an African tribe preparing for battle as is stereotypically depicted in cinema.

However, more than that, "the carcass" of a drum refers to the tightened hide of a goat that is typically used to make drums. This image portrays man as committing violence to the beat of death. The image and metaphor deftly highlight the poem's misanthropic theme.

2. Rhetorical questions

The poem is written in formal iambic pentameter; however, it has a somewhat conversational tone, which is achieved through good use of rhetorical questions. [Rhetorical questions or erotema](#) are used in Lines 9-10 of the first stanza. It is again used in Line 27 of the last stanza in the powerful question: "Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?"

The last stanza ends, just like the first stanza, with two rhetorical questions as well. These rhetorical questions have dual effects. They make a poem written in otherwise formal iambic pentameter read in a more conversational tone.

However, more importantly, they contribute to the main themes of the poem. The poet is in a dilemma. He doesn't know how to contend or come to terms with his divided loyalties. Normally, rhetorical questions are questions to which the answer is obvious. In this case, the rhetorical questions belie the lack of answers that the poet faces.

The poem ends with frustration and with the poet remaining disgusted with the poor choices that he is given in choosing sides between two cultures that he is simultaneously attracted to because of his gift of heritage from them and repulsed by because of their casual acts of cruel violence.

3. Anaphora

[Anaphora](#) describes a speaker repeating the same words in successive sentences or phrases. It is a rhetorical device based on repetition. Therefore, unsurprisingly, the poet uses them in the rhetorical questions that he asks throughout the poem.

For example, Lines 26 and 28 both begin with "I who." Lines 32 and 33 both begin with "How can I . . ." In both cases, the poet is confronting his dilemma of not being able to choose between his dual heritage.

Anaphora is also used in Lines 22 to 24, where the word again is used to compare the situation of the Mau Mau rebellion with the Spanish Civil War. In this case, anaphora is used to express the frustration of the poet at humanity repeating their senseless violence against each other. Therefore, it's a good case of a device capturing the intention of the poet.

4. Allusions

Allusions are used frequently throughout "A Far Cry from Africa." The basis of the poem itself is an allusion. The poem was inspired by a specific event in history, the Mau Mau rebellion between 1952 and 1960.

The remaining allusions compare the event and its wider meaning to other historical events. Line 10 makes reference to the Jewish Holocaust to compare British internment camps with NAZI concentration camps. Lines 24 and 25 refer to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), where socialists fighting against fascists were accused of frequently committing atrocities against civilians.

More than these recent historical events, the poet makes reference to ideas such as "the natural law," which refers to the law of the jungle of eat or be eaten. He intertwines this with another biblical allusion to man as being divine, only to mock it.

The divinity of man is a central concept of Christianity. Man in Hebrews 2:7-9 of the Bible is described as follows:

You made them a little lower than the angels;
you crowned them with glory and honor
and put everything under their feet.

By everything under their feet, the reference being made is to nature. However, in this poem, Walcott portrays man as being even lower than nature or the beasts of nature. Beasts kill to eat and survive. However, men kill seemingly because they enjoy it. From the perspective of the poem, man is certainly not "a little lower than the angels" as the Bible suggests.

Another notable allusion is to the event of human evolution, which the poet touches upon in the second stanza. Luckily for the poet, man evolved in veldts of Africa, including Kenya, where the Mau Mau uprising took place. This provides an excellent opportunity that the poet takes full advantage of. "Civilization's dawn" (Line 13) can be interpreted as humans transforming and evolving from primates who walked on all fours in the African savanna to "upright man" (Line 16), who walked on two legs.

One of the most effective allusions is to the stereotype of the "drunken officer of British rule." This is a trope common in post-colonial movies, literature, and the memories of colonized peoples. It conjures scenes and instances of colonial officers abusing their authority while being drunk on power.

Mood & tone

The mood of the poem can be described as pessimistic, which is mixed with anger and even disgust. The pessimism is based on the misanthropic view that the poet has regarding man's habit of inflicting pointless violence. As mentioned earlier, the poet even goes as far as describing man as lower than beasts. The tone of the poem may slightly suffer from this. Some parts of the poem can be described as overly moralistic and slightly condemning of the actors involved in the violence.

The poet comes across as a little self-righteous in his condemnation of violence and, by extension, humanity. For example, is the poet in any position to announce condemnations? Does he understand the struggle of fighting for independence in the face of a violent and well-armed Western power from the perspective of Mau Mau fighters? Does he understand the complications of putting down a skillful and ruthless guerrilla force that can properly overcome being out-gunned and out-resourced from the colonial perspective?

Without putting himself in the shoes of either side, his moral condemnation, eloquent though it may be, may come across as somewhat hollow. However, the misanthropic tone of the poem is wholly uncharacteristic of Walcott's poetry.

His work as a poet is defined by boundless Christian faith and optimism as well as the power of poetry and art to fuel hope and human vision and purpose. To get an idea of the faith and optimism that characterizes the poet's work, you can take a look at the poem [Letter from Brooklyn](#).

Form, meter, & sound effects

The poem is written mostly in loose iambic pentameter. There is no formal rhyming scheme; however, there are occasional rhymes throughout the poem as well as frequent examples of assonance, alliteration, and other sound effects.

The poem is divided into three stanzas, which are 10, 11, and 11 lines long, respectively. The first stanza speaks directly to the events taking place in Kenya. The second stanza links it to the global theme of man's inhumanity to man, and the last stanza explores the personal implications of the event for the poet.

The first four lines of the poem form an ABAB rhyming scheme. It's as if the poet planned to keep with this rhyming scheme but sacrificed it in favor of other more impressive poetic devices, such as stunning imagery and metaphor. However, he settles for occasional rhymes throughout the poem. For example, the second stanza ends in a rhyming couplet.

The poem's lines are in enjambment while being written in classic iambic pentameter. It achieves the effect of eloquent speech written in a conversational style. The poet makes use of striking sound effects in terms of assonance and alliteration.

Examples of assonance include "white child," "beast-teeming plain," and "British rule, how choose." However, it is Walcott's use of alliteration that is the most impressive. This is especially so when mixed with the weird metaphors or imagery — the weirdest of which is in Line 5 "Only the worm, colonel of carrion cries."

This line employs assonance with the short o vowel sounds in "worm" and "colonel." It also relies on [alliteration](#) in the repetition of the c sound throughout the line. Line 4 before that is also a mix of effective imagery, metaphor, and alliteration: "Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt." Lastly, we can't forget Line 27's "divided to the vein," with its morbid hint of suicide by slitting one's wrist.

Conclusion

A Far Cry from Africa represents an internal struggle reflected in an external and historical political event: namely, the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya. The poem is successful in taking a specific political event and linking it to broad historical themes and philosophical concepts, regarding man's inhumanity to each other.

However, the poem excels when it makes things personal. The poet expresses both his pride in his African heritage and the heritage of the English language. However, this pride is challenged by the fact of violence on both sides that he witnesses in the Mau Mau rebellion.

The poem does a superb job of balancing the use of natural speech patterns with rich and dense imagery and metaphors. There is something quite conversational about several lines in the poem. For example, "Betray them both, or give back what they give" is simple rhetorical repetition that does not seem at all out of place amid all the rich imagery of the poem. In short, the poem succeeds by taking a specific political event and transmuting it into a profound discussion about man's violent nature and questions regarding his personal and cultural identity.