

John one who is
journeying towards
the heavens.



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John Keats wrote a poem known as 'On First looking into Chapman's Homer'. He was an English romantic poet of the early 19th century known mostly for the use of sensual imagery within his popular series of odes. Though initially unpopular his poems are now some of the most critically analysed of the romantic period.

'Keats' daring and bold style earned him nothing but criticism from two of England's more revered publications, Blackwood's Magazine and the Quarterly Review' (Keats, 2018) this passage shows how popular poetry magazines at the time scorned his first attempt at poetry. Sea Grapes by Derek Walcott is a poet from a completely different time. Walcott was born and raised in the West Indies under the West Indies Federation, growing up during a time of de-colonisation, he began to incorporate his feelings and emotions about colonial rule into his literary works, this essay will aim to bridge the gap between their poetry and attempt to find common ground among centuries of difference. To begin, both employ tropes and figures of speech throughout their poems, with a good example being Keats with 'When a new planet swims into his ken' (Keats, 1816) – perhaps referencing the recent discovery of Uranus in 1781.

This is further reaffirmed with various critiques on it today 'Critics usually say that the "new planet" to William Herschel's observation of Uranus in 1781' (LOGAN, 2014) It is a common theme within criticism that this is what he meant. This passage showcases his use of figurative language, an example being the incorporation of the word 'swims' as it likens the planet to a human being, one who is journeying towards the heavens. Language like this intrigues the reader to read on. Walcott provides many examples himself of

how fluent he is with the use of figures of speech, for example 'the sail which leans on light' (Walcott, 1816: ln. 1) suggesting how the journey of literary knowledge, a recurring theme within this poem, is led by the classics written in Greece.

With 'light' being the classics, with dark being what occurred after that. This is in keeping with the themes Walcott portrays throughout his own works, as he highlights the colonial brutality towards his culture as a negative thing, suggesting that he values his culture as if it were a form of wealth. He highlights this within his other poem 'A Far Cry from Africa' (Walcott, 1962) in particular 'The salients of colonial policy. What is that to the white child hacked in bed? To savages, expendable as Jews?' (Walcott, 1962, p.

8-10) This passage describes the racial unrest between the two cultures.

From this we can see both poets employ imagery effectively to highlight what they considered the issues of the day. Continuing, both employ the use of imagery throughout their poems. 'Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold, and many goodly states and kingdoms seen' (Keats, 1816: ln. 1) This idea of 'realms of gold' brings a vivid image to mind of a rich land full of promise and adventure, to which he alludes to the discovery of at the end of the poem with 'Silent, upon a peak in Darien' which is a hill in Panama, within the Americas. This opening line is an immediate introduction to Keats' imagery as a writing technique, to help the reader, see what he is describing. 'Realms of gold' (Keats, 1816) provides a very accurate, grand image to the reader's mind; helping you visualise a rather large quantity of gold within an area. 'Much have I travelled' (Keats, 1816) suggests a voyage to foreign lands, like Odysseus to Troy – In this case however he means the Americas.

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Central America at this point was a major source of gold for the Spanish, as the Spanish colonies were plentiful with the resource and as such could be described as “realms of gold.” In another link, the natives in these colonies were treated horrendously under colonialism, something Walcott experienced first-hand. This highlights the comparison that one of these poets developed their literary styles during the height of colonialism in the early 19th century whilst the other developed and saw first-hand its decline around the 20th century. Keats uses the Greek classics as examples and comparisons from which he compares his own time to, which Walcott also does throughout his poem.

Later, Keats refers to the Aegean Sea surrounding Greece with ‘Round the western islands have I been, which bards in fealty to Apollo hold’ (Keats, 1816: ln. 3-4). Through the use of the term ‘western islands’ where Homer’s *Odyssey* would have taken place; with the reference to the Greek god Apollo further supporting this. He’s recounting a voyage like the one described in the *Odyssey*, however his voyage is one likened to one of literary development and understanding, shown through his use of the phrase ‘which bards in fealty to Apollo hold’ (Keats, 1816) bards being the orators of old within Greek society. Walcott was engrossed in Greek mythology and mentions it constantly within his work, like Keats, he used these Greek classics as a comparison to the modern times he was living in. One using this to describe the discovery of the new world whilst the other describes living within this New World almost a century later. Throughout both Keats’ and Walcott’s poems the parallels of the past and present are constantly challenged, painting a picture of the evolution of literature from

the classics into what literature has become today, an example of this is *Sea Grapes* (Walcott, 1948) 'That sail which leans on light, tired of islands, a schooner beating up the Caribbean for home, could be Odysseus, home-bound on the Aegean; that father and husband's' This meld of both the past and present in the poem creates a contrast.

Schooners are 16th century ships that were in use by colonial nations during the colonial era, he tacitly contrasts this with his mentioning of 'Odysseus, homebound on the Aegean' in the next stanza. Odysseus being a tale from Greek mythology, is on the opposite side of history, like how *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* is also written at a different point in history. (Keats, 1816) 'That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne; Yet did I never breathe its pure serene Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:' In this passage Keats speaks of Homer in the same stanza as mentioning Chapman. He is essentially crediting Chapman's translation of the Greek classics, stating that he had never experienced the pure serenity of the classics until they had been translated by Chapman into English. This shows an almost adulation for the classics, referring to them as 'serene.' Something to note between these two poems is the difference in style, Keats' poem is quite rigid as a Petrarchan sonnet whilst Walcott's is a free-flowing poem. This is due to the difference in time periods between them, and the changes that have occurred in poetry during this time.

Both maintain three line stanzas however, as it is still an effective way to structure a poem to this day. Later in his poem Keats initiates a shift in the reader's emotions with 'Then felt I...' (Keats, 1816). Similar techniques are

employed by Walcott to his advantage with 'the classics can console, but not enough.

' (Walcott, 1948) both techniques being there to illicit an effective emotional response from the reader. This is done to maintain interest from the reader, as the emotional change spur on curiosity within them. Walcott himself makes a similar point that discovery within poetry is similar to becoming special and unique, suggesting both poets had romanticised views of what a poet was in the world. 'The gift of poetry has made me one of the chosen.' (Walcott 1948) is an example of this, along with 'the classics can console, but not enough' (Walcott, 1948) This however shows that he also romanticised the classics of Greece, like Keats. In conclusion these are two very different poets. One was present through the height of colonialism whilst the other witnessed its decline.

Walcott's perspective of colonialism that is visible throughout his work contrasts with Keats' neutral opinion on the matter, as he never mentions his opinion on it throughout the poem. The use of tropes and figures of speech are common with both, and they are very effective at using them, with Keats' specialising in verbal imagery and the use of Volta's whilst Walcott excels in dramatics and shock value, emanating from his use of a short, brutal structure. All in all, the differences are quite clear here; one poet is a traditional English romanticist whilst the other is a more modern free flowing verse poet. Bibliography Keats, J. K. (1816). On First looking into Chapman's Homer.

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