

# Walcotts poems essay

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



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## Introduction

“ A Far Cry from Africa,” a poem by Derek Walcott, was written in 1962, just a year before Kenya gained her independence from Britain. The context of the poem is heavily linked to the Mau Mau uprising. The writer comes from a Caribbean background which is heavily influenced by both European as well as African roots. While he holds his African heritage dear, he also embraces a Western outlook. The poem makes the speaker question his own cultural identity when the historical events of brutality from both British forces and Kikuyu warriors take root in Africa. The ugliness of the anti-colonial movement as contributed by both sides of the divide provides a dilemma of sorts to the speaker. The Mau Mau uprising evokes feelings from his African blood and his personal stand against imperialism while his love for the English tongue and outlook, which are part of him, draw him to stand against the native brutality. This poem represents the universal ugliness of war which causes a division of loyalties for the persona who is torn in between supporting the African uprising or the British colonialists against a background of brutality from both.

The poem serves to show how war can bring out the worst from anyone

regardless of who that person is. This is depicted by showing how divided the persona is and his futile attempt to reconcile his loyalty to either side. Both the Africans and the British colonialists are represented as being brutal and animal-like. First, the speaker in the poem depicts the British as intruders who bring ugliness to a beautiful place. The British intrude not only the natural environment but also on the people. In the second stanza, Walcott shows this with the words “Threshed out by beaters, the long rushes break in a white dust of ibises whose cries have wheeled since civilization’s dawn” (Walcott 50). The words “threshed out by beaters” depict the practice used by colonialists while in big-game hunting. During this practice, the colonialists used the natives to clear out the bushes and animals such as ibises and other birds would be disturbed. This signifies the disturbance that the British brought upon the land by creating havoc in an otherwise calm environment. This disturbance was something that was not present before the colonialists came, as is signified by the words: “have wheeled since civilization’s dawn”. In addition to the destruction and disturbance that the colonialists had on the natural environment is the brutality they unleashed on the native population. The persona paints a scene of bloodshed in Africa as “blood streams” and “scattered corpses” are littered with “worms”, showing a ghastly image of battle. The persona even makes an allusion to the holocaust by saying that the native Africans are “exterminated like Jews”. Upon further critical inspection of the stylistic devices used by the poet in this poem, one discovers the use of puns like “colonel of carrion” to hint at “colonial”. The lines “only the worm, colonel of carrion cries” and “waste no compassion on their separated dead” are used effectively to

compare the destructive nature of the white man to that of worms and his animalistic nature that lacks compassion (Walcott 50).

The African natives are also represented as being brutal and animalistic in their attack on the British. This is clearly shown when the persona cites an incident where the Africans kill a white child in bed by hacking. The use of a child is effective in portraying innocence. This is because it shows how evil and depraved the natives must have been to kill an innocent child. The persona portrays the natives as beasts in the second stanza when he depicts the call for courage in a primitive dance. Even the drum to which the natives dance is used to bring forth the animal imagery. This is because it is referred to as a carcass, therefore, creating a picture of primitive and backward behavior. The dance is used to show how the Africans rally up each other to fight the British colonialist with brutish force.

The extent of this ugliness of war even causes the persona to ponder in futility as to where his loyalties lie. The title of the poem is an idiom. The words “ a far cry” may be interpreted to represent “ the impossible.” This may be because the situation that the persona finds himself in is impossible to conclude with finality. He is unable to choose between either the British colonialists or the native Africans whose “ poisoned blood” has now become a part of him (Walcott 50). Alternatively, the words “ a far cry” may be used to depict contrast. This is because the beautiful Africa that people had grown to hear about had now become ugly with war and brutal killings. Literally, “ a far cry” could signify distance. This is because the poet may use the words to register his cry for peace “ from afar” (in the Caribbean). The poem culminates in a third stanza which serves to show the persona as being

divided and with no escape. He loves the English tongue, sympathizes with the British but also recognizes his African roots. His position of futility is used to depict the universality of brutality in war, where all parties feel justified by their cause. For example, a question in stanza one compares the mass murder of Africans to the hacking of a child in their bed. Both acts are equally brutal but are performed by people whose backgrounds are worlds apart from each other.

## Conclusion

“A Far Cry” by Derek Walcott is a representation of the universality of human brutality in war. This universality is represented from a hybrid (neutral) standpoint in the context of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya against British colonialists. The author is from the Caribbean. This implies that he is heavily influenced by his African roots as well as his European blood. This factor is shown when the persona refers to his blood as being a mixture from British as well as African roots. Brutality and animal-like behavior is universal. This is because despite the geographical as well as background differences, both the British colonialists and the native Africans (Kikuyu) act with surprising brutality and animalistic behavior. These acts of brutality are so serious that the persona is left in a state of confusion. He does not know which cause to support: The brave African uprising or the British colonialism, whose outlook he favors to some degree. In the end, none of the warring sides may be viewed as being better humans than the other. The poem ends with unresolved questions. This also shows that the problems of brutality are timeless.

## **Works Cited**

Walcott, Derek. Collected poems, 1948-1984. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986. Print.