

Sample essay 5.5 (Part 5): Paper 1 (Higher Level)**Question**

Write a literary commentary on **one** of the following:

1. The poem *A far cry from Africa* by Derek Walcott – see Text 5.3 (pages 187–8) in the IB *English Literature* coursebook.
2. An extract from the short story *Lessons* by Justin Torres – see <http://www.granta.com/Magazine/Granta-104/Lessons/1>

Answer

In this poem, Derek Walcott manages to convey the inherent lack of compassion of humans, while capturing the beauty of Africa and a sense of ‘nature law.’ [✓] Walcott emphasises man’s destructive nature and uncovers the terrible cynicism which lies behind colonisation of [✓] poorer countries. He shows that in actual fact, the actions of man do not differ greatly from that [those] of ‘beasts’ and human intervention in Africa is made preposterous by its initial wonderful description. [✓]

The similarity between man and beast is underlined by Walcott’s comparison of the [✓] two species. He comments on the ‘violence’ which beasts often show as ‘natural law.’ The abrupt pause in the middle of the line after the word ‘law’ accentuates that this is the reason for the violence of wild animals and the enjambment into this line shows that for beasts, ‘violence’ is habitual and ongoing. [✓] However, the poet then speaks of ‘upright man.’ [✓] The use of the adjective ‘upright’ immediately pin-points the fact that humans have evolved beyond beasts and should be civilised, [✓] but the following simile: ‘Delirious as these worried beasts’, highlights that human instinct is not far from animal instinct. The confusion underlined by this simile is enhanced [increased] by the human [you cannot really enhance confusion??] seeking of ‘divinity by inflicting pain.’ This many seem paradoxical but many people believe that others need to suffer in order to reach ‘divinity’ [unclear?]. This contradictory statement highlights human confusion as to what is perceived [perceived] as divine and intensifies the deluded beliefs of man.

Several images employed by Walcott serve to [✓] show the destructive nature of man. The notion of ‘statistics justify’ this colonial cruelty indicates that those who instigate this overseas malpractice did not take the feelings of natives into account: [✓] they would have drawn the necessity of colonisation from facts and figures, making civilised man seem all the more inhuman. Another example of human cruelty is drawn upon by the image of ‘savages, expendable as Jews.’ Walcott would have been aware of the events of the holocaust and he would have been exposed to the severity of this mass slaughter. By drawing on this image, Walcott makes it clear that to scholars... of colonial policy’, these African men would have been easily replaced and not a thought would have been spared for their feelings. [✓] Furthermore, Walcott calls them ‘savages’ which

denotes the ignorance of civilised man about other cultures. They would have been viewed as inferior and they were therefore viewed as 'expendable.' [✓]

Walcott also draws attention to the corrupted nature of African colonisation with the metaphor of 'brutish necessity wip [ing] its hands, / Upon the napkin of a dirty cause.' The personification [✓] of 'brutish necessity' enhances its prevalence in African affairs and also shows [✓] that this is the reason given for colonisation. It is most likely that avarice has fuelled African colonisation [✓] and the personification of 'necessity' underlines it's the danger that it presents the inhabitants. In addition, the 'napkin of a dirty cause' conveys that corruption is contagious and passes on to whatever touches it.

It shows that corruption is born of the body and the image of 'necessity', wiping its hands on a napkin conjures up a sinister picture. Walcott may even use the 'napkin' as a symbol of Western wealth, because these who they were colonising would not have had access to such luxuries [✓] [Good]. This underlines the sense of inequality and the avarice of civilised man.[✓]

Walcott even personifies the 'wars' brought by colonists, commenting that they 'Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum.' This personification emphasises the vibrant and speedy nature of war and how it can ravage a people in a short time. The 'carcass', although of 'a drum', draws attention to the war time setting with many dead lying across the plain. The final rhyming couplet of this stanza emphasises the finality of a colonial invasion. The rhyme of 'dread' and 'dead' is definite and indicates the panic of the natives at the inevitable outcome of their deaths. Furthermore, 'white peace' is made to seem like a disease by the use of the 'contracted.' This again underlines the corrupted nature of colonisation and the irony of peace being 'contracted by the dead' [✓] shows the terrible yet inevitable effects of foreign pressure in Africa. [✓]

Although Walcott goes on to explain the tragedy of colonialism, he begins by detailing the breathtaking beauty of Africa, and this creates a sense of pathos [✓] for those who inherit this land. The use of words such as 'Kikuyu' and 'veldt' show that before the invasion of colonists, this place was untouched by foreigners. This diction helps Walcott to create [✓] a scene which [✓] is quintessentially African. The 'ruffling' wind indicates that there was always a cooling breeze over the land and the metaphor of the 'bloodstreams of the veldt' indicate that this place was [✓] once vibrant and life giving. However, the first word of the fourth line ('corpses') initiates a tonal shift [✓] in the poem as a foreign pressure [✓] begins to corrupt this 'paradise.' [✓] Furthermore, the tonal shift is accentuated by the breakdown of rhyme after the first five lines. [✓] The poem begins with an 'AB AB' rhyme scheme but this rhyme degenerates throughout [✓] the first stanza. This break down in rhyme has the effect of turning Africa from a 'paradise' into a war-torn land. The break down in rhyme shows that panic has set into a land which was once at peace, inducing pathos in the reader for their plight. [✓]

As well as feeling sympathy for the slain natives, the end of the poem evoke pathos for the [✓] poet himself, who is 'poisoned with the blood of both' nationalities. The use of the word 'poisoned' [✓] shows that Walcott feels it is not natural to be of dual nationality, especially when one nationality is persecuting the other. This underlines the quandary he is in and the plosive alliteration [✓] of 'blood of both' conveys his anger at his nationality and draws attention to his disillusionment even further. In addition, the phrase 'divided to the vein' reiterates that not only is he divided in his mind as to what decision to make, but also by his blood. His disillusionment is intensified by the last four

lines of [✓] the poem being four separate questions. The use of [✓] so many questions highlights his confusion and the final question of the poem truly denotes his confusion: [✓] 'How can I turn from Africa and live?' Due to his division in nationality, he cannot make the decision as to which nationality [✓] he should favour. His uncertainty is emphasised by the lack of a decision at the end of poem and this seems to evoke more pathos for his predicament. [✓]

Derek Walcott emphasises the terrible cynicism of mankind through his chronicling of the suffering of the natives to western colonists. His comparison between man and beast indicates that in reality, the instincts of humanity can be as base as those of beasts. Walcott even makes mankind seem worse by defending the violence of beasts with 'natural law.' However the beauty of this land resonates throughout the poem and although there is suffering on a monolithic scale, there is the sense that this is a paradise. [✓]

Teacher's comment

This has a sound structure and a good persuasive argument. There is lots of technical material, which is impressive – good use of appropriate vocabulary. Good introduction and ending. You could say more about the Mood and Tone.

Criterion A	Understanding and interpretation	5
Criterion B	Appreciation of the writer's choices	5
Criterion C	Organisation and development	4
Criterion D	Language	4
Total		18/20