

## Sample essay 5.4 (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 descriptive poem Derek Walcott is emphasising his loss [lack] of identify, he is unsure to which he belongs to. The first stanza describes the death and blood that has followed battles against the colonials and natives. Walcott is never overtly specific to which side he is talking about, leaving it to be interpreted in a variety of ways based on the readers background [means?]. This lack of specificity suggests that Walcott is not too sure of which side he belongs to, knowing that he cannot be both. The second stanza is more personal to Walcott with the use of 6 personal pronouns [persona?] and rhetorical questions.

From the first stanza we are confronted with Walcott's problem. In line 6 the 'colonel of carrion, cries' that the dead are 'separate' and should not be shown compassion. The divide, even after death, of the opposition [what do you mean?] proves to Walcott that he cannot be both, emphasising the difference and separate nature of the cultures. The use of alliteration and sibilance that are on either sides of the statement [again, unclear] on line 6 help to add to the harsh and distant tone of the colonel. The use of the harsh "c" in 'colonel', 'carrion' and 'cries' shortens the length of the word and creates images of the colonel, almost spitting out line 6 as he 'cries' [does it? from what?] out to his men. The use of 'compassion' also adds a sinister and careless tone. Lines 7–8 contains sibilance which creates the flow of the poem [No] with a sing song feel [really?]. Although the repetition of "s" sounds normally creates a harsh and sinister tone, in these lines it is a justification or fact.[?] The tone is very matter of fact [?] making it seem acceptable or something [?] that should not be looked over. The divide of both cultures, western and African is made apparent as the use of 'colonel' would suggest that this is from the colonial side, however the following line, 9, mentions a 'white child hacked' in bed, suggesting that this could be the African side speaking. This shows no distinction between the two cultures again emphasising Walcott's distance from both. [no – look at persona?]

The first 4 lines of the poem are filled with morbid imagery of 'corpses scattered', 'bloodstreams' and 'flies'. Walcott mentions 'kikuyu' what could possibly be the name of a tribe that had just been beaten. The use of 'flies' upon the 'corpses' emphasises the death and destruction of man but then in line 4 Walcott ends it with 'paradise'. This juxtaposing idea of death and paradise questions religion, or some kind of heaven, a

western ideal. This could also be the contrast in Walcott's beliefs that may have been muddled together, from his dual nationality. **[This mixed identity could be explored]**

The colour white is repeated 3 times in the first stanza. **[✓]** Normally associated with purity in this poem Walcott has used it as peace. In line 12 and 21 it is used first to describe the 'white dust' of cries, possibly meaning the surrender of the people under threat. It is then repeated in the final line of the stanza when the natives dread 'the white peace'. Walcott describes it as 'contracted by the dead' giving it a sense of some sort of disease or virus that one contracts. A slightly odd idea but what Walcott is suggesting is that we learn from the dead and they teach us how to make peace. **[Possibly]**

The reoccurring theme of identity is mentioned again in lines 16–17. Walcott claims that the 'upright man' seeks (for) 'divinity'. Again this ambiguous phrase which could have connotations with western religion or **[?]** native culture allows Walcott to distance himself from the specific cultures. **[don't think distancing comes into this]** He is suggesting that no matter which side it is they are only fighting for superiority and in contrast to the 'beasts' it is not 'natural law' for man to fight against each other. Again his ambiguity is mentioned when he describes the men as 'worried beasts' who dance to the 'tightened carcass of a drum' – this could mean both sides as drums, were used by both sides in warfare. **[✓]**

The second stanza does not follow the regular rhyme **[is it regular?]** in the first like 'pelt' 'veldt', flies', 'cries 'dead', 'bed'. These allow Walcott to again reassert the morbidity **[vocab]** and destruction of the fighting between the two sides that he belongs to. The first stanza is not as personal and it creates the imagery and horror of both his people that makes his identity difficult. **[unclear]** The final 4 lines of the last stanza are all rhetorical questions. These emphasise his loneliness and lack of identity because they are questions that cannot be answered and never will be. This leaves him questioning his identity. **[Are you clear about Walcott & the persona?]**

Again Walcott uses negative language when he describes his problem and background. He claims that he is 'poisoned' and 'cursed'. He questions the blood in his veins and the 'division' it has caused him in life and identity. He cannot face losing one because they are an internal part of him, mentioned by the blood of both that runs through his veins, and by leaving both he is betraying them and leaving him with nothing. He cannot stay because he cannot be 'cool' and left feeling guilty. His mind is somewhat made up. The title itself 'A Far Cry from Africa' gives the understanding of a cry for help from but more importantly for Africa. Walcott wants to help Africa and although he feels obliged to stay and support Britain he has already made his choice.

His mention of a tribe, by name, 'kikuyu' from the very beginning of the poem suggests his sympathy towards Africa but also a personal link much stronger than the other. His mention of 'Jews' in line 10 suggest that they are an outsider like Walcott himself. His use of imagery in line 14 about the 'parched river' and 'beast-teeming plain' also is suggestive of imagery associated with Africa. In the second stanza Walcott writes that 'brutish necessity' wipes its hands on a 'napkin' from a 'dirty cause'. The use of 'napkin' suggests colonial Britain and 'dirty cause' could be a view held by the colonials of the natives. Finally, he mentions that he has 'cursed the drunken officer of British rule' already showing his distaste for Britain. Although it may be ambiguous at times Walcott has made the narrator already have a predisposed choice. He longs to be able to speak the

‘English tongue’ that he loves but his conclusion is that he has made his mind up.  
[I’m not sure what you mean.]

The final line questioning how he can ‘turn from Africa and live?’ seals his fate. The line before he does not mention it by name and he cannot face the ‘slaughter and be cool’ but he cannot leave and live. The negative connotations for Britain are also present by mentioning ‘slaughter’ whereas he does not use negative language while describing Africa. [Doesn’t he? Are you sure?]

‘A Far Cry from Africa’ seems at first as a cry for help from a man who has lost his identity and is now confused but in the second stanza his opinion becomes apparent. The lack of rhyme also makes the change of tone from descriptive to personal more apparent. By questioning his own life his choice is made clear, that he will choose Africa since he cannot live if he were to turn away.

### Teacher’s comment

This is uneven: there are some very good points but also points which are unclear or undeveloped. You need to look at how you organise your essays so that there is a more logical development of ideas. Literary features should be employed to show up effect. Go back to the criteria: look at where you are being assessed. At times you expect the examiner to do too much: make your meaning clear and understandable, and always retain a formality of English.

<b>Criterion A</b>	Understanding and interpretation	3
<b>Criterion B</b>	Appreciation of the writer’s choices	3
<b>Criterion C</b>	Organisation and development	3
<b>Criterion D</b>	Language	3
<b>Total</b>		<b>12/20</b>