

Sample essay 5.3 (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 his poem, ‘A far Cry From Africa’, Derek Walcott explores the themes of cultural identity, a sense of belonging, violence, religion and love. These complex emotions are expressed through an exploration of the conflicts and contradictions that Walcott’s narrator observes. The juxtaposition of life and death is clear throughout the poem and any indication of innocence by Walcott is quickly destroyed just as ‘the white child [is] hacked in bed’.

[meaning what, exactly?] The use of the verb ‘hacked’ provides a particularly visceral image that is poetically effective because it is in such sharp contrast with the ‘white child’. Walcott uses the adjective ‘white’ understanding the dual interpretation of the word and the connotations of race that are associated with Africa. The introduction of this third factor **[theme?]** alongside death and innocence accurately and succinctly introduces three key themes that define Africa in the eyes of the narrator.

There is a sense of uncertainty throughout the poem that is expressed most obviously in the last stanza through Walcott’s use of rhetorical questions and ‘divided’ language **[what is this?]**. The introduction of the personal pronoun in the last stanza introduces an element of personal doubt to the poem and the tone of the poem and voice of the narrator shifts to a more introverted viewpoint no longer merely observing and commenting on what it perceives. Walcott’s use of the word, ‘poisoned’, gives a sense of physical discomfort to the narrator’s uncertainty. This discomfort is accentuated through the carefully described observations of the first stanza that demonstrate the depth of understanding the narrator possesses and therefore the discomfort he feels at being a part of ‘both’ worlds. Perhaps Walcott is saying that the narrator is ‘poisoned’ not only by his cultural background but also by his abilities of perception; one of the rules of poetry. **[Good point]**

[Watch your paragraphing]

Walcott uses religious imagery throughout the poem in his exploration of African life. Through the juxtaposition of ‘corpses’ and ‘paradise’ in line 4, Walcott is exploring the link between life and death and ugliness and beauty. By linking the two words, Walcott is exploring the paradoxical link between death in a ‘corpse’ and life in ‘paradise’ after death.

The contradictory image is also expressed through the use of the verb ‘scattered’ as it demonstrates the abundance of death in ‘paradise’ [✓]. The idea of ugliness in paradise is also a paradoxical one and seeks to emphasise the uncertainty [✓] expressed in the final stanza. By effectively describing the paradoxical nature of African Life, Walcott allows the final lines of the poem to be more poetically effective as the doubt of the narrator is more keenly felt and understood by the reader.

There is further use of religious imagery in the first two lines of the second stanza as ‘necessity wipes its hands.’ This allusion to Pontius Pilate washing his hands of Jesus’ blood before his crucifixion, demonstrates an acknowledgment [✓] of consequences but not of responsibility [Good]. The personification of ‘brutish necessity’ is used by Walcott to distance the narrator of responsibility for the actions described in the first stanza and yet, it is clear from the last 4 lines, that the narrator does feel an attraction to primal Africa and therefore a sense of guilt towards ‘colonial’ Africa. [Yes, a mixed response] Although not directly linked with the actions of his ancestors, he feels a sense of shame for what they did having ‘cursed / The drunken officer of British rule.’ [✓]

A sense of longing and a primal feeling are expressed through the poem by Walcott’s use of the verb ‘[to] cry.’ In the title of the poem, the verb ‘cry’ carries with it three meanings. There is a sense of longing that is linked with ‘cry[ing]’ tears, there is a feeling of primal Africa that is linked with the base, guttural emotional response that is a ‘cry’ that is linked with the origins of humanity and therefore Africa and there is also the feeling of distance, emotional + physical, as expressed in the colloquial expression, ‘a far cry from.’ [very long sentence] The triple interpretation of the title of the poem [should this be at the start?] immediately alerts the reader to the multiple interpretations and contradictory nature of the poem. Through the title alone, Walcott has introduced a motif that is loaded with connotations. This helps to make the poem poetically effective as much of the interpretation and understanding of the poem is subjective and left to the reader. [You could say that about a lot of writing.]

[Again, all one paragraph]

Walcott uses a number of literary devices throughout the poem including rhyme, sibilance, alliteration and caesura. The rhyme in the poem is not regular and is therefore used for particular poetic effect to link two words in which Walcott sees a particular contrast or similarity. He links ‘paradise’ and ‘cries’ in a half-rhyme to again emphasise the paradoxical link [you are overusing this] between suffering and paradise in Africa. The linking of ‘dread’ and ‘dead’, ‘again’ and ‘Spain’ and ‘give’ and ‘Live’ are more obvious and seek to link a concept, or word with connotations, with a quality such as ‘giv[ing]’. Most of the lines of the poem are between 8 and 12 syllables long and Walcott uses caesura half way through the second stanza to place a particular emphasis on the word [effect] ‘cursed.’ This linked with ‘poisoned’ highlights the feeling of discomfort felt by the narrator at his uncertainty of place and belonging. Walcott is using the structure of the poem in this case to emphasise the main emotional dilemma expressed in the poem’s concluding lines. [Not sure about this: not clearly expressed]

The ideas of cultural and racial identity are clearly important in the poem and Walcott compares both race and culture in the poem. The military analogy of the ‘gorilla wrestl[ing]... the superman’ is also a metaphor for the people themselves and betrays a feeling of superiority from the Western colonialists who see themselves as ‘the superman’ [or more civilised] and see the native Africans as the derogatory [derogatory] ‘gorilla,’ [possibly] There are other expressions of colonial superiority in the poem as the natives are described as Like [like] ‘these worried beasts.’ Again, Walcott is using animals to describe a animalistic and tribal culture that the narrator struggles to understand. The tribal ‘carcass of a drum’ betrays the link the narrator sees between African society and death. Indeed, the observations of the first stanza would lead the reader to believe they are inextricably linked.

Despite the negativity about African Life throughout much of the poem, the tone shifts in the final line as the narrator expresses a feeling of necessity and love for Africa. Walcott expresses this feeling of love through the final word of the poem, ‘live.’ This seems at first to be contradictory [to contradict] as it concludes a poem preoccupied with death but as much of the religious imaging in the rest of the poem has demonstrated, the death in the poem is surrounded by much life. The two concepts [Are they concepts?] are very much dependent and this links with the inherent conflict and tension throughout the poem. Although disgusted by much of the ‘slaughter’ the narrator is dependent on Africa to ‘live,’

Through exploring many of the key themes of Life, death, race and culture that exist in Africa, Walcott is able to accurately portray the indecision and uncertainty that is associated with a sense of belonging through the use of paradoxical imagery [Again, look at your sentences]. This style of writing that mirrors the conflicting nature of the narrator’s mind is highly poetically effective as the act of writing poetry itself is mirroring the themes that Walcott is trying to explore.

Teacher’s comment

Better argumentation and closer linking of literary features and effect throughout the essay could have helped. Watch your paragraphing and sentencing. These really do matter and you are not always secure in this area. Overall, though, this is perceptive.

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