

**Sample essay 5.2 (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**

Derek Walcott's poem, 'A Far cry from Africa' focuses primarily on the morality of conflict [✓] and in particular the justification of its cause. The poem is a series of reflections of a British Officer, who took part in the colonial conflicts that ravaged Africa. It is unclear from whose perception we are reading the poem until the second stanza, in which it becomes apparent through the poet's use of rhetorical questioning [questions], that the narrator is undecided as to where his loyalties lie. [✓]

Throughout the poem there is a clear indication, that in the view of the officer, nature has been disturbed and the 'paradise' that is Africa has been spoiled. [✓] This poem clearly deals with two of the three traits that the poet is often distinguished [?] by, it focuses very much on the culture, or rather the influence of culture and this sense of belonging. The language used by Walcott throughout has connotations of violence and danger. Within the opening lines of the poem, the natural landscape that is presented to the reader is literally invaded by 'the bloodstreams of the veldt.' Here the natural landscape has been disturbed and the tawny pelt has been degraded by an unnatural presence. The juxtaposition in the following [✓] line of 'corpses' and 'paradise' heightens this feeling of unease and suggests that this culture has been invaded. In using language such as 'bloodstreams' and 'corpses', Walcott has immediately set the tone of the poem, their vivid contrast with paradise, is one that will alter the reader's perception of the British and play on their minds. [✓]

From these opening lines, the title of the poem becomes clearer[: ]Africa, a continent filled with nature and culture has become desolate. This region is not what it once was, 'only the worm' lives on in these vast regions scarred by battle. [✓] The insignificance of this creature amplifies [✓] this idea of desolation, this region has been left to the worms [very good]. The personification of the worm's cries 'waste no compassion on these separate dead' implies that here an element of humanity has been lost, and even a worm can recognise that the human brutality that has taken place was so unjustified. The words 'separate dead' highlight this feeling of divergence, this conflict has taken place due to the differences in appearance and culture. Those dead are completely separated, ironically not in their literal

position, but rather in their cause for conflict. [Not clear: you have to explain what you mean at greater length.]

Although, what is this violence to the ‘white child hacked in bed?’ The future generations of these soldiers and of the British in general, will not hear of the injustice with which we pillaged Africa, but rather, only great tales of our victory. In using this question, the poet is also implying that there was, or is, a lack of interest into how we obtained our vast empire, as long as we have a material need or want in our lives, we don’t care where or how we obtain our resources. The word ‘Hacked’ has strong connotations of violence and emphasises this point that either the British population were unaware, or just didn’t care about what went on in Africa. This is also through the juxtaposition of the child’s innocence and ignorance and the violent connotation of ‘Hacked.’ [✓]

The next line suggests the immorality with which the British conducted this conflict. The Africans that rose up to defend their land were seen as completely ‘expendable.’ They are even compared to the ‘Jews’ who were persecuted throughout World War II. This is almost a rather clichéd comparison, but one that is likely to be used on purpose [deliberately] by the poet so as to allow the reader to connect with the language and understand the view point that the officer is coming from [poorly expressed]. This comparison of past and present also suggests that with time, the modern population of the world may forget about the disgraceful behaviour that the Jews were subject to, just as we have slightly [?] forgotten about how Africa was ravaged.

The use of rhyme in the poem is poetically effective in that it shows, through its lack of regularity and rhythm, the divide between the British and the Africans and also the break in the officer’s mind as to where his loyalties belong having experienced the ‘waste of our compassion.’ The connection of ‘plain’ (line 14) and ‘pain’ (line 17) highlights the unnatural presence of the British in Africa. This region has been degraded from a ‘paradise’ [✓] to a ‘parched river or beast-teeming plain.’ Again there is personification present in ‘parched river’ which is poetically effective in that it compares the lack of prosperity and life in the river to the lack of water in a human body which symbolises the loss of innocence in the officer’s mind, but also the loss of humanity of the British as water is a keystone [fundamental] to our lives, without it we died. This connection through rhyme really gives [provides] us insight as to why the British felt the need to induce so much destruction, it is that the ‘upright man / seeks his divinity through inflicting pain.’ This suggests that in fact the British were acting much like any other human beings as it is their ‘natural law; however, this is ironic in that previously it has been eluded [alluded] to that the cause for conflict was the differences between humans. This language also suggests that Walcott believes that the justification for this conflict was in fact religion a difference in culture. This is eluded [alluded] to through the religious connotations of ‘divinity.’ Yet, man can never the level of God in terms of power, perhaps the connotation of God’s power here symbolises man’s need and want to display and have dominance.

The use of the word ‘delirious’ in the following line relates back to this idea that man can never reach the same level of power as God, and thus our efforts to display dominance only display the faults in humanity. Again, anthropomorphism plays on the mind [it doesn’t

**really**] of the reader in the use of the words ‘his wars / Dance’, this implies that the enjoyment and recreational manner in which we dance is also applied to the way in which we conduct war. We do not grasp the scale and impact of suffering that will be inflicted by our action, this is eluded **[alluded]** to through the connotations of death, a recurring theme, in **[✓]** ‘the tightened carcass of a drum.’ A drum is an instrument **[don’t need such definitions]** through which we are able to produce music which we can then dance to. However, we are also able to use it for calls of ‘courage.’ This contrast is attempting to highlight the similarities in war and our recreational lives. However, morally it is clear that there are no similarities, but perhaps subconsciously, conflict is in our nature.

The final line of the first stanza is full of contrasting themes and has several connotations. The description of peace as ‘white’ holds connotations of purity and cleanliness, however, this is ironic as the poet has eluded **[avoid overusing this – spell ‘alluded’ correctly]** to the fact peace is established partly through conflict and dominance. Thus much like the African landscape is tarnished by ‘bloodstreams’, this ‘white peace’ is also tarnished. To add to this the poet then goes on to infer **[suggest]** that true peace is not possible as it has been ‘contracted by the dead.’ This is due to the fact that although there may be peace on the surface, people are still disgusting **[tense]** one another and the adverse impact of the opposition’s actions are still clearly remembered. There is a clear sense of finality in this sentiment of the officer, shown through the use of the end stop. This use of punctuation suggests that although the **[✓]** officer is undecided as to where his loyalties lie **[lie]**, his mind is clear in that he has recognised the immorality of human nature.

The poetic devices in the opening two lines of the second stanza are (particularly) poetically effective as they remind the reader of the injustice with which the British conducted themselves. The personification of ‘brutish necessity’ wiping ‘its lands’ of the matter implies that due to the fact that it is a part of human nature to strive for divine power, the British cannot be blamed for their actions. The use of the word ‘necessity’ is effective in that it relates back to the idea of peace being an impossibility. This personification then runs onto the metaphorical image of a ‘napkin of a dirty cause.’ Here the arid African landscape could be being symbolised by the napkin, and the dirty cause, though there have been attempts at justifying the British is now ironically being accepted immoral. **[I’m not clear on this]**

The officer expresses that the very core to his existence, his blood, has been ‘poisoned’ by the scenes that he has seen take place. Yet, it is really his innocence that has been poisoned as due to the fact that it is in human nature to seek ‘divinity’, his blood has always been poisoned with immorality, it is just now that he is aware of it. This line is a turning point in the poem **[✓]** as it has the first use of the first person singular. The officer is now reflecting on himself at a personal level and questioning his morality and loyalty. Like the ‘drunken officer of British rule’ he has been intoxicated and blinded to the true value and impact of his actions. This series of rhetorical questions show that he is questioning himself and his role in the conflict. His reflection has ultimately been an exploration of reason and morality. It has covered the divide in nature and culture, and yet even at the end of the poem there is an element of confusion as to where the officer belongs. The language used by Walcott expresses empathy for the officer as his innocence has been wiped away.

**Teacher's comment**

This is a very good essay. I think it would have gained even higher marks for Criterion A and C if I felt that there was a coherent argument running through it. This is a difficult poem and the language is dense and needs analysis. Your own language use is good and I would suggest you try to move up to another level of sophistication, both in general vocabulary, and critical vocabulary.

<b>Criterion A</b>	Understanding and interpretation	4
<b>Criterion B</b>	Appreciation of the writer's choices	3
<b>Criterion C</b>	Organisation and development	4
<b>Criterion D</b>	Language	4
<b>Total</b>		<b>15/20</b>