Q1: XIV

Derek Walcott’s poem “XIV” recalls a boy’s childhood experience of visiting an elderly women storyteller in the Caribbean. Walcott expresses his caribbean identity through recollection of myths, fables, and stories from the wise women. The use of personification and imagery, and diction exemplifies that notion that the author’s reason for writing the poem not only lies in the act of going to the storyteller itself, but by also listening to the wise women’s retelling of stories passed down generations through time.

While the journeying to the old women, the author describes his path as a “forest where dasheen leaves thicken (lines 3-4). As the boy nears the women’s house, Walcott details the exterior with imagery of “yam vines wrangled over gutters” (lines 6-7) and “shutters closing like eyelids” (line 8). The speaker relies heavily on the personification of plant and animal imagery. Walcott also details plants like “moss” and “mimosa” to exemplify how the caribbean culture is so immersed in nature, judging by the description of the women’s house. Personification works hand in hand with imagery here: the boy is deep in the forest among plants, avoiding the threat of the personified sunset. He revels in the cover of the forest by pointing out how the road on which he follows resembles an “old snake” (line 1) and is emblazoned with a “black twist” (line 11) as though it were an animal. The author reveals the thrill behind the boy’s independence and danger of traveling alone through the forest.

Walcott uses relevant, and descriptive details to clearly illustrate the storyteller’s rellings almost as ethereal and soothing, as her voice is “the sound of the pipe” (line 14). The author also incorporates cultural references such as, “dasheen”, “Ti-Marie”, and “Sidone” when alluding to native Caribbean names and plants. The author's diction depicts the significance placed on the oratory culture of the Caribbean. The author’s excitement in absorbing the woman’s “lamplight” reveals the speaker's sense of eagerness, community, and excitement to be passed down the cultural identity of their people through the fables and myths told by the storyteller. The old woman passes down the history of the Carriabiean people by invoking all of the boy’s senses. She predominantly appeals to the oratory and visual senses, but also smell through the “fragrant origins” (line 17) the boy notices. After the storyteller passes on stories of the Caribbean to the boys, they feel a stronger connection with one another; their history and culture binds them. The speaker is finally able to connect with his brother because they, and they alone share this experience together, and are “joined together in one shadow” (line 21).

The author’s diction also plays a role in the way the author writes the poem. The poem begins with the lines, “old snake shedding its skin/the speckled road, scored with nuts, smelling of mold” (lines 1-2). The use of consonance also appeals to the reader's senses, specifically sight, touch, smell, and sound. Doing so allows Walcott to establish the emotional atmosphere of the poem. He creates an eerie setting depicting the nature around him. His attention to detail shows his attachment to the forest and wildlife, and how this nature is intertwined in their culture. Walcott also employs slant rhymes to cleverly create a lyrical rhythm for the poem. Unlike the metric style which closely resembles that of the folk stories told by the old women, but author’s rhyme scheme is not particularly strict. For example, he uses paired words such as “skin” (line 1) and “begin” (line 4); “path” (line 11) and “aftermath” (line 12); “tins” (line 14) and “origins” (line 17). The rhymes not only allude to the open, adventurous quality of the boy’s voyage, but also to the poem itself.

Walcott provides a vivid description of a young boy’s voyage to a old storyteller. Through a retrospective lense, the speaker reminisces about his cultural heritage and the connection he feels with his the nature as well as his brother. The speaker employs the use of personification and imagery as well as diction as a way to express his Caribbean identity and remember the thrill, independence, and love he feels when seeking out the old woman and listening to her stories.