

Poems by Derek Walcott (part 2): notes, questions, a paper topic

"Ruins of a Great House": notes and allusions

disjecta membra: disjoined members, dismembered parts.

Great House: as in, plantation house, manor house.

limes: used as remedy for scurvy in the British Royal Navy; hence, "limey" for "Englishman".

Faulkner: yes, the American novelist, author of *The Sound and the Fury*, etc.

More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchang'd
To hoarse or mute, though fall'n on evil days,
On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues.
In darkness, and with dangers compassed round,
And solitude ...

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, VII 23.

rake: "idle, dissipated man of fashion" (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

Kipling: Rudyard Kipling, poet and novelist of the British Empire at its height (*The Jungle Book*, *Kim*, etc.).

Hawkins, Walter Raleigh, Drake: Sixteenth-century English seamen/pirates/explorers (Walcott does not give them their titles). William Hawkins was the first Englishman to take slaves in Africa and sell them in the Caribbean; his son John raided Spanish settlements in the Caribbean and forced them to trade with them (in slaves, inter alia). Raleigh promoted the colonization of the Americas and thought he had found El Dorado in what is now British Guiana/Venezuela. Drake was the first English circumnavigator, and also terrorized Spanish settlements in the Caribbean and South America; he brought to North Carolina a group of "Moors" rescued from Spanish slave traders.

Perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill as that he knows not it tolls for him; and perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me and see my state may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that.

.... No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

John Donne, *Meditation XVII*: Nunc lento sonitu dicunt, morieris.

Dauphin: ... I will sell my dukedom,
To buy a slobbery and a dirty farm
In that nook-shotten isle of Albion. (Nook-shotten: running out into corners or angles)

William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, III v 14.

New World: questions

Stanza 1

“Then after Eden...”: this opening places the poem at a particular moment, following Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Look at the relevant passage from *Genesis* 3:9-19 (below, or see <http://bible.gospelcom.net/>): what are the defining details of this moment? What is new about it in relation to where Adam and Eve were before, and what of those new properties is relevant to the poem?

“one surprise”: what *is* the surprise? If the surprise is “the first bead of sweat,” what makes that surprising? If it is Adam’s awe, why is *that* surprising? What are the connotations of “surprise” as a word for the unexpected?

Stanza 2

“all flesh had to be sown with salt”: how is saying this different from saying, all would sweat? or from the corresponding phrase in *Genesis*? Note: when Rome conquered Carthage and wanted to destroy the city, they tore down the buildings and sowed the ground with salt so nothing can grow. Walcott alludes to this event in other poems. Is he recalling it here?

“the edge of seasons”: literally, seasonal differences, another consequence of original sin. “Edge” suggests the border or hinge between two different things; what else can an edge be? How are other meanings relevant here?

Why is Adam’s joy his own?

What perspective does stanza 2 take on the world after Eden and after original sin?

What is good about work?

Stanza 3

The snake sounds like the same bad guy from *Genesis*. Why does he admire labor? What does that (somewhat surprising) admiration imply about labor and about the snake?

“would not leave him alone”: there are at least two ways of reading this line, all on its own. What’s the difference? Why the double meaning? Is this the voice of the narrator or Adam’s internal monologue?

Does the depiction of work seem different here than in the previous stanza? This stanza seems more colloquial than the ones before, more slangy. What effect does the tonal shift have

on how we understand what's going on?

Stanza 4

October would presumably be an instance of the “edge of seasons” (st. 2), the transition from summer to fall. How has the understanding of seasonal change shifted between stanza 2 and stanza 4?

Notice the verbs. Who is doing what to whom in each of these two stanzas?

What is missing from this October?

_____ Who are “both”? Who is not in the picture? What is implied by this grouping?

Stanza 5

What is “our New Eden”? What does it mean that Adam is exiled there? (How can you be exiled to Eden instead of from Eden?) We could try mapping this stanza onto moments in history; we should also at least try to understand it as following from the preceding events in the poem.

Why is Adam “in the ark’s *gut*”?

Why “coined”?

“that was willed”: by whom? why aren’t we told?

Stanza 6

What does “the loss of Eden” mean at this point in the poem? How does this Eden relate to the Eden of st. 1 and the New Eden of st. 5? What keys you that this is a shady transaction?

What does it mean to *make* the New World? In what sense can you make what’s already there? To look back on earlier stanzas, what kind of labor are Adam and the snake doing here?

Compare the last line to *Genesis* 1:31 (“And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good”). What do you make of the partial echo here?

At this point, the Adam/snake friendship starts to look suspect. An expression like “it looked good” sounds deeply ironic. In light of this last stanza, looking back now on the rest of the poem, how far back does the irony go?

Paper topic: give a reading of this poem, and link it to other texts we’ve read which also think about the Americas as a new world, second Eden, or blank slate. Where does Walcott stand in relation to earlier writers on this topic?

Genesis 3

⁹ And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?

¹⁰ And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.

¹¹ And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?

12 And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.

13 And the LORD God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.

14 And the LORD God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life:

15 And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

16 Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

17 And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life;

18 Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field;

19 In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.