

21L.315, Prizewinners
Prof. Mary Fuller

Lecture 9: Derek Walcott, *Sea Grapes*, *The Star-Apple Kingdom*

Oddjob, a Bull Terrier

Is the dog dying? It's hard to figure out what is going on.

Is it about something else?

He never mentions the name again, after the title – the title is very specific, then the poem becomes very general

The way this poem takes absolutely simple language and makes it very beautiful – this is very cool.

At a technical level: what makes this a poem, not prose?

He repeats certain phrases, almost like an incantation.

Adam's Song

Beginning and end stanzas have (approximately) ABAB rhyme, middle is unrhyming 3-line stanzas

a complicated configuration: Eve commits adultery against God, with the serpent, for Adam's sake

In the first stanza, the whispers are the most guilty.

Adam is singing the song to Eve (everything else is "against")

This is like the Paradise Lost telling – Adam has the option to turn against Eve, but he loves her still.

If we isolate the song, what does it say?

Maybe this sets up a time pattern – morning, night – then transitions to be about climate

Or rise and fall (bird, sun)

Does "everyone" include Eve, or is it everyone since her, looking back?

This is the moment in Genesis, after the transgression, when God comes looking for them.

"he sang it in the evening of the world"

Why is God weeping?

"ascends" keeps sticking out – the song is ascending to the level of God, it transcends the enormous gulf.

Almost as if it makes God regret.

Heaney writes about the "redress of poetry", always wanting to put weight on the other side.

Change of pattern in the last line

Dew and rain – renewal, cleanliness, softening up (cleansed of sin, rebirth)

The last stanza is highly patterned, so obviously set off from the rest of the poem. And it brings together the rhyme and the repetition, to go back to the technical side.

The Schooner Flight

This is like a little mini-epic

General time and space: sailing north, time is generally well marked ("the next morning"), moving forward with various loops back

On a quest, looking for a place that feels like home, where he won't feel guilty

The grammar – is he trying to write how they speak?

This is one of his (Walcott's) languages, in addition to the "good colonial education"

Another characteristic of epic: the range of voices

When is he deliberately talking about himself in the third person, and when might it be someone else?

Also low and high dialects, often in quick transition, for example the last passage of section 9, or end of section 7

How many voices are in this poem? Sometimes it's tempting to think there's a narrator.

You can't say this is autobiographically a poem about Walcott – it's a character – but a character with some things in common.

What must have happened, between sections 1 and 11? What's changed?

He's now blessing things, soothing to read, soft rain

He's been longing for her through the entire poem, but now he doesn't want her anymore

Reconciliation with people in the abstract, not in the flesh

Is he ever going to go back? Where is he?

He's not in a position to go home anywhere – does he actually have a place among human beings?

He's kind of redefined what "home" means.

The last line – what's going on, literally?

Is he still on the same strip, with those people? Is he alone now?

With the last line, the door and road shut down, the soft openness ends

Does it put the whole poem into quotes?

The poem ends with this lyric, reconciliatory tone, but this seems to come at a cost – never going home, never getting close to anything.

As a reader, do you rejoice in the reconciliation, or should you be critical of it?