

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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**Walcott** (1930-) *Poems* (B, 2770-2776)

Derek Walcott was born on the Caribbean island of Santa Lucia, educated at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, and has taught extensively in the United States, especially at Boston University. In 1992 he received the Nobel Prize for Literature, and joins the Norton Anthology as part of the laudable effort to widen the sense of English literature, to reach beyond the borders of England itself to colonized parts of the former British Empire. The English of his poems ranges freely between the Queen's own and island patois.

*Question: How does Walcott, as poet, relate to the mainstream western literary tradition?*

This question arises because Walcott, of mixed racial heritage—African, Dutch, English, and with a language background in French creole—is both outside and inside the traditions of British literature. Though Walcott is very conscious of the complexities of his own heritage—cf. “A Far Cry from Africa”—and though he is critical of the British colonial heritage on the ground, he adores the English language and literature of British tradition. The best test case, for trying to answer our question, is *Omeros* (1990), Walcott's Caribbeanized epic drawn from Homer and Homeric themes. What happens to Homer in that transition? How does Walcott's work relate to that of Homer, the founder of the Western epic tradition?

*Comparative Literature:*

1. Homer's creations, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, have been translated, recreated, reevaluated in every age. Virgil himself, in the *Aeneid*, developed his profound vision of Roman destiny by remaking Homer's work. Kazantzakis, in his *Odyssey* (1958), created a massive modern version of the work of Homer. Lyric and dramatic poetry have been saturated with reworkings of Homeric themes. Suggestion: look into the network of interpretations of Homer, in the West, and put Walcott's original linguistic remaking in its literary historical setting.
2. The English language has adopted many forms at different times and in different cultures. Think back to *Beowulf*, half English, half Germanic in language. Think of Dryden's poetry, seemingly so close to us, but in diction and tone no easy read for a 21<sup>st</sup> century American. Then think of Walcott's *Omeros*, with its nuggets of patois, or the mariner's island slangs in “The Schooner *Flight*.” Can you see unpredictable futures ahead for English, as the global community tightens, communication means sharpen, and the borders between languages—as, for instance, between American English and Puerto Rican Spanish—blur away.?
3. We have noted, in the introduction to this Unit, the prominence of threatening global conflict in the 20th century. Literature of the time inevitably reflects these dark issues. In the material of the present Unit where do you most clearly find this reflection? Which of the writers we have read here seem most attuned to the dark concerns of his/her time?
4. Consider the poetry of Hardy (b. 1840), Yeats (b. 1865), and Auden (b. 1907.) You note that Auden was born almost 70 years after Hardy, and over 40 years after Yeats. Can you see the difference in historical experience between the first two poets and Auden? Does that difference reflect itself in style or view point? What if you add the poetry of Walcott (b. 1930) into the equation? How does this change your view point onto Auden's situation as poet?
5. Joyce and Beckett are both Irish expatriates, virtually exiles when compared to another Irish writer, Yeats, who was an Irish statesman to the end. What do you see in common to the works of Joyce and Beckett which you read in this Unit? Do they still seem to be writing inside the tradition of “British literature?” What about Gordimer and Walcott, then, neither of whom was British? Do *they* seem to write within the tradition of British literature? Or—and this raises the question of our entire class—is British literature just a small element in the large body of creations within the English language?