Omeros Study Guide

Omeros by Derek Walcott

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Introduction

Publication of *Omeros* in 1990 signaled a milestone in the already remarkable career of Derek Walcott. This is not only because the author, who was born on the small Caribbean island of St. Lucia, went on to win the 1992 Nobel Prize for literature, but because his poem subtly undermines the very genre out of which it emerges.

Since Walcott himself voices reservations about the "heroic" dimensions of *Omeros* it is understandable that critics who are guided by textbook definitions have been reluctant to grant epic status to the poem. On one hand, Walcott's characters are unassuming peasants who fight no monumental battles; his persona/narrator is allowed no Olympic trappings; and on the other hand, the requisite narrative flow is occasionally disrupted by the poem's lyrical exuberance. Nevertheless, *Omeros* is not a literary parody. The title itself pays homage to Greek origins, deriving from the pronunciation of Homer's name. Walcott's poem has the length, the geographic scope, and enough recognizable variations on traditional epic ingredients to ensure comparison with the standard masterpieces.

Indeed, the essence of Walcott's contribution to the epic genre resides in the insights afforded by that comparison. Walcott revisits the canonical works of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton, Walt Whitman, James Joyce, and Hart Crane because they epitomize the ideals of Western civilization. Much as Walcott admires these predecessors, he also notes that the first four reflect a world of hegemonic domination or colonialism, dividing humanity into conqueror and conquered, or marginalized "other." Walcott's perspective is that of an artist who grew up in a neglected colony; he therefore asserts that the disenfranchised citizens of the world deserve their own validation. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass,* Joyce's *Ulysses* and Hart Crane's *The Bridge,* initiate the movement toward recognition of the common man. *Omeros* does nothing less than offer an alternative to the terms of classical heroism.

Author Biography

From his earliest verse written at the age of eighteen, Walcott has drawn material from his own experience. The autobiographical aspect of *Omeros* becomes unavoidable, given the frequency with which he explicitly interjects his own persona. Furthermore, the primary subject of this poem is his native St. Lucian heritage: the rich Creole culture of his transplanted countrymen, the unfulfilled legacy of his father who died prematurely, and the all-embracing sea.

Derek and his twin brother Roderick were born to Warwick (a civil servant) and Alix Walcott (headmistress of a Methodist school) in the capital city of Castries on 23 January 1930. When the twins were about a year old, their artistically gifted father died suddenly, willing them his desire to capture the beauty of the island in the few poems and watercol-ors he left. Derek showed an early interest in both media. He took painting lessons from his father's friend Harold Simmons; and with a loan from his mother, privately published his first collection of verse, *25 Poems,* which he sold on the streets of Castries.

After completing his secondary schooling at St. Mary's College under English and Irish Catholic teachers, Walcott accepted a Colonial Development Scholarship to earn his baccalaureate degree from the University of the West Indies in Jamaica in 1953. He taught briefly in Grenada and Jamaica before winning a Rockefeller fellowship to study theater in New York under Jose Quintero and Stuart Vaughan in 1958. The months he spent in New York were beneficial in two ways. First, they introduced him, through the examples of Bertolt Brecht's epic theater and the films of Akira Kurosawa, to the stylized technique of classical oriental drama. Second, the experience convinced him that New York was unreceptive to black actors and unsuitable for the kind of West Indian theater he was determined to create.

Disenchanted with prospects in the United States and armed with a new determination to succeed in the Caribbean, Walcott cut short his Rockefeller grant and settled in Port of Spain, Trinidad, in 1959. There he began writing an arts review column for the *Trinidad Guardian* while he gathered around him a group of amateur actors, dancers, musicians and stage technicians. From this highly experimental, modest beginning in the basement of a local hotel, eventually emerged the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, an institution viewed by many as the first truly professional West Indian theatrical company. The Workshop gained regional and international acclaim over the years, even winning an Obie award for Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* in 1970. After seventeen years of mutually rewarding collaboration, personal and artistic differences led Walcott to resign from the Workshop in 1976.

After a few unsettled years of writing and mounting occasional productions as he traveled among the islands of the West Indies, Walcott began accepting a series of lectureships and visiting professorships in the United States. He taught at New York University, Columbia, Harvard, Rutgers, Yale and finally Boston University, where he remained from 1981 until he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1992.

Throughout this period Walcott divided his residence between the United States and various Caribbean locations. In 1993 he decided to leave Boston and build a home at Cap Estate on the northern tip of St. Lucia. Based once again on the island that has always been the center of his universe, Walcott travels frequently to different parts of the world.

Plot Summary

Overview

One of the initial challenges in reading *Omeros* is the complexity of its multi-layered plot. The meaning of the epic builds on events that are straightforward within themselves (simple fishermen Achille and Hector fight over Helen, a woman they both desire). Walcott expands these basic facts so that Helen comes to personify an island nation historically coveted by European powers. While his narrative does move toward an end, Walcott is essentially interested in the journey itself. As a matter of fact, the nearer he comes to the final resolution, the more he focuses on the act of writing. Given his conscious emphasis on the text of the poem as one of his subjects, his epic becomes self-reflexive.

Omeros is a story of homecoming comprised of seven books recounting a circular journey that ends where it begins. Books one and two introduce St. Lucia, key sets of characters and initiate the basic conflicts. Books three, four and five retrace the triangular trade route that once linked Europe, Africa and the Americas. Books six and seven return to St, Lucia where the wandering author and his uprooted countrymen are eventually reconciled to their Creole identity.

Book One

The primary f bus of the first book is a group of indigenous fishermen and their friends in Gros Ilet village. Philoctete entertains a group of tourists willing to pay to hear local lore and to photograph the gruesome scar on his shin. Philoctete's tale, like that of his Greek namesake Philoctetes, goes back to the cause of his old wound and his quest for a cure. We learn that two of Philoctete's companions, Achille and Hector, have ended their friendship fighting over Helen, while Helen herself has broken with Achille, the man she loves, and out of spite has moved in with Hector. Pregnant by one of these rivals and out of work, she is, like her counterpart Helen of Troy, caught between two jealous contenders. Rounding out the central cast of peasants are the old blind sailor, Omeros, also known as "Seven Seas," and Ma Kilman, proprietress of the No Pain Cafe. Omeros in different manifestations serves as a wise seer, an interested commentator on the fate of others, and ultimately as the incarnation of the Greek epic poet Homer himself. Ma Kilman serves as a medicine woman, interested in a folk cure for Philoctete's suffering.

Another equally important set of characters includes the author himself, whose character moves in and out of the story to recount his own journey toward self-realization. On a social level comparable with the author's persona is the white, expatriate couple Major Dennis Plunkett and his wife Maud Plunkett. As Walcott puts it in one of his earliest incursions into the plot, each of his characters is wounded in one way or another because "affliction is one theme of this work" and he goes on to admit candidly that "every T" including the narrator's own "is a fiction."

Achille, Hector, Walcott, and Plunkett all seek to possess Helen. Walcott makes her, as personification of St. Lucia, the object of his epic. Alienated as Dennis and Maud are on their adopted island, their deepest regret is that they have no heir. To occupy his mind, it occurs to the Major that Helen and her neglected people deserve to have their story recorded. To Plunkett's allusive imagination, correspondences between the Trojan war and the protracted Anglo-French battle to dominate St. Lucia, the Helen of the West Indies, are too close to be merely coincidental. As these two writers undertake their projects, Achille agonizes over Helen's defection to Hector, while Hector suspects that Helen still loves Achille.

Book one concludes with an episode that may be seen as areversal of Major Plunkett's longingfor a son. Walcott has always regretted not having a father. In the final scene, the ghost of Warwick Walcott materializes to encourage his son to complete his unfinished work. He urges his son to honor their nameless ancestors, all the overlooked Helens, the female colliers who marched like black ants down to visiting steamers—"to give those feet a voice."

Book Two

The second book centers on two major events, each affecting one of the groups of characters already introduced. The first event involves a 1782 sea battle that ensured British sovereignty over St. Lucia. Leading up to his retelling of the Battle of the Saints, Walcott takes us back to meet a young midshipman on a spy mission for British Admiral Rodney in a distant Dutch port two hundred years earlier. Next he brings us across the Atlantic to witness Rodney's simultaneous preparations for the defense of St. Lucia. Rodney singles out one of the slaves struggling to transport a cannon up the coastal bluffs for recognition. These two new figures fill ancestral blanks for Major Plunkett and Achille: the ill-fated young midshipman entrusted with the Dutch mission is named Plunkett. When Dennis discovers his surname among dusty island archives, he claims the son he has always wanted. The slave, Afolabe, whom Rodney distinguished with the Greek name "Achilles," is an ancestor of Achille. These preliminaries out of the way, Walcott interposes a flashback to the Battle of the Saints and Midshipman Plunkett's untimely death. At the moment that the French ship *Ville de Paris* broadsides Plunkett's vessel *Marlborough,* the midshipman accidentally falls on his own unsheathed sword.

The second of the pivotal episodes of this book involves a political campaign sweeping the newly independent island. Philoctete and Hector join Maljo's fledgling United Love Party. Maljo points to lame Philoctete as a symbol of the infirm status of the nation. Hector, who has given up the sea to convey passengers around the island in his van, the Comet, provides transportation. Maljo's get-out-the-vote extravaganza is rained out; and after defeat, the candidate retreats to Florida to work the citrus harvest. The point of this interlude is to note that the transition from imperial rule to self-government has not improved the life of the average citizen. As Major Plunkett observes, local politicians have not helped Philoctete and have not affected the price Ma Kilman pays for fuel. Hector's remaking himself into a taxi driver has been equally ineffectual. Closing book two, Achille puts out to sea, where the sun induces hallucinatory visions. As Achille's

fantasy begins, he sees past generations of drowned men rising to the surface. These remnants of the Middle Passage conjure up vestiges of his enslaved forefathers. As his fishing boat, the pirogue named *In God We Troust* heads toward his lost African home, Achille considers for the first time the question of his identity.

Book Three

The actual time span covered in book three is approximately twenty-four hours, but in his trance, Achille retraces the middle passage back over centuries and vast distances to his ancestral African village. There he encounters his grandsire Afolabe, who instructs him in his forgotten tribal identity. In the primitive dances, rituals, tools, and musical instruments, Achille recognizes the origins of St. Lucian customs and devices. Together Afolabe and the village griot, or storyteller, rectify the historic amnesia of the African diaspora. Dream turns to nightmare, however, as Achille is forced to stand by helplessly as tribal enemies raid his village for slaves.

Meanwhile, *In God We Troust* does not return at dusk with the rest of the pirogues. Philoctete and Helen wait anxiously until the next day for Achille. Back in St. Lucia, he acquires a new interest in the common fates of dispossessed Native Americans and Africans in the New World. Bob Marley's song "Buffalo Soldier" heard on the radio subtly broadens Achille's perspective, and at the same time offers a foretaste of the setting for the fourth book.

Book Four

Time and space are once again divided in the fourth book. It includes scenes set in present-day New England, where Walcott suffers over the failure of his marriage, and a visit to the Dakota Indian territories in the 1890s. There, the Oglala Lakota Sioux are reacting to the genocidal policies of white men by joining the Ghost Dance, a millenarian religous movement of Plains tribes. Participation in the Ghost Dance alarmed officials monitoring activities on the reservations and led to the the massacre of more than three hundred families camped along Wounded Knee Creek on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota on December 29,1890. The dominant point of view for this sequence of events is that of the historical figure Catherine Weldon. Weldon, a wealthy white woman from New York, resembles the Plunketts of Walcott's main narrative in that she is both emblematic of her race and at the same time has voluntarily broken with her own race and class in order to identify with people who have been deprived of their place in history. In a scene mirroring the aftermath of the slave raid in Afolabe's village, Weldon stands, helpless as Achille had been, listening to the shaman Seven Seas recite the litany of an Indian village wiped out by cavalrymen.

Inevitably, Walcott identifies with Weldon. As she watches the blanketing snow eradicate traces of disappearing Native Americans, he watches the snow wipe out familiar landmarks around his Boston townhouse. While he contemplates the breach of man-made treaties—government documents to wedding vows—the ghost of Warwick

Walcott reappears to instruct him that his odyssey, like all journeys, is circular. Before Walcott can go back to his tropical island, however, his father urges him to experience the metropolitan capitals of the Old World that have ingrained their influence into his colonial culture.

Book Five

Europe has always been more than just the seat of imperial domination to Walcott: his ancestry include a mixture of Dutch and English forebears in his grandparents' generation. When he crosses the Atlantic this time, he selects four destinations that hold special significance. First is Lisbon, Portugal, early patron of the African slave trade, and once so powerful that (in 1493) Pope Alexander VI allotted it half the unexplored world. Second is London, England, the colonial administrator and source of the language Walcott has treasured since birth. Third is Dublin, Ireland, the island immortalized by Walcott's childhood idol, James Joyce, and Maud Plunkett's native country. The fourth destination is the Aegean islands, the birthplace of Western culture. From his examination of the grand monuments of the past, Walcott concludes that he prefers "not statues, but the bird in the statue's hair." In other words, although he continues to be influenced by the established literary canon, he wishes to draw material from the life around him, just as did Homer and Joyce.

Book Six

By the sixth book, Walcott has made his return to St. Lucia and it remains for him to gather the strands of his converging plots. After depicting the wreck of the Comet in which Hector is killed, Walcott is guided to the site by a talkative taxi driver. Next, Ma Kilman follows a trail of ants into the mountains and retrieves the homeopathic African herb that finally cures Philoctete's open wound. As Philoctete is cleansed, Walcott catalogs the terms of his healing. His flesh and spirit are restored as his racial shame is washed away and he reclaims his lost name.

In the same vein, Walcott exorcizes the flaw in his love of St. Lucia. His artistic preservation of local color does no justice to the integrity of living people. Soon afterward, Major Plunkett achieves a similar change of heart. His epiphany dawns shortly after his wife Maud's death from cancer. Walcott sums up their mutual conversion when he denounces the grandiose classical trappings in their homage to Helen:"Why not see Helen as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow?"

Nearing the end of *Omeros,* Walcott's announced theme of affliction gradually yields to the theme of reconciliation. Not only is every "I" a fictional construct, but each is easily interchangeable. Walcott invests his father in Plunkett, his mother in Maud, and he sees himself as a Telemachus launching his own odyssey in search of his missing Odysseus. The father/son variations proliferate. History may have shaped the present, but nothing prevents the individual from adjusting the perception of present and future options. At Maud's funeral, Helen informs Achille that she is coming home. As this sixth book

concludes, Achille helps Helen understand the insights of his African dream: the costumes, dances, and rituals celebrating Boxing Day (the day following Christmas) have roots that descend through Western customs into African origins. In their Creole practice, they now inform St. Lucian identity.

Book Seven

The Protean Omeros materializes as an animated statue in the seventh book to assure Walcott that a living woman "smells better than the world's libraries"; therefore, he should concentrate on what he sees around him. Walcott resolves to emulate the sea that absorbs history and to appreciate the privilege of knowing "a fresh people." Helen is no longer the object of an agenda for Walcott or Major Plunkett. The Major accepts Maud's death, and learns to work among rather than oversee his employees. Achille, who will never read anything Walcott writes, is depicted returning from a day of fishing, and the final line of the epic notes that "the sea was still going on."

Characters

Achille

The primary protagonist among the villagers of Gros Ilet in St. Lucia, Achille (pronounced A-sheel) is a fisherman deeply in love with the local beauty, Helen. Because he and his friend Hector both love Helen, they become arch-rivals, as did their Homeric namesakes three thousand years earlier. Afflicted with the rootlessness that often results from living under colonialism, Achille not only needs to win Helen, he also must discover his personal and racial roots in order to confirm his rightful place in St. Lucia. The event that gives his life ultimate meaning is a sunstroke-induced trance that transports him through time and space to his ancestral river village in Africa. There he meets his distant grandsire Afolabe, who teaches him his name and the forgotten ceremonies that restore the racial memory taken from his predecessors by the Middle Passage. When he reawakens the following day, he must still face all his old problems, but he has acquired a new appreciation for the transplanted customs, rituals, and ceremonies that survived in St. Lucia's Creole culture. After his estranged friend Hector dies, he acknowledges their brotherly bond and is reconciled with Helen.

Unlike Homer's superhuman Achilles (son of the sea nymph Thetis and King Peleus), Achille represents the unacknowledged type of earthy protagonist Walcott described to D. J. R. Bruckner in an interview (see Sources for Further Study). Looking at the people of the Caribbean who come from distant lands and who have been neglected by history, Walcott is inspired to capture their names, lineaments, and features in painting or words. He insists to Bruckner that a classically derived slave name such as Achille or Hector is not simply a metaphor lightly given: "It is something you watch becoming itself, and you have to have the patience to find out what it is." In *Omeros* it is significant that Achille misspells the name of his pirogue "In God We Troust." Not only does this replicate the name of an actual canoe Walcott saw in St. Lucia, but it reflects the simple, unadorned humanity Walcott wishes to celebrate. When his mistake is challenged, Achille declares "Leave it! Is God' spelling and mine." Near the end of *Omeros,* Walcott admits that despite his determination to give voice to these remarkable figures, Achille will never read the epic to which he is so central.

Achilles

See Afolabe

Afolabe

In the dream taking Achille centuries back to his African origins, Afolabe appears as his distant grandsire. Afolabe challenges Achille to reclaim his African name, believing that the person who forgets who he is lacks the substance to cast his own shadow. Under Afolabe's instruction, the amnesia caused by the Middle Passage and generations of

slavery is eliminated. Achille is surprised to see that elements of African tribal customs survive in familiar St. Lucian rituals.

While Achille watches helplessly, Afolabe and most of his village are abducted by a band of marauding Africans who sell their captives to slave runners on the coast. As it turns out, the story of Afolabe in the third book fills in the background for an episode leading up to the Battle of the Saints already recounted in the second book. When Afolabe appeared in that earlier account, he and other slaves were preparing the British defenses against an anticipated French invasion of St. Lucia. At that point, Admiral Rodney changed Afolabe's name to Achilles, This episode now acquires added significance, as it appears that Walcott intends Afolabe to represent his own African blood.

Antigone

The Greek sculptress who instructs Walcott in the proper pronunciation of Omeros (Homer's name) is given the pseudonym "Antigone." She appears briefly as Walcott's lover in her Boston studio in book one. She disappears almost at once because she has grown tired of America and wants to return to her native islands. Nevertheless, the encounter resonates throughout *Omeros.* The pronunciation of *Omeros* leads to Walcott's explication of the Antillean patois for the name: *O* expands from the throat of utterance to "the conch-shell's invocation" to all the other ovular openings in the poem; *mer* means "both mother and sea"; *os* evokes gray bone and the surf lacing the island's shore.

Frequently, Walcott's allusions to statuary, recall this character's sculptures. When he takes to the lonely streets of Boston toward the end of the fifth book, he wanders vainly attempting to relocate her dusty, marble-strewn studio. The statue of Omeros that emerges from the sea to guide him through his St. Lucian inferno in book seven is one of the last vestiges of her influence.

Christine

Christine is Ma Kilman's niece, a country girl who comes to work in the No Pain Cafe at the end of *Omeros.* For her Gros Ilet is an amazing city and she is said to be like a new Helen.

The leopard motif harks back to an Africa that no longer exists, while the blazing comet suggests an alluring future driven by tourism and corporate exploitation far beyond local control. Once he abandons the sea, Hector is never at peace, and he can find no security in Helen. In the sixth book, reckless driving takes him over a cliff to his death. Despite Hector's treachery in life, Achille mourns an irreplaceable friend. Hector appears in the inferno section of the seventh book, a soul in the purgatory of his own choosing.

Chrysostom

Chrysostom is one of the fishermen who gather with Achille and others on the shore before beginning work each day.

Circe

See Helen

F. Didier

Convinced that there is no significant difference between the two major parties that are polarizing the island in attempting to win the general elections, this character, known as Maljo, creates his alternative United Love party. Maljo runs an ineffective, American-style, grass-roots campaign, driving the streets, shouting through an unreliable megaphone about Greek and Trojan parties fighting over Helen. When Maljo is defeated, he leaves for Florida to work the citrus harvests.

Hector

Achille's friend turned rival, Hector manages to take Helen home with him early in *Omeros,* but he suffers from knowing that he has not won her heart. Hector's downfall is the result of his turning away from the calling of the sea to become a taxi driver. His van named the Comet, decorated with flames on the outside and leopard-skin upholstery within, symbolizes the island's cultural ambiguity.

Helen

From the beginning, it is necessary that Helen be perceived as an exceptional woman because she is pivotal to the action of the epic on four levels. First, she is the cause of the conflict between Achille and Hector, just as conflict between Paris and Menelaus in the *Odyssey* over her namesake, Helen of Troy, was the cause of the Trojan war. Second, Walcott, as a participating narrator, is inspired to immortalize her in *Omeros.* Third, die character of Dennis Plunkett undertakes to base a history of St. Lucia on her. Fourth, she embodies and symbolized the island of St. Lucia itself, since the island has been fought over so many times by France and England that it has earned the epithet "Helen of the West Indies." In spite of all the Homeric paraphernalia surrounding her, Walcott insists on her existence as a real person. As he explained to J. P. White (see Sources for Further Study), Helen is based on a woman he saw in a transport van he described in the poem "The Light of the World."

Helen is called Penelope as she awaits impatiently for Achille's return from the prolonged dream of Africa; Achille once refers to her as Circe when he feels unworthy to

approach her sexually; and when the Major responds to the full power of her charm, he compares her to other memorable women of the past: Helen of Troy, Judith, and Susanna from the Apocrypha. The woman carrying all this metaphorical weight in *Omeros* is out of work and unsure whether the father of her unborn child is Hector or Achille. She had been a maid to the Plunketts until they fired her when her proud assurance made them feel like intruders in their own home. Then there is the question of the low-backed yellow dress that Helen may have stolen or that may have been given to her by Maud Plunkett. Walcott leaves the issue ambiguous through most of the poem.

Hector's untimely death in book six leaves Helen to Achille. Both Walcott and Major Plunkett abandon their desire for Helen when both men realize that by regarding her as an idealized object, they are repeating the shameful pattern of hundreds of years of imperial domination. Many of the ambiguities surrounding Walcott's reliance on classical allusions are resolved when, in the text, he and Plunkett recognize Helen's right to be herself, untainted by the various meanings that they have tried to heap on her.

James Joyce

When Walcott stops in Dublin on his tour of Europe, he pays homage to James Joyce. As he stands on the embankment of the Liffey River one evening, he imagines Joyce's Anna Livia (from *Finnegans Wake)* scurrying by. Then he conjures up the image of Joyce (with his notoriously poor eyesight) as a "one-eyed Ulysses" gazing seaward after a departing ship.

Walcott's attachment to Joyce may be traced back to his school days at St. Mary's College. Walcott recalls in an autobiographical essay in *London Magazine,* 1965, his schoolboy identification with Joyce's character Stephen Dedalus. In a later interview with J. P. White (see Sources for Further Study), he disucsses the epic qualities of Joyce's *Ulysses* and of Joyce's reflective, rather than heroically active, protagonist Leopold Bloom.

Ma Kilman

Ma Kilman is the repository of African animism that has been adopted into St. Lucia's Catholicism through generations of obeah-women (practitioners of sorcery and magic with roots in African traditions). She has lost the memory of herbs, potions, and spells, but when she sheds the uncomfortable garments of civilization, she finally reestablishes contact with the homeopathic fruit of the earth. It is she who follows a trail of ants into the mountains to unearth the foul plant shaped like the anchor that gave Philoctete his incurable wound. From that plant she concocts the steaming bath that drains all the poison from Philoctete and makes him whole again. Her No Pain Cafe is the village gathering place. A skeptical but grieving Dennis Plunkett seeks her out there in order to contact his deceased wife. When he asks Ma Kilman if she sees her in heaven, she responds simply "Yes. If heaven is a green place." Knowing his wife's attachment to Ireland, the Emerald Isle, Dennis is understandably moved: "That moment bound him

for good to another race." Ma Kilman serves as an earth-mother figure, healing men and linking them with the natural environment.

Lawrence

The waiter having difficulty making his way among customers on the beach when both Walcott and the Plunketts observe Helen's first appearance in *Omeros* is sarcastically called "Lawrence of St. Lucia." He is no Lawrence of Arabia. Near the end of the epic Walcott mentions his name once again as an example of the "wounded race" who laugh uncomprehendingly when an exasperated Achille curses a group of intrusive tourists.

Maljo

See F. Didier

St. Omere

See Omeros

Omeros

The title character is an ageless blind man who has settled in St. Lucia after sailing the oceans of the world. Omeros, like both the island's sightless patron St. Lucia and the Greek Homer, possesses the gift of inner vision. Omeros is a citizen of the earth, not limited to citizenship of a single place and time. For most of the story Omeros is a trusted counselor among the villagers of Gros Het, but Walcott takes him through a series of reincarnations.

In book three, he joins Afolabe as a tribal griot in Achille's African dream. In book four he reappears as a Sioux shaman. Walcott encounters him in Trafalgar Square in London while on his own odys-sey, clutching a worn manuscript of his odyssey— testimony to the fact that Homer, Omeros, and Walcott are engaged in the same enterprise. This particular incarnation reinforces Walcott's explicit statement in an interview with Robert Brown and Cheryl Johnson (see Sources for Further Study) that his poem has nothing to do with the renowned Homer of classical tradition. While he may exploit affinities with Homer's legacy, his purpose is to do for his own island nation what the itinerant wanderer Homer did for the emerging people of his Mediterranean.

The earthy Omeros of Walcott's conception steps forward to advise the Caribbean poet that "a girl smells better than the world's libraries," but a greater cause for an epic is "the love of your own people." The walking statue of Omeros then acts in the capacity of Dante's Virgil, who escorted the poet through Hell, escorting Walcott through a hellish region of the city of Soufriere. The experience introduces Walcott to the mercantile exploiters and selfish poets being punished for violations of the island's natural

resources. Because Omeros embodies the wisdom of the ages, he is in a position to sum up the narrative strands of the epic. In his capacity as advisor to Walcott, he refines the terms of the duty imposed by Warwick Walcott. When he is last seen, sitting among the customers of Ma Kilman's No Pain Cafe, he hums quietly to himself the song of "the river griot, the Sioux shaman," and he predicts that, like Philoctete, "all shall be healed."

Pancreas

Pancreas is one of the fishermen who gather with Achille and others on the shore before beginning work each day.

Penelope

See Helen

Philo

See Philoctete

Philoctete

In conformity with the role of his classical namesake, Philoctetes, Philoctete serves as an integral mediator. He tries to convince Achille and Hector that they are brothers in the bond of the sea and should not be estranged from each other. When budding political parties in his newly independent nation threaten to divide the population against itself, he regrets the fact that people do not love St. Lucia as a whole. Furthermore, he bears a terrible shin that allegorically implies all the afflictions plaguing his countrymen. He sets the example of patience under duress, the kind of fortitude that has allowed the progeny of slavery to endure and thrive

As Philoctetes is cut off by the offensiveness of his wound in the Greek myth, Philoctete is too debilitated to participate fully in village activities throughout most of the poem. Just as the Greeks were dependent on the reclamation of Philoctetes before they could defeat the Trojans in the *Iliad,* the villagers of Gros Ilet do not begin to overcome then-colonial malaise until Philoctete is restored to health. When Ma Kilman effects Philoctete's cure in book six, Walcott catalogues the larger psychological virtues of his restoration. As the mind-forged chains of his inferiority drop away in the herbal bath, the residue of tribal shame dissolves; his muscles respond naturally to the bow and oar of his warrior ancestors; he accepts both the lost past and his new name and language until he stands a new Adam in Eden. The moment is pivotal for the self-reflexive emphasis of the rest of the epic. In the scene immediately following Philoctete's healing, Walcott announces the revelation that he has been harboring the wrong kind of love for St. Lucia. He and others must follow the example of Achille and Philoctete in shedding any prejudices that stand between themselves and the island as it really exists.

Philosophe

See Philoctete

Placide

Placide is one of the fishermen who gather with Achille and others on the shore before beginning work each day.

Major Dennis Plunkett

Expatriate Dennis Plunkett, a retired British Major, settled in St. Lucia with his wife Maud shortly after World War II. He sustained a head wound in the War and Maud nursed him back to health. As Walcott informs the reader in one of bis earliest authorial intrusions, the Major's injury is in keeping with the central theme of affliction that runs throughout the epic. At first glance, this white, landowning couple seems out of place among the predominantly black islanders. Their presence may be justified on at least two counts. First, they represent the centuries-old European entanglements in St. Lucian affairs. Second, Walcott's identification of the Plunketts with his own parents recognizes the European blood in his own veins.

The deepest regret in Dennis Plunkett's life is that he and his wife never had a son. Although the Major busies himself with the duties of raising swine, his interest in historical research fills an emptiness in his life. As it turns out, that avocation eventually provides him with a substitute son. The initial impetus is provided by none other than Helen herself. Plunkett had to fire Helen as a maid due to her imposing proprietorial attitude, but he becomes obsessed with the desire to give her a written history. For him, it is a shame that St. Lucia and her population are always marginalized or omitted from the sanctioned History texts (always capitalized) of the imperial nations. Given Plunkett's allusive imagination and the coincidence of such local names as Achille, Hector, Helen and Philoctete, his design quickly assumes classical overtones. His historical record seizes upon the actual Battle of the Saints as a latter-day confrontation between Greeks and Trojans over a Caribbean Helen. Adding to the Major's enthusiasm, his research into the Battle of the Saints leads him to the name of a Midshipman Plunkett who died serving under the famous British Admiral Rodney. Centuries stand between this father-son connection, but it supplies Dennis Plunkett with the physical link he needs to authenticate his island birthright.

The Major's literal function gradually achieves a deeper significance as he comes to appreciate Helen as a real woman, and not just as the object of his historical manipulation. In this respect his character contributes to the self-reflexive aspect of the text. When he realizes that Helen needs no inscription to give her life meaning, he abandons the project to which he had been so devoted that it "had cost him a son and a wife." The Major continues to heal and to grow after his wife's death from cancer, turning

to Ma Kilman's powers as a medium to communicate with his wife's spirit, and learning to relate to his workmen by their individual names.

Maud Plunkett

The wife of Dennis Plunkett longs for the music and the seasonal changes of her native Ireland. Much as she would like to see her homeland once again, Plunkett will not spare the money for passage. Maud is a static character, the steady anchor to her husband's often quixotic energy. Plunkett refers to her as his "crown," his "queen."

Although she is a secondary character, her influence can be traced in an ever widening circle. While Dennis devotes himself to salvaging a place for Helen in the history of declining empire, he feels guilty for abandoning his wife emotionally. Maud occupies her lonely hours apart from her husband sewing a tapestry with all the birds of the archipelago, complete with Latin name tags, thus functioning as Dennis's Penelope {the wife of Ulysses, who spun by day and unraveled her spinning by night all the time her husband was away). The yellow, low-backed dress that becomes Helen's signature garment is "borrowed" from Maud without permission. Incidentally, Maud's death brings about a sequence of communal bonding. At her funeral Walcott notes the "charity of soul, more piercing than Helen's beauty" revealed in Achille's sympathetic tears. Just outside the church, Helen informs Achille that she is coming back to him. In the ensuing weeks, Major Plunkett seeks out Ma Kilman to ease his grief and he learns to work among his laborers without being patronizing.

Midshipman Plunkett

Young Midshipman Plunkett serves two primary functions in *Omeros.* In an historical flashback, he is the man Admiral Rodney entrusts with a spy mission to Dutch ports to gather information on the enemies of England. Unfortunately he dies later by accidentally falling on his own sword after his ship is breached in the Battle of the Saints. His second, more important, role is to lie dormant for two hundred years before his name is rediscovered, allowing him to become the surrogate son of Major Dennis Plunkett. The Major uses the midshipman imaginatively to link his ancestry with his adopted St. Lucia. It does not matter that the young man passed away centuries before Dennis was born; the event allows him to take pride in the actions of a namesake who died honorably in defense of the Helen of the West Indies.

Admiral Rodney

Commander of the British fleet stationed in Gros Ilet Bay in the eighteenth century, Admiral George Rodney defeated the French fleet under the Count deGrasse on April 12,1782. The Battle of the Saints, named for the small group of Les Saintes islands, is famous in naval history because Rodney's bold "breaking of the line" maneuver established precedent for future naval engagements and his victory solidified the British position in peace negotiations with France.

In *Omeros,* Admiral Rodney dispatches Midshipman Plunkett to spy on the Dutch in book two. He is also responsible for changing the African name of Achille's ancestor from Afolabe to Achilles.

La Sorciere

See Ma Kilman

Seven Seas

See Omeros

Professor Static

See F. Didier

Statics

See F. Didier

Theophile

Theophile is one of the fishermen who gather with Achille and others on the shore before beginning work each day.

Alix Walcott

Alix Walcott, the aged mother of Derek Walcott, appears only once in *Omeros,* but Walcott makes the comment that she is incorporated into his portrayal of Maud Plunkett. The character of Derek Walcott visits her at the nursing home where she is cared for.

The domestic scene in which Walcott meets Alix is a respite from the constantly shifting narrative. The poet must prompt his mother, who struggles to remember the names of her loved ones. She finally recalls "Derek, Roddy, and Pam," the children she bore Warwick. The scene reconfirms Walcott's roots in the island before he must be off again, pursuing a calling that takes him away from the source of his inspiration.

Derek Walcott

Walcott introduces his own persona into *Omeros* and joins in the action on two primary levels. He expresses his own fascination with Helen, enters into dialogue, and is often a participant among groups of characters. In addition, he candidly discusses

autobiographical details and discloses the underlying structure of *Omeros* as he is engaged in the writing process. Despite the apparent transparency of motive, however, it would be a grave error to conclude that the Walcott who appears in *Omeros* is identical to the Walcott who is the author of the text. He expects readers to give him great latitude for poetic license.

The self-reflexive style of the poem depends on the author's freedom to shift perspectives and enter any of the other characters he chooses. His loss of his father, his failed marriages, his schizophrenia are embedded in the afflictions of Achille, Hector, Philoctete, and Dennis Plunkett. He states that in one scene he looks at Maud Plunkett through her husband's eyes. Attending her funeral, he contemplates the irony of his mourning the death of a creation of his own imagination and admits that "the fiction of her life needed a good ending." Then he takes the self-reflection one step farther. Referring to the interchangeableness of his "phantoms" Walcott predicts that readers who suspend their disbelief will themselves become phantoms of the characters with whom they identify.

Elusive as he makes himself, Walcott carries a significant portion of the narrative in his own right. Beginning in book four, he takes the reader with him as he moves to Boston, looks back at the Indian territories through his reading of Catherine Weldon, and tours Europe at the urging of his father's ghost. In Lisbon, he compares the Old World port and its equestrian monuments of conquest with his New World counterpart of colonial ruins and a past "better forgotten than fixed in stony regret." In London, he catches sight of Omeros in the guise of an old bargeman clutching a ragged manuscript. In Maud Plunkett's native country of Ireland, thinking of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake,* he recognizes Anna Livia: "Muse of our age's Omeros." Then, having visited the fabled cities of his father's dreams, he completes the circle and finally returns to St. Lucia in the sixth book. There, under the tutelage of the animated statue of Homer/Omeros in the seventh book, Walcott reaches the same accommodation that Dennis Plunkett has achieved with Helen. Given the choice between the Aegean and the Caribbean Helens, he prefers the living woman rather than the classical image. Art has its compensations, but only St. Lucia's "green simplicities" prove sufficient to maintain his inspiration,

Warwick Walcott

The father of Derek Walcott, Warwick Walcott was an influence on his son's artistic ambitions. This accounts for the two pivotal appearances of Warwick's ghost in *Omeros,* and for the father/son relationships that proliferate throughout the epic as well. Warwick appears first at the end of book one to focus Derek's attention on events of the past and present in the city of his birth. Warning against foreign distractions, Warwick notes the example of the local barber whose loyalties to the Seventh Day Adventists and Marcus Garvey leave him suspended between two Messiahs, representing phantom religious and African paradises. Prominent among the books on the barber's shelf is the multi-volume *World's Great Classics* a collection rife with icons treasured by Major Plunkett, Walcott, and his father. Warwick's second object lesson is more positive. He reminds his son of the unrecognized generations of mothers and grandmothers who labored their

lives away hauling coal up the gangplanks of transient steamers in the deep-water harbor of Castries. Then he performs the role of Virgil's Anchises, who dictated Aeneas's inherited duty to him. Warwick argues that, whereas their ancestors used the implement of their feet, Derek must use his pen "to give those feet a voice."

Warwick materializes a second time at the conclusion of the fourth book, catching his son in a period of depression over his broken marriage and life in Boston. At this juncture, Warwick advises his son to follow the example of the sea-swift and complete his odyssey by circling back home. Because Warwick knows his son still needs to achieve a more balanced grasp of Western influences, he instructs him to walk the streets of the European cities immortalized in *The World's Great Classics* before he returns to St. Lucia. Well before Derek Walcott finds within himself the right kind of love for his homeland, Warwick pronounces their common goal: "to cherish our island for its green simplicities." Only Warwick's untimely death prevented his doing more toward this end. Walcott introduces him into his text in order to establish the hereditary continuity of his epic task in *Omeros.*

Catherine Weldon

The actual Catherine Weldon was a widow from New York whose commitment to the cause of Native Americans led her to the Indian territories of the Dakotas in the 1890s. Walcott's treatment of her as a fictional creation seems to be faithful to the historical and biographical accounts that are available. Weldon became private secretary to Sitting Bull during the time that the Ghost Dance movement was making its way through the plains tribes, creating uneasiness among white settlers and frontier military units. The Ghost Dance offered the Sioux the false promise both the vanishing buffalo herds and past generations of native American warriors would return. They also believed that the magic shirts worn during the dance rituals would render their wearers invulnerable to bullets. White frontiersmen feared the unifying, rallying force of the movement and used the unrest it caused as an excuse for the Wounded Knee Creek massacre of 1890.

Perhaps the most consistent criticism of *Omeros* questions the inclusion of non-Caribbean segments in what is supposed to be a West Indian epic. Critic Robert Bensen has observed that Walcott is more concerned with the person of Catherine Weldon than simply with the time and place she appears in actual history. Weldon is another of Walcott's composite characters, embodying at different times Major Plunkett, Helen, Achille, and Walcott himself. Like Dennis Plunkett, she is an outsider attempting to carveout a place in an adopted society. She is as emblematic and unfathomable as Helen, poised between two worlds. In a mirror image of Achille watching the decimation of his African village, Weldon is relegated to standing by helplessly as Omeros in the persona of a Sioux shaman bemoans the destruction of his village. Weldon servest, as does Dennis Plunkett, to lend a vulnerable human face to the oppressor's side of the imperial equation.

Themes

Affliction, Deprivation, and Self-Esteem

Walcott mentions early in *Omeros* that "affliction is one theme of this work." Philoctete already has the seemingly incurable wound on his shin, and Major Dennis Plunkett has sustained his head injury. Walcott makes it clear, however, that this theme operates on a figurative level as well. Philoctete, for example, traces the persistence of his open sore to the chains shackling his enslaved grandfathers. The Major is tormented by his feelings that, like the history and people of his adopted colonial home, unfairly pushed to the margins of history, his own name and fame will die with him because he has no heir. Achille's afflictions include both the pain in his heart over his loss of Helen and the amnesia he suffers in having been cut off from his cultural roots. Recognizing the dimensions of such wounds, it follows that the cures must be necessarily complex. Philoctete is restored to health when Ma Kilman rediscovers an herb and the homeopathic remedies of her ancient African grandmothers. In order to regain his soul, Achille must be transported in a dream back to the African village from which his ancestors were taken into slavery hundreds of years earlier. Later, when he has grown to accept his identity as a transplanted man of the New World, Helen returns and he can begin the process of helping her to understand the African roots that now draw nourishment from St. Lucian soil. The Major gradually learns to feel whole and to make for himself a place. Helen figures prominently in his quest in the role he has imposed on her as the personification of the island of St. Lucia. Dennis Plunkett decides to rectify history's negligence toward Helen and her people by dedicating himself to writing her history. His subsequent research into the Battle of the Saints fortuitously provides the name of Midshipman Plunkett as his putative. The young man may have died in the conflict, but the crucial value of the Major's discovery is that it gives him a blood tie to St. Lucia. Later, after his wife dies, his attachment to the local people is eternally confirmed as Ma Kilman helps him to feel even closer to Maud than he did when she was alive.

Colonialism and Independence

One of the unfortunate legacies of colonial domination is that subject peoples are prone to value themselves and their colony according to the standards of their subjugators. In *Omeros,* Walcott registers this fact in terms of psychological, sociological, political, and cultural effects. This is the underlying reason he begins his epic by deliberately calling for classical comparisons, and it launches his odyssey to North America and Europe in books four and five. The gesture, however, leaves him open to charges of imitation. This unavoidable influence is also what prompts Major Plunkett to champion Helen's cause by attempting to match Eurocentric history. Achille's journey to Africa gives him back his name and establishes justifiable pride in his origins, but his most valuable insight is that Africa is not his home. His ancestors "crossed, they survived. There is the epical splendour.. .the grace born from subtraction." Philoctete's involvement in Maljo's

abortive political campaign underscore's the internecine strife that threatens a newly independent nation experimenting with democracy. Self- determination all too obviously does not guarantee cultural independence. One of the most insidious vestiges of neo-colonialism has become tourism. The natural beauty of tropical havens attracts so many leisure transients that national economies become vulnerable to foreign priorities. Reacting to the changes being wrought in St. Lucia by modernizing entrepreneurs, Walcott's persona begins to suspect his own relationship with the island. Near the end of the poem, the influx of tourists and corporate interests drives Achille and Philoctete to undertake a voyage in search of an unspoiled island where they could begin anew. Eventually they recognize that they must return and defend their integrity in the midst of a society that remains under duress.

Art and Reality

One of the pervasive themes that begins early and grows to paramount importance in the last two books centers on Walcott's self-reflexive point of view in *Omeros.* Walcott names his poem after Homer, the wandering poet who initiated the epic tradition, and he incorporates elements of the genre in order to sustain expectations. Since his intention is to validate a corner of the world that past generations have considered unimportant, he must ultimately negate expected terms of heroism and advance a new perspective. He creates room to maneuver when he first insists that every "I" is a fiction. This allows him to invest some aspect of his own persona in one after another of his characters. Such candor also disrupts the artifice of his text and allows the reader to feel more immediately privy to his intentions. He and Major Plunkett start out together in asserting their West Indian Helen's right to the coincidental Greek and Trojan parallels. But both of them come to understand that by molding Helen into the object of their imaginative designs, they do an injustice to the actual woman, who has a right to be no more nor less than just herself. In keeping with every imperial conqueror before them, they were exploiting a resource for their own gain. Gradually *Omeros* begins to dismantle the artistic structure to advance the reality that is its inspiration. After having been impressed by the monuments dedicated to European conquistadors in the fifth book, Walcott expresses a preference not for the statues, "but for the bird in the statue's hair." He advances another step when in the next book he comes to realize that as an artist he is guilty of wanting to preserve the quaint world of the poor in his imagery. He concludes that "Art is History's nostalgia," sacrificing the real for his idealized creation. He then risks interrogation of his own reason for writing about Achille, who would never care to read his own story. His answer, typically metaphorical, is twofold. First, the illiterate sea, which never reads the epics of mankind is still its own "epic where every line was erased /yet freshly written in sheets of exploding surf." Second, Achille's race, like living coral that builds on itself, "a quiet culture is branching from the white ribs of each ancestor." Finally he speaks through Major Plunkett when he decides to let Helen be herself, the reality on which the sun shines naturally, for "she was not a cause or a cloud, only a name for a local wonder."

Form serves function in *Omeros* as forces of hegemonic power, deprivation, colonial neglect, and paternalistic literary influences come under the scrutiny of an artist from the

third world, who records his people's struggle to establish their identity, self-esteem and independence even while he questions his own artistic processes.

Style

Epic Features

Although *Omeros* superficially resembles canonical epics in many ways, Walcott purposely deviates from the genre in order to broaden the scope of this traditionally heroic form. The lengthy though not consistently elevated poetic language is often more lyrical than purely narrative. There is no attempt to appear objective and the protagonists range from the poet himself to simple peasants who are the opposite of demigods engaged in great battles. Walcott depends on frequent allusions to and parallels with Homer, Virgil, Dante, and others, but his goal is to validate simple men and women whose very survival possesses unexpectedly heroic dimensions.

Point of View

Because Walcott makes his own persona one of the protagonists, his perspective is always at hand. Under other circumstances this might undermine the individuality of other characters; however, in this case, Walcott uses a self-reflexive technique, candidly insisting that each narrative "I" is a fiction, including his own. This is a crucial point, considering that one of his purposes is to dramatize the fact that all accounts of events, whether in an epic poem or a "factual" history, are selective narratives. The controlling "I" determines what is central and what is relegated to the margins. Walcott is present in his characters, and from that vantage point he is able to comment on roles played within the text.

Setting

The main action takes place in postcolonial St. Lucia, North America, and some major European capitals. Historically, the West Indies have been indelibly shaped by the influx of alien races and cultures; therefore, the story telescopes backward in time to introduce past events that have inpacted the present. In a vision, Achille is transported three hundred years into the past to recover forgotten African rituals and witness tribesmen being captured by members of their own race for sale into slavery. Other episodes include the Battle of the Saints from 1782 and incidents from the 1890s in the American frontier. The story follows Walcott himself as he travels from St. Lucia to Boston, to Europe, and back to the Caribbean. Since all the events have psychological repercussions for various characters, much of the action is internal, as each resolvse personal problems.

Allusions

From the very beginning, *Omeros* depends on the reader picking up on numerous allusions to classical literary epics. The title refers to Homer, and many of the

characters' names echo leading figures from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey.* In addition, as Major Plunkett pursues his historical research, he finds parallels between the Trojan war and the Battle of the Saints. Aside from the classical and historical allusions, Walcott also makes reference to more recent authors, painters, and sculptors as he explores the manner by which he and other artists translate their reality into art.

Imagery

Walcott makes extensive use of sensory perception throughout *Omeros.* The pronunciation of Omeros' name is replicated in the "O" sound of the blown conch shell. The blind Omeros perceives his environment by ear. Walcott and his fishermen characters relate to the sea as mother, "mer" in their patois, and her surf writes and erases her message all along the shoreline of their island. Birds proliferate on Maud Plunkett's tapestry and the sea-swift becomes a focal point for several characters, both literally and figuratively. Philoctete's existence is almost defined by his painful wound. Helen's beauty, her proud bearing, and her signature yellow dress turn heads wherever she appears. Aside from these standard appeals to the senses, Walcott's self-reflexive text draws attention to itself. He mentions his thought of a Crow horseman taking shape as he inscribes it in book four; then in the fifth book falling snow and the whiteness of the physical page itself become conflated with "the obliteration of nouns fading into echoes, the alphabet of scribbling branches."

Symbolism

The ubiquitous sea is not only the element surrounding Walcott's island, connecting it with distant continents and serving as the source of the fishermen's sustenance. It also symbolizes the historical amnesia afflicting St. Lucia's native population. Generations of African emigrants have forgotten their roots, just as each wave line left on the shore is erased by its successor Time and again these ancestors are seen as a line of worker ants, toiling anonymously under unfair burdens. The sea-swift in flight makes the sign of the cross against the sky; it leads Achille's pirogue on his African odys-sey. The ghost of Warwick Walcott cites the swift's habitual flight pattern, seaward and back, as the model his son must trace back to St. Lucia. Wounds within each character symbolize the afflictions attendant upon slavery, colonialism, and metropolitan subjugation. Ma Kilman's homeopathic cure of Philoctete serves as baptism into a new life, freeing him to remember the past without being its victim. The journey motifs—whether in dreams to Africa or to Soufriere's Malebolge; whether they are the poet's personal sojourns to the United States and Europe; whether to connect the present with Greece, the Battle of the Saints, or the American Dakotas— all represent the diverse paths leading to wholeness for Walcott's protagonists.

Prosody

The basic poetic structure of *Omeros* is occasionally off-rhymed terza rima stanzas. The rhyme scheme often interlocks, as is expected of terza rima, but Walcott ranges from exact to many forms of off-rhyme. On rare occasions, there are couplets and tetrameter passages. Walcott had descrived his meter as "roughly hexametrical"; the "roughly" needs emphasis. The numbers of loose iambic feet vary to the extent that the stanzas often approximates free verse.

Historical Context

Helen of the West Indies

The setting of *Omeros* ranges from the past to the present in the Caribbean, Africa, North America and Europe, but the constant center is Walcott's native island of St. Lucia. St. Lucia is the second largest of the Windward group of the Lesser Antilles. Small and insignificant as it may appear among so many islands, it has a remarkably colorful history. The population in 1990 was 151,00, comprised of 90.3% African descent, 5.5% mixed, 3.2% East Indian, 0.8% European. Early attempts at European settlement were undertaken in the sixteenth century. Largely because of its strategic location and its fine harbors, St. Lucia rapidly became a pawn in Europe's imperial expansion. The island was passed between England and France fourteen times before it was finally ceded to England by the Treaty of Paris in 1814. As a result of the martial and legal contention, St. Lucia has been called the Gibraltar of the Caribbean and the Helen of the West Indies. Agricultural products have been the main source of revenue—first sugar, then bananas. Until the advent of petroleum fueled ships in the late 1920s locally mined coal was important in the economy.

Despite the fact that the official language has been English since 1842, a majority of the population continues to speak a French patois and 90% are Roman Catholic. This is the milieu in which Derek Walcott, an educated, middle-class, artistically gifted member of a Methodist family, grew to adulthood. Contending with white grandfathers and black grandmothers on both sides of his family and the premature death of his father when he was only an infant, Walcott struggled to find himself with few established guidelines. As he expressed it in his autobiographical poem *Another Life,* 1972, "The dream of reason had produced its monster; a prodigy of the wrong age and colour." As a student, he was impressed with the poetry of Guadeloupe born Saint-John Perse (pseudonym of Alexis Saint-Leger Leger), but his own early verse and drama reflect the British colonial educational influences of the metaphysical poets and of Milton, Dylan Thomas, Eliot, Johm Millington Synge and Joyce. Later he adds traces of Hemingway, Kipling, Conrad, then writers who have become personal friends, Robert Lowell, Joseph Brodsky, and Seamus Heaney. Regardless of the number of Western masters he may have assimilated, Walcott remains constant in his determination to draw from the most immediate subject matter of his life, the confluence of disparate cultures in the West Indies.

The Middle Passage

One inevitable pole of Walcott's heritage is Africa. For this reason, he felt it necessary to send Achille back three hundred years, across the Middle Passage on a dream quest to eliminate the amnesia and the shame inflicted by the history of Western subjugation. Treated as merchandise and dispersed without regard to family ties, or place of origin, forced to give up their religions, customs, and given Western names, slaves could retain

and pass down only fragments of their African identity. Walcott treats Achille's indoctrination as instinctive or racial memory. In the primitive dress, instruments, and rituals, he detects traces of ancient African practices he only partially understands in St. Lucian society. When he has Achille observe one African tribe abduct members of another to be sold into slavery, Walcott dramatizes the fact that man's inhumanity to man knows no racial boundaries. Walcott is careful not to imply that Achille's knowledge of tribal life makes him somehow become African. It is important to him that Achille simply reclaim this part of his past and incorporate it into his authentic identity as a West Indian, an integral member of a Creole culture. Toward the end of *Omeros* he is thus enabled to teach Helen the deeper meaning of Boxing Day masquerades that predate their Christmas associations.

The Battle of the Saints

At the other pole of Walcott's existence is his European heritage. This aspect of Caribbean history is largely devoted to Major Plunkett and his discovery of Midshipman Plunkett: men from separate centuries whose lives intersect after some two hundred years over a famous maritime battles between England and France. Walcott's treatment of the Battle of the Saints does not emphasize European glory. Walcott and his character Dennis Plunkett are interested in this momentous battle for more domestic reasons. Together they see it as evidence of St. Lucia's intrinsic value, not as a European prize, but for its claim on them as individuals.

Independence

For modern emancipated citizens of the country, such as Philoctete, Hector, and Maljo, the current battle to possess Helen centers on their social and political custodianship. Walcott witnessed the abortive experiment of the West Indian Federation from 1956 until its collapse in 1962. The failure of the Federation disappointed Walcott because he saw it as an opportunity to integrate and combine the resources of smaller islands into a more effective, stronger unit. In the aftermath of the Federation, St. Lucia became an independent state within the British Commonwealth on February 22, 1979. Although the Federation does not figure directly in *Omeros,* the shortsightedness and destructive political infighting that destroyed the Federation are embodied in the epic's national election scene. It is tempting to see in the acronyms of the two parties Maljo wishes to oppose (LP and WWPP) the Progressive Labour Party and the United Workers Party. The parallel is especially interesting since Walcott mentions a candidate named Compton and the Honorable John Compton of the United Workers Party actually won the bitterly contested election of May 1982.

North and South

The shadow of North America looms large over the Caribbean basin and Walcott's professional life, and is included in his West Indian epic. Since Walcott is a participant in

the poem and he insists that as a West Indian he is a citizen of the Americas, his sojourn in the United States is as much a part of his extended landscape as is Africa. Once again he telescopes history, this time to dramatize the irony of a postcolonial United States that nearly wiped out one race and enslaved another. Rather than focus on the genocidal policies that threaten to annihilate the Crow and Sioux, Walcott concentrates on the historical figure of Catherine Weldon, who lost a son and suffered the ostracism of her own race in order to support the Native American cause. Walcott gives a human face to sympathetic members of the white oppressor class, such as Weldon and the Plunketts, and in alluding to the many Western authors and artists in the Euro- American section of his epic, but he is not attempting to mitigate the overwhelming evil of imperial domination and slavery; rather, he is attempting to come to grips with both the black and white polarities of his personal existence. The essential thrust of *Omeros* is reconciliation, redemption, and the empowerment of Creole West Indian consciousness.

Critical Overview

Since *Omeros* is a book of epic proportions written primarily in English by a black poet from a small Caribbean islands, its very existence is fraught with political complications. Walcott is an assimilator who does not hesitate to exploit every facet of his polyglot experience, whether his choices offend Afro-Caribbean purists or humanist liberals. Too little time has passed since publication of *Omeros* in 1990 for critical opinion to have settled definitively; however, certain aspects of the work often come under scrutiny in the commentary that has appeared. In spite of Walcott's argument to *New York Times* columnist D. J. R. Bruckner that he was not writing a "conundrum for scholars," it is impossible for commentators to ignore explicit epic references and parallels. To their credit, most of them quickly delve beneath the surface to focus on Walcott's creative deviation from the formula. Rei Terada's book *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry,* for example, stresses the complexity and sophistication of Walcott's manipulation of Homeric and other Western paradigms. Her chapter on *Omeros* pursues the idea that Walcott subtly disguises the representational nature of his own fictional characters by comparing them with their classical Greek archetypes. As a result, his "realistic" characters are more immediately vivified in contrast with the "art" they imitate. John Lucas, reviewing for the *New Statesman and Society,* argues that Walcott's exploitation of the masters presents no constriction. Classical analogies aside, Lucas contends that "the glory of *Omeros* is in the manner of its telling, in Walcott's masterly twining of the narrative threads, and also in the poem's seemingly inexhaustible linguistic riches.

Regarding the prosody and scope of *Omeros* the verdict is divided. Among those who suggest that Walcott is too ambitious, that he may have overwritten, or spread this West Indian poem too thinly in attempting to incorporate North America and Europe are Christopher Bakken in *The Georgia Review,* Christopher Benfey in *The New Republic,* Brad Leithauser in *The New Yorker,* David Mason in *The Hudson Review* and Sean O'Brien in *The Times Literary Supplement.* Regardless of his reservations, Leithauser echos Lucas in praising Walcott's linguistic virtuosity. Impressed by the range and variety of Walcott's rhyme schemes, Leithauser offers *Omeros* as "a rhyme casebook" because Walcott has "a sure, prepossessing vocabulary, a deft and ludic wit, ... an intricately calibrated ear.... wonderful analogical talents." St. Lucia-born scholar Pat Ismond, in her *Caribbean Contact* review, goes so far as to assert that Walcott's poem is "informed by a lyric" rather than an epic muse. Furthermore, writing from her perspective within the Caribbean, she disagrees with those metropolitan critics who find Walcott's excursions beyond the West Indies to be problematic. She appreciates the larger New World nexus of colonial reality. In confronting North America's unconscionable treatment of Native tribesmen, Ismond contends that Walcott "makes a truly revolutionary gesture," positing the heart of America in the Dakota plains rather than embracing the stereotypical image of Pilgrims in New England. Equally sensitive to die impetus behind Walcott's looking beyond the Caribbean, Geert Lernout argues in *Kunapipi* that it is the poet's dual vision that makes *Omeros* a "powerful

achievement":"Walcott presents the two sides, the benevolent colonialism of the minor officials of the empire on the one hand and the descendants of slaves on the other."

The polarities noted by Lernout are obviously also the sources of Walcott's personal and cultural heritage. The African episode in *Omeros* fits so seamlessly as to go unremarked by most critics. Creole by birth as well as by experience and education, his roots are nurtured by European as well as African sources. Lernout mentions in passing that Walcott and James Joyce accomplish similarly patriotic objectives for their respective island nations. Writing for the *Southern Review,* Sidney Bums insists that in rhetoric, humor, structure and style, Joyce's *Ulysses* is likely "to emerge as the most generous sponsor of *Omeros."* In addition to Homer and Joyce, critics are finding a growing number of informative parallels with other Western models At least three recent articles that seize upon Helen as the thematic center of *Omeros* make the case for Walcott's contribution to and extension of time-honored prototypes. According to Charlotte McClure in *Studies in the Literary Imagination,* Walcott's female protagonist assumes an identity of her own after 2500 years of varied treatment. Comparing the Helens of Hart Crane and Hilda Doohttle with Walcott's creation, McClure concludes that without the benefit of female support within her patriarchal society, the Caribbean Helen achieves autonomy, ultimately breaking free of Homeric and Sophocle-an associations. In *World Literature Today,* Julia Minkler draws upon Shakespeare's *Tempest* to discuss Helen among her St. Lucian Calibans, Prospero, Miranda Ariel and Sycorax. Minkler finds Walcott's Helen "not only Caliban's physiognomically complementary mate but the pivotal force of creation and procreation as well." Then, contributing to a collection entitled *Robinson Crusoe: Myths and Metamorphoses,* Paula Burnett locates Walcott's new Helen within the rich Crusoe-Friday myth that itself grows out of the Ulysses legend. Due to their healing power, "moral courage, endurance, compassion, and knowledge of the human condition," Helen and Ma Kilman are primary forces in Walcott's narrative of the "handover of white power to black, in the name of a multiracial and multicultural future in which the wounds of history stay healed."

From some of the claims represented among these critics, it is apparent that Walcott's *Omeros* is expected to be capable of sustaining a weighty philosophical and aesthetic burden. Even before Walcott's receipt of the Nobel Prize in 1992, *Omeros* began attracting more and more serious scholarly attention. Among the books on the poem that will inevitably be making their appearance is Robert Hamner's *An Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott's Omeros,* scheduled for publication in 1997.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, "The Aleatory Muse of Omeros," Hamner surveys ways that Walcott's work both adheres to and diverges from classic epic traditions.

Omeros and wisely proceed to Walcott's deviations from the traditional formula. At this point some conventional approaches begin to note perceived weaknesses. One common objection, voiced by David Mason in *The Hudson Review* and Sean O'Brien in *The Times Literary Supplement,* is that Walcott errs in attempting to include Euro-American material in what is ostensibly a West Indian epic. Another complaint, offered by Christopher Bakken in *The Georgia Review,* is that rhetoric occasionally threatens to overwhelm the narrative impetus. One answer to both these concerns is that *Omeros* is to a significant extent the offspring of chance, fortune, the coincidental roll of dice, Walcott's aleatory muse. At least this is a stratagem, an authorial ploy that allows Walcott to exploit the ambient space between the vital people who are his immediate subject and the aesthetic distance required to depict their lives artistically.

Chance and coincidence are sufficiently important to Walcott that he makes them explicit in minor details and within the thinking processes of major characters. In her *American Mimicry,* for example, Rei Terada comments on 1) Walcott's paying attention to spelling errors; 2) both Walcott's and English expatriate Major Plunkett's fascination with one-to-one correspondences between Aegean and Caribbean events; and 3) coincidental details mentioned by Warwick Walcott diat link him with Shakespeare and *Hamlet.* Certainly, Achille accidentally gets "trust" wrong in naming his canoe *In God We Troust,* Major Plunkett misspells the Arawak word "Iounalo," and a sign is misprinted "HEWANNORRA." Clearly, Walcott in his own persona and Major Plunkett expend much of their energy in the poem pursuing a well-intentioned, nonetheless misguided, quest to immortalize their West Indian Helen in emulation of Homer's white paradigm. This eclectic blend of misprision and fancied correspondence in *Omeros,* however, goes much deeper than these overt manifestations. Indeed it pervades the subtext and Walcott's aesthetic technique. Since Walcott makes himself a participant within *Omeros,* the circumstances of his birth serve as one antecedent accident. As he describes his predicament in *Another Life,* "reason had produced its monster: a prodigy of the wrong age and color." Even his obscure island happened to be so desirable to France and England that he grew up being taught St. Lucia was the "Helen of the West Indies."

An impressionable Walcott absorbed such incidental correspondences until he eventually realized their potential not only as subject for analogy, but also for the recognition latent within any accident or mistake. Shortly before undertaking the writing of *Omeros,* Walcott explained at a literary conference the lesson he learned when he mistyped the word "love" in his manuscript where he intended to say "life." It immediately occurred to him that this slip of the finger registered a truth he had not previously conceptualized. He records his conclusion later in "Caligula's Horse" for *Kunapipi;* "That is one part of the poetic process, accident as illumination, error as truth,

typographical mistakes as revelation." As a matter of fact, early in the second chapter of *Omeros* Walcott candidly informs readers that his very title grows out of a simple mistake. When he speaks of Homer to his lover, a Greek sculptress, she informs him that the authentic pronunciation of the name is "Omeros." Title in hand, with all its connotations, Walcott undertakes the conversion of Aegean rudiments into a Caribbean narrative. This epic of the dispossessed centers on a Creole island that has dropped between the lines of history. Since St. Lucia and her people have been lost or marginalized in the record of European conquest, Walcott may be said to have "found" them and himself as subject matter. Already at hand are black countrymen named after figures from classical myth and legend, educated under a system of hierarchical Western values. The precursor of Helen, he explains in a *Green Mountains Review* interview with J. P. White, is the woman he happened to encounter on a local transport bus. Portraying this incident in "The Light of the World" from *The Arkansas Testament,* Walcott introduces this remarkable ebony rival to Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People,* a van like Hector's Comet, the Halcyon Hotel where Helen will be employed at the close of *Omeros,* and he registers his desire to give something to these people he has abandoned in pursuit of art.

Thus it would be appropriate to categorize the contents of *Omeros* as "found art." At least that is the impression Walcott cultivates in having Helen first appear as a mirage before his persona. When his eye happens upon this feline beauty in madras head-tie and yellow dress, the narrator can only pronounce, "And all the rest followed." From one unexpected vision, all the other characters, themes, and plot lines cohere in Helen both as a person and as the embodiment of St. Lucia. Initially, she may serve as a cause just as her Greek namesake does in the *Iliad;* however, in the modern setting no demigods are found working their will on a grand scale. Instead, Walcott consistently presents a sequence of events wherein ordinary humans must feel their way tentatively, reacting to shifts in fortune, whose most well-intentioned plans may turn out to be misguided. Of the four major questing figures, only Achille and Ma Kilman achieve untainted goals. In each case, they succeed not through personal assertion but by allowing an external power to reveal missing knowledge. The overriding difference is that Ma Kilman responds to instinct and follows a trail of ants in locating the African herb that cures Philoctete's physical and spiritual affliction. Achille, in turn, succumbs to a sunstroke-induced trance to regain the African heritage that had been wrested from his people by the Middle Passage. For Dennis Plunkett, "all the rest" begins with his commitment to giving Helen the history she has been denied, making her the object of the Battle of the Saints. Apparently, even Helen's possession of the butterfly-colored frock that serves as the standard for that famous battle comes into her possession due to misunderstanding. Whether she imagined Maud Plunkett intended it for her or she stole it, there is the accomplished fact. Equally determined to exonerate Helen, Walcott undertakes her artistic representation through the Westernized paraphernalia of *Omeros.*

Before these men realize the colonial paternalism inherent in their agendas for Helen, the stations of their quests afford fruitful insights. Pursuing his research, the Major happens upon a surrogate for the son he and Maud were unable to conceive. Although young Midshipman Plunkett died over 200 years ago, by accidentally falling on his own sword during the Battle of the Saints, the Major's discovery of his name in the annals of

the military engagement is sufficient to confirm his blood-ties to his adopted country. His luck in finding the name unexpectedly and his obsession with fortunate parallels, however, only affirm the European framework of his historical account. After his wife's untimely death, he becomes more thoroughly integrated into authentic island society when he calls on Ma Kilman's powers as an obeah-woman to establish communication with Maud in the afterlife. Humbled by personal loss and realizing that he had been inadvertently imposing his will on Helen's story, he at last concedes that she is "not a cause... only a name for a local wonder."

Walcott's sojourn carries him away from the island to North America and Europe in books four and five—the portions of the epic that some critics see as the least artistically defensible. The fact that Walcott's own professional life necessitated foreign residence is insufficient alone to justify the material of these two books. An equally autobiographical yet more compelling motive may be found in the "accident" of his being born of mixed blood. Not only has he sung this theme since adolescence, but it is as integral a component of his existence, as it is of all Creoles, regardless of whether they wish to acknowledge the disparate sides of their ancestry. Walcott's "all the rest" encompasses this broader context. When he needs an alter ego to share the pain of a broken marriage and growing disenchantment with the American Dream, an unlikely figure jumps from the pages of a book he is reading, Rex Smith's *Moon of Popping Trees.* As Walcott explains, "Catherine Weldon arose in high relief ... making a fiction of my own loss." Prompted by the ghost of his father, he traces the roots of colonialism to the decadent seats of European empire. In the Old World, he learns to prefer the birds perched on the commemorative statues to the monuments themselves. That lesson is reiterated when he returns to St. Lucia and the image of Homer himself counsels that, "A girl smells better than the world's libraries." In addition, this talking statue of authority argues that as powerful as love for a woman may be, "the love of your own people is greater." Acting in Virgil's capacity as guide to Dante in *The Inferno,,* the statue removes Walcott's remaining illusions by taking him through St. Lucia's inferno near Soufriere. After thisecorrective experience, Walcott reaches an epiphany similar to that of Dennis Plunkett:' "The sea was my privilege. And a fresh people."

Although Walcott draws many literary figures into *Omeros,* it is imperative to note one other crucial influence on the epic. Walcott, who is a painter as well as a poet and playwright, has always sketched scenes for his poetry and drama. This is important because he plans to publish in a separate book the ink and watercolor illustrations he has prepared for *Omeros,* and also for his technical affinities with two out of the many graphic artists he cites directly. The lucky coincidence of Winslow Homer's surname, in itself, merely fits into the litany of correspondences. However, when Walcott chances upon Homer's *The Gulf Stream* he is forced into a singular recognition. Homer's realistic depiction of a lone Negro sailor adrift in a dismasted skiff between voracious sharks and an oblivious sailboat on the horizon leads to his exclamation, "Achille! My main man, my nigger! /... forever, between our island and the coast of Guinea." Combined in that electric moment are two painters, two Homers, and two representatives of a race suspended precariously between the Old and New Worlds. The second painter deserving special notice is equally instructive, but for an entirely different reason. Walcott's allusion to Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* should elicit the heart of Dadaist

"aleatory," "chance" or "found art" theory. It is this anti-art technique that underlies Walcott's non-linear plotting of *Omeros.* Whereas Duchamp declares a "ready-made" urinal to be an art object, Walcott proclaims the artistic validity of St. Lucia's readily available but disregarded population. Furthermore, when Walcott mentions the accidental cracks in Duchamp's *Large Glass,* he draws from this artist's celebration of the creative value of mishaps. Speaking to Katherine Kuh in *The Artist's Voice,* Duchamp explains his random dropping of three lengths of thread onto painted strips of canvas to form his iconoclastic *3 Standard Stoppages:* "The idea of letting a piece of thread fall on a canvas was accidental, but from this accident came a carefully planned work. Most important was the accepting and recognizing of this accidental stimulation."

Neither Duchamp's nor Walcott's manipulation of chance and ready-made objects can be taken as purely haphazard. Their material is carefully selected, yet each choice is cast as random enough to maximize a sense of spontaneity—creativity arising from the mundane. Walcott's characters may seem diminished when compared with the glorious warriors of the *Iliad,* the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid,* but as he demonstrates, they possess a dimension of heroism all their own. *Omeros* has room for good-hearted Dennis Plunkett whose putative son inadvertently anchors the Major's life in St. Lucia by his accidental death. It is also about Walcott, Achille and the other descendants of Afolabe and the female colliers whose menial labor fueled the economy of an empire. Walcott's contribution is to demonstrate that, although they did not set out to conquer anyone, were not able to return to their native land, and did not found a marbled Rome, "they crossed, they survived. There is the Epical splendour."

Source: Robert D Hamner, for *Epics for Students,* Gale Research, 1997

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Minkler proposes that in many ways, Walcott's Omeros *retells Homer's version of the story of Helen of Troy — but with Helen a victorious rather than victimized figure. Minkler also offers comparisons with* The Tempest, *by William Shakespeare—a play that, similarly to Walcott's work, features an island setting and a much-desired central female character.*

But she'd last forever, Helen.

In book 1 of *The Histories* Herodotus implies that Helen of Sparta (alias Helen of Troy) was lewd and unchaste (an opinion shared by other fifth-century men of letters as well), "for," hesays, "itis obvious that no young woman *allows* herself to be abducted if she does not *wish* to be." Herodotus also mentions another version of the abduction story (a version, however, of which he himself seems quite skeptical), according to which Helen did not really go to Troy but ended up in Egypt, where she spent some time at the court of King Proteus.Finally, according to Euripides in *Helen,* Hera, "angry that she was not given the prize," gave Priam's son "a breathing image out of the sky's air" so that Paris would hold a "vanity" (i.e., a shadow) instead of the real woman.

Certainly, Helen's legend has endured numerous interpretations from many cultures, from classical mythology to the present, or, as Derek Walcott says in *Omeros,* his most extensive poetic work, "Smoke wrote the same story since the dawn of time" (2.23.2). Caribbean culture is no exception. Resonant of the Homeric story yet at die same time successfully adapted to the specificity of the region's *tempora* and *mores,* the Helen theme is multifariously present in Caribbean literature and folklore. From the popular Jamaican song "Helena," to Stanley French's play *The Rape of Fair Helen,* to Walcott's *Omeros* and his recent stage adaptation of the *Odyssey,* Helen's myth and "nature" are now seen under a new, inter/metacultural perspective.

Specifically in *Omeros* the St. Lucian poet, critic, and playwright Walcott treats Helen in an idiosyncratic narrative of Caribbean aspiration and inspiration. His version of Helen deviates considerably from the original matrix. For him, Helen's story is no longer the account of her abduction by Paris and her exile in Troy but rather that of her growth as a woman after the war. What is more, Paris himself is no longer accounted for in the text except through a pun implied by the name of the sunken battleship *Ville de Paris* ("City of Pans," "Vile Paris").

This new Antillean Helen should not be seen as a victim but rather as the axis about which the entire "horned island" (1.7.2) and its elemental men rotate: Achille, a dignified version of Menelaus; Hector, Paris's counterpart and, like Pans, a man of duplicitous nature; Philoctete, a low-key character suffering from an incurable leg wound; the Vagrant Poet, a version of divine Homer himself; and Dennis Plunkett, the softhearted colonizer of a town "he had come to love" (2.22.3). In brief, Walcott changes the original story, in which the male captor victimizes his female captive, into a story of seduction—this time, however, it is a seduction of the male by the female.

Finally, and above all, Walcott turns the original story into an account of textual rebirth for both male and female. This new story, "Not his, but her story," takes over immediately after the war, "Not theirs, but Helen's war" (1.5.3). Unlike the white Helen, who has died long ago "In that pause that divides the smoke with a sword" (1.6.2), this Helen of the West Indies (7.62.1) seems happily settled down in a revived postwar Troy, which she now tenderly but possessively calls *her* village (1.5.3); for, in her new Antillean transformation, as one sees it unfold in and out of *Omeros,* Helen symbolizes as well as personifies the island itself, which is likewise called Helen (2.19.1,2.19.3).

In addition to being resonant of the Homeric story, however, Walcott's *Omeros* is also reminiscent of yet another work, Shakespeare's *Tempest** Not only does it share with the latter such characteristics as an island setting and a storm as catalyst, but it also relates to *The Tempest* on the basis of the psychological and/or symbolic proximities of its main characters, save one. In particular, both Achille and Hector, the local fishermen antiheroes of the poem, partly identify with Caliban, the "abhorred slave," the "savage," and the "thing most brutish" of Shakespeare's play. At times Philoctete, who "anoint[s] the mouth of his sore" (1.3.2), thus "feeding" his wound, also identifies with Caliban, who, in *The Tempest,* is bound by Prospero to "feed" the island's gaping "wound," its furnace. Omeros, Ihe omniscient, omnipresent, yet invisible Poet, and his local visible reduction, Seven Seas, the island's blind griot and seer (3.28.1), resemble Prospero, the island's master poet, sage, and magus. The Vagrant Poet-Narrator (and at times Walcott himself) often evokes an echo of Ariel, Prospero's bewildered captive. Eager to disentangle himself from Homer's intellectual web (thus opting for a Caribbean identity that is no longer uncritically dependent on a cultural subordination to the West and its tradition), he gradually succeeds in freeing himself and his island from *the* poet's enchanted but fatal grasp. Ma Kil[l]man, the owner of the No Pain Cafe, an Obeah figure who ultimately cures Philoctete's gangrenous wound, represents the domesticated version of Sycorax, Caliban's absent mother. Last but not least, Maud Plunkett, obsessed with her never-ending (and Penelope-like) quilt-making, stitching birds "into her green silk with sibylline steadiness" (7.62.2), becomes a more mature, toned-down Miranda.

Helen, on the other hand, who in the poem personifies the concretized version of a long-awaited Canbbean identity, resists comparison and belongs to no one. Throughout the narrative she functions independently of the other characters' fates, as she alone stands and acts outside that narrative. At the same time, and of all the other characters in *Omeros,* she is the one to determine the narrative's progressions and its crucial outcome as well. Already divergent from her Greek counterpart, Walcott's Helen does not on first impression seem to parallel any of the characters from *The Tempest,* yet in a unique way she does.

In "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silenc-ing the 'Demonic Ground' of 'Caliban's Woman"' Sylvia Wynter analyzes the adverse relation of "sameness" and "difference" that unifies yet differentiates Caribbean womanists from white feminists. Wynter brilliantly suggests that we see the silenced Caribbean and black American woman as the long-anticipated mate of Caliban, so pronouncedly absent from *The Tempest.* Addressing previously posed questions on the absence of Caliban's legitimate father

and the "silent presence of a mother not yet fully understood," Wynter now poses the significant question on the absence of Caliban's Woman, i.e. "of Caliban's physiognomically complementary mate" (SW, 360). Characteristically, Wynter says:

Nowhere in Shakespeare's play ... does Caliban's mate appear as an alternative sexual-erotic model of desire .. Rather there, on the New World island, as the only woman, Miranda ... is canonized as the "rational" object of desire; as the potential genitrixof a superior mode of human "life," that of "good natures." (SW, 360)

According to Wynter (as well as to Maryse Conde, whom Wynter quotes), Caliban is reduced to a labor machine. His nondesire for his own mate, a woman like him, as well as his nonneed for the procreation of his own "kind," constitutes the founding function of the social pyramid of a global order,"put in place following upon the 1492 arrival of Columbus in the Caribbean" (SW, 360). The absence of Caliban's endogenous desire for his kind of woman and instead the soldering of Ms nevertheless-existing sexual desires onto Miranda (SW, 361), the woman he absolutely *cannot* have, polarize Caliban's unconscious. Thus he is now displaced from the state of a "brutish slave" to that of a frustrated and almost schizohrenic being. In Wynter's view, Caliban's Woman, seen as the harbinger of a new era of consciousness in the Caribbean, would/could have helped (if allowed into existence) to reinstate Caliban's human status, otherwise subhuman.

At this point, further elaboration on the concept of Caliban's Woman is necessary. In her essay Wynter seems primarily concerned with the political rather than literary dimensions of this concept. For her, the Caribbean womanist—whether a member of the intelligentsia, a middle-class housewife, or a member of the working class—is at last becoming an indispensable factor of Caribbean sociopolitical and cultural reality; and although Wynter too reckons Caliban as a symbol of the Caribbean people in general, from the beginning of their enslavement to their present status of economic subordination to the West, she seems particularly disturbed not so much by the fact of *his misrepresentation* (Caliban now personifying Caribbean males) as by the total *lack of representation* of Caliban's Woman, because of racial and patriarchal domination. In other words, Wynter's concerns as a womanist pertain to the fact that women's marginalization in the Caribbean is colonization twice removed: first by colonial Prosperos and second by colonized Calibans and their repressed desires and needs. Still, one should keep in mind that Wynter's essay is after all *the* concluding statement of a selection of essays wntten by women who write, or write about, literature and who address not only political but literary questions as well. What is more, the fact that in this same essay Wynter calls Caliban's Woman "demonic" (SW, 364)—a notion that in my view is diametrically opposed to Walcott's "Adamic" notion —brings to the surface literary connotations equally implied by this very concept.

Walcott states in "The Muse of History," an essay written in the early seventies, that although amnesia—and especially amnesia of the literary European past—is the "true history" of the Caribbean, "The great *poets* of the New World, from Whitman to Neruda, reject this sense of history. *Their* vision of *man* in the New World is Adamic. "By mentioning Whitman and Neruda, and also Borges, Ce"saire, Saint-John Perse, and

other New World (American, Latin American, or Caribbean) poets, vis-a-vis the Adamic element, Walcott unquestionably relates this image not to political or politicized issues but directly to literature and literary concerns. In addition, Walcott also looks at Caliban from a purely literary angle, openly distancing himself from those New World, militant poets who see Caliban's *mastery* of the *master's* language not as victory but as self-deceit (3-4), thus reducing it to a language that, as Shakespeare put it, taught Caliban only how to curse. Referring to the Adamic man of letters (who is newly "made" but not ignorant of the world) and his second Eden, Walcott says:

The greatpoetry of the New World does not pretend to such innocence [i e., molded after the myth of the noble savage], its vision is not naive. Rather, like its fruits, its savor is a mixture of the acid and the sweet, the apples of its second Eden have the tartness of experience. (5)

As a matter of fact, Walcott's Adamic concept obviates female intervention. Like the biblical Adam, this New World Adam is "made" directly by his "god," without female interference or any other connection, for that matter. As described in *Omeros,* in the New World "each man was a nation in himself, without mother, father, brother" (3.28.1). In this "second Eden with its golden apple" (2.18.2), all "men are born makers, with the original simplicity in every maker since Adam. This is prehistory" (3.28.2).

Going back at this point to Wynter's demonic image, I suggest we see the term *demonic* as the antonym of *Adamic.* I likewise suggest we see the term as far removed from the current Christian connotation as possible. *Demonic* derives from the Greek word *daimon,* meaning god- or goddesslike, a link between gods and humans, and good or bad spirit. In this particular context (i.e., as a good spirit) a demon, especially a female demon, can virtually relate to the spirit (or force) of inspiration, creativity, or to a faculty pertaining to the mind or soul of the individual involved, very much in the sense of the Socratic *daimon*—namely, his conscience. (It is worth mentioning that, in Greek, words such as *inspiration, creativity,* and *conscience* are all feminine.) In this sense, Wynter's "demonic Woman" could represent the second stage of growth for Caliban's Woman, a stage of cultural (since pertaining to creativity) rather than solely political self-consciousness and maturation. Thus, in her demonic stage, Caliban's Woman is no longer looked at as just a Muse—i.e., the inspirational force behind *male* creativity (a stereotypical male contrivance)— but rather creativity *herself,* especially creativity of the mind, for her and for women to follow. As such, Caliban's Woman is viewed as the female creative force that propagates, procreates, and builds upon her own mental capabilities, without man's or "god's" intervention.

her beauty is what no man can claim any more than this bay. Her beauty stands apart at a golden dress, its beaches wreathed with her name.

(7.57.3)

In my view, Walcott's Helen in *Omeros* is the well-balanced conflation of Wynter's demonic model and Caliban's Woman. She is not only Caliban's physiognomically complementary mate but the pivotal force of creation and procreation as well. As the

personification of Caliban's Woman, this new and promising Helen is now pregnant, "carrying Hector's child" (6.49.3). In her saffron dress, stolen from Maud, Helen meanders enigmatically from man to man "with the leisure of a panther" (7.64.2), yet her eyes "never betrayed horned Menelaus or netted Agamemnon in their irises" (7.64.2). She, "Black maid or black mail," is everywhere, yet her presence is "oblique but magnetic" (2.18.2). She could be everybody's, yet, in her remote stillness (7.64.2) and Sphinx-like evasiveness, she belongs to nobody. In her case even the term "Caliban's Woman" becomes a misstatement, since it no longer describes Walcott's Helen accurately, a woman with a glossy but nevertheless substantial personality. It is a fact that in *Omeros* Caliban has at last been blessed with a woman of his "kind," but it is also a fact that he has not, under any circumstances, been able to claim this woman as his own. Rather, it is Helen who *owns* him and men like him.

In an unexpected turn of events, the island's men have become Helen's men instead—Helen's Calibans, so to speak. Her radiance and exuberance push them to extremes. Achille feels "like a dog that is left to nose the scraps of her footsteps" (1.7.1). Hector, *unhommefou* (1.3.1), is determined to fight an enraged Achille (7.59.3), his former friend and companion,"for a tin and Helen" (6.46.1), later to lose his life unfairly and ingloriously. And Major Dennis Plunkett, the colonizer with the heart of gold—himself a Caliban—is "fixed by her glance" (2.18.1), fatally lost in her "seduction of quicksand" (6.53.1). Even Philoctete, who is beyond caring about women, has suddenly become her "footman" (2.20.2). Knowing "It was her burden [the woman's and the island's] he bore," he now wonders:

Why couldn't they love the place, same way, together, the way he always loved her, even with his sore? Love Helenlike a wife in good and bad weather, in sickness and health, its beauty in being poor' The way the leaves loved her, not like a pink leaflet printed with slogans of black people fighting war?

(2.20.2)

From now on, Helen has become an aphorism: Helen, the woman, is no man's prey, no warrior's spoil; Helen, the *island, is* no man's *land.* Finally, as the personification of the demonic woman mustering creativity and wisdom, Helen has bewildered two more of the island's Calibans, the last ones to fall into her nets: Omeros, the divine poet himself; and the Vagrant Poet, the most complex of the poem's Caliban-like characters.

According to the Vagrant Poet, Omeros, who is both his nigger and his captain (3.30.2)—in a word, his exorcism (7.59.1)—personifies creativity, knowledge, and enchantment. Introduced to him by a Greek girl exiled in America, Omeros also personifies the experience of a past trying to grow roots anew inside the New World poet, a past that does "what the past always does: suffer and stare" (1.2.3). What is more, for the Vagrant Poet, Omeros is a vision, the sibylline voice of divine wisdom, and the ever-living discourse with that past. He says "Omeros,"

and *O* was the conch-shell's invocation, *mer* was both mother and sea in our Antillean patois, *os,* a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore.

(1.2.3)

As the source of knowledge (a Prospero figure in the Shakespearean sense as well), Omeros is also portrayed as a snake, thus evoking Eden's serpent.

I saw white-eyed Omeros motionless. He must be deaf too, I thought, as well as blind, since his head never turned, and then he lifted the dry rattle in one hand, and it was the same sound I had heard in Cody's circus, the snake hiss before battle.

(5.43.2)

Both a serpent- and a godlike figure (a trickster/seer), this Caribbean-construed Omeros feels no anger for having shown Woman how to partake of God's knowledge. On the contrary, himself a symbol of wisdom, he allows Helen to savor the fruit of that wisdom unconditionally, in an act of divine communion. In addition to the yellow dress, Helen also steals a bracelet from Maud (the bracelet of knowledge) but is caught in the act by Dennis Plunkett, who, bewitched by her spell, lets her take it.

... he was fixed by her glance in the armoire's full-length mirror, where, one long arm, its fist closed like a snake's head, slipped through a bracelet from Maud's jewel-box, and, with eyes calm as Circe, simply continued, and her smile said, "You will let me try this," which he did He stood at the mercy of that beaked, black arm, which with serpentine leisure replaced the bangle... The bracelet coiled like a snake. He heard it hissing: Her housebound slavery could be your salvation.

(2.18.1-2)

Viewed as *the* poet's embrace with her in disguise, this serpentine bracelet underlines Helen's spiritual communion with the absolute ideal of knowledge.

Last of all, the Vagrant Poet—Walcott's Adamic man par excellence—entrusts Helen with the secrets of his mystical, metaphysical, and poetic experience, an experience that derives not only from Homer and the classical tradition but also from Shakespeare and the perpetuation of that tradition. During a metaphorical descent into the depths of his soul in pursuit of knowledge and spiritual fertility, the New World poet of *Omeros* visits with the phantom of his Father/father, who in turn unveils to his initiate son the secrets of their patrilineal heritage. He says to him: "I was raised in this obscure Caribbean port, where my bastard father christened me for his shire: Warwick. The Bard's county. But never felt part of the foreign machinery known as Literature. /1 preferred verse to fame, but I wrote with the heart of an amateur. It's that Will you inherit" (1.12.1). Later on in the poem the Vagrant Poet also meets with the phantom of his mother," who too feels compelled to emphasize her son's origins: "'You are my son. "Warwick's son,' she said. 'Nature's gentleman"' (3.32.1).

Once the spiritual journey to his personal past is completed, the Vagrant Poet undertakes a series of journeys to a communal past via Africa, Europe, and North America over a considerably long but discontinuous span of time. It is during these voyages that he begins to have particular doubts about the nature of his Adamic identity and decides to set sail for maternal roots. And, although he will later admit "I had nowhere to go but home. Yet I was lost" (4.33.2), he finally, deliberately and unconditionally, surrenders to Helen: the mother figure of Africa, the earth goddess of Greece, the Nereid of the "other" archipelago. He ponders:

"If this place is hers, did that empty horizon once flash its broadsides with their inaudible rays in her honour? Was that immense enterprise on the baize tables of empires for one who carries cheap sandals on a hooked finger with the Pitons for breasts Were both hemispheres the split breadfruit of her African ass, her sea the fluted chitons of a Greek frieze?"

(7.62 2)

And in response to his own psychological qualms, he adds:

"You were never in Troy, and, between two Helens,yours is here and alive,.. .. .These Helens are different creatures, one marble, one ebony.... but each draws an elbow slowly over her face and offers the gift of her sculptured nakedness, parting her mouth."

Still later he exclaims, "What a fine local woman!" (7.64.2). The Vagrant Poet is home at last! "I sang our wide country, the Caribbean Sea,"he says. Let "the deep hymn of the Caribbean continue my epilogue" (7.64.2). As for Helen, her cycle come to a closure, she now passes the torch of her "demonic" nature to a new Helen (7.63.1), Christine, Ma Kilman's niece. Thus the *Helenic*— and no longer Hellenic— character of Walcott's story has created a literary intercultural continuum, which, like the sea, will be going on forever (7.64.3).

Almost two decades ago, in "The Muse of History," emphasizing the New World poet's Adamic idiosyncrasy, Walcott wrote: "I needed to become omnivorous about the art and literature of Europe to understand my own world. I write 'my own world' because I had no doubt that it was mine, that it was given to me, by god, not by history, with my gift." Contrasting his ideology to the militant beliefs of the "new prophets of bitterness" in the Caribbean, he also wrote:"I say to the ancestor who sold me, and to the ancestor who bought me, I have no father, I want no such father, although I can understand you, black ghost, white ghost."

In *Omeros,* through the persona of the Vagrant Poet (often seen as Walcott's own alter ego), Walcott's Adamic theory seems revised. The poet no longer considers his mythopoeic gift divinely sent but rather realized and propagated through a female demon: the demon of imagination—or, as Walcott calls it in "The Muse of History," the "memory of imagination in literature" (25). In *Omeros,* however, this spirit is no longer an abstraction. On the contrary, it is conveyed by the intellectual, spiritual, and physical powers of a "real" woman, Helen, who also identifies with that New World woman

Wynter calls "demonic" and constitutes the companion of the New World man. This new woman (of whatever class, status, or occupation) has taught her "Caliban" the way of belonging anew. She has taught him the way of belonging not to a person but to a present that draws its energy from the past, a past that, although no longer Adamic (i.e., god-sent and male-propagated), nevertheless musters the divine and, at the same time, the female characteristics of life.

Sources

1 Derek Walcott, *Omeros,* New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990. "Omeros" is the Greek form of "Homer." In the epigraph here Walcott refers to an Ideal—i.e., the eternal and universal "Helen" rather than the mythological figure of Homer's epics. Subsequent citations are followed by parentheses indicating book, chapter, and section number.

2 Herodotus, *The Histories,* Aubrey de Selincourt, tr., London, Penguin, 1983, book 1, p. 42 (emphases added).

3 Ibid., book 2, pp. 170-74.

4 Euripides, *Helen,* in *Euripides II,* Richard Lattimore, tr., Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1969.

5 "Helena," *Jamaican Folk Singers, vol. 3, Encore.', n.d.*

6 Stanley French, *The Rape of Fair Helen,* Barbados, Carib Printers, 1983. French is a contemporary Caribbean playwright from St. Lucia, West Indies.

7 For a review of the production of Walcott's *Odyssey* at The Other Place in Stratford-upon-Avon, England (Summer 1992), see Oliver Taplin, "Hustling Homer," *Times Literary Supplement,* 17 My 1992, p. 19. Taplin calls the production a "feat of poetry" and a "meta-heroic folk-tale." As far as Helen is concerned, and although the central female character here is Penelope, any connection with the Helen theme should be made by juxtaposition of flighty, untamed Helen to domesticated Penelope, the faithful wife par excellence for the Greeks.

8 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest,* Robert Langbaum, ed., New York, New American Library, 1964. As in *Omeros,* links between Homer and Shakespeare are also apparent in Walcott's *Odyssey.* Taplin characterizes Shakespeare's tragedy *Troilus and Cressida* as the "forerunner in English" of Walcott's play adaptation, although, unlike the latter, which is based on Homer's *Odyssey, Troilus and Cressida* is based (among other sources) on the *Iliad.* For a textual interpretation of Helen in *Troilus and Cressida,* see Mihoko Suzuki's *Metamorphoses of Helen: Authority, Difference and the Epic,* Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1989, pp. 210-57.

9 Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman,'" in *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women in Literature,* Carole Boyle Davis & Elaine Savory Fido, eds., Trenton, N.J., Africa World Press, 1990, p. 363. Subsequent citations use the abbreviation SW.

10 For an exhaustive analysis of the figure of Caliban's mother, see Lemuel Johnson, "Whatever Happened to Caliban's Mother? Or, The Problem with Othello's," in *Shakespeare and Cultural Traditions,* Fifth World Shakespeare Congress, Tokyo, August 1991.

11 Derek Walcott, "The Muse of History: An Essay," in *Is Massa Day Dead? Black Moods in the Caribbean,* Orde Coombs, ed., New York, Anchor, 1974, pp. 2-3 (emphasis added).

12 The spider/trickster Anancy (or Anansi) is an important figure of Caribbean and African folklore. For a different, creative retelling of Anancy, see Andrew Salkey's *Anancy's Score* (London, Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1973) and *Anancy, Traveller* (London, Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1992). In particular, Salkey's Anancy is the conflation of a lovable trickster and a clairvoyant sage.

13 In an interview following *Omeros'*s publication, Walcott called Homer a great Caribbean artist. For excerpts of that interview and a review of *Omeros,* see D. J. R. Bruckner, "A Poem in Homage to an Unwanted Man," *New York Times, 9* October 1990, pp. C13, C17.

14 The spiritual union/embrace of Omeros (disguised as a bracelet) with Helen is reminiscent of the various metamorphoses of Zeus and his sexual embraces with mortal women.

15 Pertaining to a *mystes,* in Greek "the initiate to a mystery or cult."

16 Pertaining to the epic hero's *katubatic* venture. According to the conventions of the epic, the hero, although still alive, undergoes a *katabasis*— i.e., a descent into Hades— in pursuit of knowledge and/or fertility.

17 Pertaining to creation in general, from the word *poietes,* Greek for "creator," "composer," "maker."

18 In this episode the Vagrant Poet follows the example of Vergil's Aeneas *(Aeneid,* book 6), who descends into the underworld to consult with the soul of his dead father Anchises about the founding and destiny of Rome.

19 This scene is reminiscent of Odysseus' descent into Hades to consult with Teiresias about his future *(Odyssey,* 11, "Nekyia"). While in Hades, Odysseus runs across the soul of his dead mother Anticleia, who informs him about the fates of his loved ones (wife, son, and father) after his departure for Troy.

20 For a personification of Canbbea (the Caribbean Sea), see Andrew Salkey's epic poem *Jamaica* (London, Hutchison, 1973).

21 Walcott, "The Muse of History," p. 26.

22 Ibid., p. 27.

Source: Julia A. Minkler, "Helen's Calibans: A Study of Gender Hierarchy in Derek Walcott's *Omeros," World Literature Today,* Vol. 67, No. 2, Spring, 1993,272-76

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Leithauser considers Walcott's epic poem as a recovered history of 400 years of the Antillean islands, most of which has passed without being recorded. He also discusses the links between Omeros *and the* Iliad *and* Odyssey *of Homer. Leithauser also discusses Walcott's style and prominent themes in the work.*

In one of the first glimpses we have of Helen, the heroine of Derek Walcott's book-length poem *Omeros,* she walks barefoot along a beach on her native Antillean island of St. Lucia, singing a Beatles song. The tune is "Yesterday," and the line she focusses on strikes a note of understated wistfulness: "Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away." Helen is reflecting upon the upheavals of romance— as well she might, for she, in her surpassing beauty, is a heart-breaker. An "ebony girl" in a "lemon frock," she has recently been fired from her job as a servant to a pair of British expatriates, Dennis and Maud Plunkett. Dennis, a retired major who has taken up the disciplining of a new sort of troops— he has become a pig farmer—is silently mad about her. So are, silently or vociferously, most of the other men on the island, including a pair of fishermen whose rivalrous designs threaten to unravel the community's uneasy workaday calm.

Some forty pages farther along, we learn that the young woman's troubles were never "far away," as Walcott resurrects "Helens from an earner time," whose lives were indentured to an inhumane colonialism. He vividly summons those forebears of hers who, working for pittances under the scorching Caribbean sun, once carried staggering loads of anthracite down from the hills to the holds of imperial freighters:

Hell was built on those hills. In that country of coal without fire, that inferno the same colour as their skins and shadows, every labouring soul climbed with her hundredweight basket, every load for one copper penny, balanced erect on their necks that were tight as the liner's hawsers from the weight The carriers were women, not the fair, gentler sex.

As she sings, Helen is ruefully conscious of an unwanted burden: she is pregnant and does not know who the father is. But she bears, simultaneously and unwittingly, a greater burden still. She, like all the dark-skinned islanders, carries the weight of a history of generations of cruelty and chicanery, most of which has passed away unchronicled and unrighted. Through Helen, and Helen's precursors, Walcott ventures back more than four hundred years, to that "yesterday" when the first African slaves were transported to the Caribbean.

Yet his backward-looking muse does not halt there. He equates the Caribbean and the Mediterranean—both belonging to a "sea without time"— and thereby likens his Helen to Homer's, and his squabbling fishermen to the warring Greeks and Trojans. The whole of *Omeros* (the title is Homer's name in Greek) is anchored to *The Iliad* and, in a lesser degree, *The Odyssey.* Only a page after Helen strolls the beach, Walcott forges a litany of yesterday's, and St. Lucia dissolves into the fields of Troy:

And yesterday these shallows were the Scamander, and armed shadows leapt from the horse, and the bronze nuts were helmets, Agamemnon was the commander of weed-bearded captains; yesterday, the black fleet anchored there in the swift's road

Implicit in the undertaking of this colossal poem are a number of presuppositions, among them a root belief in the sustaining continuities of history. The links between ancient Greece and the modern Caribbean are regarded as genuine and artistically negotiable. No matter that the Greeks were empire builders and the Antilleans are portrayed as the pawns of new empire-makers, the multinational corporations. Both peoples are seafarers, and Walcott makes much of the notion that to a marine community the daily nudge and drain of the tides overrides more recent life rhythms. His characters may watch American TV programs or dance to reggae music or hot-rod down the streets, but all such trappings of modern life vanish before the larger reality of the "ocean's voice." Similarly, Walcott confederates the two cultures on the basis of their pagan convictions; they are alike in inhabiting islands flush with ghosts and natural spirits. "Omeros" opens in a state of what might be called vegetal panic: jungle trees are quaking in fear as islanders hack their way toward them in search of trunks that might make seaworthy canoes. Finally, Walcott assumes that his dark-skinned islanders cultivate a spoken language of sufficient beauty, punch, and dexterity to render it suitable for the elevated dignities of an epic poem. Needless to say, there is in this assumption a touch of the antiquated. The broad consensus among English-language poets is that the eclogue is no longer viable. The conventions that deemed it plausible for the common man, in the guise of shepherd or fisherman, to declaim in elaborately patterned verse died some time ago, perhaps when the last of Frost's rugged New Englanders traded in his Vermont sheep farm for a rent-with-option-to-buy condo in Sarasota. Fortunately, news of the form's demise has not yet reached Walcott, who presents his fishermen, taxi-drivers, domestics, and barkeeps as natural poets. To be sure, he has fun with their linguistic uncertainties—their solecisms and malaprops and misspellings. But make no mistake: he is singing a song of praise to the mettle and resilience of a tongue that has wandered far from those shores where the King's English is spoken.

It becomes evident after only a couple of pages that Walcott in "Omeros" has set himself a pair of sizable tasks, one a matter of content and the other of technique. As regards the former, he must have recognized from the outset the grave risk that the parallels between Homer's Greeks and Walcott's Antilleans would, in the long haul, grow artificial and contrived. (It is a danger he has chosen to confront head on, going as far as to name the two fishermen who battle over Helen's affections Achille and Hector.) In terms of technique, Walcott has likewise deliberately courted our eventual fatigue, by deciding to work in three-line stanzas whose rhymes evoke Dante's terza rima. In English, as opposed to rhyme-rich Italian, the rhymed tercet has proved to be of scant utility over the centuries, its currency typically restricted to the short lyric. A potential reader is therefore entitled to hesitate before embarking on an epic poem set in the modern Caribbean which draws heavily for subject upon Homer and for music upon Dante. But these are reservations likely to fade straightaway in the presence of Walcott's sure-handed stanzas. The welcome truth is that in *Omeros,* his ninth full-length book of verse, Walcott has overcome a number of seeming insurmountables.

Even those readers who, like me, have admired much in his previous work may well find *Omeros* an inspiring and enlivening surprise.

Although Homer lends his name to its title and many details to its plot, *Omeros* is hardly a mere retelling or updating of *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey. Omeros* moves on a wide diversity of tides and currents, and the bulk of the book is devoted to incidents and meditations that have an exiguous link, at best, to Homer's epics. Its narrative encompasses a nineteenth-century woman pioneer on the Great Plains; an eighteenth-century midshipman ancestor of Dennis Plunkett's; an aborted Antillean political campaign; a sunken treasure; a hallucinatory pilgrimage to Africa; a faith healer; and a contemporary poet—not so much a persona of the author as the author himself—who ponders modern urban life in Boston and Toronto. In dreams, in memory, sometimes in the flesh, Walcott's characters venture onto at least four continents and across at least four centuries.

Generally, what unites these far-flung souls and objects is the sea (or its agonizing absence, as when Major Plunkett relives the campaign against Rommel in the Sahara). In Greek mythology, it was of course a body of water—the navigable Styx— that conjoined the living and the dead, and Walcott has solid precedents for supposing that an epic poet should feel at liberty to travel by means of the mind's waterways from one end of creation to the other. Still, there are moments when, in aspiring to be all things to all people, *Omeros* winds up chugging like an overburdened motorboat. The Great Plains sections, in particular, seem not only narratively peripheral but thematically superfluous. They feel didactic, as though composed chiefly to highlight our nation's betrayal of the Indian. But do they—one must finally ask—add anything noteworthy? Hasn't the issue of the Old World's pillage of the New already been broached, umgnorably, by Walcott's decision to center the poem on impoverished Antilleans? One recalls the lesson that, half a century ago, the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh encapsulated in his sonnet "Epic," in which Homer's ghost materializes in order to point out that *The Iliad* was fabricated from nothing but a "local row." Even for the epic writer, Kavanagh reminds us, largeness needn't begin large; the trick is not in the scale of the tale but in the skill of the telling.

Omeros is most moving, significantly, when it stays close to home. The extended interludes in which the poet converses with the ghost of his father are indelibly drawn: spooky and graceful and loving and wrenchingly sad. Although the poet is, implicitly, an eminent man (he's the author, after all, of the brilliant feat of learning that is *Omeros),* and the father in his life-time was, explicitly, a gifted man whose career was hamstrung by poverty and race prejudice, the place of honor throughout the meeting belongs to the father. He is at once taskmaster, supporter, and counsellor. It is from him that we learn of those earlier Helens who slaved under hundredweights of anthracite, and he is the one who—playing upon the multiple meanings of "feet"—tautens the cords that bind the poet's burden to the poet's craft. He reveals to his son a method of fusing form and content:

Kneel to your load, then balance your staggering feet and walk up that coal ladder as they do in time, one bare foot after the next in ancestral rhyme Because Rhyme remains

the parentheses of palms shielding a candle's tongue, it is the language's desire to enclose the loved world in its arms; or heft a coal-basket, only by its stages like those groaning women will you achieve that height whose wooden planks in couplets lift your pages higher than those hills of infernal anthracite

And yet as rich a character as the poet's father becomes, Major Plunkett may be a still more considerable artistic achievement, in part because he begins so unpromisingly. When we first see him, in his "khaki shirt and capacious shorts," he is wiping the froth of a Guinness from his "pensioned moustache." He looks, in brief, like an all too easy stereotype and target—the English-colonial "hanger-on"—and the reader naturally worries that Walcott's rage will get the better of him. But quickly, as the lineaments of Plunkett's life come clear—his bewilderment over Britain's geopolitical decline, his flair for puns, his unfulfilled dream of a freewheeling trip around the world, his taciturn grief in the face of his wife's illness-—he takes on subtler pigments and finer shadings. Indeed, the tragedy that eventually sinks him, as he careens into a stunned widowerhood, is the book's most fully realized bereavement. We feel for him. And that a man who appeared destined to provide the poem with its villain instead becomes a stirring, weighty figure testifies to the deep sympathies that inform *Omeros.* It's a bighearted book.

As a prosodic form, the rhymed tercet is no workhorse; it's nearer to a carrier pigeon. It offers only four self-contained rhyme schemes (AAx, AxA, xAA, AAA), as opposed to the fourteen available to the quatrain. Little wonder, then, its relative unemployment among English-language poets; and no surprise that Walcott, having accepted the challenge of fitting so straitened a form to so vast a project, has resorted to a great deal of cross-stanzaic rhyming. He rhymes with broad flexibility, though he frequently, feintingly suggests that he plans to proceed otherwise. Time and again (by my estimate, there are more than a hundred such examples), he opens a new section as though he were going to adopt terza rima. The initial stanza's first and third lines will rhyme, as will its second line and the first line of the next stanza. But then—almost invariably after four lines—he snaps the pattern and begins rhyming catch-as-catch-can. (Why he has chosen this particular juncture as his breaking point, and has stuck to it so faithfully, remains something of a conundrum—one of many formalistic puzzles woven into *Omeros.* I was similarly mystified by his decision, in an otherwise uneventful passage deep in the middle of the poem, to run twenty-four "L" rhymes in twenty-seven lines: vertical skull smell swell idle sail middle supple gunwale skill, and so on. As you would expect, the music shifts from lilting to leaden—but you're never sure why Walcott has brought the change about.)

Minute scrutiny of this sort might seem finicky but for the matchless variety and inventiveness of Walcott's rhymes; the care he has manifestly lavished upon them solicits our closest attention. In any poem of this length you would expect to find a range of rhyme types, if only because the customary prototype—exact rhyme—can become constraining or monotonous over time. But Walcott extends himself far beyond all foreseen deviations. A teacher of versification might well employ *Omeros* as a rhyme casebook. Here, in addition to exact masculine and feminine rhymes, one encounters triple rhymes (gentility humility) and visual rhymes (plough enough) and pararhymes or

rim rhymes (often coming in strings: nose canoes noise) and anagrammatic rhymes (organ groan) and apocopated rhymes (river deliverer) and macaronic rhymes (come *hotnme,* glory *mori)* and light rhymes (sea money) and rime riche (piss precipice, Raj mirage) and hosts of intricate couplings—each bearing its own distinctive acoustical qualities—for which, so far as I know, no terms have been coined except that grabbag designation "off rhyme." (How would one classify, for example, the not quite rime-riche pairings of pier happier or captains capstans? Or a blend of visual rhyme and rime riche, like fishpot depot? Or a hybrid of light rhyme and rim rhyme like egret great? Or the sort of rhyme—a favorite of Walcott's—in which one word, orthographically speaking, envelopes another, as in brows burrows or rows arrows or acre massacre?)

Perhaps the most striking feature in his rhyming is his ready use of outlandish pairings of a sort usually reserved for light verse. When he rhymes "panther" with "and her" or "altar" with "halt. Her" or "Florida" with "worried her" or "hunter" with "front of her," we are closer to W. S. Gilbert or Ogden Nash than to Milton or Spenser. We are perched right at the teetering edge of parody—which is where he wants us. *Omeros* is no sendup of epic traditions—it is no *Rape of the Lock* but Walcott is keenly attuned to the humble, farcical aspects of his island world, as when his hero Achille, with a touching combination of faith and ignorance, christens his boat In God We Troust.

Omeros is a poem of elusive metres. Robert Frost once observed that there are "virtually but two" metres in English—strict iambic and loose iambic. *Omeros* initially looks like an example of the latter, with interspersings of a tighter iambic line. But elsewhere the lines are loosened to a point where the iambic beat disappears, with the result that any systematic attempt to read the poem metrically —with that easy sense of place, that fluid but constant awareness of where you stand within the line, which is the hallmark of solidly metred poetry— must end in frustration. There are simply too many uncertain feet, extra stresses, ambiguous emphases, and so forth, for comfortable processing, Perhaps Walcott would have us take another approach? So many of the lines contain twelve syllables that one is tempted to conclude that he has forgone conventional metrics in favor of purely syllabic verse. However, the uncertainties that attend syllabic count in English, and the reader's difficulties in comprehending such a long syllabic line, make this interpretation problematic. The cadences are powerfully rhythmic, to be sure, and one may decide that Walcott has "captured the music of the sea," or something of the sort, and let the matter drop there—but the lack of an orthodox metre is in fact a crucial, individuating trait. Rhyme— which could not help playing a signal role in *Omeros,* given Walcott's ingenuity with it—becomes preeminent in the absence of a clearly felt metre. Rhyme-based rather than metre-based, *Omeros* is a nonesuch among long poems.

One might go as far as to call it rhyme-driven. Over and over, rhymes are what hold the tumbling, pell-mell stanzas together, and since so many of the rhymes are unorthodox and recherche the poem's structure is forever on the verge of being lost. Even more than most verse, *Omeros* demands to be read aloud. When the prosodic underpinnings of a poem consist of rhymes like, say, "coffee" and—some twenty syllables later—"of the," you probably can't depend on your eye alone to catch the buried order that balances the hurly-burly; for this, you probably need actual, spoken echoes lingering in

the air. (Here and there, one might describe the poem as rhyme-driven in another sense, for Walcott occasionally allows his appetite for choice rhymes to bend his phrasings or sentence structures. But even in such instances the sheer oddity of his music often diverts the reader from any impression of strained or forced rhyming.) Although one can conceive of a somewhat altered *Omeros* whose faint ghost of an iambic-pentameter line has been expunged and whose metre is purely free, an *Omeros* without rhyme is unthinkable. It would be a different beast altogether.

Writers on English-language prosody generally contend that metre is a fundamental and rhyme a secondary or ornamental tool. But this view, while sound in the main, may distort those unusual poetic imaginations—in our century one thinks immediately of Charlotte Mew and Louis MacNeice and, especially, John Crowe Ransom— for whom metre is often expendable but rhyme remains essential. (Like *Omeros,* Ransom's oeuvre is imaginable without metre but Ransom wouldn't be Ransom without rhyme.) Such poets usually are demons for brevity. It has been left to Walcott to demonstrate a means by which rhyme —the "invention of a barbarous age," according to Milton—might support a Mil-tonic macrocosm.

Douglas Wakiihuri, the winner of [1990's] New York City Marathon, remarked after the race that real fatigue hadn't set in until Mile 20, some three-quarters of the way. Among marathoners, Mile 20 traditionally represents the point of greatest pain and trial and despair, and it is tempting to postulate that among the epic poets—the marathoners of the versifying world—a similar testing ground arrives at about the three-quarters mark. In any case, I had reached approximately that point in my reading of this more-than-three-hundred-page poem when either my own or the poet's energies flagged a little. Somewhere toward the close of *Omeros* the reader sees that its various branches are never going to wind up belonging to a single trunk; and with the knowledge that the poem will remain a thing of disparate parts comes the realization that one can in fairness formulate piecemeal judgments— can conclude, perhaps, that the passages dealing with Plunkett's ancestor could use some trimming, or that Hector's character needs to be clarified. Late in the poem, too, one may weary somewhat of Walcott's penchant for the sweepingly abstract— for big, summational declarations about the nature of time or history or love. Every poetic virtue contains its hazards, obviously, and Walcott's characteristic eagerness to don a sage's getup and utter vatic grandiosities carries the risk that he may at times stumble on his robes, or his beard may slip a bit.

But they're apt to be momentary lapses, these stumblings or slippages, since Walcott wields all kinds of strengths that can bolster a sagging passage in a twinkling. He has a sure, prepossessing vocabulary, a deft and ludic wit ("she was an adamant Eve"), an intricately calibrated ear. He's a man of wonderful analogical talents, especially when he fixes his eye on the natural world. He gives the reader roosters that really crow ("their cries screeching like red chalk drawing hills on a board"), jellyfish that truly float ("tasselled palanquins of Portuguese man-o'-wars bobbed like Asian potentates"), swifts that genuinely fly ("this frail dancer leaping the breakers, this dart of the meridian"). And he's better than wonderful—he's little short of miraculous— when he stirs up some weather. The hurricane he brews in an early chapter is so splendidly overmastering that a reader is left feeling dazed, windblown, waterlogged. If to read *Omeros* is to sign on

for a substantial voyage during which small doubts are constantly raised and quelled, raised and quelled—well, what long poem of our time can be read without misgivings or objections? Who doesn't find elements to quarrel with or quibble about in John Berryman's "The Dream Songs" or James Merrill's "The Changing Light at Sandover"? And who, even so, is any the less grateful to their makers?

So bright and immediate are many ofWalcott's local virtues that one can lose sight of the lowering darkness of *Omeros.* Not until I'd set the book down, the journey completed, did it become clear what an unbroken line of woes it enfolds. Maud Plunkett is not the only one whose life ends sadly: Hector dies in an accident; the midshipman falls in combat while still a boy. And, year by year, political corruption cankers the island's soul, pollution threatens its beauty. There is a loud call of anguish at the center of *Omeros,* but the book is something more— something better—than a simple cry from the heart. It's a complex cry from the heart, for Walcott has succeeded in filtering all sorts of titanic sorrows through a limpid and ferocious intellect.

Source: Brad Leithauser, "Ancestral Rhyme," *The New Yorker,* 11 February, 1991, pp. 91-5

Adaptations

Excerpts from Walcott's *Omeros, The Odyssey* and *Collected Poems* are read by the author on a Caedmon audiotape, recorded November 18, 1993, copyrighted 1994; available from HarperCollins Publishers.

Walcott reads excerpts from *Omeros* and discusses the epic in a 1991 taped interview with Rebekah Presson, released as "Derek Walcott" in the *New Letters on the Air: Contemporary Writers on Radio* series; available from the University of Missouri, Kansas City.

Topics for Further Study

Dennis Plunkett, a British expatriate, feels a sense of greater belonging to his adopted community of St. Lucia after he discovers that a possible ancestor of his died in its defense. Identify and write about an actual historical case of a member of another race or culture dying or risking death in the defense of a land, people, or cause not his or her own.

As American leaders discovered in the years following the revolution of 1776, the requirements of achieving true independence extend far beyond a declaration, a war, and the formation of a national government. There are challenges of cultural, economic, psychological, and social independence as well. Conduct research into the post-revolutionary period of the United States. Compare the obstacles that had to be overcome with those faced more recently by a nation such as St. Lucia, newly emerged from colonialism since World War II.

Although sophisticated forms of art may seem to be detached from the real world, Walcott recognizes that art can serve as a valuable means of human expression. Investigate some of the folk arts, crafts, dance, music, or rituals of Africans or native Americans. Determine ways that these media help people to identify and define themselves as a culture.

Compare and Contrast

1600s-1820: The African slave trade along the Middle Passage brought approximately 6,777,000 slaves into Brazil and the West Indies by 1820. During the same time, immigration brought approximately 964,000 Caucasians into the region. This created an ethnic imbalance, with an 88% majority population of African descent. By 1820 in North America, 550,000 Africans were imported among a Caucasian population of 651,000, making blacks an ethnic minority of 46%. In the third book of *Omeros,* Walcott has Achille retrace three hundred years of history to reaffirm his African origins.

1833-1865: British Parliament abolished slavery in its West Indian colonies in 1833. President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation abolished slavery in the United States in 1863 and the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution guaranteed freedom at the close of the Civil War in 1865.

Late twentieth century: St. Lucia has a population of approximately 151,000, with a majority of African descent (90.3%), racially mixed (5.5%), East Indian (3.2%), Caucasian (.8%). With a population of 22 million, the ethnic distribution of the United States is more varied: Native American .8%, Asian-Pacific 2.9%, Hispanic 9%, African-American 12%, non-Hispanic Caucasian 71.3%. Books four and five of *Omeros* recount Walcott's reaction to racially divided Boston.

1776-1814: The English colonies in North America fight to win their independence in 1776. This corresponds with the height of conflict between the French and Great Britain for disputed possessions in the Americas. In *Omeros* the Battle of the Saints is central to Major Plunkett's historical research. France finally ceded St. Lucia to England in the 1814 Treaty of Paris.

1941-1979: In 1941, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States joins the British Commonwealth and her allies against the Axis powers in World War II. In *Omeros* Major Plunkett frequently recalls his participation in Montgomery's North African campaign during World War II. The Plunketts' retirement to St. Lucia after the war makes them a part of the postwar independence movement. The time period includes the short-lived experiment with the West Indian Federation (1958-1967) and St. Lucian independence on February 22,1979.

Late twentieth century: The United States has a bicameral government with an elected president as chief executive. St. Lucia owes allegiance to the British regent, who is represented by a governor general, but is governed by an elected parliament, led by the prime minister. In the second book of *Omeros,* Walcott recounts an election campaign pitting the St. Lucia Labour Party against the United Workers Party.

1780-1870: Historically, the St. Lucian economy has depended on agriculture. By 1780 there were already nearly fifty sugar plantations. This labor-intensive crop that fueled the rapid influx of slave labor in the West Indies. **1870-1930:** During the late 1800s, natural coal deposits in St. Lucia became a significant source of income. This industry is

recognized by the ghost of Warwick Walcott in the first book of *Omeros* when he draws attention to the female colliers loading steamers in Castries Harbor. By the 1940s, income from coal production declined due to the replacement of steam power with petroleum-fueled shipping. In 1923, bananas were introduced into the local economy and eventually replaced sugar as the main source of agricultural income.

Late twentieth century: While agriculture remains the primary source of St. Lucia's international income, efforts are being made to diversify crops (67% banana production), to encourage tourism and industry into the 1990s. Tourism is the second largest sector of the economy, bringing in millions of dollars each year. As Walcott indicates in *Omeros,* there are considerable misgivings about the commercialization of property, handicrafts, and local customs for the entertainment of foreign visitors.

What Do I Read Next?

Austin Clarke's *Growing up Stupid under the Union Jack,* 1980, is a humorous account of a youngster's attempts to cope with the contradictions of colonial society in Barbados.

Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney's play *The Cure at Troy: a Version of Sophocles' "Philoctetes,"* 1991, focuses on the Greek character Philoctetes (who appears as Philoctete in *Omeros).* Heaney and Walcott are friends who have drawn from the same classical sources in these works.

George Lamming's novel *In the Castle of My Skin,* 1954, recounts an aspiring artist's experiences of village life in Barbados, similar in many ways to Walcott's Gros Ilet village in St. Lucia.

Rex Alan Smith's *Moon of Popping Trees,* 1981, is the book alluded to but not named in *Omeros,* from which Walcott reads about Catherine Weldon and the Sioux Ghost Dance.

Irish writer James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is a complex, allusive, humorous landmark stream-of-consciousness novel recounting H. C. Earwicker's odyssey through one night in Dublin.

Walcott's *Collected Poems 1948-1984,* 1986, reprints several poems with classical allusions and themes that show up again in *Omeros,* including the mini-epic "The Schooner *Flight"* from *The Star-Apple Kingdom* and the whole of the highly autobiographical *Another Life.*

Walcott's play *The Odyssey,* 1993, is a somewhat more straightforward West Indian adaptation of Homer's epic account of Odysseus' difficult journey back to Ithaca after the victory at Troy.

Further Study

Bakken, Christopher. Review in *The Georgia Review,* Vol. 45, No. 2, Summer 1991, pp. 403-06.

Notes that although Walcott tends to tell rather than show, his epic of the people who are usually excluded from the narrative of history "demands a revision of our world view "

Benfey, Christopher. "Coming Home," *The New Republic,* Vol. 203, October, 1990, pp. 36-9.

Concludes that *Omeros* shows great ambition but lacks the "surefootedness and verve" ofWalcott's best poetry.

Bensen, Robert "Catherine Weldon in *Omeros* and "The Ghost Dance'," *Verse,* Vol 22, No 2, Summer 1994, pp. 119-25

Offers a thorough analysis of the role of Weldon in Walcott's *Omeros.*

Brown, Robert, and Cheryl Johnson. "An Interview with Derek Walcott," *The Cream City Review,* Vol 14, No 2, Winter, 1990, pp 209-23.

Walcott expresses thoughts on the composition of *Omeros* He sees similarities in between ancient Greeks and modern West Indians.

Bruckner, D J R. "A Poem in Homage to an Unwanted Man," *New York Times,* October 9, 1990, pp. 13,17. In an interview with Bruckner, Walcott discusses influences on *Omeros,* and his reservations about calling the poem an epic

Burnett, Paula "The Ulyssean Crusoe and the Quest for Redemption in J M Coetzee's *Foe* and Derek Walcott's *Omeros,"* in *Robinson Crusoe: Myth and Metamorphoses,* edited by Lieve Spaas and Brian Stimpson, St. Martin's Press, 1996, pp. 239-55

Compares and contracts the two works cited, singling out for analysis Helen's unifying role in *Omeros* and Waicott's portrayal of women generally as figures of healing and redemption

Hamner, Robert D. *Derek Walcott.* Rev. ed Twayne, 1993. Examines Walcott's career through his receipt of the Nobel Prize in 1992

Ismond, Patricia. "Walcott's *Omeros:* A Complex, Ambitious Work," *Caribbean Contact,* Vol. 18, No 5, March-April, 1991, pp 10-11.

Overview and analysis of the work and its influences Lernout, Geert. "Derek Walcott's *Omeros*- The Isle Full of Voices," *Kunapipi,* Vol 14,1992, pp 90-104.

Interprets *Omeros* as a "counter-narrative" critical rather than imitative of Western traditions

Lucas, John "The Sea, The Sea," *New Statesman and Society,* Vol. 3, October 5,1990, p. 36

Commends the linguistic richness of *Omeros.*

Mason, David Review of *Omeros* in *The Hudson Review,* Vol. 44, No 3, Autumn 1991, pp. 513-15.

Contents that Walcott's introduction of material extraneous to the central Caribbean setting weakens the narrative.

McClure, Charlotte S. "Helen of the 'West Indies': History or Poetry of a Caribbean Realm," *Studies in the Literary Imagination,* Vol 26, No. 2, Fall, 1993, pp. 7- 20.

Considers the character of Helen a fresh conception of her Greek counterpart because of the Carribean background against which Walcott portrays her.

O'Brien, Sean. "In Terms of the Ocean." *Times Literary Supplement,* Vol. 4563, September 14-22,1990, pp. 977-78.

Review contending that the narrative fails to hold reader interest in the North American and European sections.

Ramazani, Jahan. "The Wound of History: Walcott's *Omeros* and the Postcolomal Poetics of Affliction." *PMLA* 112, No 3, May, 1997, pp. 405-18.

Discusses *Omeros* as a repudiation of postcolonial writing as a "literature of victimization" through examination of wound and affliction imagery in the work.

Terada, Rei. *"Omeros,"* in her *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry,* Northeastern University Press, 1992, pp. 183-227.

Examines Walcott's utilization of the Homeric literary model.

White, J P. "An Interview with Derek Walcott" *Green Mountains Review,* New Series, Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring-Summer, 1990, pp. 14-37.

In this wide-ranging interview, Walcott discusses the difficulties of progressing from a slave mentality to authentic freedom. After commenting on the epic aspects *of Moby Dick, Ulysses,* and Walt Whitman's poetry, he states his desire to capture, in *Omeros,*"the names of things and people in their own context."

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Epics for Students (EfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, EfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of EfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of EfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in EfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by EfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

EfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Epics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the EfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the EfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Epics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Epics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from EfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Epics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Epics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Epics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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The editor of Epics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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