

21L.315, Prizewinners
Prof. Mary Fuller
Lecture 11: Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, Books I-II

What do we know about the narrator?

He seems to share many biographical details with Derek Walcott.

Wondering exactly how this relates to the *Odyssey*

Walcott has said many times that he's never read *Odyssey*, *Iliad*

Why doesn't he just write a Caribbean epic, then, that doesn't use these classical names?

Many poet figures in the poem

Beginning: where are we in time? He tells the story and shows his wound, but not how it was healed.

Woundedness is a theme that runs through the story, as is work.

Major Plunkett's head wound still affects him, he's obsessive and crazy, it affects his mind

Philoctete's wound is from a rusty anchor

Yet also historical – the chains of his ancestors

Philoctete remembers cutting down the cypress trees for canoes.

Represented as violence: the blood of the wounded trees is flowing

It seems like other work is more solitary, this destruction is more communal

This is represented as an epic moment – violent, destructive, yet foundational.

Seems blasphemous and sacramental at the same time, destroying something yet making something new

In general, the people in this poem do their work alone.

Book II: need to raise the cannon

This work done by African slaves and British engineers

It seems to become more heroic as it goes along, there's an investment in the work

How do we read the giving of the name?

"This is work that was heroic, so here is a Homeric name"

The context of the work is coercive, but the work itself isn't necessarily; the work has (provisionally) bound them together, slaves and engineers.

A moment ago, he was looking at the foam and thinking of home – makes the naming less meaningful? It's very far from home, these classical names.

An imaginary son from two centuries ago – time is moving in a mythic/dream/epic sense, not linear

(in *Ulysses*, the other famous rewrite of the *Odyssey*, there is a son who is his father's father)

Epics are a sort of beginning through conquest.

It's hard to understand Helen as a person – she's more like an object, perhaps.

Who does Helen love? It's hard to figure out; we don't have the same access to her.

What's her agency?

What's the work for Helen? To be an object of desire, maybe this is part of why she's hard to see as a person (agent of action).

There are at least three poet-characters: Seven Seas, the "I", and the one who turns up in a variety of places/times: the trans-historical poet figure
Who is the narrator and what is his relationship with what he's talking about?
Why would you make him a traveler? Descartes would say it's to get an abstract view of the whole world, but the cost is distance from your own culture.
Is Seven Seas the poet the narrator would like to be?
Alienation can be another kind of wound. Will I be like Major Plunkett, writing a meaningless history? Like Seven Seas, drinking at the No Pain Café instead of a tourist bar?

In Walcott, the alternative to linear time is found in poetry, and the ocean – you notice this if you track the ocean throughout.
The Plunketts, side by side, are two different approaches to time and history.

Omeros is narrative length, but not written as a narrative – it's thick with metaphor, almost congested.