

Derek Walcott



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Derek Walcott (1930-) published his first poem at the age of just 14 in a local paper that was circulated on the Caribbean island of his birth, Saint Lucia. This island falls within the Windward Islands and, as an ex-British colony, is part of the Anglophone Caribbean. Walcott's hereditary make-up reflects these complex historical pasts - he had two white grandfathers and two black grandmothers, and he is subsequently of both African and European descent. Walcott's father, Warwick, was well-versed in English literature and was himself an artist - a watercolour painter. This adoption of a European cultural heritage, alongside his African ancestry, means that the creolized identity pervasive in the Caribbean becomes one of Walcott's central concerns. Both his poetry and plays, written almost completely in English, though with some French scattered throughout, interrogate these complexities.

At the age of just 19 Walcott self-published two collections of poems, *25 Poems* (1948) and *Epitaph for the Young: XII Cantos* (1949), and they both encapsulate two more key thematic strands of Walcott's later work: his methodist and distinctly spiritual background, and his engagement with English modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound - indeed, Walcott would go on to win the T.S. Eliot Prize for his poetry collection, *White Egrets* (2010), in 2011. Walcott's first international fame came, however, with the publication in 1962 of his collection *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960*, which included his perhaps mostly widely read poem, 'Ruins of a Great House'. This poem configures brilliantly the contradiction that runs through Walcott's oeuvre, a contradiction interrogated by many other, now canonical, postcolonial authors: the dilemma of producing severe critiques of British imperialism and the horrors that went hand in hand with colonialism, whilst also seeking affiliation with, and a position within, the strong literary cultures that originate there. For Walcott, in the poem as in much of his other work, the answer to this contradiction lies in the creation of new hybridized identities that are rooted in the soil of Caribbean islands and the abundance of water (with its connotations of redemption and 'washing away') that moves between them.

As a playwright, Walcott came to international notice just a few years later when his drama, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*

(1970), appeared on NBC-TV in North America in the same year of its publication, winning an Obie Award for 'Best Foreign Play' - a year after the play's appearance, the British government gave Walcott an OBE for his literary work. However, it was with the publication of *Omeros* in 1990 that Walcott's prowess was solidified on the international stage. The epic poem once again shows influence by a European literary tradition as it loosely rewrites the Homeric epics ('Omeros' is Homer in Greek). However, the action is set on Walcott's home island of Saint Lucia, narrating the history of colonialism depicting daily life on the island. In *Omeros*, Walcott encapsulates what is one of the central tenets of his life's work: the appropriation of the English language by the post-colonial world. For a summary of Walcott's achievements and their importance for post/colonial writing, we need look no further than The Nobel Foundation, who awarded him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992 'for a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of multicultural commitment.'

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