

Southern New Hampshire University

Derek Walcott's *Omeros*: How Effective Stories Benefit the Human Experience

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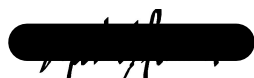
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Abstract

This thesis offers a fresh perspective about the benefits of stories on the human experience, when they are written, structured, and told effectively. To examine how stories inform us, Derek Walcott's epic poem *Omeros* is deconstructed through the theoretical framework of narratology in the paper. The theory of narrative highlights how Walcott's exceptional use of structure, language, characters, and themes educate readers about the past and present struggles of life on the island. In his poem, Walcott revisits the history of St. Lucia through the tale of local characters who feel dispossessed in a post-slavery/post-colonial environment.

Mieke Bal's "The Point of Narratology," Mark Freeman's, "Why Narrative Matters: Philosophy, Method, Theory" and David Herman's "Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind: Cognitive Narratology, Discursive Psychology, and Narratives in Face-to-Face Interaction", explain how stories help readers form human connections whilst providing them with an opportunity to understand familiar and unfamiliar worlds that are imagined or real, in the past, present, or future. Through Walcott's *Omeros*, this thesis expands on the idea that stories allow writers to transport their interpretation of identity and their experience of the self and otherness, as readers experience how Walcott uses storytelling, textuality, and expression to revisit unhealed wounds within himself and his people.

Stories are core to communicating, exploring the imagination, preserving culture, and educating oneself and others about present and past life experiences in our world. Whether it be fictional or based on true events, stories are a part of society and human life, and it is through our stories we seek to understand others and ourselves (Hancox). With certain narrative elements applied, stories engage the reader and provide them with insight that is useful and informative. Some writers struggle to construct an effective story, and this is usually clear in the disinterest of their targeted group of readers. It is not always a matter of the readers' preference, but the writers' inability to draw them in. Stories must be written to captivate and engage readers. The potency of effective stories can go beyond simple entertainment. Anthropologist Paul Stoller says, "There's something about narrative that connects people, connects a writer and a reader... Somehow, stories create a resonance in a person, such that they take away some lesson from the story" (Walker 197). When written and told effectively, stories expose readers to authentic experiences and distinct realities of other cultures.

Knowing the benefits of effective stories is important because in our present world, travel is extensive and interaction with others from different areas of the world is constant. Therefore, through stories, we become informed of diversity and gain the ability to successfully communicate with people from various walks of life. Narratologist David Herman write, "Narrative representations convey the experience of living through storyworlds in-flux, highlighting the pressure of events on real or imagined consciousnesses affected by the occurrences at issue. Thus ... it can be argued that narrative is centrally concerned with quatta, a term used by philosophers of mind to refer to the sense of "what it is like" for someone or something to have a particular experience (Herman 137). Effective stories allow readers to experience an alternate space, environment, and events, as Mark Freeman says, "there remains

no more fitting and appropriate vehicle for exploring the otherness of both others and oneself than through narrative” (Freeman 1). It is through this mobility constructed by narratives we as readers are transported into spaces that come from within us or from separate realities.

Furthermore, writing an effective story highlights the writer's ability to reason and better perceive circumstances. Author Sarah Worth argues, “Narrativity is the principle way that human beings order their experience in time. It is also one of the primary ways that humans make coherent sense out of seemingly unrelated sequences of events.... those who are able to develop the capacity to reason narratively will be able to have a more comprehensive understanding of the human experience” (Worth 42). In simpler words, narrative writing and storytelling provides the writer with the tools to gain better awareness of life.

A prime example of an effective storyteller is the late playwright and poet Derek Walcott. His unique narrative skills are evident in the epic poem *Omeros* (1990). Walcott’s use of an Odyssean structure, voice & language, symbolic characters and recurring themes of nature, memory and myth introduce readers to the post-colonial history of St. Lucia and the fractured identity of characters who feel dispossessed in a post-slavery environment. Walcott weaves his tale intricately as he explores both personal and cultural memories—what writer Wolf Kansteiner refers to as “collectively shared representations of the past” (182). He details the effect of colonization on the personal and collective identity of those existing within St. Lucia’s culture whilst celebrating the country as the *Helen of the West*. Writer Gabriel Fakar Sasmite Aji asserts, “Walcott’s *Omeros* is the model of how the new paradigm of postcolonialism could accommodate all perspectives dealing with what already happened in the past and what would & should happen in the future due to the newer human civilization” (Aji 231). As such, Walcott’s *Omeros* works as a medium to help him dissect the trauma of displacement. He seeks to

understand the personal and collective fractured identity passed down to him from his ancestors and to decipher how, he and his people (St. Lucians) can heal from the pain of the past. The scholars Maria Fumagalli and Peter Patrick explains, “The narrator/Walcott, in fact, both through his own experience and those of his alter egos, eventually manages to conclude his (spiritual) journey across his island, and, ultimately, into language and into himself” (Fumagalli & Patrick 23). Indeed, it is through storytelling Walcott gains the ability to better express the inner struggles he faces.

Walcott’s *Omeros* benefits the human experience by sharing a distinct reality of the history of life in St. Lucia. Readers gain insight and a clear understanding of this world because of his unique implementation of the narrative elements—structure, voices/languages, characters, and themes—without which, the story would lack authenticity and meaning. According to the article, “Does Narrative Writing Instruction Enhance the Benefits of Expressive Writing” from The US National Library of Medicine, “In attempting to explain mechanisms by which expressive writing produces benefits, researchers have emphasized the importance of creating a narrative (Pennebaker & Seagal; Ramírez-Esparza & Pennebaker; Smyth & Pennebaker). Although numerous theories exist regarding what constitutes a narrative (e.g Gergen & Gergen; McAdams), definitions often emphasize story-telling qualities such as coherence and a clear beginning, middle, and end” (Ramírez-Esparza & Pennebaker). Walcott's text, though complex, provides a well-rounded story. Most importantly, his story successfully shows his ability to express his thoughts and imagination through narrative. Assessment of the epic through the application of narrative theory or narratology--a term coined by theorist Tzvetan Todorov that defines the “the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events;

cultural artifacts that ‘tell a story’ (Bal 3); highlights the effectiveness and significance of *Omeros* as a hallmark of Caribbean literature.

The reception of *Omeros* was quite positive. Critic, Geert Lernout asserts, “In his poem *Omeros* Derek Walcott may well have succeeded in doing for St. Lucia what Joyce did for Ireland and Dublin...in the grand manner of the later Joyce's *Ulysses*. The ambition of Walcott's poem is clear: the poet measures himself against Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Joyce. It is an ambition worthy of a Nobel prize” (Lernout 90). In 1992, Walcott received the Nobel prize in Literature for his poem *Omeros*. Proving to be a great masterpiece, the profundity of *Omeros* lingers and is still quite relevant to the country, as economic, political, and social changes take place in St. Lucia and in the Caribbean at large. In the article, “Can the Subaltern Sing? Analogy, Alienation and Discursive Precarity in Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*” the author Sneharika Roy states, “While the representation of material living conditions of St Lucians has also drawn critical attention in the past, recent trends demonstrate a more concerted focus on the poem’s depictions of tourism as a neo-plantation enterprise, of the commodifying and homogenizing processes of global capitalism, and of local environmental practices like fishing industry read through an ecocritical prism” (Roy 461). Walcott’s work is still essential to understand the pattern of change in St. Lucia-- from the history of post-colonialism presented in his epic poem, to the present conditions that affect the collective identity/identities of the country.

History of St. Lucia

St. Lucia is in the chain of islands that makes up the Caribbean, between North and South America. It is the homeland of approximately 184,598 locals of African, African-European, and Indo-Caribbean descent. The history of St. Lucia is rich and important to its locals and provides

the outside world with unique insight into slavery and colonialism within the West Indies. The first inhabitants of the country were the Amerindians (Kalinago) who lived on the island for 800 years. Because of their formidable presence, early European settlers were unable to settle on the island for a very long time. The first Amerindian group (Arawaks/Aruacs) named the country “Iounalao” which means “There where the iguana is found” or “land of the iguanas” (St. Lucia Embassy). “Iounalao” eventually evolved into the word “Hewanorra”, after which the airport in the south of the country is named—Hewanorra International Airport. The country’s name is a key piece of information that Walcott expresses in his story:

Although smoke forgets the earth from which it ascends,
And nettles guard the holes where laurels were killed,
An iguana hears the axes, clouding each lens

Over its lost name, when the hunched island was call
“Iounalao,” “Where the iguana is found.”
But taking its own time, the iguana will scale

The rigging of vines in a year, its dewlap fanned,
Its elbows akimbo, its deliberate tail
Moving with the island. The slit of its eyes

Ripened in a pause that lasted for centuries,
That rose with the Aruacs’ smoke till a new race
Unknown to the lizard stood measuring trees.

Walcott highlights how important the iguana has been to the historical identity of the country, since it is connected to the first name given to St. Lucia by the Arawaks- one of the two Amerindian groups on the island. This name was passed down to the “new race” (Africans) who were “unknown to the lizard”. Like the Amerindians, this new race measured and cut down trees to make canoes for fishing and travelling.

In the 15th century, the French, having purchased the island, eventually settled there and ward off the attacks of the more dominant Amerindian group called the Caribs. However, the

British laid claim to the island, stating that they attempted to colonize the country before the French. Their dispute developed into a bitter war that lasted for approximately 150 years. The battles resulted in the country being governed fourteen times (seven times British and seven times French) by the two imperial powers. Hence St. Lucia gained the name the *Helen of the West Indies* after the tale, The Helen of Troy (McClure 9). The French eventually surrendered rulership to the British in 1814. St. Lucia gained its independence in 1979 and is currently a member of the British Commonwealth.

Narrative Structure

In *Omeros*, Walcott attempts to capture how change and history molded the present and future of the inhabitants of St. Lucia who felt the brunt of slavery and the lasting impacts of colonialism. The epic poem is divided into seven books and contains 64 chapters. There are three main, single narrative threads that intersect within the poem to create the entire story. These narrative threads provide the reader with a holistic reading experience. Within the poem is the narrative thread of St. Lucia's history, played out through the rivalry of the fisher-man Achille and the taxi-driver Hector, who strive to attain the love of the alluring maid Helen. Their quarrel is bitter, and it trickles into their daily interactions, "Hector ran, splashing/ in shallows mixed with the drizzle, towards Achille, /his cutlass lifted. The surf, in anger, gnashing / its tail like a foaming dogfight. Men can kill their own brothers in rage..." (Walcott 17). Achille and Hector—names of Homeric characters from Homer's classic *The Iliad*, symbolize the two imperial powers, (the French and British) that fought for rulership over St. Lucia. Within the story, Achilles' and Hector's conflict seem to be more situated in their desire to have power over Helen's body rather than her fickle heart. Helen, the ebony beauty, is described as catlike,

sensual, dangerous, and titillating. Everything about her invites others in because she is mysterious. Her arresting beauty brings any man to his knees—that includes the narrator. He says,

I saw her once after that moment on the beach
when her face shook my heart, and that incredible
stare paralyzed me past any figure of speech,

when, because they thought her moods uncontrollable,
her tongue too tart for a waitress to take orders,
she set up shop: beads, hair-pick, and trestle table.

She braided the tourists' flaxen hair with bright beads
cane-row style, then would sit apart from the vendors...
Her carved face flickering with light-wave patterns cast

among the coconut masks, the coral earrings
reflected the sea's patience. Once, when I passed
her shadow mixed with those shadows, I saw the rage

of her measuring eyes, and felt again the chill
of a panther hidden in the dark of its cage
that drew me towards its shape as it did Achilles.

I stopped, but it took me all the strength in the world
to approach her stall, as it takes for a hunter
to approach a branch where a pantheress lies curled

with leaf-light on its black silk. To stand in front of her
and pretend I was interested in the sale
of a mask or a T-shirt? Her gaze looked too bored,

and just as a pantheress stops swinging its tail
to lightly leap into grass, she yawned and entered
a thicket of palm-printed cloth, while I stood there

stunned by that feline swiftness, by the speed
of her vanishing, and behind her, trembling air
divided by her echo that shook like a reed (Walcott 36).

Helen is a force to be reckoned with. Throughout the story, we see her power, yet she has a childlike fragility. Her helplessness is clear in her inability to maintain a living. The men she encounters sexually exploit, disrespect, and fight over her. This is evident in Achilles words and actions towards her.

““What?” he said. “What make you this whore?” ... “More men plough that body than canoe plough the sea.”/The lance of his hatred entered her with no sound/ Yet she came and lay next to him...she found his hand and held it. He turned. She was asleep. Like a child” (Walcott 115). She represents the beautiful St. Lucia, which underwent exploitation and drastic changes through war, colonization, the killing of the natives (the Kalinagos), and the enslavement of African men and women who were brought to a new environment that became their home. Despite hearing Helen’s voice in the story, she is not given an opportunity to narrate her experience. Readers perceive Helen through the eyes of others. Her silence whilst her story is being told can be interpreted as the country’s helplessness as others dictate the changes being made to it.

The second narrative thread details the life of former British officer Major Dennis Plunkett and his wife, Maud Plunkett. Their presence in St. Lucia signifies the victory of the British over the French to become the existing power in the country. Major Plunkett’s life is bittersweet. His understanding of his service to Britain and his reason for participating in the war is obscure and seems meaningless to him. Yet his sexual relations and lingering desire for the character Helen, who once worked for him as a maid, highlight the British’s involvement and presence in St. Lucia. Major Plunkett is desperate to understand Helen, “So Plunkett decided what the place needed/ was its true place in history, that he’d spent hours/ for Helen’s sake on

research, so he proceeded” (Walcott 64). He tries to uncover the secrets of the island, in order and to make sense of his attachment to Helen—the country, and Helen—the woman.

Finally, the third narrative thread is the foretelling of the narrator’s own story within the poem. He shares his history and how his father and African ancestors contributed to his identity as a writer and storyteller:

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.
There, like ants or angels, they see their native town,
unknown, raw, insignificant. They walk, you write;

keep to that narrow causeway without looking down,
climbing in their footsteps, that slow, ancestral beat
of those used to climbing roads; your own work owes them

because the couplet of those multiplying feet
made your first rhymes (Walcott 71).

The words above are powerful because they highlight the lessons Walcott, as an individual and representative of St. Lucia absorbed from his ancestors. Speaking to himself through the voice of his late father is a brilliant narrative technique that shows the reader the importance of culture and significance of the past to Walcott’s/the narrator’s future. The narrator's experiences, his history, as well as the places he has travelled to, are also mentioned in the book and are much like Walcott’s. The critic Sneharika Roy states,

Like the narrating consciousness of Césaire's ([1939] 2017) *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Journal of a Homecoming), the poet-narrator of *Omeros* – an expatriate St Lucian writer who teaches and lives in North America, and has travelled across the global north – relates his visit to his island home of St Lucia. (In fact, this visit is one of many, for Walcott's persona frequently returns to his native land.) His arrival on the island occasions reflections on the Caribbean's history – the decimation of its native Arawak population by European colonizers, the forced deportation of African slaves to its shores and its consequent plantation economy, and the now independent island's dependency on American tourism (Roy 460).

The narrator travels through time, seeing through the eyes of his characters, like Achille-who interacts with his ancestors, and like Major Plunkett who recalls his time in the imperial war. It is through the experiences of these characters and the narrator's own consciousness the reader is given multiple sides to the story; each facet contributes to a significant piece of the history of St. Lucia.

Moreover, *Omeros* voices the history of the Caribbean as it details slavery, colonization, emancipation, and the struggle that many countries like St. Lucia encountered. Locals strive to make a living whilst the Caribbean islands become spectacles for foreigners and tourists, and opportunities for better living conditions dwindle (Roy 461). Despite the truth and disconcerting events within the story, Walcott shows that there is hope through pain and endurance in the life of the minor character Philoctete, the wounded and isolated fisherman. Philoctete suffers throughout the story, until he is healed by Ma Kilman—the shop owner, “Walcott also situates the healing of his Philoctete's wound in a temporal locus that looks both to the past and conveys a sense of optimism for a positive future through acceptance” (Beattie & Bertacco 88). Overall, the narrative structure of *Omeros* is key to understanding the essence of the story. Works like *Omeros* highlight the narrative styles of Caribbean writers to show the essence and profundity of Caribbean Literature.

The poem begins with strong imagery of the laboring fishermen building canoes, the natural environment of trees and plants, and the forbearing presence of white tourists-- which according to the tone of the narrator, is an unsettling welcome. Fumagalli says, “Walcott has always been very critical of the tourist industry; through Philoctete’s behaviour he articulates his distaste and disparagement for this new form of exoticism and exploitation. He shows how the tourists’ attempt to take Philoctete’s “soul with their camera”” (Fumagalli 77). The character of Philoctete (Walcott’s Homer in *Omeros*) begins the tale. He says,

“This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes.” Philoctete is humoring the tourists with his experiences. The Omniscient narrator then says, “Philoctete smiles for the tourists who try taking his soul with their cameras” (Walcott 3). Philoctete tells the story of the life of a fisherman. He is clearly a spectacle to them. He continues,

Wind lift the ferns. They sound like the sea that feed us
fishermen all our life, and the ferns nodded ‘Yes,
the trees have to die.’ So fists jam in our jacket,

Cause the heights was cold and our breath making feathers
Like the mist, we pass the rum. When it came back, it
give us the spirit to turn into murderers.

I lift the axe and pray for strength in my hands
To wound the first cedar. Dew was filling my eyes,
But I fire one more white rum. Then we advance” (Walcott 3).

Philoctete, the wounded fisherman speaks in a St. Lucia English dialect (patios) and recounts how he and other men, travel on foot to the heights (forest areas) where it is cold, to cut down cedar for canoe making. It takes determination, strength, and white rum (shared amongst them) to help Philoctete and the men complete their tasks.

First, to Walcott’s Caribbean/St. Lucian audience, the narrative structure of this tale is significant because it rouses memory of times past and aligns with the stories of the generations

during the 20th century. These are the same stories that grandparents presently share with their grandchildren, to let them know how challenging life in the country had been. Yet, the uncertainty of memory and the paradisiacal aspect of Afro-Caribbean culture lends to the mythical quality and structure of Walcott's narrative. Myth distinctively deals with the foretelling of events from the past. However, Walcott's narrative structure in the epic, merges past, present and the foreseeable future of St. Lucia. He amalgamates the tale with the present reality to express what he hopes for. It can be argued that the use of the epic, which usually deals with myth and the past, seems aberrant in this story. However, this is an excellent way through which Walcott connects with the foreign reader because the epic is a narrative style that derives from old literature,

Here is the interesting phenomenon, due to the poem's characteristic, because *Omeros* is narrating a story but in many lines. This fact actually reminds readers to a genre of epic, from the past, which was commonly in the form of poems containing many and long lines. Adeline Johns-Putra (2006) stated that epic is defined as a long heroic poem, and Frey (1990) suggested that in epic there is conventionally a compilation consisting of tales, myths, and histories. Therefore, from its form *Omeros* is obviously an epic, since it is a long poem which narrates. Meanwhile, from its content the characteristics of the epic are shown in the existence of the old figures, such as the character names of Omeros (adapted from Homer), Philoctete, Achille, Hector, and also Helen. This reminds readers to Greek mythology, especially to the old epics of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Gabriel Fajar Sasmita Aji 230)

The Odyssean structure of *Omeros* connects to readers of European descent, who may be familiar with Homeric texts or Greek mythology. This is a brilliant way of gaining a new audience and portraying how human beings despite cultural differences still have strong ties to worlds that are viewed separate from theirs. It is thoughtful to allow these groups of people to connect to narratives with structures that appeal to them--some of these individuals are unaware of life in territories who were once colonized by their countries.

One key element that separates Walcott's epic from Homer's is its lack of heroic acts and glory. Scholar Mathias Iro Orhero insists, "Walcott's poem lacks the heroic candour of *The Odyssey* or *The Iliad*, but it takes up the life of low Caribbean characters as they struggle to make sense of their society" (Orhero 36). One way to analyze this point can be that Walcott's use of the epic is not so much to highlight the hero but rather the journey of individuals who despite lacking fame and recognition are still as notable in their fight for survival. By definition, an epic poem is a story that recounts a physical or mental journey. For instance, Homer's *Iliad* tells the story of the Trojan War and the heroic figures within that world and *The Odyssey*, tells the tale of the wandering Heroic figure *Odysseus* and his return to Ithaca. Comparably, Walcott embarks on a journey in St. Lucia, in hopes of repairing his fractured past.

Despite the Homeric style is crucial in Walcott's work, his use of this structure varies from that of the Greek texts. For instance, at the beginning of *the Odyssey* the narrator says, "Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the Story", and at the beginning of *the Iliad* states, "Sing, Goddess, Achilles' Rage," (Homer 1). Likewise, the narrator in *Omeros* "sings" and tells the story of his characters. Yet this saying appears at the end of the epic, in past tense, rather than at the beginning in *the Odyssey* and *the Iliad*. In the last pages of the epic, the narrator says,

I sang of quiet Achille, Afolabe's son,
who never ascended in an elevator,
who had no passport, since the horizon needs none,

never begged nor borrowed, was nobody's waiter,
whose end, when it comes, will be a death by water [...]

I sang of our wide country, the Caribbean Sea.
Who hated shoes, whose soles were as cracked as a stone,
who was gentle with ropes, who had one suit alone,

whom no man dared insult and who insulted no one,
whose grin was a white breaker cresting, but whose frown
was a growing thunderhead... (320).

The narrator is proud of his people despite their insignificance to the outside world and despite their displacement. They are not well-known like the mighty Achilles or Prince Hector or the fair Helen of Troy, but they are strong. They fight their own battles and sculpt their own identities from relics of their ancestors, the world of post-colonialism, and indigenous people who once lived in St. Lucia. This tale is basically, an epic of the dispossessed as asserted by author, Robert D. Hamner, “I have chosen to call *Omeros* an epic of the dispossessed because each of its protagonists is a castaway in one sense or another...they are transplanted individuals whose separated quest all center on the fundamental need to strike roots in a place where they belong. Unlike Homer’s Odysseus who must return to an established kingdom... Walcott’s humble colonists must create a home in the aftermath of Europe’s failed dream of a New World Eden, using only their bare hands, faith, and imagination” (Hamner 3).

Achille is a perfect example of one who had to survive with his hands, faith, and imagination and according to the above stanza, he had no prospects to travel to a foreign land, “sang of quiet Achille, Afolabe’s son, / who never ascended in an elevator, /who had no passport” (Walcott 320). Achille is bound to his island; he has no documents to travel. Yet there is no shame in not owning a passport. The narrator shows that this is unnecessary to achieve success or survive, “since the horizon needs none.” Furthermore, Walcott’s use of this Homeric statement, “I sang” at the end of his epic highlights his own interpretation of the epic and his ability to travel through time, space, and memory.

Significance of the Characters Philoctete and Ma Kilman

Readers approach the story with an expectation based on the names given to the characters. Apart from Achilles, Hector, and Helen, Philoctete's presence in the story is key because it is through him, there is strong symbolic representation of suffering and the presence of the wound of slavery and colonization. Writer Jahan Ramazani explains, "Walcott grants a European name to the primary bearer of the wound, the black fisherman Philoctete, who allegorizes African Caribbean suffering under European colonialism and slavery...By metaphorizing pain, he vivifies the black Caribbean inheritance of colonial injury and at the same time deconstructs the experiential uniqueness of suffering" (Ramazani). In the opening lines of the story, it is Philoctete that smiles for the tourists, humoring them with his tales. Yet, we see him suffering unable to exercise flexibility or work as the other fishermen do, "The rest walked up the sand with identical stride/except for foam-haired Philoctete/ The sore on his shin/unhealed, like a radiant anemone" (Walcott 10). The imagery of this wound allows the reader to visualize how grave and deeply impactful it is, just as painful and sore as St. Lucia's past.

At first, Philoctete gains momentary relief from Ma Kilman, the shop owner-- who offers him white rum to numb the pain he feels, "With his hop-and-drop/limp, hand clutching one knee, he left the printed beach/ to crawl up the early street to Ma Kilman's shop. /She would open and put the white rum within reach" (Walcott 10). Walcott intends for the reader to visualize Philoctete as the collective identity of those who struggled within the island of St. Lucia, post-colonization. The words, "hop-and-drop", "limp" and "crawl" shows how the country progressed. St. Lucia moved on through and under great strain. With little prospects within the country and reliance on first world countries that provided limited support to the colonized, it was difficult to survive. St. Lucia's reliance on Britain is also seen through interaction between

the White woman, Maud Plunkett (Major Plunkett's wife) and her former maid, Helen. Maud is strongly displeased with Helen because she sees her as arrogant and treacherous. Maud says,

“Come back looking for work after ruining two men, /after trying on my wardrobe, after driving Hector/ crazy with a cutlass, you dare come... We've no work Helen.” (Walcott 124).

Maud feels that Helen needs to be humbled. She believes that Helen's deceptive character drives her to be deviant and menacing. But what she fails to acknowledge is the desperation and poverty that causes Helen to act the way she does. Helen responds,

“Is not work I looking for.”
Pride edged that voice; she honed her arrogance
On Maud's nerves when she worked here, but there was sorrow

In the old rudeness. Helen tore the stalk in her hands.
“What I come for this morning is see if you can borrow
Me five dollars. I pregnant. I will pay you next week” (Walcott 124).

Helen is symbolic of St. Lucia and Maud represents Great Britain. Their interaction highlights how Walcott intended to capture the relationship between the two countries. St. Lucia is dependent on the mother country yet has its pride and confidence. Sadly, confidence does not always lead to sustenance.

Going back to Ma Kilman's significance as a character, readers are made aware of her reputation as an obeah woman. Through her cultural practices, she completely heals Philoctete and every other significant character in the story-- including those who represent the colonizer (Major and Maud Plunkett). The critic Loretta argues, “Through Homeric associations and multiple ironies, Walcott launches both Afro- and Anglo-Caribbean characters on an Odyssey of confrontation and reconciliation... Each character in his own way has been wounded by the diaspora and colonial rule” (Collins). In order to cure Philoctete and the community, Ma Kilman seeks herbal remedies passed down from her ancestors,

In the Egyptian silence she muttered softly:
 “It have a flower somewhere, a medicine, and ways
 My grandmother would boil it. I used to watch ants
 Climbing her white flower-pot...

Where was this root? What senna, what tepid tisanes
 Could clean the branched river of his corrupted blood...(Walcott 19).

Ma Kilman tries to recollect an old medicine, “It have a flower somewhere” (There’s a flower located somewhere). It is through this herb/flower the wound which plagues Philoctete can be cured. It is important to note that this cure derives from Ma Kilman’s African ancestry, rather than Western medication. The role of Ma Kilman simply shows how important it is to preserve culture. Furthermore, her act of curing Philoctete through cultural medicine restores a sense of identity, and then peace renews the community:

Ma Kilman, in agony, bayed
 Up at the lights moving in the high leaves, like aeons

Like atoms, her dugs shifting like the sow’s in a shift
 Of cheap satin. She rubbed dirt in her hair, she prayed
 In the language of ants and her grandmother, to lift

the sore from its roots in Philoctete’s rotting shin,
 from the flower on his shin-blade, puckering inwards...

Philoctete shook himself up from the bed of his grave,
 And felt the pain draining, as surf flowers sink through sand.

Ma Kilman’s character introduces specific cultural practices to the reader. Even the narrator expresses how he and those who came before him were healed through Ma Kilman’s actions, “See her there, my mother, my grandmother, my great-great-grandmother. / See the black ants of their sons, /their coal carrying mothers. Feel the shame, the self-hate/draining from our bodies from all our bodies...” (Walcott 245). Walcott shows that if St. Lucia cling to its past and the practices of its ancestors, the wound caused by colonizers will be healed. The symbolic roles of

the characters Ma Kilman, Philoctete, Helen, Achille and Hector prove their effectiveness to the plot. Their purpose within the story benefits the reader's understanding of St. Lucia and of Walcott's goals within the story.

Language and the Multiplicity of Voices

Language is an essential and telling narrative element within *Omeros* because it celebrates St. Lucia's culture and identity. *Omeros* is written in English, which underlines the influence and presence of the British in St. Lucia, and there are specific areas that are written in St. Lucian creole/*Kwéyòl*, also known as Patwa—a primarily French-based language with African syntax. The portions that are written in Creole are also translated into English. Areas where French creole is identified are usually dialogue. For instance, the narrator speaks of a hymn that Achille could not utter but felt within. He says:

And this was the hymn that Achille could not utter:
 “Merci, Bon Dieu, pour la mer-a...Qui ba moin force moin”--
 “Thank God for the Sea... Who gave me the privilege--.”

“Toutes gibiers c'est freres moin', pis homme
 ni pour travaille kou gibiers jouk tan li mour”
 “Every bird is my brother because man must work like the birds until he die.”

In St. Lucia, when telling certain jokes, sharing sentiments, showing gratitude, or giving a scolding, locals would most likely speak Creole rather than the official language- English. Despite translation, the weight and meaning of an expression seems to be better captured in Creole than in English. The narrator speaks on Achille's behalf and gives the readers insight into what or how he feels, and it appears that this feeling is better expressed in Patwa. However, the two languages within the text goes beyond just simple expression. They represent diverse communities in the island. Also, despite there is one main narrator, there are multiple voices in

the text. We hear the voice of Philoctete, Hector, Achille, Helen, Maud Plunkett, Major Plunkett, and others. Author Mara Scanlon writes, “Reading the multivoicedness of the epic *Omeros* through the lens of heteroglossia suggests two things: one, it attempts to give voice to the diverse linguistic composition of St. Lucia, speaking for a nation as an epic traditionally does; two, it is a powerful authorizing strategy for a disenfranchised epic poet, challenging monologic constructions of the genre by insisting on the polyvocality of all language” (Scanlon 22). According to Scanlon, the multiple voices and diverse linguistic structure of the poem are important for understanding the amalgamated culture of St. Lucia. The word “polyvocality” refers to the power of multiple voices within a text that alternate or support narrative change. The languages Creole and English and the multiple voices are key narrative elements that represents diversity in St. Lucia.

It is through the voice, words and language, emotion is expressed in the text, and through the emotional responses from the reader, the writer know that they connect to the text. In the article, “A Passion for Plot: Prolegomena to Affective Narratology” the author Patrick Hogan argues, “narrative is fundamentally shaped and oriented by our emotion systems...the distinctive aspects of narrative are to a great extent the product of emotion systems” (Hogan 66). Therefore, Walcott’s ability to channel his emotions through the stories and voices of his characters lends to the effectiveness of *Omeros*.

Themes: The Sea

Nature, Memory and Myth are recurring themes in the poem. Nature plays a great deal in the setting and plot of the story. From the first chapter, we witness how connected the characters are to their surroundings. For instance, the fishermen are in the cold temperature in the forest cutting down trees to make canoes, and throughout the story they are at sea. Readers are

provided with an excellent outlook on the natural surroundings of the story at beginning of the poem. The narrator speaks of the sunlight, the wind, the ferns, the heights (forest/mountainous areas), and the leaves of the laurier-canelles- a plant that is native to St. Lucia, related to bay and cinnamon. Notably, the sea is a significant body of water that links *Omeros* to *the Odyssey*. Its significance lies in the title of the book. The word *Omeros* derives from the Greek name *Homer*.

The narrator addresses Homer/Omeros in the poem:

O, open this day with the conch's moan, Omeros,
As you did in my boyhood...

A lizard on the sea wall darted its question
At the waking sea, and a net of golden moss
brightened the reef, which the sails of their far canoes

avoided. Only in you, across centuries
of the sea's parchment atlas, can I catch the noise
of the surf lines wandering like shambling fleece

The journey of the narrator is rooted in the ocean. He is like Odysseus adrift at sea, bound to find his Ithaca. In the story, he provides the reader with a more in depth understanding of the title.

The narrator says, "O was the conch-shell's invocation/ *mer* was both mother and sea in our Antillean patois, / *os*, a grey bone, and a white surf as it crashes/ and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore" (Walcott 14). When fishermen do their weekly visits to the different communities in St. Lucia, they blow the conch shell to indicate that they are selling fish. In truth, the sound of the conch shell makes an "O" sound as Walcott describes. Moreover, the word *mer* is the creole word for the sea (*la mer*) and *os* as the narrator explains is a bone, which he describes as a white surf (also connected to the sea).

In the article, "The Sands of Un-Certainty: Tidalectically Synthesizing

Nature and Culture in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*", the writers, Aguilo Quintero and Maria del Carmen insists:

The sea serves as the poetic embodiment of nature and its relationship to the land—in this case culture— finally to hit landfall on the beach where both realms are reconciled and reconfigured. *Omeros* thus represents what Jonathan Raban calls "the classic British opposition between wild sea and tame land, between nature and culture" (24; emphasis in original). Like the fishermen in the poem who cross the beach and inhabit both land and sea, this new culture will yield a Caribbean identity that will not only look to communion, relation, fusion, and conflation between the two but also to a malleable, metamorphic, regenerative, and protean culture that will infinitely create and synthesize nature and culture.

Through an ecocritical reading of the text, the integral role of the sea as a thematic element of nature and its representation of the narrator's journey to finding culture and identity is evident.

According to the above quotation, the land and sea are like two worlds colliding. Critic

Stephanie Boeninger says, "the sea is most significant for its ability to erase history, allowing the postcolonial artist to rename his world from a site where cultures and traditions converge"

(Boeninger 465). The land and sea symbolize environment and culture. Their merging represents an amalgamated identity that will emerge from within the Caribbean, more specifically in St.

Lucia.

The sea is so significant to lives of the characters and their detachment from it is seen as betrayal. For instance, Hector was first a fisherman before becoming a taxi driver. The narrator says his reason for leaving the sea and fishing was motivated by a desire for money. Hector does feel remorseful and longs for the sea. His achievements do not fill the emptiness he feels. Hector dies in a crash after trying to avoid a piglet crossing the road. However, the narrator says that his "betrayal" to the sea led to his death:

He paid the penalty of giving up the sea
As graceless and as treacherous as it had seemed,

For the taxi business, he was making money
 but all of that money was making him ashamed
 of the long afternoons of shouting by the wharf
 hustling passengers. He missed the uncertain sand
 under his feet, he sighed for the trough of a wave
 and the jerk of the oar when it turned in his hand
 and the rose conch sunset with its low pelicans.

Castries was corrupting him with its roaring life,
 Its littered market, with too many transport vans
 competing. Castries had become his common-law wife
 who, like Helen he had longed for from a distance,
 and now he had both, but a frightening discontent
 hallowed his face; to find the sea was a love

he could never lose made every gesture violent
Mer was both mother and sea. In his lost canoe
 He had said his prayers...

Hector was buried near the sea he had loved once.
 Not too far from the shallows where he fought Achille
 For a tin and Helen.

Castries is the city, the mark of industrialization and change in St. Lucia. The narrator shows that being in the city leads to life or a career with money. However, it is an aggressive and compact environment that can lead many astray through greed--this is what happens to Hector.

The poem also closes with Achille at the sea. He seems to be coming to peace with life as it is:

An immense lilac emptiness
 Settled the sea. He sniffed his name in one armpit.
 He scraped dry scales off his hands. He liked the odours
 of the sea in him...

Achille put a wedge of dolphin
 that he saved for Helen in Hector's rusty tin.
 A full moon shone like a slice of raw onion.
 When he left the beach the sea was still going on.

The sea is the medium through which the characters and narrator seek to grasp, create, and cement their culture as well as erase the dark past of St. Lucia and the Caribbean at large, “In its wide-ranging depiction of the inhabitants of a St. Lucian fishing community, *Omeros* creates a sense of Caribbean cultural identity that is fluid and hybrid, grounded not in history but in the “amnesiac Atlantic” (61), whose transformation of the slave bodies drowned in it metaphorically frees a space for “the new naming of things” (Walcott “Muse” 428)” (Boeninger 463). The sea instigates change and creates opportunities for the people of St. Lucia to embrace and sculpt a life in the space it provides.

Furthermore, its permanence indicates that the collective identity and way of life within St. Lucia will endure, “the sea was still going on”. This statement implies that the narrator and the many voices of St. Lucians within the story can be at peace because they have found themselves, the wound has been healed, despite the threat of industrialization, globalization and the many changes brought about by foreigners. The narrator, like Achille, is at peace, and like Philoctete, he feels whole again. Themes such as the sea, myth and memory resonate with readers and Walcott’s writing technique and narrativity reveal these common threads in the story. Myth is evident in the Odyssean structure of the text, memory is relayed through the history of the island and its people, and the sea is an ever-present element in the lives of the characters. These themes are integral to understanding St. Lucia, the Helen of the West, through the perspective of Walcott.

Regarding the narratological aspects of *Omeros*, author Piret Peiker argues, “It is a text full of cultural tension and extraordinary combinations...It is a quest for history: a Dantean pilgrimage... an autobiographized epic, exploring the patterns, possibilities and temptations of post-colonial historiography” (Peiker 104-105). Despite being a tale about the history of St.

Lucia, *Omeros* is universal because of its multifaceted narrative style. These are important elements to consider when assessing the layout of the epic and how it benefits the reader's experience.

Omeros has proven to be an effective story that explores issues of identity, slavery, and post-colonialism through its three major narrative threads, voices/language, and themes. *The story* is saturated with a wealth of knowledge about the island and the Caribbean which benefits the human experience because it recounts the history of St. Lucia and shares substantial insight about the region. A limitation faced in the research was finding recent sources that aligned with the topic. Also, majority of critiques and scholars assessed Walcott's narrative style, but little connection was made to its impression on Caribbean and foreign readers. However, the significance and monumental impact of Walcott's narrative is widely acknowledged. Readers are offered a glimpse into Walcott's psyche through his omniscient narrator who embarks upon a journey of finding self and establishing roots in the natural environment of St. Lucia. Based on the text and research, we learn that the collective identity of the characters stem from a hybrid of African ancestry and European colonialism. This identity is celebrated through the lives of the fishermen, the voices of multiple characters, the two languages expressed in the text and through the portrayal of the stirring beauty Helen--the woman, and Helen, the island.

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