

A Far Cry from Africa



SUMMARY

A breeze lifts Africa's yellow-brown fur. People from Kenya's Kikuyu tribe, fast and lively as flies, fasten themselves to the veins of the grassland. Dead bodies are strewn throughout paradise. Only a worm, captain of decaying bodies, yells out: "Don't bother feeling sympathy for each of these dead people!" People use statistics to justify colonialism; scholars jump on different facts about colonialism to debate it. What do these abstract discussions matter to a white child who is chopped to death in bed? What do they matter to native Africans who are considered savages, who are seen as worthless Jews in Nazi concentration camps?

Shaken by farmers, the long grasses snap and a white dust fills the air. This dust is actually the flapping of ibises—white, long-legged birds. The birds are disturbed by the farmers and take off, crying out, just as they have done for thousands of years, ever since civilization began, whether over the shallow river or the plain full of animals. People interpret animals' violence towards each other as natural, but humans have often seen themselves as god-like, walking on two legs rather than four. Humans try to embrace that godliness by hurting others. But people are as crazed as fighting animals. They wage wars that are like dances to the beat of drums made out of corpses. Native rebels believe they have courage, when it is really just fear of extermination—a false peace that white people achieve by killing all those who resist.

Once more, the brutal idea of necessity is used to justify violence, appealing to a movement that itself is deeply flawed—just like someone trying to clean their bloody hands with a dirty napkin. Once more this is a waste of everyone's sympathy, as it was with the Spanish Civil War. As in racist stereotypes, it's like an ape fighting a super-human. I'm poisoned with the blood, or heritage, of both colonizer and colonized. Which side will I support when even my veins are split in two? I have vehemently opposed British colonial rule, which is like a drunken army or police officer (and also is literally enforced by drunken officers). How can I choose between African peoples and the English language that I love so much? How can I betray both of them? How can I give each of them what they've given me? How can I face all this violence and remain calm? How can I forsake Africa and keep on living?



THEMES



COLONIALISM AND DIVIDED IDENTITY

"A Far Cry From Africa" responds to the Mau Mau Uprising, a rebellion fought by native Kenyans against the British colonial army in the mid-20th century. The poem's speaker has connections to both Africa and England, and feels conflicted about how to interpret the violence of this conflict. Usually identified closely with Walcott himself, the speaker is painfully divided between his connections to the English as well as to the colonized people of Africa. In fact, the poem implicitly argues that a confused identity—and the anxiety it causes—is one of the painful legacies of colonialism.

To understand the speaker's dilemma here, it's important to understand some historical context. The Mau Mau, or Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), were rebels from the Kikuyu tribe in Kenya that waged a gruesome guerrilla war against English settlers for eight years (1952-1960). The British response to the rebellion was even more brutal.

This, then, is what the speaker is responding when asking, "How can I face such slaughter and be cool? / How can I turn from African and live?" For the speaker the word "slaughter" seems to suggest the highly publicized violence of the Mau Mau, which provoked the subsequently brutal response from the British. These lines embody the speaker's internal division between England and Africa, laying out the two sides as diametrically opposed choices.

The speaker feels that the violence of the Mau Mau Rebellion requires a passionate and decisive response. Either one must condemn the Mau Mau and side with England, or support the Mau Mau and forsake England entirely; accept the violence of the Mau Mau rebellion as necessary to Kenyan independence, or reject such violence, and in the process reject Africa and all connection to colonized people. The speaker is suspended between these two options, unable to choose.

Thus, the speaker feels alienated from each side of the conflict. At the same time, however, the speaker also feels inextricably linked to both the British and the Kenyans. It's implied that the speaker has a colonial heritage, ancestry from both English colonists and colonized Africans. As a result, the speaker feels as if his own body is divided by this conflict.

In the third stanza, the speaker addresses this problem explicitly: "I who am poisoned with the blood of both, / Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?" The word "poisoned" conveys the powerful sense of alienation the Mau Mau Uprising provokes in the speaker. Although the speaker has "the blood of both" Europeans and Africans—that is, ancestry from each

place—this blood feels poisonous, linking the speaker to violence no matter what.

This heritage also “poison[s]” the speaker because speaker feels “divided to the vein.” No matter which way the speaker “turn[s],” it’s as if half the speaker’s “blood” does violence to the other half. By framing this conflict in terms of “blood” and the speaker’s own “vein[s],” the poem captures the very personal, even bodily, division the speaker feels. This isn’t a matter of abstract politics for the speaker, but a very intimate struggle that’s taking place within him—a struggle caused by the legacy of colonialism.

At the end of the poem, the speaker is no closer to choosing a side than at the beginning. Colonial history has forced the speaker into this situation, forever divided by colonizer and colonized.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-33



LANGUAGE AS A TOOL OF RESISTANCE AND SELF-EXPRESSION

The poem explores the complex relationship between colonized peoples and the language that they’re often pushed to adopt—in this case, English. For the speaker, there are two distinct sides to the English language: one is the rich tradition of English literature, particularly poetry, and the other is England’s brutal history of colonization. While English *literature* has given the speaker a means of thought and self-expression, English *colonists* have only caused pain in the speaker’s eyes. As a result, the very act of writing in English embodies the speaker’s complex and conflicted identity. The poem, by its very existence, also illustrates how may one may find a means of resistance and self-expression while using the language of an oppressor.

The speaker’s antipathy towards England is a response to the history of colonization, which, for the speaker, is directly connected to the English language. In other words, the English language is not separate from the actions of England; the poem implies that language is closely linked to identity and heritage.

The speaker states this connection and its resulting dilemma most clearly in the third stanza: “I who have cursed / The drunken officer of British rule, how choose / Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?” In other words, the speaker hates English colonial rule and wants to support the independence of Africans. Yet the speaker feels that such support means rejecting the English language—the very language the poem is written in, and which is also a part of the speaker’s identity and means of expressing himself. In fact, the speaker expresses “love” for “the English tongue.” This “love” communicates how passionately the speaker feels about

English, how difficult it would be to give up writing in it.

This passion makes a lot of sense if the speaker is interpreted as someone from a British colony, as Walcott himself was (he grew up on the Caribbean island of Santa Lucia). While native peoples in English colonies did not originally speak English, they were forced to adopt it, especially those who attended school. English became a very important language for such people, even their primary mode of expression, as it was for Walcott. At the same time, though, it was a language they were coerced into adopting, the language of their oppressor.

The poem’s form conveys this nuanced relationship with English. The speaker engages with the traditional constraints of English verse while also striving for some freedom from those constraints. The poem—like the rest of Walcott’s work—is based on a traditionally English understanding of poetic form, albeit one that Walcott loosens and tweaks. In other words, the poem sounds like a freer, more modern version of traditional English poetry. For instance, the poem weaves in and out of a loose [meter](#), sporadically using rhyme and half-rhyme in no set [scheme](#).

By writing like this, the speaker conveys “love” for the English language and English literature. Yet by not fully conforming the forms of that past, the speaker reveals some distrust. Perhaps poetic constraints are not so different from the legal constraints imposed on natives by British colonial rule. The speaker bristles against colonial rule, even at a literary level. In adopting a more fluid attitude towards form, then, the speaker attains a degree of self-expression and self-interrogation that resists colonial authority.

As a result, the speaker occupies a kind of halfway point: not fully conforming to English expectations, but not fully free of them either. Rather than finding a resolution to this conflict, the speaker lingers in the painful contradictions of a divided identity, using eloquent English and a fluid attitude towards traditional form to address the suffering that colonization has caused.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-33



HUMANITY AND VIOLENCE

Much of the imagery in “A Far Cry From Africa” depicts violence. This imagery refers to the brutal tactics employed by British forces in Kenya, as well as the acts that the Mau Mau—or Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA)—used in their rebellion. While the speaker understands that British colonial rule is ultimately the source of this violence, the poem also laments the bloodiness of human affairs more generally. To the speaker, the violence of the Mau Mau also seems reprehensible. Violence begets violence in this

poem, leaving the speaker pessimistic about ever achieving humanity's higher ideals.

The speaker depicts both the Mau Mau and the British colonial regime as equally violent. To understand the force of this depiction, it's important again to get a sense of the historical events it alludes to. For instance, "the white child hacked in bed" refers to one of the most notorious acts of the uprising, when a European family—including a six-year-old boy—were hacked to death on their farm by the Mau Mau. The Mau Mau often used tactics like this, targeting both white settlers and loyalist Kenyans (those Kenyans who supported British rule).

In response, however, the British killed vastly more people and employed brutally repressive tactics, such as the resettlement of natives and forced labor camps. These camps were compared—even by some disenchanted British officials—to the conditions of Nazi concentration camps only a decade earlier. That's why the speaker thinks the British see Kenyans as "savages, expendable as Jews." In this damning comparison, the British colonists are no better than Nazis.

As such, the speaker depicts both the British and Kenyans as succumbing to the same human failing of resorting to violence. Each group's use of violence undermines their higher ideals. Referring to the British, the speaker says, "upright man / Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain." This refers to the traditional ideology of European colonists, who regarded themselves as virtuous Christians bringing "savages" closer to God. Yet these Christians enact their closeness to "divinity" by engaging in incredibly violent acts. The speaker implies that these Christian colonists are hypocrites; Christianity emphasizes having sympathy for the meek, not violently oppressing them.

Similarly, the speaker refers to the Kenyans whose "wars / Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum." This image suggests that the actions of Mau Mau are as appalling as those of the British, undermining the ideals of their own cause. More specifically, such actions [metaphorically](#) turn traditional Kenyan drums into "tightened carcass[es]." These drums should be a symbol of Kenya's national pride in its culture. Instead, however, the drums have been reduced a gruesome image of death. Indeed, the speaker doesn't see violence of the Mau Mau as "courage" but as "dread / Of the white peace." That is, the Kenyans are acting out of fear of oppression by whites, rather than out of courage and pride.

On both sides of the conflict, then, the speaker sees people giving in to violence. While the English and Mau Mau both view themselves as upholding what they most value, the speaker sees violence as undermining those ideals. The speaker's outlook on humanity's use of violence, then, is pretty bleak. Violence continues to produce more violence, advancing neither the cause of human "divinity" nor of African freedom.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-33



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*A wind is ...
... of the veldt.*

"A Far Cry From Africa" responds to the Mau Mau Uprising, a guerrilla war waged by Kenyan rebels against British colonists from 1952-1960. This fact becomes apparent as soon as the speaker references the Kikuyu, the tribe that the Mau Mau fighters were from.

Before making this reference, though, the poem begins with a suggestive and [metaphorical image](#) of the African continent: "A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt / Of Africa." This sentence seems to refer to the "veldt," or grassland, whose grasses look like a "tawny pelt"—that is, yellow-brown fur. It also summons images of some animals that live in that environment, such as lions. At a more abstract level, this image also comments on human affairs. Something is happening in Africa, a disturbance that the speaker will soon implicitly reveal to be the Mau Mau rebellion.

Describing this disturbance as a "wind" creates some ambiguity. Is this a gust of wind that suggests a storm is coming? Or is it simply a passing breeze? Does the Mau Mau rebellion signal a coming wave of violent struggles for independence, or is it an isolated instance that will be quashed and forgotten?

This first sentence invests the landscape with intense metaphorical energy. Throughout the poem, the speaker will use descriptions of landscape to loop in comparisons to human events. This happens more explicitly in the poem's second sentence: "Kikuyu, quick as flies, / Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt." By metaphorically transforming the people of the Kikuyu tribe into "flies," the speaker is able to use this description of the natural world as a means of commenting on human affairs. Such descriptions can also be thought of as a form of [metonymy](#), in which the landscape *adjacent* to human events comes to stand *for* those events.

As noted above, the Kikuyu were the tribe that the Mau Mau, or Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), came from. Rather than fighting the British army head on, the Mau Mau mostly engaged in surprise attacks at night, often targeting white settlers instead of the army. The description here seems to channel the bloodiness of those attacks. "Batten" means lock down, "bloodstreams" refers to veins, and "veldt" refers to African grassland. In this intensely metaphorical description, the grassland has veins that the Kikuyu, as flies, attach themselves to. This description has parasitic connotations, suggesting, at the very least, how flies often hover around dead

bodies.

The speaker conveys deep ambiguity about the Mau Mau here. Although later in the poem the speaker displays clear hatred for colonization, that doesn't translate to automatic sympathy for the Mau Mau. Right off the bat, there's a feeling that violence transforms people into creatures of death. That violence, at least for the speaker, makes it hard to keep viewing people as humans. In fact, this description foreshadows the speaker's later description of the Mau Mau as "Delirious as [...] worried beasts." All this to say, the speaker is deeply suspicious and critical of the Mau Mau.

These first lines begin to display the poem's loose take on [iambic pentameter](#) (five stresses per line in a da-DUM rhythm). For instance, the first line might most intuitively be read as:

A wind | is ruff- | ling the law- | ny pelt

This first line, then, hints at iambic pentameter without committing to it wholeheartedly (since there's an [anapest](#), da-da-DUM, in that third foot). Line 3 plays with a similar ambiguity:

Batten | upon | the bloodstreams | of the veldt.

Throughout the poem, this tension between strict meter and a looser tendency towards [free verse](#) reflects the speaker's own struggle. More specifically, with the legacy of colonialism in the language of the poem itself: English. (The "Themes" section of this guide discusses this legacy in depth.)

Also note the [rhyme](#) between lines 1 and 3, "pelt" and "veldt." As with meter, this rhyme indicates the importance of [formal](#) poetry to the speaker, while the poem's loose use of rhyme throughout suggests an uneasiness with the connotations of such forms.

LINES 4-6

*Corpses are scattered ...
... these separate dead!"*

The next three lines bring violence front and center: "Corpses are scattered through a paradise" says the speaker. In other words, there has been a massacre here.

What is "a paradise?" Well, this seems to describe "the veldt," the African grassland. Describing the Kenyan landscape as "a paradise" has several [connotations](#). Most directly, this word suggests that the natural world *could be* a paradise, a wonderful place to be, if it weren't for human violence. It implies that the natural world, outside human influence, is perfect. This word also implies that Kenya was still a paradise before white colonists showed up, that it was a paradise for native Kenyans. "[P]aradise" also has distinct connotations in the context of colonization. European explorers often described the lands

they visited as paradises, and colonization has often been framed as taking advantage of idyllic, unspoiled lands. Such lands were wasted on the "savage[]," non-Christian natives—at least according to colonists. Europeans thought it was up to them to cultivate these paradises and convert the natives to Christianity. On a related note, the Mau Mau Uprising was heavily based around land usage, as British settlers pushed natives onto increasingly small tracts of land, often miles away from where they originally lived. The British subsequently forced these same natives to work on British farms, sometimes the very land these natives used to live on.

In connection to the role of Christianity in colonization, "paradise" also suggests the role that Eden plays in Christian mythology and theology. Paradise is supposed to be a place free of sin and suffering. Clearly, though, that is not the case here. And if the use of this word is a [sarcastic](#) criticism of colonial policy, it's also an indictment of violence in general: though the British may have caused this situation, the violence of the Mau Mau—in the speaker's eyes—isn't bringing Kenya any closer to recovering "paradise."

Continuing with a [metaphorical](#) description of the natural world, the speaker introduces "the worm, colonel of carrion." A "colonel" is an army officer, and "carrion" is decaying animal flesh eaten by scavengers like vultures or worms. In other words, the worm is [personified](#) as being in charge of death and decay. By bringing in military terminology, the speaker links the army and war to this carnage in paradise. At the same time, though, by making the "colonel" a "worm," the speaker deflates the military's prestige. As with the flies above, the speaker treats soldiers almost like pests—tiny scavengers, rather than mighty warriors. Again, this conveys the speaker's distrust of those who promote violence.

The worm says "Waste no compassion on these separate dead." In other words, don't feel bad for each of these dead people. There is little sympathy in the landscape the speaker describes. This is not a scene in which people strive for better human understanding, but in which violence reduces people to compassionless "worm[s]" and "flies."

Notice the [rhyme](#) between "flies" and "cries", and the [slant rhyme](#) between those words and "paradise." The speaker's use of rhyme doesn't follow a set [rhyme scheme](#) but seems to occur intuitively. Rhyme is clearly important to the speaker, and the speaker is adept at using it. This suggests that traditional elements of [formal verse](#), like rhyme, are important to the speaker. At the same time, the speaker has learned from formalist modernists like T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden, who adopted a looser, more oblique attitude towards form. All this to say, the speaker has a clear and nuanced view of the history of English poetry, navigating that history in the writing of this poem.

LINES 7-10

*Statistics justify and ...
... expendable as Jews?*

In the final lines of the first stanza ("Statistic justify [...] expendable as Jews?"), the speaker zooms out to what could be called *the international conversation*—how public intellectuals discuss the Mau Mau Rebellion. The speaker is clearly frustrated. This conversation seems to mostly revolve around "Statistics" and "scholars" talking about "policy." Not only is this discussion dry, but it ends up "justify[ing]" colonialism. It doesn't get at the heart of the injustice and violence of colonialism. Such conversations help neither "the white child hacked in bed" nor the "savages, expendable as Jews."

These two phrases need a bit of unpacking, so let's take them one by one. "[T]he white child hacked in bed," [alludes](#) to a notorious incident from the Mau Mau Uprising, when the Mau Mau attacked a family farm at night, killing an entire white family including a six-year-old boy. The Mau Mau used machete-like swords, so this killing was particularly gruesome.

In turn, the British responded with a strategy that included forced labor camps, which even some uneasy British officials compared to Nazi concentration camps. This is what the speaker alludes to in the phrase "expendable as Jews" in line 10. Kenyans, many who had nothing to do with the rebellion, were relocated to camps where they faced terrible conditions.

In this line, the speaker parrots the views of white supremacists, calling Kenyans "savages." This was a common way for English colonists to think of colonized people. By demeaning natives, the English could justify exploiting them. Similarly, in the phrase "expendable as Jews," the speaking doesn't actually believe that Jews are expendable at all. Rather, the speaker's parroting Nazi propaganda, and comparing the Nazi attitude to that of the British.

This of course is a very damning statement. The first stanza ends with no one looking good, neither the Kikuyu, the British, nor international commentators. Reflecting this pessimism, rhyme fizzles out in these final lines. First, "seize" has a subtle [slant rhyme](#) with "policy" in lines 7-8. Although "bed" does harken back to "dead" in line 6, this only makes the absence of rhyme in the stanza's final line all the more apparent. The speaker makes this [allusion](#) to the Holocaust bluntly, with a sarcastic or [ironic](#) glibness conveyed by the lack of rhyme. The critic Theodor Adorno famously suggested that writing poetry after the Holocaust was "barbaric." The dropped rhyme subtly captures a similar sentiment.

Additionally, these last few lines also raise a question that Adorno's comment implies. How *does one* write after the barbarity of the Holocaust, and the continued barbarity of world events? If the Holocaust is seen not as a culmination of systematic violence, but as one chapter in modernity's ongoing saga of genocides, what are artists supposed to do? What is the

role of art in such a world? What, for that matter, are the roles of "scholars" and "Statistics"?

LINES 11-14

*Threshed out by ...
... or beast-teeming plain.*

The second stanza begins by refocusing on the landscape. This time, the speaker describes agriculture. Farmers thresh a crop—most likely wheat—separating the grain from the straw. This noise startles nearby ibises, a type of bird, who take off from long grass known as rushes. African sacred ibises (the species of ibis the speaker's probably referring to) emit a high screeching noise, conveyed here by the word "cries." Their bodies are white, which creates the appearance of "white dust" filling the air.

As their name suggests, African sacred ibises were held sacred by the Ancient Egyptians. Combined with the speaker's reference to "civilization's dawn," the speaker seems to [allude](#) to this Egyptian [symbolism](#), and to ancient Egyptian civilization more generally. Ibises summon the ancient history of Africa, its great civilizations—such as ancient Egypt—that vastly predate any such civilization in England.

Again, the speaker uses landscape to discuss humanity. For the speaker, "civilization[]," "the parched river," and "the beast-teeming plain" are all connected. Simply describing events in the Kenyan landscape allows the speaker to summon vast elements of human history. The speaker implies that the British did not "civiliz[e]" Kenyans, but that natives already had a rich culture and history long before Europeans showed up.

Just as "the long rushes break," the [meter](#) breaks here too:

Threshed out by beaters, the long rushes break

There's no use trying to cram this line into [iambic](#) pentameter; it follows its own unique rhythm: a [spondee](#) (DUM-DUM) followed by an iamb (da-DUM), a pyrrhic (da-da), then another spondee-iamb pair. The line unharnesses itself from the distinctly English rhythms of iambic pentameter. Just as the references to "ibises" and "civilization's dawn" suggest a distinctly African history, this bristly rhythm helps push away—if only momentarily—England's influence, creating room for an expression of African pride.

At the same time, however, the speaker also uses this [imagery](#) to suggest violence. The "beaters," the "break[ing]," and the "cries" all have violent connotations, although the violence here is mostly [metaphorical](#) rather than literal. The images resemble a common use of montage in films, when a flock of birds startles into flight in reaction to a gunshot. Because of current events, the speaker can't help but see violence in the Kenyan landscape.

LINES 15-17

*The violence of ...
... by inflicting pain.*

In lines 15-17, the speaker reflects on human violence and violence in nature:

The violence of beast on beast is read
As natural law, but upright man
Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain.

In other words, humans interpret that violence between predator and prey as part of the natural world; it couldn't be otherwise. In fact, this supposedly senseless violence is what makes animals "beast[s]," and therefore below humans.

Historically, many European thinkers have argued that humans are above animals, in part because "man" is "upright." That is, people walk on two legs rather than four. This has even been interpreted as evidence of humanity's "divinity." Humans, on this view, are godlike. The speaker comments on this view sarcastically: "upright man / Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain." In other words, humans try to find their inner holiness by torturing others.

If this seems hypocritical, that's exactly the speaker's point. For one thing, it doesn't make sense for Christians to view themselves as godlike only to commit distinctly ungodly acts. Secondly, this use of violence erases what supposedly separates humans from animals. As the speaker's imagery thus far has suggested, violence in fact turns people into "beasts," rather than leading them to "divinity."

This is a good point to take stock of the use of [rhyme](#) thus far in the stanza. The end words in lines 16 and 17, "man" and "pain," pick up on the rhyme words in lines 13 and 14: "dawn" and "plain." Here, "pain" and "plain" clearly rhyme. Additionally, there is a [slant rhyme](#) between these words and "man" and "dawn." These words all end with the /n/ sound and employ vowels that echo each other. One effect of this slant rhyme is that a dissonance enters the poem, a slightly out-of-tune quality that matches the speaker's sarcastic representation of humanity's pretension to divinity.

LINES 18-21

*Delirious as these ...
... by the dead.*

In the final sentence of this stanza, the speaker continues to critique human uses of violence. First, the speaker once more compares humans to animals, saying that humans are "Delirious as worried beasts" when it comes to war. In this [simile](#), people are as crazed as predator and prey locked in a frenzied battle for survival.

Next, the speaker says that humanity's "wars / Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum." This is a striking [metaphor](#) that

criticizes the Mau Mau in particular. The image of "the tightened carcass of a drum" refers to traditional Kenyan drums, made with animal skins stretched taut. These drums, used in different dances and rituals, would normally be a point of cultural pride. But in the speaker's eyes, war has transformed these drums into images of death and violence. A drum's stretched animal skin becomes a "tightened carcass." War becomes a "Dance" to these drums, a perversion of Kenyans' cultural pride.

The speaker thinks that the Mau Mau aren't thinking about violence the right way. Just as they've transformed drums into a [symbol](#) of war, they've taken their fear of death and called it "courage." The speaker says that the fighters "call[] courage still that native dread / Of the white peace contracted by the dead." Here, "white peace"—a peace enforced by white people—is compared to a disease that people "contract[]" and die from. Viewing "peace" as a disease that kills people is a bit of a [paradox](#), and a pretty bleak one at that. This depiction highlights the brutality and hypocrisy of colonial rule, which enforces peace through oppression. In Kenya, the British responded to the Mau Mau Rebellion by instituting forced labor camps and killing up to six times as many people as the Mau Mau did.

That said, the speaker doesn't believe the Mau Mau have responded to British repression in the right way. The speaker says that the Mau Mau "call[] courage still that native dread / Of the white peace." In other words, what the fighters believe is courage is actually just fear of being killed by the British. For the speaker, Kenyans haven't found any dignity or true self-consciousness through the rebellion. Instead, they have become "beast"-like and self-deceptive.

The end of the stanza picks delivers one of the loudest [rhymes](#) in the poem: "dread" and "dead." This emphatic rhyming [couplet](#) conveys—if not *the* moral of the poem—at least *one of its* morals: that violence as a response to fear is not the same thing as courage, and that it will not lead to greater dignity for colonized African peoples. Rhyming couplets like this one often have a way of wrapping up a stanza with a punchy, quotable message. In using such a couplet, the speaker again conveys a deep knowledge and love of poetic forms.

This is the only stanza that ends in a rhyming couplet, suggesting that the form of the poem doesn't *require* any couplets; instead, the speaker employs it spontaneously and freely. In writing like this, the speaker finds a measure of freedom, self-expression, and, yes, even dignity, outside the traditional constraints of English verse.

LINES 22-25

*Again brutish necessity ...
... with the superman.*

Rather than returning to a description of the landscape, which is how the speaker began the first two stanzas, the third stanza

uses [metaphor](#) and [personification](#). It begins: "Again brutish necessity wipes its hands / Upon the napkin of a dirty cause." As with some of the poem's other instance of metaphorical language, the lines pack a lot of meaning into a small space, so talking about it will require some unpacking.

Here, "brutish necessity" personifies "necessity" as a *brute*, an animal-like and violent person. This brute "wipes its hands / Upon the napkin of a dirty cause." Necessity's hands are soiled, probably with blood. Yet it uses a dirty napkin to clean them. In other words, this napkin probably isn't going to actually clean necessity's hands. In turn, the napkin metaphorically represents "a dirty cause." The word "cause" here means *movement* or *struggle*, as in the struggle for independence. The speaker suggests, however, that the Mau Mau aren't engaged in a pure and just struggle for independence. Rather, their cause is "dirty." It is tainted, perhaps by a thirst for vengeance, personal greed, or a love of violence.

This metaphor and personification suggest that the Mau Mau feel that violence is necessary, but that they also want to absolve themselves of guilt for all the killing. However, their "cause," their struggle for independence, can't absolve them because it's not longer about justice. The speaker sees the Mau Mau as focusing on gruesome acts of violence rather than the elevation of the Kenyan people, and this makes their actions irredeemable.

Next, the speaker turns to history for an example that can shed light on current events in Kenya. The speaker [alludes](#) to the Spanish Civil War, fought in the mid 1930s between left-wing and right-wing forces in Spain. Ultimately, right-wing forces won and a totalitarian government ruled Spain into the '70s. "[A]s with Spain," says the speaker, "The gorilla wrestles with the superman." Here, right-wing totalitarian forces are "the superman," better armed and capable of violence on a grander scale than "The gorilla," the left-wing forces. Notice here also the [pun](#) on *guerilla*, which refers to warfare that relies on sneak attacks against a more powerful army, a strategy commonly employed by leftist revolutionaries.

The reference to "The gorilla" and "the superman," however, also summon some other connotations. The word "gorilla" suggests racial slurs and stereotypes commonly directed at people of African descent, comparing them to animals and suggesting they are less than human. Such slurs have often been used to justify colonialism, treating native people as animals to be domesticated, rather than as human beings with equal rights. Meanwhile, the word "superman" conjures racist Nazi beliefs in the *Übermensch* (*over-man* or *superman*, a misreading of a term created by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche), which for them was embodied by the German people.

The connotations of these two words suggest that the speaker believes the Mau Mau Uprising has devolved into a battle of

stereotypes. This goes along with the speaker's implied conclusion throughout the poem that violence reduces people to "beasts" rather than elevating them. As a result, such struggles are "A waste of our compassion." Even though people like the speaker want to support struggles for African independence, the Mau Mau have wasted that support. The struggle will not achieve what the speaker believes in: dignity, freedom, and justice for African peoples.

LINES 26-27

*I who am ...
... to the vein?*

In lines 26-27, the speaker introduces the first-person pronoun "I" for the first time: "I who am poisoned by the blood of both / Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?" This sentence captures the speaker's personal stake in responding to the Mau Mau conflict. The speaker has both English and African "blood," or ancestry. While "blood" is a common [metaphor](#) for ancestry, the speaker brings out some of the more physical resonances of "blood" as well. This physicality turns the speaker's emotional pain into bodily pain as well. For instance, the speaker imagines African and English blood literally "divid[ing]" the speaker's "veins" in two—a painful experience to imagine.

"[B]lood" also suggests violence, which the word "poisoned" plays into as well. As a whole, this sentence captures how the speaker's complicated colonial heritage isn't just a matter of abstract contemplation, but also a lived form of violence that has followed the speaker throughout life. Furthermore, this inner experience of violence isn't so different from the national violence in Kenya.

This sentence also connects the poem to Walcott personally. Walcott grew up on the island nation of Santa Lucia when it was still a British colony. Walcott, like the poem's speaker, had a mixed heritage. Although the poem isn't overly autobiographical, it clearly draws on certain experiences from Walcott's own life and is meant, at least partially, to be read as Walcott's personal response to the Mau Mau Rebellion. And while the speaker can't be interpreted as explicitly Walcott himself, it's important to keep in mind the kinds of experiences that informed Walcott's poetry.

Understanding the speaker as someone from a British colony also gives a window into the speaker's criticism of the Mau Mau. More specifically, it allows the speaker's criticisms to be taken in good faith. In comparing, for instance, the Kikuyu to flies, the speaker isn't blindly insulting Kenyans. Rather, the speaker is trying to make a pointed argument about how violence transforms people for the worse. As a native of a British colony, the speaker naturally sides with other natives. Yet as a sensitive and life-affirming poet, the speaker also wants to reject acts of violence. Herein lies the poem's conflict.

LINES 28-33

*I who have ...
... Africa and live?*

The speaker's hatred of colonial rule becomes explicit in the next two lines: "I who have cursed / The drunken officer of British rule." On a literal level, the drunken officer here refers to drunk police officers and army officers enforcing British control over Kenya. More importantly, it [metaphorically](#) asserts that Britain itself behaves as a drunken officer in its rule over colonies. However, although the speaker admits "curs[ing]," or speaking out against, British rule, that doesn't mean the speaker knows how to act in this particular situation.

The speaker stills feels "divided to the vein," and doesn't know how to "choose / Between this Africa and the English tongue I love." This opposition, Africa on one hand and the English language on the other, adds a new layer to the speaker's feelings. After all, the poem itself is written in English. The speaker declares "love" for English, and that love is apparent in the care with which the poem is crafted. The poem's nods to traditional [formal](#) elements of English verse, the liveliness of the poem's rhythms, its vivid [imagery](#)—all these point to a real love of written English.

At the same time, though, this opposition links "the English tongue" with "The drunken officer of British rule." In other words, the English language becomes an element of English colonialism. Wherever the English ruled, English became the language of the powerful and the educated. Colonized peoples were forced to learn English. Someone like the speaker may have even come to love English and English-language literature. Many anti-colonial intellectuals have written in the languages of their colonizers. But that's not to say that these same people didn't have fraught relationships with their adopted languages. In fact, writing in the language of one's colonizers, at least in the context of this poem, becomes a way to confront colonialism, neither hiding from it nor embracing it.

Even so, fully acknowledging the colonial history of English doesn't help the speaker resolve this conflict. The speaker feels the need to either forsake Africa entirely or give up using English. Clearly, though, the speaker isn't prepared to do either, isn't ready to "give back what they give." That is, too much of the speaker comes from both Africa and England. Yet by not making a choice, the speaker suggests it will be like "Betray[ing] them both."

The final two lines present the speaker's dilemma in succinct terms: "How can I face such slaughter and be cool? / How can I turn from Africa and live?" In other words, how can the speaker learn about the Mau Mau's use of violence and be okay with it? On the other hand, how can the speaker reject the Mau Mau, and thus the project of African independence, and go on living? As suggested in the previous lines, each choice involves a "Betray[al]" of some sort. There is no resolution to this

question.



POETIC DEVICES

SIMILE

The speaker of "A Far Cry From Africa" uses a lot of [metaphorical](#) language, and some of this is framed explicitly through [simile](#).

Line 2, for example, introduces a striking comparison:

[...] Kikuyu, quick as flies,
Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt.

The Kikuyu are the tribe that composed most of the Mau Mau. Here, the speaker compares the Kikuyu—probably thinking specifically of the Mau Mau—to flies that fasten to bloodstreams (i.e., veins). They are like mosquitoes or flies pecking at a body. This is a bold and ambiguous comparison to use right off the bat, especially for this speaker who is sympathetic to the project of African independence. The simile suggests the Kikuyu are like parasites or scavengers. Although the speaker has African ancestry, clearly the actions of Mau Mau have left the speaker unsure how to feel about them.

At the end of the first stanza, the speaker references "savages, expendable as Jews." Here, the speaker parrots the racist ideologies of colonists and Nazis. Colonists have often referred to colonized natives as "savages," uncivilized people who needed to be ruled by Christian colonists; the Nazis killed millions of Jewish people in concentration camps in an effort to exterminate them. In comparing these two ideologies, the speaker suggests that colonists are no better than Nazis. If the comparison of the Kikuyu to flies has a queasy ambiguity to it, there's no question about where the speaker stands on colonists—they are reprehensible.

In the second stanza, the speaker says that "man" is "Delirious as these worried beasts." In other words, people who engage in acts of violence as just as crazed as predator and prey locked in a battle for survival. Although people often like to think of themselves as above animals, the speaker implies that this belief is refuted by humans' use of violence. In their thirst for blood, according to the speaker, British forces and Kenyan rebels are no different from hunger-crazed lions.

And in the third stanza, the speaker says that the Mau Mau rebellion is "A waste of our compassion, as with Spain." Here, the speaker compares the Mau Mau rebellion to the Spanish Civil War, fought in the 1930s between left-wing and right-wing Spanish forces. Despite vicious fighting, leftists lost that war and a totalitarian government rule Spain for four decades. According to the speaker, the Mau Mau rebellion, like Spanish civil war, isn't worth the sympathy of liberal people. Not only do the Mau Mau use tactics the speaker disapproves of, but they

will also probably lose to the larger and better-armed British army.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Kikuyu, quick as flies,"
- **Line 10:** "savages, expendable as Jews"
- **Line 18:** "Delirious as these worried beasts"
- **Line 24:** "A waste of our compassion, as with Spain,"

METAPHOR

"A Far Cry From Africa" is filled with [metaphor](#). One prominent use of metaphor, especially in the first half of the poem, is to describe the Kenyan *landscape* as a means of commenting on *human* affairs.

The first four lines of the poem use this kind of metaphor:

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt
Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies,
Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt.
Corpses are scattered through a paradise.

In these first lines, the speaker compares Africa to a "tawny pelt," a furry hide with yellow-brown fur. More specifically, this metaphor can be interpreted as comparing African grassland ("the veldt") to a "tawny hide." This initial comparison, then, compares the landscape to an animal's skin. It also makes one type of Africa landscape stand in for Africa as a whole (an example of [synecdoche](#)). Furthermore, the [image](#) of "wind [...] ruffling" Africa suggests a disturbance, implied to be the Mau Mau rebellion. The poem packs all this into a metaphorical description of landscape, showing how the speaker views the natural world as a very powerful means of understanding human life.

A related description occurs in the first four lines of the second stanza, when the speaker describes how "Threshed out by beaters, the long rushes break / In a white dust of ibises." Here, the speaker compares the flight of white-feathered ibises, a type of bird, to "white dust" filling the air. To the speaker, it looks *as if* the ibises have been beaten out of the grass by "beaters," farmers who are threshing a crop for its grain. In reality, they've probably just been startled by the noise.

This description creates a kind of metaphorical blur in the poem's imagery. Read literally, these lines would suggest that farmers aren't getting grain out of their crops, but birds! And that these birds emerge as a cloud of white dust. Of course, this is only a metaphor, capturing how humans, animals, plants, and earth are all interconnected, to the point of blurring together. Again, this moment reveals the speaker's faith in nature's power to elucidate human events.

After this moment, the speaker begins to turn away from nature to more human imagery. The speaker describes how

humanity's "wars / Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum." Here, the speaker summons images of traditional Kenyan drums, made with animal hides stretched taut. In the description of a "tightened carcass," the speaker emphasizes the violence that goes into making these drums. While the drums are traditionally used for ritual and dance, the speaker compares such dances to "wars." In other words, this metaphor suggests that the Mau Mau have debased rich cultural traditions through their acts of violence.

Next, the speaker compares the "peace" of colonial rule to a disease. More specifically, the speaker refers to "the white peace contracted by the dead." The speaker is thinking of the brutal tactics used by the British to enforce "peace," which is really just oppression. The verb "contracted" gives away the falsity of such peace: usually used in the context of disease, it suggests that colonial peace is like a plague, creating more "dead," not less.

The final stanza uses the most abstract metaphorical language in the poem. "Again brutish necessity wipes its hands / Upon the napkin of a dirty cause," says the speaker. We unpack this phrase in more detail in the Line-by-Line section of this guide, as well as the Poetic Device entry on Personification. For now, let's note how the speaker has shifted away from concrete imagery in the natural world.

Here, necessity is personified as a violent person who tries to clean their bloody hands with an equally dirty napkin, which in turn represents the "cause," or beliefs, of the Mau Mau. The speaker believes that the Mau Mau have fundamentally tainted the struggle for Kenyan freedom, and that they cannot be forgiven. Similarly, the British may claim that their acts of violence are necessary, but the speaker doesn't believe that in the slightest.

The speaker employs the poem's most personal metaphors in lines 26-27:

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?

The speaker has ancestry from both England and Africa, and compares this ancestry to being "poisoned with the blood both" and being "divided to the vein." This comparison captures how the speaker doesn't just have conflicted thoughts, but feels that conflict bodily. It's as if the speaker's very body has been split in two by this rebellion.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt / Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies, / Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt. / Corpses are scattered through a paradise."
- **Lines 18-19:** "his wars / Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum,"

- **Line 21:** "the white peace contracted by the dead."
- **Lines 22-23:** "Again brutish necessity wipes its hands / Upon the napkin of a dirty cause,"
- **Lines 25-29:** "The gorilla wrestles with the superman. / I who am poisoned with the blood of both, / Where shall I turn, divided to the vein? / I who have cursed / The drunken officer of British rule,"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker uses [personification](#) twice in the poem. The first instance comes in line 5:

Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries:

A colonel is an officer in the army, and a carrion is decaying flesh eaten by scavengers. A "colonel of carrion," then, is an officer in charge of death and decay. By personifying the worm as such an imaginary figure, the speaker again mixes elements of humanity and elements of nature.

On one hand, calling a worm the "colonel of carrion" is just a poetic way of conjuring the role worms play in decay. On the other hand, it suggests that armies are no better than worms. This worm says "Waste no compassion on these separate dead!" *Don't feel bad about each of these corpses*, the worm is saying. Not a very considerate worm! By calling the worm a colonel, the speaker implies that soldiers don't really have much compassion either. Thus, this personification does double work. It makes the natural environment more vivid, and it also critiques humans.

In the third stanza, the speaker says:

Again brutish necessity wipes its hands
Upon the napkin of a dirty cause [...]

This use of personification is also an instance of [allegory](#), in which an abstract entity is personified as interacting with other abstract entities. Here, "necessity" is personified as a *brute*, a senselessly violent person. Necessity is what must be done. "[B]rutish necessity" suggests acts of violence that certain people (e.g., the Mau Mau or British colonists) believe must be done.

Meanwhile, a "dirty cause" is represented as a napkin. A "cause" is a movement or struggle. Here, the speaker implies that the "dirty cause" is the Mau Mau rebellion, which—although it struggles for Kenyan independence—is ultimately based on principles, such as violent retribution, that the speaker finds morally reprehensible. A "dirty cause" could also be interpreted at the British struggle to impose order on Kenya at the cost of tens of thousands of lives.

Putting these two pieces together: the armies involved in this

conflict believe that violence is a necessary part of the conflict. They don't want to feel guilty of such violence, so each side tries to "wipe[] its hands" of the bloody results. However, their "cause[s]"—their goals and ideas—can't absolve them of guilt, because those causes are no longer noble. The causes are too tainted by violence to absolve anyone of guilt.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "the worm, colonel of carrion, cries: / "Waste no compassion on these separate dead!""
- **Lines 22-23:** "brutish necessity wipes its hands / Upon the napkin of a dirty cause"

ALLUSION

They are a lot of [allusions](#) in "A Far Cry From Africa," all of which contribute to the richness and gravity of the poem's language. Some allusions connect the poem to contemporary events in Kenya, making the poem's response to the Mau Mau rebellion explicit:

- When the speaker mentions "Kikuyu, quick as flies," this refers to the Kikuyu tribe, which formed the majority of the Mau Mau. Referring to this tribe right off the bat lets the reader know that the speaker is thinking of the Mau Mau.
- Similarly, "the white child hacked in bed" alludes to a notorious incident from the uprising, when the Mau Mau killed a family of white English settlers at their farm, including a six-year-old boy.

There are two other allusions to events that happened within Walcott's lifetime. Also in the first stanza, the speaker alludes to the Holocaust with the phrase "expendable as Jews":

- During WWII, Nazi Germany killed six million Jews in an effort to exterminate Europe's Jewish population.
- The speaker compares the British strategy in Kenya to the Holocaust: as the speaker watches events unfold, it seems that the British value Kenyans' lives about as much as the Nazi's valued the lives of Jewish people.

The other event during Walcott's lifetime is the Spanish Civil War, referenced in lines 24 with "A waste of our compassion, as with Spain."

- The Spanish Civil War was fought between left-wing and right-wing forces in Spain. Observers throughout the world felt drawn to take sides. In the end, right-wing forces won and imposed a totalitarian government, which ruled Spain into the '70s, under the leadership of Francisco Franco.

- The speaker views the war as "A waste of our compassion" in part because both sides committed atrocities, and in the end totalitarian forces still won.
- As before, the speaker compares this to the situation in Kenya, where both sides have committed atrocities, and in the end—the speaker assumes—England's imperial rule will continue. (In reality, Kenya would gain independence only a few years later; but that hadn't happened yet when Walcott wrote this poem!)

The speaker also makes some cultural allusions. In particular, the speaker sarcastically parrots racist ideologies:

- In using the word "savages" at the of line 10, "gorilla" in line 25 ("The gorilla wrestles with the superman"), and "beast" throughout stanza 2, the speaker [ironically](#) uses racist slurs.
- Historically, these words have been used to demean native peoples, especially in Africa. They imply that Africans are less than humans, that they are animals who have no "civilization[.]". By viewing Africans in such a manner, Europeans have justified colonization. In fact, Europeans often said they were *doing native peoples a favor*, by introducing them to Christianity and European culture.
- The speaker sees right through this ideology, and only brings up these slurs in order emphasize the ridiculousness of colonial rule. Walcott himself had a mixed ancestry from both England and Africa, so he doesn't bring use such words lightly—rather, he speaks from the lived experience of colonialism and racism.

On the flip side, the speaker also alludes to how colonial powers have viewed themselves, with the phrase "upright man / Seeks his divinity" in the middle of stanza 2 and the word "superman" in stanza 3.

- The first phrase references a historical belief among Europeans that humans were more divine than animals because people walk on two legs as opposed to four. Additionally, this belief is linked to the idea that Christian Europeans were superior to non-Christian nations, which gave them the right to colonize those nations.
- The word "superman" translates the Nazi belief in the *Übermensch*, a word taken from the philosophy of Fredrich Nietzsche and misused to racist ends. The Nazis believed Germans were the most superior people on the planet, that they were supermen, and that this gave them the right to take over the world and exterminate peoples they viewed as inferior.

Finally, the speaker makes an allusion to the ancient history of Africa by mentioning "ibises" and "civilization's dawn":

- The species of ibis the speaker is probably referencing here, the *African sacred ibis*, was held sacred by the Ancient Egyptians. Ancient Egypt existed centuries before any equivalent civilization developed in Northern Europe. In fact, civilization is commonly believed to have begun in Northern Africa and the Middle East.
- Thus, when the speaker mentions "civilization's dawn," this is a subtle dig at the supposed superiority of European nations and an attempt to shift focus to the accomplishments of African peoples. Just as the speaker wants to critique ideologies of colonialism and violence, the speaker also wants to shed light on the rich land and history of Africa, which is exactly what this allusion does in its own subtle way.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Kikuyu"
- **Line 9:** "the white child hacked in bed"
- **Line 10:** "savages," "expendable as Jews"
- **Line 12:** "ibises"
- **Line 13:** "civilization's dawn"
- **Line 15:** "beast," "beast"
- **Lines 16-17:** "upright man / Seeks his divinity"
- **Line 18:** "beasts"
- **Line 24:** "as with Spain"
- **Line 25:** "gorilla," "superman"

IMAGERY

The first two stanzas use vivid [imagery](#) to tie human events to the natural landscape of Kenya. The images in these stanzas blend human, animal, plant, and earth to convey how these things are interconnected. Through this, the speaker is able to comment on human affairs with images from the natural world.

The first four lines are a good example of how this works:

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt
Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies,
Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt.
Corpses are scattered through a paradise.

The imagery here isn't straightforward and naturalistic. Rather, it blends and conflates different aspects of the human and natural environment. The [metaphorical](#) resonance of these lines is unpacked in the corresponding entry of this guide. For now, let's note how the speaker uses visual and tactile imagery to engage the reader.

The visual of Africa's "tawny pelt," a hide of yellow-orange-

brown fur, immediately saturates the poem in that color. Furthermore, "ruffling fur" and the word "pelt" conjure how animal hides feel, their rough or smooth texture, depending on the animal.

Meanwhile, the image of people (members of the Kikuyu tribe) as flies is a striking image. Even more striking is what follows—"the bloodstreams of the veldt," which imagines the grassland (veldt) as having veins. These fly-people attach themselves to the veins like mosquitoes or flies hovering around a dead body. The word "batten" means to lock down or secure. In other words, the fly-people lock themselves onto the land-veins like suction cups. This imagery brings physical sensations into play, engaging the reader on a tactile level.

The second stanza also begins with four lines of vivid imagery:

Threshed out by beaters, the long rushes break
In a white dust of ibises whose cries
Have wheeled since civilization's dawn
From the parched river or beast-teeming plain.

This imagery blends distinct actions (farmers threshing grain, startled birds taking off) into a single continuous motion, further blended by the comparison of the birds' white feathers to "white dust" floating in the air. This gives the appearance of farmers beating out a white dust of birds from the grass. As with the introductory lines of stanza 1, this imagery has an imaginative vividness that goes beyond realism into a more poetic realm. First the sound of "thresh[ing]" (whipping stalks to remove the edible grain), then the sound of rushes (long boggy grass) breaking, then the "cries" of the ibises (a high pitched call). Again, this imagery fills the reader's sense, creating an immersive experience of the poem's environment.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt / Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies, / Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt. / Corpses are scattered through a paradise."
- **Line 9:** "What is that to the white child hacked in bed?"
- **Lines 11-14:** "Threshed out by beaters, the long rushes break / In a white dust of ibises whose cries / Have wheeled since civilization's dawn / From the parched river or beast-teeming plain."
- **Line 19:** "Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum,"

ENJAMBMENT

"A Far Cry From Africa" makes pretty extensive use of [enjambment](#). As a whole, these line breaks contribute to poem's forward momentum and the texture of its language. In the clear cases of enjambment, the end of the line is grammatically incomplete, requiring the next in order to make sense. Lines 7-8 are an example:

Statistics justify and scholars seize
The salients of colonial policy.

Here the verb "seize" needs a direct object to complete it, which the entire next line provides. Another example is lines 12-13:

In a white dust of ibises whose cries
Have wheeled since civilization's dawn

This time, the line ends in a noun that needs a verb. In both of the above cases, sentences span more than one line, creating a "wheel[ing]" feeling that is slightly off-kilter, slightly frantic, capturing the speaker's uncertain state of mind.

Many other instances of enjambment aren't so grammatically clear-cut. Nonetheless, they employ the forward-looking and off-balance momentum essential to enjambment. There are two examples of these at the start of stanza 2:

Threshed out by beaters, the long rushes **break**
In a white dust of ibises whose cries
Have wheeled since civilization's **dawn**
From the parched river or beast-teeming plain.

Here, the lines could grammatically end on the bold words. However, the absence of punctuation sends the reader plummeting to the next line, so that this sentences takes four lines to reach a stopping point. Each of these instances of enjambment is crucial to depicting the interconnected environment the poem is describing. Just as the images of farmers, rushes, and grass blend together in one fluid motion, so too do these lines seem to blend together.

Such uses of enjambment are interspersed with [end-stops](#) that punctuate the poem, often dramatically. Apart from the second line, the speaker never ends a sentence in the middle of a line, meaning that all sentences finish as end-stopped lines. Furthermore, many of the sentences end not with a period, but an exclamation point or a question mark. A quick glance down the right-hand margin of the poem reveals how many question marks there are.

This punctuation overtly signals the speaker's own confusion. In particular, the four question marks that end the poem show how the poem ends in a space of deep uncertainty. The speaker hasn't reached any conclusion; rather, the poem has given vent to the frustration and pain that is colonialism's legacy.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "pelt / Of"
- **Lines 7-8:** "seize / The"
- **Lines 11-12:** "break / In"
- **Lines 12-13:** "cries / Have"

- **Lines 13-14:** "dawn / From"
- **Lines 15-16:** "read / As"
- **Lines 16-17:** "man / Seeks"
- **Lines 18-19:** "wars / Dance"
- **Lines 20-21:** "dread / Of"
- **Lines 22-23:** "hands / Upon"
- **Lines 23-24:** "again / A"
- **Lines 28-29:** "cursed / The"
- **Lines 29-30:** "choose / Between"

IRONY

The speaker's use of [irony](#) can roughly be summed up as sarcasm. The speaker parrots racist ideologies in order to show scorn for them. This happens in each stanza. In the first stanza, for example, the speaker says:

Statistics justify and scholars seize
The salients of colonial policy.

In other words, people use "statistic" to justify colonial rule. Meanwhile, university experts weigh in on "policy" matters of colonial rule—that is, subtle matters of British laws and practices in Kenya. Yet neither of those approaches gets to the heart of the matter: that the British shouldn't be in Kenya at all!

In the next line, the speaker asks, "What is that to the white child hacked in bed?" This angry and accusative [rhetorical question](#) indicates that the speaker brings up "statistics" and "policy" only ironically, to point out how useless such approaches are in the face of violence.

In the next stanza, the speaker parrots a certain European way of viewing humanity, animals, and religion:

The violence of beast on beast is read
As natural law, but upright man
Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain.

Throughout the modern history of Europe, thinkers have posited a sharp difference between humans and animals. One common trope is that humans are superior to animals because humans walk on two legs rather than four, are "upright." In fact, such thinkers have often assumed that humans are the living beings closest to God.

The speaker ironically reiterates such a view, before going on to say that "upright man / Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain." In other words, humans embrace their divine nature by hurting others. If this doesn't sound quite right, that's exactly the speaker's point. Europeans colonists act so high and mighty, but when it comes to their behavior in colonies they are downright "beasts." They employ brutal, distinctly un-godlike tactics.

In the final stanza, the speaker again ironically cites racist

tropes. "The gorilla wrestles with the superman," says the speaker. Here, "gorilla" is a racial slur white supremacists use against people of color. In the context of colonization, it plays into the belief that colonized people are "beasts" rather than human beings. Citing this belief, colonial powers have tried to justify what has amounted to centuries of oppression and exploitation.

The term "superman" cites the Nazi belief that the German people were super-people, superior to all other nations and thus justified not only in conquering other nations, but also eradicating those peoples they deemed inferior. The word "superman" translates the German word *Übermensch*, a term the Nazis took from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and corrupted.

By pairing these words, the speaker captures the absurdity of racist thought, which transforms both oppressor and oppressed into ugly cartoons. At the same time, the speaker's expression of these tropes captures how they become a self-fulfilling prophecy in terms of armed conflict. That is, because colonial powers have such a stranglehold on the colonized, those peoples have little resources to wage a successful war against their oppressors. To racists, this may seem like evidence of those peoples' inferiority. But the speaker's irony here points to the falsity of such a conclusion, suggesting—as all these instances of irony do—that European superiority is both absurd and the source of much suffering.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "Statistics justify and scholars seize / The salients of colonial policy."
- **Lines 15-17:** "The violence of beast on beast is read / As natural law, but upright man / Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain."
- **Line 25:** "The gorilla wrestles with the superman."

ANTITHESIS

The poem ends on a series of [antitheses](#), contradictory options that capture the speaker's internal conflict. They are, first:

[...] how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?

Then:

Betray them both, or give back what they give?

And finally:

*How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live?*

Above, we've italicized the first term in each antithesis and bolded the second. Each of these instances relies on [anaphora](#) of the word "how" to drive home its point; each is also subtly different from last, slight tweaking the two opposing choices the speaker faces.

The first antithesis suggests that the speaker has to choose between loyalty to Africa and using English. That's a pretty big choice to make! Of course, this stark opposition represents the more subtle conflict the speaker actually feels, that the speaker's immersion in English complicates the speaker's sympathy for Kenyans' struggle. That using English somehow binds the speaker to England in some way.

Next, the speaker has to either "[b]etray" both Kenya and England, or return to them everything they've given the speaker. In other words, the speaker's personality is informed by both Kenyan and English heritage. And if the speaker doesn't choose sides, that will mean betraying them both, as if the speaker has stolen each ancestral heritage. Yet, of course, the speaker can't give that heritage back, any more than the speaker can unlearn English.

Finally, the speaker states the central conflict most clearly: "How can I face such slaughter and be cool? / How can I turn from Africa and live?" When the speaker says "slaughter," this seems to most directly reference the gruesome violence employed by the Mau Mau. The speaker is saying there's no way someone can know about such violence and remain okay with it. On the other hand, there's no way the speaker, with African ancestry, can desert the struggle for African independence.

Clearly, there's no resolving any of these antitheses; the [questions here are all rhetorical](#). Set up as they are, they can only convey the stalemate that speaker is left in, neither able to decide which side deserves sympathy nor able to resolve the divided identity a colonial ancestry produces.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 29-33:** "how choose / Between this Africa and the English tongue I love? / Betray them both, or give back what they give? / How can I face such slaughter and be cool? / How can I turn from Africa and live?"

CONSONANCE

The speaker uses [consonance](#) throughout the poem, sometimes very noticeably and sometimes subtly. This ties into the speaker's overall attitude toward poetry, reflecting keen attention to the dynamics of English and of traditional English verse.

Line 2 is a good example of the speaker's careful use of sound:

Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies,

The repeated /k/ sounds link "Africa" and the "Kikuyu," the Kenyan tribe the Mau Mau were mostly composed of. By repeating this sound in the phrase "quick as flies," the speaker zooms in from Africa, to Kenya, to individual insects in the natural environment. The /k/ sound also adds a clicking, finicky texture to this line, mimicking the swarm of insects it describes.

In the third stanza, the speaker subtly uses the /n/ sounds to keep a feeling of unity through the first four [enjambéd](#) lines:

Again brutish necessity wipes its hands
Upon the napkin of a dirty cause, again
A waste of our compassion, as with Spain,
The gorilla wrestles with the superman.

Quiet uses of consonance such as these aren't necessarily made to stand out. Rather, they are part of the poem's foundational artistry, the speaker's constant control of sound that contributes to the fluid feel of these lines.

The speaker is also fond of a type of consonance called [sibilance](#), made of /s/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds. Lines 18-19 are full of such sounds:

Delirious as these worried beasts, his wars
Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum,

Here, the constant /s/ and /z/ sounds mimic the "Deliri[um]" of these "worried beasts," the sounds hissing like panicked animals. A similar use comes in the opening lines of the same stanza:

Threshed out by beaters, the long rushes break
In a white dust of ibises whose cries

Here, the fine "dust" of /s/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds fills the page just as the sound of the "beaters" and the "cries" of the ibises fill the air. In both these examples, a plethora of sibilant sounds mimics a frenzy of animals.

As these examples show, the speaker pays careful attention to consonant sounds. Such attention places the speaker in a long tradition of English poets who wedded careful attention to sound with [formal meter](#) and [rhyme](#). Although the speaker loosens and modernizes this tradition, the sound of this poem clearly speaks to a careful study of the poetry of the past.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "wind," "ruffling," "tawny," "pelt"
- **Line 2:** "Africa," "Kikuyu," "quick"
- **Line 3:** "Batten," "upon," "bloodstreams," "veldt"
- **Line 4:** "Corpses," "scattered," "through," "paradise"
- **Line 5:** "worm," "colonel," "carrion," "cries"
- **Line 6:** "no," "compassion," "on," "separate"

- **Line 7:** “Statistics,” “justify,” “scholars,” “seize”
- **Line 8:** “salients,” “colonial,” “policy”
- **Line 9:** “What,” “that,” “to,” “white,” “child,” “hacked,” “bed”
- **Line 10:** “savages,” “Jews”
- **Line 11:** “Threshed,” “by,” “beaters,” “rushes,” “break”
- **Line 12:** “white,” “dust,” “ibises,” “whose,” “cries”
- **Line 13:** “Have,” “since,” “civilization’s”
- **Line 14:** “parched,” “river,” “or,” “beast,” “teeming”
- **Line 15:** “beast,” “beast,” “read”
- **Line 16:** “natural,” “upright”
- **Line 17:** “Seeks,” “inflicting”
- **Line 18:** “Delirious,” “as,” “these,” “worried,” “beasts,” “his,” “wars”
- **Line 19:** “Dance,” “to,” “tightened,” “carcass,” “drum”
- **Line 20:** “calls,” “courage,” “dread”
- **Line 21:** “contracted”
- **Line 22:** “Again,” “necessity,” “wipes,” “its,” “hands”
- **Line 23:** “Upon,” “napkin,” “again”
- **Line 24:** “compassion,” “Spain”
- **Line 25:** “gorilla,” “wrestles,” “superman”
- **Line 26:** “blood,” “both”
- **Line 27:** “Where,” “turn,” “divided,” “vein”
- **Line 28:** “have,” “cursed”
- **Line 29:** “drunken,” “officer,” “British,” “rule”
- **Line 30:** “English,” “tongue”
- **Line 31:** “Betray,” “both,” “give,” “back,” “give”
- **Line 32:** “such,” “slaughter,” “cool”
- **Line 33:** “can,” “turn,” “from,” “Africa”

ASSONANCE

There isn't a ton of [assonance](#) in "A Far Cry From Africa." The speaker tends to focus much more on [consonance](#). This scarcity of assonance contributes to a slightly more prose-like feel in the language, emphasizing the seriousness of the subject and how hard the speaker is mulling these things over. At the same time, [rhyme](#) stands out more when it doesn't have to compete with assonance. That isn't to say that assonance *doesn't* play a role in the poem. Rather, it provides scaffolding in the background, steadying the poem's construction with its subtle precision.

Most of the instances of assonance are pretty quiet. One of the more noticeable lines is 18:

Delirious as these worried beasts [...]

Here the long /e/ sound repeats four times, capturing the delirium of frenzied animals.

Another noticeable use is line 12:

In a white dust of ibises whose cries

Similar to line 18, the repeated long /i/ sounds capture a rush of animals, this time the white flutter of ibises (a type of bird) taking flight.

The first two lines also provide a somewhat noticeable use of assonance, this time with the short /i/:

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt
Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies,

The short /i/ sound conveys the interconnectedness of the Kenyan landscape as the speaker describes it, almost as if the /i/ sound is blown by the "wind" across the lines. Although subtle, such uses of sound are important because they back up other devices like [metaphor](#) and [imagery](#), cementing the ideas, feeling, and sensations conveyed by these devices.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “wind,” “is”
- **Line 2:** “Africa,” “Kikuyu,” “quick”
- **Line 4:** “scattered,” “paradise”
- **Line 5:** “worm,” “colonel”
- **Line 7:** “Statistics,” “justify”
- **Line 9:** “white,” “child,” “hacked”
- **Line 10:** “savages”
- **Line 12:** “white,” “ibises,” “cries”
- **Line 13:** “since,” “civilization’s”
- **Line 14:** “beast,” “teeming”
- **Line 15:** “beast,” “beast”
- **Line 16:** “natural,” “man”
- **Line 17:** “divinity,” “inflicting”
- **Line 18:** “Delirious,” “these,” “worried,” “beasts”
- **Line 21:** “white,” “by”
- **Line 22:** “hands”
- **Line 23:** “Upon,” “napkin,” “cause”
- **Line 24:** “compassion,” “as”
- **Line 27:** “I,” “divided”
- **Line 28:** “I”
- **Line 30:** “this,” “Africa,” “English,” “tongue,” “love”
- **Line 31:** “Betray,” “they”
- **Line 32:** “face”

ALLITERATION

The speaker uses [alliteration](#) through the poem. This alliteration provides emphasis and unity, increases the poem's lyrical energy, and links the speaker with traditional English poetry of the past.

Certain moments create a tightly-knit burst of sound, holding particular [images](#) and descriptions together, as in line 3:

Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt,

Or lines 5-6:

Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries
 "Waste no compassion." [...]

Sounds like these fill the mouth with textures that mimic the images they're paired with. The repeated /b/ sounds in line 3 have a percussiveness that suggests snapping something shut and locking it, which is what "Batten" means. And the /k/ sounds in lines 5-6 have a sharpness to them that summons some of the authoritative personality of this personified worm. Additionally, the poetically artificial sounds of these lines emphasize that their images are not naturalistic; that is, these lines aren't describing the environment in purely realistic terms, but blending various aspects of the human, animal, and geological into a single [metaphor](#).

One noteworthy aspect of the poem's alliteration is that /b/ and /c/ sounds appear prominently throughout the poem. For instance, hard /c/ alliteration is taken up again at the end of the second stanza:

Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum,
 While he calls courage still that native dread
 Of the white peace contracted by the dead.

There are some overlaps here with the earlier example of the "worm, colonel of carrion." Namely, "carcass" echoes "carrion," and "courage" replaces "compassion." These substitutions suggest that alliteration can be used in a very subtle way as a sort of [refrain](#), a way of hearkening back to earlier moments in the poem through repeated sounds.

In the third stanza, alliterative /b/ sounds capture the intricacy of the speaker's internal conflict:

The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
 Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
 Betray them both, or give back what they give?

The words "British," "Between," "Betray," "both," and "back" offer a kind of suggestive overview of the speaker's dilemma: that siding with the British or the Mau Mau feels like a betrayal either way. The repeated /b/ hammers home this dead-end.

Alliteration has always been an important element of English poetry. In fact Old English poetry, the oldest known literature in English, was based around patterns of alliteration ([Beowulf](#) is a good example). Throughout the history of poetry of English, alliteration has been a fundamental device. English's many consonants give it a rich texture. The speaker makes full use of that texture in this poem.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Kikuyu," "quick"
- **Line 3:** "Batten," "bloodstreams"

- **Line 5:** "colonel," "carrion," "cries"
- **Line 6:** "compassion," "separate"
- **Line 7:** "Statistics," "scholars," "seize"
- **Line 8:** "salients"
- **Line 9:** "What," "white"
- **Line 11:** "by," "beaters," "break"
- **Line 14:** "parched," "plain"
- **Line 15:** "beast," "beast"
- **Line 18:** "worried," "wars"
- **Line 19:** "Dance," "carcass," "drum"
- **Line 20:** "calls," "courage"
- **Line 21:** "contracted"
- **Line 23:** "cause"
- **Line 24:** "compassion," "Spain"
- **Line 25:** "superman"
- **Line 26:** "blood," "both"
- **Line 29:** "British"
- **Line 30:** "Between"
- **Line 31:** "Betray," "both," "back"
- **Line 32:** "such," "slaughter"

APHORISMUS

In the second stanza the speaker uses a combination of [aphorismus](#) and [diacope](#), calling into question uses of the word "beast." The word "beast" refers to animals, but in contemporary English it isn't a neutral word. It implies that a creature is violent, "brutish" (to use a word from stanza three), impulsive, senseless, etc. In connection with these connotations, the word has often been used to enforce a sharp distinction between humans and animals by asserting that humans are self-conscious and rational, while animals are only "beasts." Maintaining such a division has also been a part of racist ideologies, which assert that only some people (e.g., white people according to white supremacists) are truly human, while others are more like "beasts" than people. Racist beliefs like these have played a prominent role in how colonial powers have justified their exploitation of colonized people.

The speaker cast doubt on racialized uses of the word "beast" in stanza two, most directly in lines 15-17:

The violence of **beast** on **beast** is read
 As natural law, but upright man
 Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain.

Here, the speaker discusses how humans supposedly separate themselves from animals because humans are more godlike and less violent than animals. This is of course absurd: humans are capable of extraordinary violence. In fact, when humans engage in war, they become "Delirious as these worried beasts." In other words, people become beasts when they engage in atrocious acts.

These lines suggest that "beast" as an insult should be reserved for humans who engage in atrocious violence at the cost of human dignity and justice. It should never be used to refer to people in a racist manner. Furthermore, this sense of beast is different from the beast of the "beast-teeming plain," the animals in the natural environment just trying to eke out their survival. The repetition of "beast" teases apart the differences in these uses, interrogating how humans have asserted their superiority over animals as a means of justifying racist oppression—and showing how such assertions have ultimately led to human actions that are more beastly than anything animals are capable of.

Where Aphorismus appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "beast-teeming"
- **Line 15:** "beast," "beast"
- **Line 18:** "beasts"



VOCABULARY

Tawny (Lines 1-2) - A yellow-brown or orange-brown color.

Pelt (Lines 1-2) - The skin and fur of a dead animal.

Kikuyu (Line 2) - The tribe most of the Mau Mau were from, and the largest ethnic group in Kenya.

Quick (Line 2) - *Quick* can mean not only "fast," but also "alive," as in the biblical phrase "the quick and the dead."

Batten (Line 3) - Shut, lock down. Here, this word suggests the flies lock themselves to the bloodstream, perhaps like mosquitoes landing on a vein.

Veldt (Line 3) - African grassland. Pronounced "velt."

Bloodstreams (Line 3) - Veins. Here, the word is used in a [metaphorical](#) and surreal way, as if the landscape itself has veins.

Colonel (Line 5) - Pronounced the same as *kernel*, a "colonel" is an officer in an army.

Carion (Line 5) - Decaying animal flesh eaten by scavengers.

Salients (Line 8) - The most relevant or noticeable aspects of something.

Savages (Line 10) - Barbaric and uncivilized people. This word is now usually considered to have racist connotations.

Expendable (Line 10) - Disposable. This darkly [ironic](#) phrase recalls how the Nazis killed millions of Jewish people in the Holocaust because they viewed their lives as worthless.

Threshed (Line 11) - Threshing is a phase in the farming of grain-based crops. Farmers gather stalks and hit them in order to separate out the grain.

Beaters (Line 11) - People doing the threshing.

Ibises (Lines 12-13) - A type of long-legged bird. There are several types of ibises native to Africa. The one the speaker's probably referencing is called the *African sacred ibis*, a white bird that searches for food by wading through shallow water. The ancient Egyptians held it sacred, hence its name.

Wheeled (Line 13) - Flew in an arc.

Worried Beasts (Line 18) - Frenzied animals, referring to the previous sentence where the speaker discusses animal violence.

Native Dread (Lines 20-21) - Dread is fear or foreboding. The speaker elaborates on this phrase in the next sentence, so that "native dread" can be interpreted as colonized peoples' fear that their colonizers will use extreme violence to suppress any uprisings.

Brutish (Line 22) - Senseless and violent.

Gorilla (Line 25) - Besides the [pun](#) on *guerilla*—a term, often associated with leftist revolutionaries, that refers to soldiers who use ambushes and unconventional tactics—this word also has racist connotations. Colonizing nations have often referred to the people they colonized as animals in order to justify their oppression.

Superman (Line 25) - Super human. The word is also a translation of the word *Übermensch*, a term the Nazis stole from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and corrupted. For the Nazis, the word refers to the supposedly superior German people, who because of their superiority had the right to conquer the rest of the world and eradicate those they deemed inferior.

Drunken Officer (Line 29) - Police officers or army officers enforcing British colonial rule who, when they got drunk, were probably more belligerent and arbitrary than helpful. [Metaphorically](#), this phrase also suggests that Britain as a whole behaves like a drunken officer rather than a rational ruler.

Cool (Line 32) - Calm; that is, how can the speaker learn about such violence and be okay with it?



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Far Cry From Africa" has 33 lines broken into three [stanzas](#) of increasing length. Stanza 1 is 10 lines long, stanza 2 is 11 lines long, and stanza 3 is 12 lines long. These stanza uses a flexible [rhyme scheme](#) and [meter](#).

The poem's form of increasing stanza length creates a kind of middle ground between [formal verse](#) and [free verse](#). While a casual observer might not even notice that the stanzas are different lengths, thus assuming that this poem has a pretty traditional idea of poetic form, closer observation reveals this

not to be the case. This creates a kind of hidden flexibility, then; it's as if the speaker has invented a new form within the auspices of older forms. Or, at the very least, as if the speaker is continually pushing against the walls of poetic constraint.

Stanza literally means "room" in Italian, but for some poets these rooms can feel more like prison cells. This plays into the speaker's meditation on the role of English for colonized people. The speaker sees English as both a means of self-expression but also as an inescapable bond with the colonizing nation, and the poem's form captures this conflict. The speaker engages with the constraints of formal poetry just as the speaker doesn't shy away from addressing the oppressive practices of English colonists. At the same time, the speaker embraces English's expressive possibilities, adding an individual touch to the poem's form, just as the speaker addresses the nuances of the Mau Mau Uprising from a personal point of view.

METER

The poem is written in a very flexible form of [iambic pentameter](#) (meaning there are five feet per line, each with a da-DUM rhythm). The first two lines kick off the poem with a language that hews pretty close to this [meter](#):

A wind | is ruf- | fling the tawn- | y pelt
Of A- | frica. | Kiku- | yu, quick | as flies,

While this is close to perfect iambic pentameter, the third foot of line 1 is actually an [anapest](#) (da-da-DUM; "-fling the tawn-"). This suggests that although the poem clearly gestures towards iambic pentameter, it won't necessarily always strive to match it. Instead, the poem thrives on ambiguous lines such as these.

Sometimes, the poem uses bunches of stresses that seem to override the meter, like a wire heating up and short-circuiting. Here's the start of stanza 2:

Threshed out | by beat- | ers, the | long rush- | es
break
In a | white dust | of i- | bises | whose cries
Have wheeled | since civ | iliza- | tion's dawn
From the | parched riv- | er or | beast-teem- | ing
plain.

These lines range from four to six stresses per line, and none of them are in regular iambic pentameter. Although the rhythms of some of them still bear the stamp of meter (mostly the third line), others, such as the first and fourth line, have found their own rhythm, pretty divorced from iambic pentameter.

Such examples indicate that the speaker refuses to be bound by iambic pentameter—perhaps by the strictures of any European meter. At the same time, the speaker doesn't feel entirely free from meter. Rather, the speaker wants to acknowledge the role

that meter has played in the history of English poetry. The speaker is someone who has inherited English through the cultural oppression of English colonization, yet who also has—even so—come to love English. In interrogating this relationship, then, it's important for the speaker to acknowledge English's fraught and complicated history.

Additionally, meter [metaphorically](#) represents the constraints imposed by English governance on colonized peoples. The straightjacket of iambic pentameter mimics harsh colonial laws, which took away freedom and land from the colonized, reducing them to second-class seconds. By turning the poem into a protracted battle with meter, then, the speaker reenacts these many struggles with colonialism.

The point where the speaker most obviously breaks with meter is very telling in this regard. Line 28, in its totality, reads: "I who have cursed." This tiny, two-foot line contrasts with the heavily stressed lines above, and is most definitely *not* iambic pentameter. It marks a point where the speaker has gotten totally exhausted with even gesturing towards such a meter. Furthermore, this line is referring to the speaker's hatred of "The drunken officer of British rule," so it's fitting that the line bucks its British constraint so vehemently. The speaker has inserted this line as if to show how meter is a *choice* poets make, and that it's possible to give a metaphorical middle finger to colonial England simply by messing with meter.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem doesn't follow a steady [rhyme scheme](#)—which might feel too formal and constricting for the subject at hand—but it does make use of rhyme sounds. In terms of the experience of reading the poem, [rhyme](#) happens at any easy and intuitive level. But once that reading gives way to analysis, the poem's use of rhyme turns out to be a bit more complicated. This is due to the poem's use of [slant rhyme](#) and its recycling of rhyme sounds across stanza.

One reason that slant rhyme complicates things is that sometimes a word is introduced seemingly as a slant rhyme, only for that word to serve as a full rhyme with a later word. For instance, here are some of the early rhyme words in stanza three: "hands," "again," "Spain," "superman," "vein." At first, "hands," "again," and "Spain" appear back-to-back as slant rhymes, whose /an/, /en/, and /ayn/ sounds share a consonant /n/ and whose vowels echo each other. This rhyme scheme for the first three lines might be written as:

AA* A**

...suggesting how a single rhyme morphs through each of these words.

In the following lines, however, "superman" is clearly a much closer rhyme to "hands" than either of these words, and "vein" is a perfect rhyme with "Spain." In which case, the rhyme scheme for the first five lines could be revised as:

ABCAC

But this means that "again," the B rhyme, doesn't rhyme with anything! Should it be taken as a slant rhyme with "hands," or an eye rhyme with "Spain?" Of course, the sane answer to such questions is that they are non-issues: they arise mostly from the problems of labeling and terminology, rather than fussiness on the poem's part.

That said, there is *some* fussiness in the poem, and these rhymes are part of it. They form a miniature ecosystem of sounds that can't quite be harnessed by traditional attitudes towards rhyme. This plays into the speaker's general quandary with the history of English poetry, reflecting the speakers need to *engage* with that history without totally *giving in* to it.



SPEAKER

The speaker is closely identified with Derek Walcott himself, yet the poem doesn't fully license the reader to treat *as* Walcott. Rather, the speaker is someone who draws on the kinds of experiences Walcott had after growing up in an English colony, experiences that are crucial for understanding the poem.

Derek Walcott grew up on the (now former) English colony of Saint Lucia and later attended university in Jamaica. The speaker of this poem is likewise implied to be someone who is well-educated, who grew up in a colony and adopted English as a primary means of expression, as evidenced by the phrase "the English tongue I love." It's also possible to treat this line as self-reflexively referring to the poem, and to the speaker as a poet.

Going off these implications, the speaker's personal dilemma begins to grow clear. The speaker is someone who has become immersed in English to point of writing English poetry that places itself within the long English poetic tradition. Yet the speaker has also "cursed / The drunken officer of British rule." In other words, the speaker vehemently hates English colonial rule. And at the same time, the speaker doesn't trust the "slaughter" employed by Mau Mau revolutionaries.

All these things are elements of the speaker's moral and cultural conundrum. The speaker senses that the Mau Mau Rebellion requires people to take sides, yet the speaker feels that every side requires the speaker to "betray" the other. By ending on this note, the speaker offers no solution to this problem, only further problems.



SETTING

The title "A Far Cry From Africa" adds some complex resonance to the question of the poem's setting. This title can be interpreted in three ways:

1. In the idiomatic sense of *a far cry*, meaning "very different." In this sense, something that is "A Far Cry From Africa" is very different from Africa.
2. This idiom can be interpreted as saying that the speaker is physically very far away from Africa. Though the speaker has African ancestry, perhaps the speaker doesn't actually live in Africa, but lives in England, America, or a Caribbean nation.
3. The title can be read literally as *a distant call of distress coming from Africa*. This, of course, summons all the troubles caused by the Mau Mau rebellion as the speaker learns about them from abroad.

Considering these interpretations, the title suggests that the speaker is mulling over Kenyan events while living on another continent. At the same time, though, the poem summons the Kenyan landscape as if it *does* take place in Africa, as when the speaker describes how "the long rushes break / In a white dust of ibises." This image makes it seem as if the speaker is in Kenya, watching these things unfold.

There are thus two levels to the poem's setting. At a literal level, the speaker is thousands of miles away from these events. Yet at a poetic level, the speaker has used the power of lyrical language to transport the poem to Kenya. Seen in this way, the poem has a special kind of magic that allows the speaker to engage with what's happening in Kenya in an intimate and physical way. Rather than being abstract events and news headlines, the goings-on in Kenya become flesh and blood in the poem, whose physicality brings speaker and reader face-to-face with the complexities of a colonial revolution.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

To understand the importance of Derek Walcott's work, it's necessary to know a little bit about his background. Walcott grew up on the (now former) British colony of Saint Lucia. He had mixed African and English ancestry, and although his first language was *Patois* (a creole of French and African languages), his schooling was in English. Early in his career, Walcott lived on the island of Trinidad, where he founded a theater company. He wrote "A Far Cry From Africa" in his late 20s and included it in his first major collection, *In a Green Night*. Later in his career, Walcott achieved a great deal of fame as a poet, living and teaching in places like New York and Boston. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992 and travelled all over the world reading and speaking. As this brief biographical sketch suggests, the themes and concerns present in "A Far Cry From Africa" arose directly from Walcott's own experience.

In fact, these themes make Walcott's work an example of postcolonial literature—writing that addresses the experiences of people from formerly colonized nations. There are many

approaches that can be taken to such literature, and Walcott's is just one. This approach involves a reverence for the traditional forms of English poetry mixed with impressionistic descriptions of life in the Caribbean as well as abroad. As "A Far Cry From Africa" shows, Walcott's material was both personal and worldly in scope, bringing tangible and intimate [imagery](#) into contact with bigger issues. At its most radical, his poetry follows a flow of associations, even to the point of being surreal.

However, Walcott also faced criticism for his embrace of both English and traditionally English forms. While some postcolonial poets tried to develop forms that felt native to their respective lands, Walcott placed himself squarely in the tradition of English poets. The Renaissance poet [John Milton](#) (*Paradise Lost*), for instance, was one of his important influences. Many postcolonial writers of Walcott's generation ended up living abroad, often in the countries of their colonizers, whose language these writers used. This further complicated such writer's relationships with the countries of their births.

One writer that it's useful to compare Walcott to is Aimé Césaire. Césaire lived most of his life in his native Caribbean country Martinique (which neighbors Santa Lucia), but as a young man he studied abroad in France. During this time he wrote his most famous work, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*. The hybrid work of poetry and prose uses explosive surrealist writing, shocking imagery, and vehement arguments against colonialism. More politically active and experimental by temperament than Walcott, Césaire helped found the movement of Négritude, which rejected European culture in favor of a celebration of blackness and African heritage.

These two poets, a generation apart but from neighboring countries, offer two different approaches to postcolonial writing. Césaire embraced experimentation and militancy against colonialism, ultimately returning to Martinique where he served as politician and worked on developing new, native forms of theater. Walcott, meanwhile, began his career by founding a native theater, but eventually found himself a part of intellectual institutions in America, Canada, and English. Rather than rejecting European culture he embraced it. His masterpiece *Omeros* is an epic poem that combines material from the ancient Greek poem *The Odyssey* with the form used by Medieval Italian poet Dante in his poem *Inferno*. It was this work in part that won him the Nobel Prize in the '90s.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Mau Mau Uprising lasted eight years, from 1952-1960. The Mau Mau, or Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA) as they called themselves, were a group of guerilla fighters, most of whom were from the Kikuyu tribe, Kenya's ethnic majority. The Mau Mau fought in response to England's oppressive rule over Kenya, especially their exploitative approach to land. Kenyan's were increasingly forced off their own land and

compelled to work for white farmers at poor wages.

The Mau Mau didn't have the resources to fight the British head on, so they employed guerilla tactics, such as night attacks on unarmed civilians. While any armed revolution is bound to be violent, the Mau Mau's use of violence was especially shocking to outside observers because of these attacks. In one notorious example, the Mau Mau killed an entire white family at their farm, including a six-year-old boy. Committed with machete-like swords, this murder was particularly gruesome.

For some intellectuals, notably the anti-colonial writer Frantz Fanon, such acts were a necessary phase in a colonial revolution—an outcome sparked by the decades of violence perpetrated by colonial forces. However, for observers like Walcott, such acts were unforgivable, even if British colonialism was equally detestable.

Eventually, the uprising was brutally suppressed. The British employed forced labor camps that some felt were uncomfortably similar to Nazi concentration camps—which had existed only a decade earlier. Additionally, because the Mau Mau employed such gruesome techniques and because the British were especially adept at sowing ideological division among natives, the uprising never gained enough support to swell into a full-scale revolution.

Despite the suppression of the rebellion, however, it did force the British to grant certain concessions to Kenyans, such as political representation. And just a few years later, Kenya gained independence.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [An Overview of Négritude](#) — A discussion of the concept of Négritude developed by writer Aimé Césaire, from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Césaire's concerns can be usefully studied to both contrast with, and illuminate, Walcott's themes. (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/negritude/>)
- [The Poem Out Loud](#) — Listen to Derek Walcott read "A Far Cry From Africa." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6txi1Z_ZGPY)
- [The Mau Mau Uprising](#) — A history of the Mau Mau Uprising, from the BBC. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-12997138>)
- [Frantz Fanon and the Mau Mau](#) — Frantz Fanon's important book on colonial revolution and independence, "The Wretched of the Earth," was heavily inspired by the Mau Mau Rebellion. For Fanon, the Mau Mau represent an essential phase of independence, one whose violence is a direct result of decades of violent colonial rule. (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/frantz->)

[fanon/#WretEart](#))

- [Walcott's Biography](#) – A short biography of Walcott from Emory University. (<https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/21/walcott-derek/>)



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