UNIT 3 DEREK WALCOTT - II

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to discuss Walcott’s poetry published in the 1980s and 1990s. In doing so I shall touch upon various aspects of Caribbean culture and society which Walcott has incorporated to a much greater extent in his later work. The poems to be discussed are from his collections The Fortunate Traveller (1981), Midsummer (1984) and Omeros (1990). It is absolutely essential for you to have read carefully the poems discussed at length in the previous unit and the extracts from other poems. This will help you in noting for yourself the differences between Walcott’s early and later poetry.

3.1 THE TRAVELLER

Since the 1970s Walcott has divided his time between the Caribbean and the United States. He has taught at Yale, Columbia, Boston and other universities. The title of his 1981 collection of poetry The Fortunate Traveller indicates this movement between two regions and cultures and the poems reflect the diasporic or exilic perspective. In “The Hotel Normandie Pool” he writes, “corruption, censorship and arrogance/make exile seem a happier thought than home” (CP 442). However it is not as if the condition of exile is an unmixed blessing. In interviews Walcott has acknowledged, that contained in the exile’s physical separation from the place of origin, is “this physical nostalgia for simple things like warm sea, sun, a certain kind of food” (White 157). Linking the art of poetry to the idea of heaven which posits that we are in exile from a place to which we really belong, Walcott calls poetry “a situation of divine discontent” (White 158). The exile’s discontent can take as its reference point both the place of origin as well as the place of present abode. Walcott is aware of the haunting, abiding presence of racism in America. The title poem of his collection The Arkansas Testament (1977) explores this issue in detail. Since 1990 Walcott has been teaching creative writing at Boston University. He has called Boston the “toughest city in terms of Black fear” explaining that there is a fear of using Blacks in the theatre of this town. Aware of the problems of both the regions
between which he divides his time, Walcott is, in a sense, like his literary creation Shabine, the “red nigger” from “The Schooner Flight” who “had no nation now but the imagination” (CP 350). And yet, paradoxically, “the effort to create a nation as if it were an act of imagination” is present in Walcott’s later poetry along with the distancing which arises out of his status as an exile (White 90).

3.2 THE SPOILER’S RETURN

3.2.1 The Cutting Edge of Satire

Walcott’s engagement with and distancing from the Caribbean is suggested in this poem through the persona of Spoiler, a calypsonian, who has come back from hell to visit Trinidad by special permission of his master Satan. The identification of Spoiler as a calypsonian immediately places him in the satirical tradition for the calypso is a popular satirical song in rhymed verse. Cultural critics locate the calypso’s origin at the time of French settlement of Trinidad in the 18th century as songs sung in praise of a master or reparation for his enemies. At the beginning of the twentieth century calypsos sung by masquerade bands became a part of formally organised carnival competitions. The first calypso competition was arranged in 1914. In it the competitors sought to outdo each other in wit and rhyme. Errol Hill who has researched the form and function of the calypso in his book on the Trinidad carnival calls it “an instrument of social criticism” and “an escape measure for resentful public feelings.” He has also pointed out that one of the earliest surviving calypsos in the English language is levelled at a 19th century British governor Sir Hubert Jermingham. Spoiler’s criticism of opportunist politicians, profiteers and bureaucrats is in keeping with this satirical tradition.

The other satirical tradition invoked in the poem is Western. Spoiler asks the Roman satirists Juvenal and Martial to “back me up.” These satirists worked in the epigrammatic style which in its pithiness is quite similar to the succinctness of calypso couplets. Their evocation of Roman life, criticism of fortune-hunters, gluttons, drunkards, debauchers and sympathy for the poor is comparable to Spoiler’s picture of contemporary Trinidad. He also places himself in the line of English satirists from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. Rochester, Dryden, Pope, Swift, Byron whom he labels “lords of irony” are visualised as contenders in Satan’s “tent.” The allusion is to calypso tents during carnival where competitions were held and in which a small fee was charged for admission. Walcott brings together the Trinidadian and Western forms of satire by making the Roman and English satirists competitors in a calypso tent. I want to bring to your attention the fact that there are two forms of satire mentioned in the poem: the calypso which as an expression of popular culture can be called a part of “the little tradition,” and literary satire which can be seen as comprising “the great tradition.” Such a hierarchical division would entail denigrating the calypso, which is primarily oral, below the Western mode of satire as literature. Spoiler’s and Walcott’s attack on contemporary Trinidad is double edged in its use of both oral and literary resources. This enables the poem, which is after all in print, to be seen as “orature,” literature inscribed with orality.

3.2.2 The Text

The Spoiler’s return

[for Earl Lovelace]

I sit high on this bridge in Laventille,
watching that city where I left no will
but my own conscience and rum-eaten wit,
and limers passing see me where I sit,
ghost in brown gabardine, bones in a sack,
and bawl: "Ay, Spoiler, boy! When you come back?"
and those who bold don't feel they out of place
to peel my limeskin back, and see a face
with eyes as cold as a dead macajuel,
and if they still can talk, I answer:"Hell."
I have a room there where I keep a crown,
and Satan send me to check out this town.
Down there, that Hot Boy have a stereo
where, whole day, he does blast my caiso;
I beg him two weeks' leave and he send me
back up, not as no bedbug or no flea,
but in this limeskin hag and floccy suit,
'to sing what I did always sing: the truth.
Tell Desperadoes when you reach the hill,
I decompose, but I composing still:

_I going to bite them young ladies, partner,
like a hot dog or a hamburger
and if you thin, don't be in a fright
is only big fat women I going to bite._

The shark, racing the shadow of the shark
across clear coral rocks, does make them dark—
that is my premonition of the scene
of what passing over this Caribbean.
Is crab climbing crab-back, in a crab-quirrel
and going round and round in the same barrel,
is sharks with shirt-jacs, sharks with well-pressed fins,
ripping we small-fry off with razor grins;
nothing ain't change but colour and attire,
so back me up, Old Brigade of Satire,
back me up, Martial, Juvenal, and Pope
(to hang their self I giving plenty rope),
join Spoiler' chorus, sing the song with me,
Laord Rochester, who praised the nimble flea:

_Were I, who to my cost already am
One of those strange, prodigious creatures, Man,
A spirit free, to choose for my own share,
What case of flesh and blood I pleased to wear,
I hope when I die, after burial,
To come back as an insect or animal._

I see these islands and I feel to bawl,
"area of darkness" with V.S. Nightfall.

Lock off your tears, you casting pearls of grief
on a duck's back a waxen dasheen leaf,
the slime crab's carapace is waterproof
and those with hearing aids turn off the truth,
and their dark glasses let you criticize
your own presumptuous image in their eyes.
Behind dark glasses is just hollow skull,
and black still poor, though black is beautiful.
So, crown and mitre me Bedbug the First—
the gift of mockery with which I'm cursed
is just a insect biting fame behind,
a vermin swimming in a glass of wine,
that, dipped out with a finger, bound to bite
its saving host, ungrateful parasite,
whose sting, between the cleft arse and its seat,
reminds Authority man is just meat,
a moralist as mordant as the louse
that the good husband brings from the whorehouse
the flea whose itch to make all Power wince,
will crash a fete, even at his life's expense,
and these pile up in lime pits by the heap,
daily; that our deliverers may sleep.
All those who promise free and just debate,
then blow up radicals to save the state,
who allow, in democracy's defence,
a parliament of spiked heads on a fence,
all you go bawl out, "Spoils, things ain't so bad."
This ain't the Dark Age, is just Trinidad,
is human nature, Spoiler, after all,
ain't big genocide, is just bohbohl;
safe and conservative, 'fraid to take side,
they say that Rodney commit suicide,
is the same voices that, in the slave ship,
smile at their brothers, "Boy, is just the whip,"
I free and easy, you see me have chain?
A little censorship can't cause no pain,
a little graft can't rot the human mind,
what sweet in goat-mouth sour in his behind.
So I sing with Attila, I sing with Commander,
what right in Guyana, right in Uganda.
The time could come, it can't be very long,
when they will jail calypso for picong,
for first comes television, then the press,
all in the name of Civic Righteousness;
it has been done before, all Power has
made the sky shit and maggots of the stars,
over these Romans lying on their backs,
the hookers swaying their enormous sacks,
until all language stinks, and the truth lies,
a mass for maggots and a fete for flies;
and, for a spineless thing, rumour can twist
into a style the local journalist---
as bland as a green coconut, his manner
routinely tart, his sources the Savannah
and all pretensions to a native art
reduced to giggles at the coconut cart,
where heads with reputations, in one slice,
are brought to earth, when they ain't eating nice;
and as for local Art, so it does go,
the audience have more talent than the show.

Is Carnival, straight Carnival that's all,
the beat is base, the melody bohbohl,
all Port of Spain is a twelve-thirty show.
some playing Kojak, some Fidel Castro,
some Rastamen, but, with or without locks,
to Spoiler is the same old khaki socks,
all Frederick Street stinkiing like a closed drain.

Hell is a city much like Port of Spain,
what the rain rots, the sun ripens some more,
all in the due process and within the law,
as, like a sailor on a spending spree,
we blow our oil-bloated economy
on projects from here to eternity,
and Lord, the sunlit streets break Spoiler’s heart,
to have natural gas and not to give a fart,
to see them line up, pitch-oil tin in hand:
each independent, oil-forsaken island,
like jeering at some scrunter with the blues,
while you lend him some need-a-halfSOLE shoes,
some begging bold as brass, some coming meeker,
but from Jamaica to poor Dominica
we make them know they begging, every loan
we send them is like blood squeezed out of stone,
and giving gives us back the right to laugh
that we couldn’t see we own black people starve,
and, more we give, more we congratulate
we-self on our own self-sufficient state.
In all them project, all them Five-Year Plan,
what happen to the Brotherhood of Man?
Around the time I dead it wasn’t so,
we sang the Commonwealth of caiso,
we was in chains, but chains made us unite,
now who have, good for them, and who blight, blight;
my bread is bitterness, my wine is gall,
my chorus is the same: “I want to fall.”
Oh, wheel of industry, check out your cogs!
Between the knee-high trash and khaki dogs
Arnold’s Phoenician trader reach this far,
selling you half-dead batteries for your car;
the children of Tagore, in funeral shroud,
curry favour and chicken from the crowd;
as for the Creoles, check their house, and look,
you bust your brain before you find a book,
when Spoiler see all this, ain’t he must bawl,
“area of darkness,” with V.S. Nightfall?
Corbeaux like cardinals line the La Basse
in ecumenical patience while you pass
the Beetham Highway-Guard corruption’s stench,
you bald, black justices of the High Bench-
and beyond them the firelit mangrove swamps,
ibises practising for postage stamps,
Lord, let me take a taxi South again
and hear, drumming across Caroni Plain,
the table in the Indian half hour
when twilight fills the mud huts of the poor,
to hear the tattered flags of drying corn
rattle a sky from which all the gods gone,
their bleached flags of distress waving to me
from shacks, adrift like rafts on a green sea,
“Things ain’t go change, they ain’t go change at all,”
to my old chorus: “Lord, I want to bawl.”
The poor still poor, whatever arse they catch.
Look south from Laventille, and you can watch
the torn brown patches of the Central Plain
slowly restitched by needles of the rain,
and the frayed earth, crisscrossed like old bagasse,
spring to a cushiony quilt of emerald grass,
and who does sew and sow and patch the land?
The Indian. And whose villages turn sand?
The fishermen doomed to stitching the huge net of the torn foam from Point to La Fillette.

One thing with hell, at least it organize in soaring circles, when any man dies he must pass through them first, that is the style, Jesus was down here for a little while, cadaverous Dante, big-guts Rabelais, all of them wave to Spoiler on their way.

Catch us in Satan tent, next carnival:
Lord Rochester, Quevedo, Juvenal, Maestro, Martial, Pope, Dryden, Swift, Lord Byron, the lords of irony, the Duke of Iron, hotly contending for the monarchy in couplets or the old re-minor key, all those who gave earth’s pompous carnival fatigue, and groaned “O God, I feel to fall!” all those whose anger for the poor on earth made them weep with a laughter beyond mirth, names wide as oceans when compared with mine salted my songs, and gave me their high sign. All you excuse me, Spoiler was in town; you pass him straight, so now he gone back down.

Glossary

limers: an idler standing at a public place
gabardine: a kind of cloth used for making suits
limeskin: an old felt hat that has lost its shape
macajuel: a large snake also called a boa - constrictor or anaconda
caiso: alternative spelling for calypso, a popular satirical song in rhymed verse, often performed by a male singer with body gestures
floccy: made of wool
Desperadoes: person of reckless or criminal undertakings
crab-quarrel: fight with the intention of pulling the other down
shirt-jaes: loose-fitting, shirt-like garment, worn on official occasions
rip off: defraud
small-fry: inconsequential people

Martial: Roman poet of the first century A.D., especially famous for his work Epigrams which satirize diverse characters of contemporary Rome.

Juvenal: Second century Roman satirist, author of Satires, characterised by bitter invective and grim epigrams.
Caribbean Poetry

Pope: Alexander Pope (1688-1744), Augustan poet famous for his satires *Dunciad* on Dullness. *Imitations of Horace, Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*.

Rochester: John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (1647-80), lyric poet and satirist. One of the first Augustans to write social and literary verse satires. The poem contains a quotation from his "Satyre on Mankind."

"area of darkness": V.S. Naipaul wrote a highly controversial novel about India titled *An Area of Darkness* (1964).

Lock off: choke back or stop

dasheen: a large tuber with big, heart-shaped leaves

carapace: shell

mitre: Bishop or abbot’s tall cap, a symbol of episcopal office

mordant: caustic or biting

louse, flea: small parasitic insects

-crash a fête: interrupt a party or a public dance

lime pits: for steeping hides to remove hair

Dark Age: 5th to 10th cent. A.D., the period preceding the Middle Ages was known as the Dark Ages, a period of unenlightenment.

genocide: deliberate extermination of people

bohbohl: to steal company or public funds

Rodney: probably Walter Rodney, a radical Guyanese lecturer and writer whose deportation from Jamaica in 1968 sparked off a massive student demonstration which was taken over by the general public and ended in violent clashes with the police.

goat-mouth: ability to cause minor misfortune by predicting the future, also called bad mouth

Atilla, Commander: stage names of famous calypsonians

picong: spontaneous verbal battle in rhymed song between two or more contending calypsonians

hookers: small fishing boats

Carnival: the massive, nationally organised festival of competitive, costumed street-dancing, calypso singing held usually in the last four days before Ash Wednesday.

tart: sharp, cutting
members of the Rastafari cult, developed in Jamaica, believing Ethiopia to be the ultimate home of all Black people and the Western society as a survival of the wickedness of Babylon. Characterised by dread-locked hair and ganja smoking, its members reject private property.

Port of Spain: capital of Trinidad

Fidel Castro: leader of the Marxist-Leninist government in Cuba

pitch-oil: kerosene

scrunter: derogatory term for a person reduced to begging

bold as brass: defiantly

blight: cause harm

Phoenician: inhabitant of Syria

Corbeaux: carrion crows

cardinals: leading dignitaries of the Roman Catholic church

ecuménical: representing the whole of the Christian world

mangrove: tropical tree or shrub

ibises: stork-like birds with long, curved bills, found in lakes and swamps

flags: yellow fibrous shaft

bleached: whitened by exposure to sunlight

arse: damned, accursed, a term expressing frustration

bagasse: dry pith of sugarcane, also indicating the dregs of society

emerald grass: bright green grass

cadaverous: corpse-like

Dante: Dante Alligheri (1265-1321), Italian poet and author of Divina Commedia comprising the Inferno, the Purgatorio, and the Paradiso.

Rabelais: François Rabelais (1495-1553), French physician, humanist and satirist whose great works are the satirical entertainments on popular giants titled Gargantua and Pantagruel.

Byron: George Gordon Byron (1788-1824), English poet, dramatist and satirist, author of English Bards and Scotch Reviewers, a satirical poem in which he attacks many of his contemporaries.
Caribbean Poetry

Quevedo: probably Raymond Quevedo who wrote a memoir titled *Attila's Kaiso* (1983), containing an anecdotal history of Trinidad calypso, written in the 1950s by this early practitioner who performed as 'Atilla the Hun' but most likely Francisco Gomez de Quevedo (1580-1645), Spanish poet and prose writer famous for his satires which show the commercialism, racialism, imperialism, slavery in his age.

Dryden: John Dryden (1631-1700), English poet, dramatist and satirist, wrote a biting satire on his contemporary poet Shadwell in *Mac Flecknoe* (1682) and on the state of the times in *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681).

Swift: Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), attacked contemporary politics, literature, religion, society in satires like *The Battle of Books* and *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) and *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).

3.2.3 Analysis

Spoiler's return to Laventille and people's surprise at seeing him is the subject of the opening section of this poem. That this place was where Spoiler was famous as a calypsonian is obvious by his own statement that he had left his "conscience" and "rum-eaten wit" here. Indications of the poverty and squalor he lived in are provided by this phrase, which indicates he was a hard drinking man, and the next line in which he is described as a bag of bones. People express their curiosity at his return but some are put off by his ghostly appearance. Spoiler talks about his sojourn in hell where Satan, called "Hot Boy" by him, is a fan of his and listens to his songs on his stereo. Satan's partiality towards Spoiler makes him send the latter back to earth, not as a "bedbug" or a "flea" but as man dressed in a suit and a hat. He hints at the social function performed by the calypsonians, that of singing the "truth." Playing on the word "compose," he sends out a message that even though his physical appearance is subject to decay ("I decompose") his artistic abilities are still intact ("I composing still"). To give evidence of the latter he sings a snatch from one of his compositions about the attractions of women.

Spoiler's meditations on the current political and social situation in the Caribbean bring out the predatory instincts of those in power, whom he calls "sharks." These sharks thrive by exploiting the "small-fry" or ordinary people. The line "crab climbing crab-back, in a crab-quarrel" is wonderfully evocative of people using other people to attain power at somebody else's expense. The marine imagery used in the passage to describe bureaucrats and politicians as sharks and crabs accentuates their influence. If the Caribbean is an area of pristine, Edenic beauty with "clear coral rocks," these people are like ominous dark shadows across it. Spoiler hints that commoners aren't any better off under their chosen representatives than they were under a colonial government. The "colour and attire" of those in power may have changed but the exploitative mentality is still the same. The change in attire is indicated by the word "shirt-jacs," a name for a shirt-like garment which originated in Guyana in 1969 and which is worn for official occasions. For Spoiler the most effective weapon against the current scenario is satire and he invokes satirists like Martial, Juvenal and Pope to aid him in his endeavour. He laments the contemporary situation in the Caribbean and through Rochester's words expresses a pessimistic outlook towards it in his desire to be born as an insect or an animal. This is connected to his previous mention of Satan's kindness in allowing him to be reborn as a man rather than as a lower form of life. It seems as if taking into consideration the present circumstances Spoiler is regretting having come back to earth in human form. Spoiler is aware that his despondency is shared by other artists of the region.
particularly the East Indian Caribbean author V.S. Naipaul who has analysed aspects of Caribbean culture and society in his novels and essays. Naipaul’s critics have often accused him of presenting too gloomy a picture of the Caribbean in general and of Trinidad in particular. This explains Spoiler’s play on Naipaul’s name, “V.S. Nightfall” and the evocation of his most pessimistic work to date, An Area of Darkness. These two lines serve as a refrain underscoring the bleakness and despondency of Spoiler’s vision of the Caribbean and of Trinidad. His realization that his grief is misspent is expressed as self-rebuke. He realizes that his “pearls of grief” are like water off a duck’s back. This popular English idiom is made Caribbean by affixing another comparison with it. Spoiler’s tears are also like water slipping off the smooth surface of a dasheen leaf. The majority of the populace remains unaffected by what is happening around them, turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to it, insulating themselves against the “truth” which upsets Spoiler. Bewailing the lack of intelligence which makes people of colour objects of aesthetic appreciation without in any way alleviating their material conditions he says, “black still poor, though black is beautiful.”

Continuing the insect imagery which had been introduced in the opening section of the poem, Spoiler compares the effect of his mockery to that of an insect bite. The point of comparison is the nuisance value of vermins like bedbugs, fleas and lice. The hypocrisy of those who make pretensions to liberal thoughts and action, and yet persecute others who are willing to effect change root and branch, is a prelude to their violent actions. These are effected to curb the fundamental democratic principle of freedom of expression and justified in the name of “human nature.” Extenuation for these actions is provided by contrasting them with heinous historical crimes like genocide. Walcott puts a typical Trinidadian word “bohbohl” in Spoiler’s vocabulary to ensure readers’ understanding of corruption in Trinidad’s economy.

One instance of public apathy to social concerns is the acceptance of restrictions on their freedom. The attitude is one which did not object to slavery in the past and didn’t have an understanding of radical ideology like that propagated by Walter Rodney. Spoiler is himself accustomed to censorship but this does not stop him from giving voice to the misfortunes afflicting the country like the well known calypsonians who performed under the names Atilla and Commander. The technique of the calypso is that of “picong,” a verbal war which according to Spoiler might soon be outlawed by the authorities. The various ideological state apparatuses like the television and press become vehicles for government propaganda. Complete control over natural resources and even nature itself is expressed in scatological terms. Even language has been corrupted by being used for nefarious means at the hands of unscrupulous journalists. Language is also wielded by the calypsonian but for ends quite different from that of the “local journalist” with his pretensions to a thorough understanding of the artistic and political scenario. The degeneration of the artistic impulse to a market oriented commodity, the hawking of a false idea of the “folk” has become a characteristic of all forms of art including the carnival. The commercialisation of this public celebration has made it another means to hoodwink the locals as well as the tourists. Music and melody are no longer what they previously were. The carnival masquerade consists of people dressed up in various costumes. In these days of role-playing some of the most popular figures people dress up as are Fidel Castro and Rastafarians who embody political justice. But since this ideal is far removed from Trinidadian society Spoiler comments that this is just “playing” or imitation.

Starting from a description of the squalor of Port of Spain, Spoiler extends the scope of this critical gaze to include Trinidad and the Caribbean. The stinking streets of the city make Spoiler call it hellish. The “oil-bloated economy” of the country suffered a serious blow in the eighties when the government found itself unable to call in the loans it had made to other Caribbean territories. Spoiler personifies the small nations of this part of the world as beggars with tins in their hands lining up to receive gratefully whatever meagre aid is doled out to them. The richer nations of the region, like oil-rich Trinidad, congratulate themselves on the charity they bestow to other
smaller regions in the name of black solidarity which couches their materialistic intent. Spoiler says he preferred the unity which resulted out of all the countries being under colonial servitude, “the Commonwealth of Caiso,” rather than this pseudo alliance of provider and dependents. Such a system has been responsible for the wide gap between the rich and the poor, it has led to the typical feature of a capitalist, consumerist society in which “who have, good for them, and who blight, blight.” Bitterness and gall feed the calypsonian’s anger, fortified with such nourishment it is no wonder that he expresses a death wish by uttering the words “I want to fall.”

The multiracial identity of the Caribbean comprising Creoles and other ethnicities like Syrian and Indian, each community playing an important role in the economy, is evoked by Spoiler. He mentions the different occupations they are engaged in: the Syrian is called a “Phoenician trader” and the Indian is described as an agriculturalist. Both are shown as eager for profit whether monetary or political, it is the Creole who remains illiterate and unambitious. Lest this seem too harsh a depiction Spoiler hastens to add that every community is exploited by corrupt officers of the law. The pastoral scenario of ibises standing in the swamps, flags of corn waving in the fields and the drumming of a tabla across the plain is undercut by the use of phrases like “flags of distress.” The Indians are called “children of Tagore” but this ancestery in which they are identified with this nationalist social reformer and man of letters is ironical especially in a scenario where such ideals and accomplishments have ceased to be virtues. Here poor farmers and fishermen work desperately to eke out a meagre living, existence is worse than hell where at least punishment is meted out to sinners according to the severity of the sins committed. The idea of hell as a graduated conical funnel, to the circles of which various categories of sinners are assigned, is from Dante’s Inferno. Spoiler mentions Jesus, Dante and Rabelais as being in this hellish city for some time and acknowledging his presence by waving to him. I think this probably refers to the carnival masqueraders being influenced by mythology and literature and dressing up or “playing” these parts. The next few lines confirm this interpretation because all those playacting as satirists say they can be seen in “Satan tent” at the next carnival. During carnival the calypsonians contended for the title of calypso king by engaging in verbal wars, sometimes two of them combined forces to sing duets. One of the first duets was sung by Atilla the Hun and Roaring Lion. These contests for supremacy or “monarchy” not only served the purpose of entertainment but also of social criticism. In the last few lines of the poem Spoiler speaks of the calypsonian as the keeper of social conscience and acknowledges the influence of the famous verbal and literary satirists he has just named. The insignificance of this art in the present times is evident in the way Spoiler’s return fails to evoke any excitement in the town. It is this which makes him go back “down” to hell. That satire has lost its cutting edge and has become ineffective as a weapon of social criticism is evident from the despondent choral refrain repeated at regular intervals in the poem and the pessimistic ending.

3.2.4 Carnival

The form and function of calypso can be interpreted within Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque outlined in Rabelais and His World (1965). Bakhtin read the carnival as part of a thousand year tradition of folk humour. The calypso, an inextricable part of carnival celebrations in Trinidad, has preserved the major types of traditional songs functionally associated with the lives of folk at work, at play, at worship and even in revolt (the insurrectionary songs of slaves). Carnival in Bakhtinian terms “belongs to the borderline sphere between art and life.” Comic verbal compositions in it used a variety of genres and styles, both the official and the vernacular. If the calypso is taken as such a composition it can be seen to exhibit these features of mixing high and low vocabulary. Walcott’s poem about a calypsonian is itself structured like a calypso, a dramatic monologue in rhymed couplets. Before Walcott, Errol Hill had used this form in his play Man Better Man in which the dialogue is entirely in calypso couplets. “The Spoiler’s Return” in its intermingling of standard English and localisms in words, phrases and syntax subverts the hierarchy which
undervalues creole. Folk laughter and the ribaldry intrinsic to carnival traditions are present in the few lines of a calypso sung by Spoiler in the opening section of the poem. Grotesque realism associated with bodily functions is also effectively used in phrases like “What sweet in goat-mouth sour in his behind.” Both Rabelaisian and Trinidad carnival ambience involves a participation of all sections of society, here the calypsonian is a spokesman for these oppressed masses. The established order is temporarily suspended during carnival celebrations when the utopian ideal and the realistic merge as servants don the garb of their masters who dress in rags. Spoiler’s composition and the Trinidad calypso, though part of the temporary suspension of reality, express a wish for an inversion in which freedom of speech, social justice and solidarity becomes the order of the day. Reality, pointed out through satirical means, is never lost sight of, but the possibility of change is an unexpressed hope which is never really abandoned in the calypso.

3.3 FROM MIDSUMMER

3.3.1 Poetry as Autobiography

Like Another Life (1973), a sequence of lyrics from Walcott’s middle period of poetry, Misdunliner is an exploration of aspects of the poet’s intensely personal moments of life. In both collections the influence of the American poet Robert Lowell’s much acclaimed Life Studies (1959) can be traced. Lowell’s work contains poetic and prose recollections of his family, his childhood and his mature experiences of marriage, imprisonment and hospitalization for mental problems. This started the trend for what came to be called “Confessional” poetry in which the revelation of the private universe with all its attendant irrationality became acceptable. Madness, for instance, was a hitherto taboo aspect of private life but in the poetry of Lowell and Sylvia Plath it became a theme for the enunciation of one’s identity. Walcott’s poetry has its moments of tortured anguish which indicates its links with confessional verse. However, since these moments are only one aspect of these two collections I prefer to use the term ‘autobiographical poetry’ for them. Let me point out some similarities between them. Immediate family members are made the subjects of poetry. Some poems in the early collection are addressed specifically to Walcott’s mother while in the later work his first wife and his daughters figure prominently. The memory of his father Warwick Walcott and the paintings he left behind is reworked into poems in both Another Life and Misdunner. The visual arts, especially in comparison to the verbal art of poetry, is a much discussed theme. To this end Another Life alludes principally to Italian Renaissance painters while Misdunlinner refers to Northern painters like Breughel, Durer, Vermeer and in the French tradition to Chardin and Gauguin. The poet’s painter friends Harry Simmons and Dunstan St. Omer (called Gregorias) are mentioned as playing a significant role in his artistic development. The future trends this development might take are prefigured in Misdunliner. In the two untitled sections of this collection chosen for discussion I shall be pointing out these trends.

3.3.2 The Text

FROM MIDSUMMER

XXV

The sun has fired my face to terra-cotta. It carries the heat from his kiln all through the house. But I cherish its wrinkles as much as those on blue water. Gnats drill little holes around a saw-toothed cactus, a furnace has curled the knives of the oleander, and a branch of the logwood blurs with wild characters. A stone house waits on the steps. Its white porch blazes.
Caribbean Poetry

I tell you a promise brought to me by the surf:
You shall see transparent Helen pass like a candle
flame in sunlight, weightless as woodsmoke that hazes
the sand with no shadow. My palms have been sliced by the twine
of the craft I have pulled at for more than forty years.
My Ionia is the smell of burnt grass, the scorched handle
of a cistern in August squeaking to rusty islands;
the lines I love have all their knots left in.
Through the stunned afternoon, when it’s too hot to think
and the muse of this inland ocean still waits for a name,
and from the salt, dark room, the tight horizon line
A lizard gasps on the wall. The sea glares like zinc.
Then, in the door light: not Nike loosening her sandal
but a girl slapping sand from her foot, one hand on the frame.

XXVI

Before that thundercloud breaks from its hawser,
those ropes of rain, a wind makes the sea grapes wince,
and the reef signals its last flash of lime.
Feeling her skin cool, the housemaid August
runs into the yard to pull down clouds, like a laundress,
from the year’s meridian, her mouth stuffed with wooden pins.
She’s seen these flashes of quartz, she knows it’s time
for the guests on the beach to come up to the house,
and, hosing sand from scorched feet, let the hinges rust
in holes for another year. But an iron band
still binds their foreheads: the bathers stand
begging the dark clouds, whose spinnakers race over the dunes,
for one more day. Here, the salt vine dries
as fast as it grows, and before you look, a year’s gone
with your shadow. The temperate homilies can’t
take root in sand; the cicada can fiddle his tunes
all year, if he likes, to the twig-brown ant.
The cloud passes high like a god staying his powers-
the pocked sand dries, umbrellas reopen like flowers-
but those who measure midsummer by a year’s trials
have felt a chill grip an ankle. They put down their books
to count the children crouched over pools, and the idolaters
angling themselves to the god’s face, like sundials.

XXVI

Certain things here are quietly American-
that chain-link fence dividing the absent roars
of the beach from the empty ball park, its holes
muttering the word umpire instead of empire;
the grey, metal light where an early pelican
coasts, with its engine off, over the pink fire
of a sea whose surface is as cold as Maine’s.
The light warms up the sides of white, eager Cessnas
parked at the airstrip under the freckling hills
of St. Thomas. The sheds, the brown, functional hanger,
are like those of the Occupation in the last war.
The night left a rank smell under the casuarinas,
the villas have fenced-off beaches where the natives walk,
illegal immigrants from unlucky islands
who envy the smallest polyp its right to work.
Here the wetback crab and the mollusc are citizens, and the leaves have green cards. Bulldozers jerk and gouge out a hill, but we all know that the dust is industrial and must be suffered. Soon-the sea’s corrugations are sheets of zinc soldered by the sun’s steady acetylene. This drizzle that falls now is American rain, stitching stars in the sand. My own corpuscles are changing as fast. I fear what the migrant envies: the starry pattern they make-the flag on the post office-the quality of the dirt, the fealty changing under my foot.

Glossary

_Midsummer XXV_

**terra-cotta:** unglazed, brownish-red pottery

**kiln:** furnace of oven for firing pottery

**gnats:** small, winged insects

**oleander:** evergreen shrub

**logwood:** a tree found in the Caribbean whose wood is used for dyeing and blossoms for honey

**Helen:** in Homer’s _Iliad_ the wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta whose free or forced elopement with Paris causes the war between the Greeks and Trojans.

**twine:** rope

**Ionia:** a region away from mainland Greece where early Greek literature and philosophy were principally developed

**cistern:** tank for storing water

**line:** piece of cord or rope e.g. fishing line

**knots:** intertwining of ropes

**Nike:** in Greek religion the female personification of victory, statues depict her with wings

_Midsummer XXVII_

**pelican:** large water bird with pouch in its bill for storing fish

**Maine:** a region in New England, U.S.A.

**freckling:** light brown coloured

**St. Thomas:** small U.S. island in the Caribbean

**Occupation:** occupation of France by German forces during the Second World War

Derek Walcott-II
Caribbean Poetry

Casuarinas: tree with needle-like, leafless branches
polyp: simple organism with tube shaped body
molluse: soft bodied, hard shelled animals like snails and oysters
green card: prerequisite for citizenship in the U.S.A.
corrugation: contract into wrinkles or folds
acetylene: flame used for soldering
fealty: a feudal tenant's loyalty to the lord

3.3.3 Analysis

These two numbered sections from Midsummer contain detailed descriptions of the landscape and illustrate Walcott's "contribution to the resurrection of 'landscape poetry'" (Jone 37). In an early poem addressed to Edward Thomas (1878-1917), whose work shows a keen observation of English pastoral scenes, Walcott had said "topography delineates its verse." This can just as easily be applied as a general characteristic of Walcott's oeuvre. Dr Johnson has described topographical poetry as "local poetry, of which the fundamental object is some particular landscape... with the addition of... historical retrospection or incidental meditation." Here topography becomes the point of entry for meditations on the poet's sources of creativity. "XIV" begins by describing the poet's acute consciousness of the process of ageing. The brownish red hue of terra-cotta acquired by firing it in a kiln becomes an image for the poet's aged and weather-beaten appearance. But this is not a source of grief since co-relates for this process can be found in nature: the ripples on the water are like "wrinkles," the pointed leaves of the oleander droop in the sun as sapped of energy as people and a branch of a tree shows signs of decay ("blurs with wild characters").

It appears as if the direction the poet's creativity will take in the future is also delineated by the topography, the waves make a "promise" to him. The mythological figure of Helen is described as the dominant icon of this creativity whose moment of inspiration is fleeting. The evanescence is accentuated by the words "transparent" and "weightless" used for this momentary vision of Helen vouchsafed to the artist. The apprenticeship for this moment has been long and hard, "forty years," for this is the midsummer of the poet's life. Playing on the dual meanings of the word "craft," as an acquired skill and a small boat, Walcott says he has "pulled" or laboured at it. The mention of Ionia, away from mainland Greece, indicates the awareness of the marginality of poetry from this region. Both landscape and seascape are evoked through the words "scorched grass" and "cistern," the unpolished rough hewn quality of the poet's work being a reflection of the "rusty islands" themselves. The pun on the word "lines" which have "knots" in them becomes ironical in the context of critics' valuation of Walcott's poetry as exhibiting a too-finished quality in its form and content. Besides meaning a rope or a cord and a line of poetry, "line" is also used in another sense of a fishing rod which "catches" nothing. The second time it is mentioned it is made into a compound word "horizon line," the horizon catches fire with the blaze of the setting sun, the glow symbolising poetic inspiration which is denied to him in the darkness of his room. The crumpled papers are evidence of the poet's labour at his craft which at certain times, like the moment described here, is uninspired by the muse. The gasp of the lizard and the metallic glare of the sea seen to blame the poet's seemingly futile efforts. Even when the door opens to let in the light it is not the brightness of victory over lack of poetic inspiration, "not Nike loosening her sandal," but a local girl entering the room.
This girl is personified as "the housemaid August" in section XXVI of *Midsummer* which is not discussed in this unit. In the next section XXVII the poet describes in detail the "quietly American" landscape of the island of St. Thomas. The "chain-link fence" which divides the sea from the ball park or the elemental from the civilizational is like the hedge rows dividing the "wild green landscape" from the "pastoral farms" in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey." The sense of supervision and control implied by the word "empire" is both contained and extended by "umpire." Only the rules of the game have altered, since what was once a playground for the empire builders has now become a resort for rich tourists whose means of relaxation here are the sea and sports. The continuation of colonialism as neo-colonialism involves only a slight shift signified by the change effected in empire by replacing the letter e with u. The Americanised way of life is perceived as mechanical, the pelican's gliding over the sea is like an airplane's with its "engine off." In the last few lines the bright glare of sunlight is referred to as the acetylene flame which is soldering the zinc-like rippled surface of the sea. The Americanisation of the landscape is reinforced by comparisons with places like Maine in the New England region of America. Small air crafts used by the tourists for commuting are linked to those used by the Germans for the "Occupation" of France in the Second World War. The imperialistic overtones are hard to miss specially in the lines where developmental work is seen as hazardous to the landscape from which hills are gouged out by bulldozers. The tourism industry and its detrimental impact on the Caribbean is a topic much discussed in literature. Trevor Rhone's play *Smile Orange* (1971) is a comic elaboration of this theme in contrast to Walcott's grim presentation of it in this poem.

The affluent class whose members pay for the rights and privileges of living or holidaying on St. Thomas jealously guard the natural surroundings from natives. There is a great disparity between the economies of the various Caribbean islands. Those who migrate from impoverished or "unlucky" islands seek employment in places like St. Thomas, lucky enough to be a part of America. A migrant's dream of citizenship to the U.S.A., fulfilled on acquiring a green card, is gently satirized by the poet when he says that the leaves on the island have green cards. The aggressiveness of the residents of this place in safeguarding their interests and their indifference to the social inequality is brought out in the poet's nomenclature of the citizens as "crabs," ever ready to attack and "molluscs," who retreat into their shells. The pattern of stars and stripes on the American flag is worked into the poem through the star-like indentation made on the earth when raindrops fall on it. The migrant's desire for belonging to a more affluent country is called "envy" and distanced from the poet's "fear" of it. When even the soil seems to lose its Caribbean identity in favour of an American one, the poet's anxiety, about the psychological changes effected due to the topographical changes involved in migration, becomes understandable.

3.3.4 Imagi/Nation

In making poetry out of his most private experiences, like the difficulties of creative output and his fears of migrancy, Walcott has used a long, expansive verse line. By his own admission it is "reflective, and contains a lot of indirection, and psychology, and self-analysis and connotation" (Walcott, "Thinking Poetry" 186). The free verse pattern with its irregular, unrhymed lines which has been followed in *Midsummer* seems best suited to express the autobiographical, introspective concerns. One facet of this introspection is themes for poetry to be written much later. In "XXVI" it appears to have been prophesied to the poet that he will write about Helen which in turn leads him to think of his Ionia. This prophecy is fulfilled, as it were, in the publication of *Omeros* in 1990 in which Helen is both a stunning negro woman as well as the poet's island St. Lucia. The creative imagination elucidates a Greek epic with St. Lucia, the nation, as its epistemological context.

This closely approximates to the migrants' fear of losing touch with the nation as a source of creativity expressed poignantly in "XXVII" as "the fealty changing."
“Midsummer LIV” there is an attempt to imprint the landscape that “made” the poet. The guilt as well as the necessity of movement to another land is conveyed in the line “the faith that I betrayed, or the faith that betrayed me.” I pointed out at the beginning of this unit that from the 1970s Walcott began spending part of every year in America and the other part in the Caribbean. The idea of straddling two cultures and the danger of prioritising the adopted over the native is an anxiety which besets the poet. The concluding lines of “LIV” express this by mentioning Joseph, Jacob’s son, who was forced to stay away from his homeland: “Ah Joseph, though no man ever dies in his own country, the grateful grass will grow thick from his heart” (CP 510). Nation thus emerges as the basis of identity in Walcott’s poetry and imagination as the migrant’s only means of reclaiming it.

3.4 FROM OMEROS

3.4.1 Cultural Translation

In relocating characters from Homer’s epic into a Caribbean setting Walcott effects a cultural translation which can be compared to James Joyce’s Ulysses. In his seminal essay on this topic Homi Bhabha uses translation as a metaphor, a rhetorical figure describing the "increasing internationalisation of cultural production." The performative terms of cultural engagement, the introduction of other incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition is seen by Bhabha as an act of cultural translation. He insists on the cannonising and sacralizing of the “transparent assumptions of this translation attempted from a migrant, hybrid perspective. I have shown how this is true of re-versions of canonical texts like Robinson Crusoe and The Tempest. Based on Walcott’s statements I think this can partially explain the author’s agenda in re-writing the Homeric epic in Omeros. The author’s views on literature, like his pronouncements on history, have come under attack in recent times when post-colonial writers are expected to “write back” with a vengeance. He has often commented on the similarities between Mediterranean and Caribbean cultures, the most obvious reason for this being that both regions are characterised by their proximity to the sea. He does, however, take issue with those who question his claim to the idea of Greece but accept unquestioningly Joyce’s right to it because of a shared European-ness:

As West Indians, we are closer in temperament to the Greeks than they are. . . . If I think of the classic in the Caribbean, I think of modern. I think of the freshness of Homer. I don’t think of the antiquity of Homer. I think of the immediacy of Homer. So if I feel this, yes: I understand islands, I understand sails, I understand wind, and I understand the weather. I understand that. I understand what he felt. It’s not that I’m trying to be Homeric. I am on an island in an inland ocean, so the correspondence leaps centuries . . . (Walcott, “Interview” 291).

Look closely at the above quotation, the word “understand” is reiterated no less than five times. So it would not be accurate to say that Walcott’s cultural translation of the Homeric epic is merely an attempt to appropriate and subvert the dominant literary tropes of a canonical Western work. Rather it can be seen as setting up “correspondences” between two cultures and their literatures. Walcott has often expressed his view about the cultural peripherality of the Greeks: “the Greeks were the niggers of the Mediterranean” (Walcott, “Thinking Poetry” 183). In the context of this it becomes important to see the relations and affiliations between the works and only then turn to the appropriations and subversions. In an essay on the wound trope in Omeros John Ramazani has stressed these very “interethnic connection[s]. The conclusion of this essay provides a qualification to postcolonial theory which sets up an opposition between the margin and the centre with its attendant idea of the
victim and the victimiser, “Appropriating a Western icon of suffering and refashioning a polysemous and multiparented trope, Walcott’s *Omeros*, together with the poetry of Goodison, Brathwaite, p’Bitek, and Ramanujan, champions a post colonial poetics of affliction that obliterates the distinction between “victim’s literature” and its supposed opposite” (Ramazani 415).

### 3.4.2 The Text

**From *Omeros***

**III**

“O-meros,” she laughed, “That’s what we call him in Greek,” stroking the small bust with its boxer’s broken nose, and I thought of Seven Seas sitting near the reek

of drying fishnets, listening to the shallows’ noise.

I said: “Homer and Virg are New England farmers, and the winged horse guards their gas-station, you’re right.”

I felt the foam head watching as I stroked an arm, as cold as its marble, then the shoulders in winter light in the studio attic. I said, “Omeros.”

And *O* was the conch-shell’s invocation, *mer* was both mother and sea in our Antillean patois, *os*, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes

and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore.

*Omeros* was the crunch of dry leaves, and the washes that echoed from a cave-mouth when the tide has ebbed.

The name stayed in my mouth. I saw how light was webbed on her Asian cheeks, defined her eyes with a black almond’s outline, as Antigone turned and said:

“I’m tired of America, it’s time for me to go back to Greece. I miss my islands.” I write, it returns—

the way she turned and shook out the black gust of hair.

I saw how the surf printed its lace in patterns on the shore of her neck, then the lowering shallows of silk swirled at her ankles, like surf without noise, and felt that another cold bust, not hers, but yours saw this with stone almonds for eyes, its broken nose turning away, as the rustling silk agrees.

But if it could read between the lines of her floor like a white-hot deck uncaulked by Antillean heat, to the shadows in its hold, its nostrils might flare

at the stench from manacled ankles, the coffled feet scraping like leaves, and perhaps the inculpable marble would have turned its white seeds away, to widen the bow of its mouth at the horror under her table, from the lyre of her armchair draped with its white chiton, to do what the past always does: suffer, and stare.

She lay calm as a port, and a cloud covered her with my shadow; then a prow with painted eyes slowly emerged from the fragrant rain of black hair.
And I heard a hollow moan exhaled from a vase, 
not for kings floundering in lances of rain; the prose 
of abrupt fishermen cursing over canoes.

Glossary

Omeros: Greek name for Homer, author of the epic poems the 
Iliad and the Odyssey

Seven Seas: the blind seer in Omeros, intended as the St. Lucian 
analogue of Homer who was said to be blind

shallows: submerged sandbank

winged horse: in Greek mythology Pegasus is a winged horse

sibilant: with a hissing sound

washes: agitated motion of water as in waves

Antigone: in Greek mythology one of the four children of 
Oedipus, the subject of a tragedy by Sophocles in 
which she disobeys her uncle Creon to bury the body 
of her brother Polynices

caulk: stop up the seams of a ship with oakum and melted 
pitch

hold: a cavity in a ship below the deck where cargo is 
stored

coffled: train of slaves fastened together

inculpable: not worthy of blame

seeds: generations

bow: fore-end of a ship

lyre: musical instrument

prow: projecting front part of a ship

floundering: move with great difficulty

lances: long spear used by horsemen

3.4.3 Analysis

This extract from Omeros delineates one of those moments in which the author 
makes his presence felt in the narrative. The narrator’s memory of a conversation 
about Homer, called Omeros in Greek, provides an entry point into the literary and 
social ancestry. A statue of Homer with a chipped nose reminds him of Seven Seas, 
the Homeric persona in this work. In a section preceding the one from which this 
extract has been taken Seven Seas’ daily rituals involving homely details like 
preparation of breakfast, waiting for the sunrise had already been detailed. The 
conjunction between the marble statue of Homer and Seven Seas had already been 
made there:
Except for one hand he sat as still as marble with his egg-white eyes, fingers recounting the past of another sea, measured by the stroking oars. (Omeros 14)

If Seven Seas is a localised Homer it is no wonder that New England farmers are called by the names of epic poets like Homer and Virgil or even that the winged horse becomes the sign for a local gas station or petrol pump. This is in keeping with the use of Homeric names for the St. Lucian villagers who are the “heroes” of this Caribbean epic. So Philoctetes becomes ‘Philoctete,” Achilles is named “Achille,” and Hector and Achille complete for the attentions of Helen, a local girl who has worked as a housemaid and a waitress.

Homer’s statue kept in the “studio attic” of the artist-narrator is invested with a life-like presence. The narrator feels it is “watching,” and later senses its “turning away.” The utterance of its name “Omeros” is linked to the sounds of nature like the “crunch” of dry leaves and the water moving in and out of cavernous openings in rocks. This can be seen as an acknowledged of the detailed descriptions of various aspects of nature which characterise the Homeric epics. The breaking of the word into its constituents to make it signify natural manifestations invests it with accretions of meaning, much like a neologism. Both the nurturing and the destructive potential of the sea is highlighted through the division of the word and the explanation of its parts. The invocation contained in the letter “O,” a feature of epic poetry connoting high classicism, is counterpoised with “Antillean patois” in which “mer” means both mother and sea. French creole, used in interpreting “os” as the grey bone, is posited as having at least equal standing with the language of the classical epics. The crashing of the surf on the shore is onomatopoeically reproduced in the pronunciation of Omeros.

Significantly even the woman who uttered the word has a Greek name, Antigone. And yet her appearance is Asian with big almond shaped eyes accentuated by the light filtering through a window in the studio attic. Links between the American islands where the narrator and his work are located and the Greek islands to which both the poet’s literary precursor Omeros and his muse Antigone belong are made when the latter expresses a wish to go back to her islands in Greece. That this is a memory of events long past is indicated by the phrase “I write, it returns.” The image of the woman with black hair, a lacy collar and a swirling silk dress is curiously conjoined with that of a ship sailing upon the seas. The sea waves beating at the ship are like the silk swirling at the ankles forming a picture observed by the all-knowing eyes of Homer who, the narrator says, would be shocked if he could “read between the lines.” The narrator taps ancestral memory to revive the horrors of the Middle Passage when slaves were bundled in the hold of the ship like cargo. The caulking of a ship’s floor hides its seams, an “uncaulked” surface or unsmoothened reality would not be a very attractive sight. The “Antillean heat” which uncaulks the deck of the ship is the poet’s own creativity laying bare the foundations of Caribbean society under the veneer of civilized sophistication symbolized by the “white chiton” covering the armchair. Omeros only observes this vision and turns away his head, it is up to the modern Omeros, the narrator himself, to interpret the past and put it to creative use in his “craft,” the pun linking poetry and ship or by extension the muse of his poetic inspiration who is also the vessel carrying memories underlying his poetry.

The collation of the two is extended towards the end of the extract. The cloud covering the vessel is also the poet consummating his union with the muse (the Asian looking woman with the Greek names) attesting to the varied cultural sources the narrator taps on for the distinctly Caribbean voice he achieves. The “hollow moan” he hears from the vase-like throat of his muse carries within it the suffering of the enslaved Africans as well as the frustration of their descendents, the fishermen,
bending over their canoes in stormy waters. Consciously distancing himself from the epic situations described by Homer in which heroic kings like Odysseus are shown as being caught in tempests at sea, the narrator calls his medium of expression “simple prose” as opposed to the epic verse of Homer.

3.4.4 Epic Re-vers[ion]

When asked about the metrical form of his epic, Walcott replied that it was “Roughly hexametrical with a terza rima form. It’s like a combination of a Homeric line and a Dantesque design” (“An Interview” 174). The hexameter is the metre of epic and didactic poetry consisting of six metra (a short sequence of syllables). Every line has a caesura or ‘cut’ which means that a word-end occurs regularly within a particular metron. The terza rima form consists of a series of interlocking tercets in which the second line of each one rhymes with the first and third lines of the succeeding one. It is Italian in origin and was first successfully used by Dante in *Divina Commedia*. Ramazani commenting on Walcott’s versification says, “Perhaps the most ambitious English-language poem of the decolonized Third World, Walcott’s *Omeros* fills hundreds of pages with rolling hexameters in terza rima . . .” (406). The word “rolling” in the above comment captures succinctly the sea-like rhythm of the tercets. You must also keep in mind that the author does not strictly adhere to these metrical regulations. Let me give you an example from the passage just analysed:

I felt the foam head watching as I stroked an arm, as cold as marble, then the shoulders in winter light in the studio attic. I said, “Omeros,”

and O was the conch-shell’s invocation, mer was both mother and sea in our Antillean patois, os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes

The rhyme scheme of the two tercets given above is not aba, bcb as demanded by the terza rima, it is rather aba, aca. Also the third line being shorter than the others is not hexametrical. Other innovations include ending many of the lines with words containing the “s” sound which reproduces the sound of the sea within the structure of the poem. Even the relatively conventional versification contains strategic revisions which make them more reflective of the Caribbean ethos evoked in the work.

3.5. LET US SUM UP

By now you should be able to comprehend the differences between Walcott’s work till the seventies and the poetry he wrote in the eighties and nineties. I have analysed three pieces from his later work which are varied in terms of their form and content. “The Spoiler’s Return,” a dramatic monologue, satirically comments on the socio-economic situation in Trinidad. The numbered passages from *Midsummer* are introspections in free verse capturing an exile’s sensibility. The extract from *Omeros* in hexametrical terza rima stresses both the literary and social heritage of the narrator, or the poetic persona in the epic. Walcott’s later poetry is characterised by woman as an image of poetic inspiration whether it is the maid in the *Midsummer* passages or Antigone in *Omeros*. In this Walcott adheres to stereotypes of archetypal male representations of women which can be effectively analysed from a feminist perspective.

3.6 QUESTIONS

Q.1 Examine the impact of popular cultural forms like the calypso on Walcott’s poetry.

Q.2 Discuss any two innovations in rhyme you find in Walcott’s poems.
Q.3 Analyse the representation of women in "Midsummer XXVI" and the extract from *Omeros* given in this unit.

### 3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

**Primary Material**


**Secondary Material**


**Theoretical Material**

