UNIT 10: DEREK WALCOTT: "THE ANTILLES: FRAGMENTS OF EPIC MEMORY"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- gain an idea on the life and works of Derek Walcott
- read the Nobel Speech in terms of its various important aspects
- make a list of the important themes implicit in his Nobel Speech
- explain the style and language of Walcott
- appreciate Walcott as one of the most significant poets of the 20th century

10.2 INTRODUCTION

The present unit deals with one of the most significant Nobel Speeches—"The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory" delivered by Derek Walcott who

received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992. Walcott is one of the greatest poets in world literature of contemporary times. He grew up in the relatively isolated island of Saint Lucia in the Caribbean, moved to Trinidad in his twenties, and now spends much of his time in the USA teaching literature and creative writing at Boston University. Such a background has added richness to his writings. He has deep roots in his native culture of the Caribbean, but at the same time, he beautifully asserts his place within the English-speaking literary tradition. He was awarded the Nobel for Literature, after the publication of his most ambitious and celebrated epic poem *Omeros* that draws on the Homeric tradition and contextualise the same in the voices and lives of the people of the Caribbean. His experience of living in two cultures has powerfully influenced his works, and in the Nobel speech that you will be studying in this unit, Walcott deals specifically with this experience to showcase his upbringing as a poet who has strong roots in the history of his own native island and its people.

10.3 DEREK WALCOTT: LIFE AND WORKS

Derek Alton Walcott was born on January 23, 1930 to Warwick and Alix Walcott in **Castries** on the island of Saint Lucia, a former British colony in the West Indies. His family is of African and European origin which reflects the complex colonial history of the island in which he was born and which he explores as a poet. His mother was a teacher and a lover of arts, while his father was a painter and poet. After the death of his father, when he was just 31, the twins Derek and Roderick were born. Walcott's family was part of a minority Methodist community, who felt overshadowed by the dominant Catholic culture of the island established during French colonial rule. Thus, the experience of growing up in a colony had had a strong influence on Walcott's later life and works. He started writing since he was a young boy and published his first collection as *25 Poems*, which he distributed on street corners. A born poet and playwright Walcott was also a painter like his father.



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Castries is twenty-seven miles long and fourteen miles wide, small island compared to Trinidad or Jamaica. Before 1963, the island's main product was sugar, with bananas gradually increasing in importance. In Walcott's childhood, Castries Harbour served as a coaling station, though its coal trade had been declining since the 1920s.

Walcott finished his studies at St. Mary's in 1947. At that time, St. Lucia was allotted one Island Scholarship per year, to send its best student to Oxford or Cambridge. Walcott recalls that he "had failed to win the Island Scholarship because of [his] poor math", and did not continue his education until 1950 when he received a Colonial Development and Welfare Scholarship following which he entered the University of the West Indies, Jamaica, as a student of Liberal Arts. During the interim, he served as assistant master at St. Mary's and continued to work on his poetry and painting. Walcott's attending a newly-opened University of the West Indies was very significant, allowing him to receive his education within the Caribbean. The university was both a product and an inculcator of West Indian cultural nationalism. After graduation, Walcott moved to Trinidad in 1953, where he became a critic, teacher and journalist. There, he also founded the Trinidad Theatre Workshop in 1959.

Three historical events heavily influenced St. Lucian life during Walcott's adolescence. The first was World War II, which was more directly felt in the Caribbean. The second major event was the planning for Independence and Federation of the British West Indies by the end of the 1940s. With the end of the War, England began to dismantle its empire, starting with the Independence of India in 1947. Subsequently, the movement for West Indian unification and Independence reached its climax. The last of the three events framing Walcott's youth and rendering an immediate impact on the emerging poet was perhaps the greatest of all. On June 19, 1948, a fire destroyed about four-fifths of Castries. Although "there was no loss of life in the fire, more than 800 families comprising a total of nearly two thousand people became

homeless. People of different classes were thrown together by necessity". In his early poem, "A City's Death by Fire," Walcott called the fire a "hot gospeller" that "levelled all but the churched sky", the levelling was social as well, striking at the class structure as well as the infrastructure of the city.

Walcott's major success as a writer came with the poetry collection *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960* (1962) which both celebrates the Caribbean and its history. The same themes overshadow nearly all his later poetry collections—*Tiepolo's Hound* (2000), *The Prodigal* (2004), *Selected Poems* (edited by Edward Baugh, 2007) and *White Egrets* (2010) etc. However, critics point to his *Omeros* (1990), an epic poem reimagining the Trojan War as a Caribbean fishermen's fight, as Walcott's major achievement. The book is "an effort to touch every aspect of Caribbean experience," according to critic O'Brien who also calls the poem an 'Ars Poetica' that deals with "art itself—its meaning and importance and the nature of an artistic vocation." Walcott's wide reading in modernist literature, as well as the influences of Ezra Pound, James Joyce, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and Stephen Spender is obvious in his collections like *25 Poems* (1948) and *Epitaph for the Young* (1949), both written before he left St. Lucia to attend the University of the West Indies in 1950. As St. Lucian journalist George Odlum remarked, "it is in itself surprising that Walcott was aware of the movements taking place in the mainstream of 20th century European literature at a time when most of his colleagues in the sixth form of St. Mary's College…were desperately grappling with 19th Century romanticism." While at St. Mary's, Walcott also wrote plays, two of the scripts survived in the collection of Errol Hill, a playwright and director who has known Walcott from his arrival at the university in Jamaica in 1950s.



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Walcott notes of growing up in West Indian culture: "What we were deprived of was also our privilege. There was a great joy in making a world that so far, up to then, had been undefined...My generation of West Indian writers has felt such

a powerful elation at having the privilege of writing about places and people for the first time and, simultaneously, having behind them the tradition of knowing how well it can be done—by a Defoe, a Dickens, a Richardson."

Later, Walcott was hired as a teacher by Boston University, where he also founded the Boston Playwrights' Theatre in 1981. Subsequently, he has been constantly travelling in-between US and Saint Lucia. Walcott is also a renowned playwright. In 1971, he won an Obie Award for his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, which *The New Yorker* described as "a poem in dramatic form." Walcott's plays generally treat aspects of the West Indian colonial experience, and drawing upon various forms such as the fable, allegory, folk and morality play. In 1992, he won the prestigious Nobel Prize in Literature for his work *Omeros*. The Nobel committee depicted his work as "a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment." In addition to his Nobel Prize, Walcott's honours include a MacArthur Foundation "genius" award, a Royal Society of Literature Award, and, the Queen's Medal for Poetry. He is an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. He is also a Professor of Poetry at Essex University.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. From where did Walcott receive inspiration to become a writer? What is his first published work?

Q2. Why is the last of the three events the most significant in shaping Walcott's adolescent experience?

Q3. Name some of Walcott's poetry collections.

Q4. What are the two Theatre houses that Walcott built?

Q5. What did the Nobel Committee say about Walcott's work *Omeros*?

10.4 EXPLANATION OF THE SPEECH

Derek Walcott begins his Nobel Speech, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," in Felicity—a village in Trinidad on the edge of the Caroni plain. The village Felicity still grows sugar as indentured cane cutters were brought here after **Emancipation**. Thus, the small population of Felicity is East Indian. In the afternoon of the day on which he visited the village, with friends from America, he saw the happy faces of the Indians along the road as next Saturday afternoon *Ramleela* would be performed, and the costumed actors from the village were assembling on a field strung with different-coloured flags. Walcott also writes that under an open-shed on the edge of the field, there were two huge armatures of bamboo that looked like immense cages. They were parts of the body of a God, His calves or thighs, which, fitted and reared, would make a gigantic effigy. This effigy would be burnt as a conclusion to the epic. The ritual of burning is annually repeated, the point of the destruction being renewal through fire. To Walcott, 'God' is the shrug that embodies the African and Asian Diasporas. But the interesting point is that nobody in Trinidad knew any more than he did about Rama, Kali, Shiva, Vishnu, apart from the Indians. And the writer misread *Ramleela* to be a theatre of the people, while in fact it was a faith of the people.



LET US KNOW

Emancipation implies an effort to procure economic and social rights, political rights, or equality for a specifically disenfranchised group. In the present and former British West Indies islands the holiday Emancipation Day is celebrated to mark the end of the Atlantic Slave Trade.



Diaspora: the dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland.

In his Speech, Walcott beautifully plays with the name "Felicity" with all its resonances and colonial history, but not without engagement with its African and Indian **Diaspora,** memory, actors, mythologies. He sees the landscape as peopled by a series of actors, performing a variety of roles from various epics. But more than anything else, it is the re-creation and joy in the process that

marks the Caribbean as what it is. This is what Walcott celebrates. Thus, for him, "Visual surprise is natural in the Caribbean; it comes with the landscape, and faced with its beauty, the sigh of History dissolves." Felicity thus, becomes his metaphor of a new Caribbean creation. Then Walcott beautifully refers to Antillean arts through the metaphor of broken vase. The totality of the Antillean arts is like the gathering of the broken pieces of the vase—the African and Asiatic traditions. Thus, in his views "Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent. And this is the exact process of the making of poetry, or what should be called not its "making" but its remaking." He further states that Poetry combines the natural and the marmoreal; the past and the present, if the past is the sculpture and the present the beads of dew or rain on the forehead of the past.

Subsequently, Walcott describes his experience of the Antillean language and states that deprived of their original language, the captured and **indentured** tribes create their own, accreting and secreting fragments of an old epic vocabulary, from Asia and Africa, and an ancestral and ecstatic rhythm in the blood that cannot be subdued by slavery or indenture. The original language dissolves into the process of re-creation like the fog trying to cross an ocean, but this process of recreation, of finding new metaphors, is the same process that the poet faces every day making his own tools like Crusoe, assembling nouns from necessity, from Felicity, even renaming himself. Walcott sends out the message to his readers that this is the basis of the Antillean experience, this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a huge tribal vocabulary, these partially remembered customs, and they are not decayed but continuously getting enriched in the works of the writers.



Indentured: a contract binding one party into the service of another for a specified term.

Then, Walcott makes some important comments on the act of writing about the Caribbean as well as the status of Caribbean poetry which deals mostly with the impact of colonial history that destroys originality, because the colonisers carried with them the infection of their own malaise, and the colonial writers and travellers reduced even the Caribbean landscape to melancholia and self-contempt. Moreover, even an English novelist like Graham Greene,

looked at the Caribbean with elegiac pathos, a prolonged sadness. According to Walcott, the mood is understandable, but there is something alien and ultimately wrong in the way such sadness as described by the English, French, or the writers of Walcott's ilk. It relates to a misunderstanding of the light and the people on whom the light falls. These writers describe the ambitions of their unfinished cities, but the Caribbean city may conclude just at that point where it is satisfied with its own scale, just as Caribbean culture is not evolving but already shaped. Its proportions are not to be measured by the traveller or the exile, but by its own citizenry and architecture.

After this, Walcott's speech makes a reference to the book *At Last* written by the Victorian traveller Charles Kingsley. This is one of the first Caribbean books where according to Walcott who feels that history got recognized, "at last". This early book admitted the Antillean landscape and its figures into English literature. Similarly, Alexis Saint-Leger, better known as Saint John Perse, was the first Antillean to win a prize for poetry. But the point is that a "Caribbean genius is condemned to contradict itself", and there lies the problem. For example, to celebrate Perse may also be to celebrate the old plantation system, the **mulatto** servants and so on. But Walcott wonders if that really needs to be so remarkable. Because, he feels that the history of the worldis a record of intertribal **lacerations**, of ethnic cleansings.



Mulatto: an offspring of a black and a white parent.

Laceration: intertribal distress.

In Walcott's view, a native Caribbean novelist then is absolutely at home in the Caribbean, able to navigate a Trinidad with ease, as a St. Lucia. He sees in that epic recognition of the "sea as history" the meaning of the Caribbean but also its ongoing new histories as exemplified by writers from C. L. R. James to Selvon, St. Jean Perse of Guadeloupe and Cesaire of Martinique and Jean Rhys of Dominica etc. But, the Caribbean poet is lucky to have this opportunity to celebrate and mark a culture in the making, because: "There is a force of exultation, a celebration of luck, when a writer finds himself a witness to the early morning of a culture that is defining itself, branch by branch, leaf by leaf, in that self-defining dawn, which is why, especially at the edge of the sea, it is good to make a ritual of the sunrise."It is not that History is obliterated. History is present in Antillean geography, in the vegetation itself.

Since boyhood, Walcott has been reading about the sighs of the people, the butchery of its aborigines, or the lances of cane as a green prison where indentured Asians—the ancestors of Felicity are still serving time. Most of these people are illiterate; they do not read, they are there to be read, and if they are properly read, they create their own literature.

Thus, in this Nobel Speech, Walcott presents his evaluative description about poetry, history and evolutionary literature.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q6: What is the significance of the term Broken Vase?

Q7: How does Walcott comment on Antillean language?

Q8: What, according to Walcott, is the problem with Caribbean poetry?

Q9: Why is Charles Kingsley's book *At Last* important for Walcott?

Q10: Why, according to Walcott, is a Caribbean poet lucky?

Q11: What does Walcott say about the Caribbean people and their relation to literary works?

Q12: Make a list of the important aspects of the Nobel Speech delivered by Derek Walcott?

10.5 MAJOR THEMES

Based on the text of Walcott's Nobel Speech, the following can be seen as the important themes.

Meaning of Poetry:

Walcott in his Nobel Speech provides interesting insights into his own ideas of Poetry. Poetry, according to him, must seem as fresh as the raindrops on a statue's brow, and should combine the natural and the marmoreal. Poetry

conjugates both past and present—the past being the sculpture, and the present the beads of dew or rain on the forehead of the past. The process of poetry is one of excavation and self-discovery, and the poet needs to dig out the buried language with the help of his own vocabulary, because, it is the individual voice which shapes its own accent, vocabulary and melody in defiance of an imperial concept of language–the language of Ozymandias, libraries and dictionaries, law courts and critics, and churches, universities, political dogma, the diction of institutions and so on. Poetry is an island that breaks away from the main.

The Antillean Linguistic Experience:

In his Speech, Walcott makes an interesting reference to the Antillean Linguistic experience. Deprived of their own country and language, the captured and indentured tribes in the Caribbean create their own vocabulary derived from Asia and Africa. Their feelings cannot be subdued by slavery or indenture. Their original language dissolves from the exhaustion of distance like fog trying to cross an ocean. They start the process of renaming, of finding new metaphors. This is the same process that the poet faces every morning of his working day, making his own tools like Crusoe, assembling nouns from necessity, from Felicity, even renaming himself. The stripped man is driven back to that self-astonishing, elemental force, his mind. That is the basis of the Antillean experience, this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a huge tribal vocabulary, these partially remembered customs, and they are not decayed but strong. Walcott considers such a background to be a new world, a writer's heaven.

Writing Against General Perceptions:

Walcott in his speech also hints at the impact of colonialism on the Caribbean people. He makes some important remarks on the act of writing about the Caribbean as well as the status of Caribbean poetry which deals mostly with the impact of colonial history that destroys originality as the colonisers carried with them the infection of their own malaise, and the colonial

writers and travellers reduced even the Caribbean landscape to melancholia and self-contempt. Walcott is worried about the fact that every new endeavour by a Caribbean author is belittled as imitation. There is a conviction that since History is based on achievement, and since the history of the Antilles was so genetically corrupt, so depressing in its cycles of massacres, slavery, and indenture; a culture was inconceivable and nothing could ever be created in those ramshackle ports, the feudal sugar estates. Walcott however makes a reference to the book *At Last* written by the Victorian traveller Charles Kingsley, which is one of the early books to admit the Antillean landscape and its figures into English literature. The pity is that the Antillean archipelago is there to be written about but by compassionate and beguiled outsiders like Walcott himself. But a traveller cannot love, since love is stasis and travel is motion. If he returns to what he loved in a landscape and stays there, he is no longer a traveller but in stasis and concentration, the lover of that particular part of earth, a native. Thus, one need not write about the Caribbean like a tourist would write. Instead, one should write like an insider, like a native who loves his own people and country.

Walcott's Views on History:

Walcott's comment on Poetry and History is like this:"For every poet it is always morning in the world. History a forgotten, insomniac night; History and elemental awe are always our early beginning, because the fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world, in spite of History." Walcott is interested in history not History, the history of lives lived in this landscape, not the History of ruins. Walcott conceives the Antilles as a site of multiple and inextricable histories of victimization and cruelty, histories deposited not only in its landscape and its languages but even in his body. From the perspective of identity, a Caribbean writer metaphorically enacts inter ethnic connections to falsify the historical specificity of their people's experience. But for Walcott, there is no need for such falsification as that would lie in an aesthetic separatism blind to the culturally webbed history of the Caribbean, of his ancestors, and of his imagination, in a viewpoint hostile to the cross-racial and cross-historical identifications the New World offers.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q13: What is the process of poetry, according to Walcott?

Q14: State the nature of the Antillean Linguistic Experience?

Q15: How does Walcott view the idea of Antillean history?

Q16: How, according to Walcott, should be the nature of a Caribbean writer?

10.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Derek Walcott is well-known for his technical control, erudition, and the portrayal of large canvases. According to poet-critic Sean O'Brien, Walcott is "one of the handful of poets currently at work in English who are capable of making a convincing attempt to write an epic... His work is conceived on an oceanic scale and one of its fundamental concerns is to give an account of the simultaneous unity and division created by the ocean and by human dealings with it." Similarly, in his *The New Yorker* review Adam Kirsch highly praised Walcott's oeuvre, describing his style in the following manner: "By combining the grammar of vision with the freedom of metaphor, Walcott produces a beautiful style that is also a philosophical style. People perceive the world on dual channels, Walcott's verse suggests, through the senses and through the mind, and each is constantly seeping into the other." Such remarks help us to examine the poetic style of Walcott.

However, Walcott's prose style too seems to be very unique which can be experienced while reading his Nobel Speech. His hometown had had a deep influence on him, which is reflected in his works as well. Implications of his experience of growing up on an island is seen in many of his works—be it poetry, plays or essays. He is much faithful to his childhood experience while writing in the present. The resonance and musicality in Walcott have been the other important stylistic components of Walcott's prose writing. Recurring

themes of loss, survival, and remembrance are present in his prose writings, as can be seen in the Speech. Besides, the desire to keep faith with reality, to reconstruct his past and his people as they are/were, articulates beautifully his personal pain and melancholy through an engagement with history and myth, the festival celebrations in the streets.



10.7 LET US SUM UP

In the above sections of the unit you have learnt that Derek Walcott is an important Caribbean poet who received the prestigious Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992. He grew up in the relatively isolated island of Saint Lucia in the Caribbean, moved to Trinidad in his twenties, and now spends much of his time in the USA teaching literature and creative writing at Boston University. In his Nobel Speech, Walcott presents his evaluative description about Caribbean history and its evolutionary literature. Experiences during the author's visit to the village Felicity and seeing "Ramleela", the dramatization of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*; evaluation of the cultural traditions associated with performing epic drama; felicity of epical customs; discussion of the Antillean art, culture, and literature; features of poetry as a method of self-discovery; evaluation of the Antillean art as the restoration of shattered histories are some of the most important aspects of the Speech. However, Felicity is the name of the small village in Trinidad to which Walcott returns throughout the entire Nobel Speech as it carries both the irony and truth of names.



10.8 FURTHER READING

1. Bloom, Harold. (2003). *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Derek Walcott.* Chelsea House Publishers.

2. Edward, Bough. (2006). *Derek Walcott.* UK: Cambridge University Press.

Web Resources:

http://www.enotes.com/topics/derek-walcott/critical-essays/walcott-derek-vol-160 *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1991-1995*, Editor Sture Allén, *World Scientific Publishing Co*., Singapore, 1997

http://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/derek-walcott-110.php

Nobel prise.org



10.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: The experience of growing up in a colonised island had had a strong influence on Walcott's later life as a writer. His first published collection is *25 Poems*, which he distributed on street corners.

Ans to Q No 2: Because, the fire that took place on June 19, 1948, destroyed about four-fifths of Castries, and a huge number of people became homeless. As the people of different classes were thrown together by necessity, Walcott called the fire a "hot gospeller" that "levelled all".

Ans to Q No 3: *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960* (1962), *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000), *The Prodigal* (2004), *Selected Poems* (edited by Edward Baugh, 2007), and *White Egrets* (2010).

Ans to Q No 4: Trinidad Theatre Workshop in 1959 and Boston Playwrights' Theatre in 1981.

Ans to Q No 5: The Nobel committee stated *Omeros* as "a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment."

Ans to Q No 6: Derek Walcott refers to the Antillean arts through the metaphor of a broken vase. The totality of the Antillean arts, according to the poet is like the gathering of the broken pieces of the vase—the African and Asiatic traditions.

Ans to Q No 7: In Antilles, deprived of their original language, the captured and indentured tribes create their own language derived from both Asia and Africa. The original language dissolves in the process of re-creation which is the same process that the poet faces every day.

Ans to Q No 8: According to Walcott, Caribbean poetry deals mostly with the impact of colonial history that destroys originality, because the colonisers carried with them the infection of their own malaise. Consequently, the colonial writers and travellers reduced the Caribbean landscape to melancholia and self-contempt.

Ans to Q No 9: Charles Kingsley's book *At Last* is important because, this is one of the first Caribbean books that helped in the recognition of the history of the Caribbean.

Ans to Q No 10: Because, "There is a force of exultation, a celebration of luck, when a writer finds himself a witness to the early morning of a culture that is defining itself, branch by branch, leaf by leaf, in that self-defining dawn, which is why, especially at the edge of the sea, it is good to make a ritual of the sunrise."

Ans to Q No 11: Walcott has been reading about the sighs of the Caribbean people, the butchery of its aborigines, or the lances of cane as a green prison where the ancestors of Felicity are still serving time. Most of these people are illiterate; they do not read, they are there to be read, and if they are properly read, they create their own literature.

Ans to Q No 12: The most important aspects of the Speech are—experiences during the author's visit to the village Felicity and seeing "Ramleela", the dramatization of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*; evaluation of the cultural traditions associated with performing epic drama; felicity of epical customs; discussion of the Antillean art, culture, and literature; features of poetry as a method of self-discovery; evaluation of the Antillean art as the restoration of shattered histories.

Ans to Q No 13: The process of poetry is one of excavation and self-discovery, and the poet needs to dig out the buried language with the help of his own vocabulary.

Ans to Q No 14: Deprived of their own country and language, the captured and indentured tribes in the Caribbean create their own vocabulary derived from Asia and Africa. Their original language dissolves into the new; they start the process of renaming, of finding new metaphors. That is the basis of the Antillean Linguistic experience.

Ans to Q No 15: Walcott is interested in history not History, the history of lives lived in this landscape, not the History of ruins. Walcott conceives the Antilles as a site of multiple and inextricable histories of victimization and cruelty, histories deposited not only in its landscape and its languages but even in his body.

Ans to Q No 16: The writer need not write about the Caribbean like a tourist would write. Instead, he/she should write like an insider, like a native who loves his own people and country.



10.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1: Write an account of Walcott's upbringing as a writer with particular focus on his life history.

Q2: Which are the three important events that influenced and shaped Walcott's career as a writer? Explain.

Q3: Why does Walcott consider himself lucky to be a Caribbean poet? Discuss.

Q4: Discuss the important aspects of Derek Walcott's Nobel Speech with special reference to the important themes.

Q5: "One need not write about the Caribbean like a tourist would write." Discuss.

Q6: Narrate in your own words, the significance of Derek Walcott's Nobel Speech.

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