

*Joyce, Walcott, and the Need  
for Homecoming Portrayed  
through Homeric Epics*

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"'This is the same story,' he says. 'This is 'The Odyssey'. Once I began to adapt it, I realized how underneath all that stuff about the gods and the threats and the Cyclops, this man is simply trying to get home to Ithaca, and is terrified of never getting there. It's something we all have -- the terror of never getting home.'" —Washington Post<sup>1</sup>.

**Introduction**

James Joyce's *Ulysses* has long inspired readers and authors alike as each group seeks to understand both in-

dividual and collective struggles, those of an ordinary and an extraordinary nature. In part, what makes *Ulysses* unique is that it is itself inspired by very real past and past literary works, leaving readers to shape and mould what is left to us in the form of the novel. Possessing unique literary moves and methods alongside strangely inviting content, *Ulysses* does what few other texts can; it undeniably resembles that of *The Odyssey* while simultaneously working to tell the tale of the common Irish citizen, all through the lens of a man who struggles to support the political and cultural shifts taking place in his home country. While *Ulysses* demonstrates a willingness to break the mould and methods of writing, storytelling, and literature, it also invites, as it employs, a unique reading of history, as well as history's need to tell present and future tales. Less than a century after Joyce's finished work was made available to the public, Derek Walcott, long recognized for his literary achievements in stunningly pragmatic poetry, shared his own reimagined tale of homecoming: *Omeros*. This text has been heralded as a beautiful reimagining of both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, bringing the two epics together to combine with the colorful culture of St. Lucia, an island whose complex history can be envisioned through the lens of the Homeric epic. Merely a few years later, Walcott once again reimagined *The Odyssey* in its original form; as a play, the contemporary adaptation titled *The Odyssey: A Stage Play* surprisingly encompassed the heart of *The Odyssey* while concurrently driving itself away from the style and setting, centering itself on the shores of St. Lucia to tell

a story of homecoming from the Caribbean. Walcott has been quoted as being inspired by Joyce and other Irish authors (Hirsch and Walcott 1979, 288) claiming “[t]hey were the niggers of Britain” (288) and communicated the suffering and sensibility of a people that few can convey solely through literature.

While it would be facile to simply unpack the ways in which Walcott too examines the human fear of "never getting home" and how Joyce inspires a unique resurgence in telling the stories of homecoming, both epic and ordinary, I feel that would be a disservice to both authors; to only examine the common thread of the everyday would share the hope and intent of the "everyday epic" that is often attributed to Joyce with none of the inspired enthusiasm that both Joyce's and Walcott's works deserve. My goal is to examine Walcott's *The Odyssey: A Stage Play* and scenes from *Omeros* that illustrate not just an inspired and intentional shift toward recreating the Homeric epic as a postcolonial text, but further demonstrate how Joyce gave postcolonial writers like Walcott an opportunity to reimagine *The Odyssey* and create subversive rewritings for other authors, namely postcolonial writers seeking a new canvas on which to paint their stories and the stories of their people and communities. One beautiful thing about writing about someone like Walcott is that we have access to interviews and personal writings. Thanks to the back-breaking work of interviewers and scholars lucky enough to have met and interviewed Walcott, we have access to moments where

Walcott admits he was inspired by Joyce and other Irish writers (288). While there is no need to analyze passages and scenes to prove what has been stated by the author himself, I intend to point to what his work, as inspired by Joyce, has given readers in the form of an opportunity, both to read this work as something that speaks to their own experiences, and to rewrite the work in such a way as it can influence their reading and writing processes. My hope is to demonstrate the ambition that he has left all writers, pointing to the good that can come of reading Joyce's *Ulysses* as something that can inspire creativity in postcolonial writings, a genre that is experiencing an epic all its own.

### **Joyce's Depiction of *The Odyssey***

James Joyce's *Ulysses* blends the qualities of the Homeric epic with the heart of the Irishness he sought to reject. Using characters and the physical landscape to tell a story, *Ulysses* can be easily perceived as a postcolonial text, and yet there is so much more to uncover as to how we can read this. It is important to clarify that this text does not demand that it be read alongside or in comparison to another work, namely a postcolonial one; the relationship between Joyce's interpretation and reimagining of *The Odyssey* as *Ulysses* points readers to poignant postcolonial themes that speak volumes on their own. One of the ways in which it does this is through the representation and use of memory; in *Joyce's Book of Memory: The Mnemotechnic of Ulysses*, John Rickard argues that "[j]ust as

no events or thoughts escape the mind but rather ‘abide there and wait,’ Joyce’s text in *Ulysses* represents a memory that...retains all that has happened in the course of the novel as well as wider cultural associations” (Rickard 1999, 127). I would take this one step further and not only suggest that Joyce threads memories throughout the text, expecting readers to invoke their own memory of the reading, but that Joyce himself wrote from a place of memory by incorporating *The Odyssey* as the backdrop for this text, using his own memory of his interpretations to set the scene while simultaneously using a work that embodies the drive that memory inspires. Though Joyce was known for writing “for” those in Ireland, he used the landscape of Ireland to retell the ancient tale of *The Odyssey* in a modernist way that attempts to speak to the Irish experience through a postcolonial lens. In *Semicolonial Joyce*, editors Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes explain that they have employed the term “semi-colonial” as the focal point of their work as

“signal[ing] [their] sense of a partial fit between this set of approaches and Joyce’s writing. Rather than claiming that the issues raised and models offered by postcolonial studies can illuminate every element of Joyce’s works or supersede other interpretive or theoretical frameworks, we believe that it is precisely from the limited compatibility between them that the most interesting lessons can be drawn – for both readers of Joyce and theorists of colonialism” (Attridge and Howes 2000, 3).

What is important is, rather than honing in on the use of this term as immediately definitive of Joyce's or Walcott's work, it speaks to the conversations surrounding their work, pointing to an inability or unwillingness in readers and scholars to solely mark Joyce's texts as "postcolonial." Here Walcott holds his own space as a writer because his works also fit the mould of semicolonial works. While Attridge and Howes are not entirely wrong in their suggestions about Joyce's work, my own research is pointing to the ways in which Walcott was inspired by Joyce, who in turn was inspired by Homer's epics as a way to tell a modern tale.

When we think of contemporary authors such as Derek Walcott and how the narrative of the Irish peoples speaks to similar issues of oppression, discrimination, and neglect that have been felt by countless other groups, we recognize that each is seeking a literary form that made room for their conversations and respective stories. *Ulysses* simultaneously brought to life the resurgence of the Homeric epic and made a space for works like Walcott's. While much of *Ulysses* can be interpreted as speaking on behalf of the everyday Irish person, this work will specifically examine sections of "Cyclops" that demonstrate a postcolonial reading while arguably speaking to similar moments in some of Walcott's works. The goal is to demonstrate not only the ability of Joyce's work to influence these other works, or even to demonstrate

how Walcott would have read Joyce's work, but to show what a probable reading inspired, created, and ultimately led to texts written by Walcott that closely resemble both Joyce's work and the heart of the Homeric epic. While my intent is not to suggest that Walcott was "best" at reimagining the epic, I would argue that there is something to be said for the postcoloniality of these works and how they might more so directly correlate with the Homeric epic in ways that Joyce's work was unable or unwilling to.

In *Ulysses*, "Cyclops," much like the other chapters, appears to have a "job" of its own. To tell a story that stands alone while at the same time conveying the message of the story as a whole is not unique to Joyce, and yet his approach leaves readers taken aback. This chapter expounds on the conflicting views we have seen on Irish nationalism and specifically how Leopold Bloom is situated within this space and as part of these conversations. While the entirety of this chapter offers insight into the lens through which Joyce viewed Bloom, as well as possible postcolonial themes he inserted, to effectively examine this alongside Walcott's other works I find it is important to only examine a single moment in each work in the hopes of identifying how each text as a whole demonstrates similar methods of reading Joyce, and therefore points to specifically similar moments that share the sentiments of postcoloniality and likely inspired such a reading.

While Bloom has spent much of his time in the bar waiting for Cunningham, his role seems particularly shifted toward fitting the role of Odysseus pinned against the citizen that fits the mould of Polyphemus. As their discussions of capital punishment and religion escalate far beyond idle chit-chat, the citizen becomes enraged at Bloom. This escalation moves throughout the chapter and finally comes to a head during the last few pages when Bloom has had enough after the citizen mocks him for his Jewishness and jokingly suggests that Bloom would be the “new Messiah for Ireland,” (Joyce 1986, 277, line 1642) touting the line “[t]hree cheers for Israel!” (280, line 1791). As he follows him out of the pub the scene unfolds into one that most closely speaks to the altercation between Homer’s Polyphemus and Odysseus:

Mendelssohn was a jew and Karl Marx and Mercadante and Spinoza.

And the Saviour was a jew and his father was a jew.  
Your God.

--He had no father, says Martin. That'll do now.  
Drive ahead.

--Whose God? Says the citizen.

--Well, his uncle was a Jew, says he. Your God was a Jew. Christ was a Jew like me.

Gob, the citizen made a plunge back into the shop.  
By Jesus, says he, I'll brain that bloody Jew man for using the holy name.

By Jesus, I'll crucify him so I will. Give us that biscuit box here. (280, lines 1804-1812)

As Bloom is pictured speaking, pushing back on the citizen's argument, he calls forth examples of Jewish individuals who were involved in the arts and philosophy as a way to indicate their worth, which is interesting given what we quickly learned about the citizen and that this was likely lost on him. Notably, Bloom is sharing the truth with the citizen and onlookers in much the same way that Odysseus did, waiting to be far enough away (and quite able to ignore the jabs) and then shouts his true name at the Cyclops, enraging him and causing him to throw his boulder. Because this interaction is between Bloom and the citizen, the truth pertains to the differences between the two when it comes to religion, which is fitting for this text as it appears to demonstrate a long-needed discussion about religious controversies in Ireland that *The Odyssey* inherently points readers to, via the role of the gods. Without needing direct explanation as to how the citizen resembles the Cyclops, when we look to the beginning of the chapter, where the citizen is almost blinded by the end of the chimney sweep with his brush<sup>2</sup> we see a correlation between his physical and social responses to outside behaviors and opposing viewpoints, and the behavior and attitude of the Cyclops, both in Homer's *The Odyssey* and Walcott's later depictions of the Cyclops.

Though throughout the scene in the pub the citizen is seen as close-minded, arrogant, and touts the Irish Nationalist movement like a badge of honor for himself as

an Irishman, the actions he takes in reaction to Bloom's statements are what drives this work, and what arguably drives the narrative throughout the text in many ways. The act of throwing the biscuit tin in retaliation to Bloom's response offers interpretations that seemingly overlap each other; and it resembles the move of Polyphemus throwing the rock at Odysseus' boat, and is later the model for Walcott's interpretation of the Cyclops figure. While this is a simple examination of this scene, the power of this scene will be brought forth in the examination of Walcott's works. While it may seem potentially problematic to examine and interpret Joyce's work this way, it truly is no less problematic than audiences engaging with Homer's work through the lens of Joyce. By examining Walcott's texts, the goal is to convey the importance of the steps this writer took to recreate the story of *The Odyssey* using Joycean methods that created a postcolonial narrative, telling a story that speaks of all the courage of the past with the hope of the future.

### **Walcott's Renditions of The Odyssey & Postcolonial Readings**

Derek Walcott's *Omeros* is a tale for the ages: blending the setting of St. Lucia with the motifs of *The Odyssey*, Walcott's reimagining of the Homeric epic as postcolonial is a demonstration of literary achievement like no other. Though Walcott was known for his poetic

prowess, this Nobel-Prize winning work demonstrates a talent unimaginable for many. *Omeros* not only uses the Homeric epic to tell a Caribbean tale, but it is inspired by other stories, and authors, who have long demonstrated a kinship to the Caribbean view and usage of literature as a way to express struggles shared between the two different cultures. While the literary approach to writing *Omeros* demonstrates a rereading of Joyce in its style and application, even making a point to depict Walcott, as then-narrator, seeing and hearing Joyce's ghost in Dublin (Walcott 1993, 201), in examining solely the moments and scenes that portray or involve depictions of the Cyclops of the Homeric epic by pointing to specific moments that all three texts have in common, I hope to more closely point to the commonalities between both authors and how this speaks to a shared experience of postcolonialism, despite their cultural differences. Within *Omeros*, the presence of a Cyclops figure or representation is threaded throughout the text, ever a reminder of its power and uniquely portraying this figure as a representation of many aspects of postcolonialism. One of Walcott's many reinterpretations of the Cyclops lies within the first pages of *Omeros*, where Seven Seas, a blind man who arguably resembles Homer and a Muse in the tale, is out to sea and considers the beginning of the day:

O, open this day with the conch's moan, *Omeros*,  
as you did in my boyhood, when I was a noun  
gently exhaled from the palate of the sunrise.

A lizard on the sea-wall darted its question  
at the waking sea, and a net of golden moss  
brightened the reef, which the sails of their far ca-  
noes

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

of the lighthouse's flock, that Cyclops whose blind  
eye

shut from the sunlight. Then the canoes were galleys  
over which a frigate sawed its scythed wings slowly.

(Walcott 1993, 12-13)

Here *Seven Seas* calls on Omeros, another name for Homer, as a sort of prayer for the beginning of the day. *Seven Seas* is blind, but she is remembering the sounds of the ocean, bringing the image of Homer's Cyclops to the landscape of St. Lucia through memory, using a single moment to speak to the method and meaning of the entire poem: the use of memory as a conduit for stories long in existence, but never told. We later see Walcott once again play with the image of the Cyclops in *The Odyssey: A Stage Play*, where the Cyclops is referred to as only *The Eye*, and resembles the Foucauldian image of power (Brown-Robison 2018, 2), where we see the seeds of this later reimagination coming through in this moment. In much the same way that Joyce presented the Cyclops as a socially blind and misguided citizen, Walcott

depicts the Cyclops as a beacon of hope, a guiding star once living on the shores of St. Lucia that calls its sailors home. This can be interpreted as Walcott attempting to use elements of both Homer and Joyce to create a new image of the Cyclops, one that speaks to images past, while including his own reading of Homer's work as an opportunity to tell his own tale.

In "Black Odysseys: The Homeric Odysseys in the African Diaspora since 1939," Justine McConnell argues:

The 'Homer-esque' story that Walcott composes in *Omeros* then, may be closer in sentiment and atmosphere to its ancient predecessor than the literary appreciations by classical scholars would be inclined to admit. Walcott is removing classical Greece from its pedestal, but he does so without lowering its value..." (McConnell 2013, 108).

McConnell most accurately notes the difficult yet necessary distinction between Homer's and Walcott's works, and wonderfully marks Walcott's movement of appreciation with a nod toward the ancient epic and the careful tearing down of the literary pedestal that prevents readers and authors alike from engaging or rereading this literature with his own Caribbean reimagining. While Walcott does this and more within *Omeros*, as we will further examine, he too demonstrates a sort of split view of his re-readings, not solely reading from Homer as the only source with a proper message worth sharing, but also

looking to Joyce, whose methods of reading and interpreting how *The Odyssey* speaks to human experiences so far untold. And yet, it must be remembered that this is not solely a reading of the “original” Homeric epic; rather it is a reading of both Homer and Joyce in that, while Homer inspired the heart of the tale, Joyce arguably inspired the approach to the retelling of the tale.

Merely a few years later Walcott was commissioned to write *The Odyssey: A Stage Play*, and it appears that in those few years, his interpretations of Odysseus, The Cyclops, and the meaning of the Homeric epic itself had become something new. Walcott’s stage-play more closely portrayed the ancient epic, though its variances place his interpretation solidly within the contemporary reader’s expectations. While it may seem easier to compare the effects of Walcott’s work, comparing them to each other as postcolonial or contemporary works, the examination that offers such inspiring answers is that of Walcott’s *The Odyssey: A Stage Play* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*. While *Omeros* has been heralded as the reimagining of *Ulysses*, *The Odyssey: A Stage Play* reinvents much of the literary movement and societal and cultural criticisms that Joyce demonstrates in his own work. In his rendition of *The Odyssey*, which is in much the same scenery as the original Homeric epic, the Cyclops is known also as The Eye, and the island on which he and his followers exist appears structured and tightly controlled. His being depicted as a strong political force, The Eye reads more so as an all-seeing Panopticon-like figure (Brown-Robison

2018, 7), one that sees and controls all on this island. When Odysseus bests him by stabbing him in the eye with a skewer, the Eye alerts the rest of the island, to which his followers respond on high alert. Yet, he is still inevitably powerless, for not only has he lost his eye, but the truth has now been revealed to him, only too late and much to his dismay:

CYCLOPS

NOBODY, YOU HEAR ME? NOBODY IS HIS  
NAME!

ODYSSEUS

SON OF POSEIDON! YOU OBSCENE OCTO-  
PUS!

YOU TON OF SQUID-SHIT, WITH YOUR EYE  
POURING BLACK INK!

MY NAME IS NOT NOBODY! IT'S ODYSSEUS!  
AND LEARN, YOU BLOODY TYRANTS, THAT  
MEN CAN STILL

THINK!

(Sirens moan. The CYCLOPS picks up an oil drum  
and hurls it at the retreating Odysseus, screaming.)

(Walcott 1993,

71-72)

One thing we notice immediately is the use of contemporary English as opposed to a poetic following of the Homeric epic style of writing; while other scenes incorporate a more traditional writing style, this moment in

particular is interesting because it blends the scene and traditional movements with traditional language, swearing, and even Ebonics, which we see in an earlier exchange between the Eye and Odysseus that speaks to an acknowledgement of race that is unseen in the traditional epic. Looking back to Joyce's work in "Cyclops," we see a similar method of writing that, while using The Odyssey as a backdrop, both authors blend their own cultural and societal understandings with the epic. The final assertion that "men can still think," which is likely attributed to the relationship between freedom and the Eye as a sort of overlord, is arguably representing thoughts on people's relationship to knowledge, which we see represented in the works of Homer, Joyce, and Walcott.

In many ways *Ulysses* is thought to be so enticing because it makes so much of daily life in Dublin, placing the city behind rose-colored lenses while simultaneously depicting the struggles of the everyday amongst the strong Irish history, using language play and setting (Wales 1992, 25). Throughout the "Cyclops" chapter the citizen uses uncommon Gaelic words, smattering them throughout his dialogue that is English and speaking to the modern Dublin he lives in (Wales 1992, 25), at the same time demonstrating a use of linguistic memory that creates a space for postcolonial writers like Walcott. As we can see above, Walcott implements this into his work as well, incorporating swearing and slang into these

scenes because, in so closely following the methods of the original epic, his story has its own voice against the epic. Walcott's work demonstrates a method of this even better in his treatment of Odysseus who, to charm the Eye, takes on a Black accent to make him laugh (Walcott 1992, 65). While we are not closely examining the relationship between language use and postcolonial writing, it is important that we recognize this is a critical piece of the foundation that supports the postcolonial narrative.

While the Homeric epic inherently speaks to many walks of life and cultural struggles, the methods that Walcott employs speaks to his reading of Joyce as an author and reader of *The Odyssey*. In *Washed by the Gulf Stream: The Historic and Geographic Relation of Irish and Caribbean Literature*, Maria McGarrity examines each author's relationship with and treatment toward the epic as a traditional method of story-telling, but one that requires steps further away from one's home in order to find the right steps forward (McGarrity 2008, 80). More specifically though, she brings to light an interesting question about the relationship between these two authors, positing

“[a]re Joyce and Walcott somehow more at ease casting in the molds of island nations and seafaring heroes than they would have been had they chosen to call upon some other tradition? Or perhaps they are simply literary opportunists—erudite men who saw the absence of significant work invoking the epic in their own isles and took the chance to make their own knowing the import such works are likely to be given? Perhaps they are neither. (91)

It appears that these authors are neither, as McGarrity suggests, operating as though they could not use, say, a Shakespearian play as a backdrop for their respective plays, nor are they seemingly playing to the interests of their majority of readers, given their respective genres. It is that the stories that needed telling were best suited to this backdrop, because the Homeric epic allows authors the space they need to have their conversations on race, religious stigma, or postcolonialism, and inevitably deals with issues of homecoming in the face of danger and uncertain death. It is important to recognize how these authors are received as a pair, observing how scholars like to examine them together as innovative writers whose experiences naturally connect, in recognition of their shared ability to write their histories and experiences onto the Homeric epic. But it is so much more than merely writing their stories onto the epic: these stories have a natural space amongst the ancient Greek texts, whether because of the historical significance or the nature of their stories, allowing room for postcolonial authors of all backgrounds to insert their narratives, allowing them to create a story that encompasses old and new.

## **Conclusion**

James Joyce and Derek Walcott have both gifted audiences works that critically engage with the past while demonstrating creative ways we can reimagine these texts as they apply to current conversations surrounding postcolonialism. Joyce's creative approach to the epic-ness

that exists in the everyday story of the Irish does what few texts have the ability to: to reimagine the Homeric epic as a classical template that can portray and converse with modern concerns. Walcott's look to Ireland to tell the stories of those struggling on their own islands results in an exceptional view of what Joyce's work inspires, yet when we think of these two authors as having a relationship to *The Odyssey*, it may be instinctual to only consider this insofar as the text speaks to the original epic; and yet, when we consider the content with which each author grapples with, we recognize the undeniable thread of the postcolonial narrative that binds them to each other. The bustling city of Dublin near the Atlantic, thrums with the same sounds of the rushing Caribbean waters, both sharing in the struggles and miseries of the other while being simultaneously almost worlds apart. Though it is easy to demonstrate their differences, from their countless other works and the variances between them, to their writing styles and approach to literary depictions of their homelands, the strength that is seen in their respective takes on *The Odyssey* is unmatched in its demonstration of the postcolonial narrative as it relates to the Irish and Caribbean experience.

Though we might not automatically recognize Joyce as a postcolonial author and the same could technically be said of Walcott, it is important to recognize that the literary credentials for such a qualification are muddled at best. When we move beyond the literary classifications,

those that we feel are implied when grappling with postcolonial literature, we can more freely examine literary relationships between authors like Joyce and Walcott. Yet recognizing that these works can be examined as postcolonial is different than suggesting their authors can be designated as solely postcolonial authors; if anything, their being authors of different backgrounds offers new insight into how we consider these texts that are now being reinserted into our literary consciousness, having much more to offer than solely conversations on nationalism, religion, and conflict. Though each author's works delve into postcolonial themes throughout, the pointed look to the depiction of the Cyclops as reimagined by each allows for a focused view of the relationship between Joyce and Walcott that arguably speaks to the postcolonial themes throughout each text. Each Cyclops figure somehow depicts a dissatisfaction and disenchantment with forces on each authors shores, playing to the themes of the Homeric epic in ways few can, while creating a new method of writing all their own. By reevaluating the literary approach to the Homeric epic that occurs across literature, we might recognize the doors that are opened to readers, writers, and authors alike, as we navigate what it means to search for the representation of one's understanding through a reimagined story.

**NOTES:**

1. Taken from the Washington Post article titled "Derek Walcott's Odyssey." Streitfeld, David. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1994/09/25/derek-walcotts-odyssey/dccfce4a-cf58-46e3-ac0f-a8435ecc3a6a/?utm\\_term=.62d2039356d6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1994/09/25/derek-walcotts-odyssey/dccfce4a-cf58-46e3-ac0f-a8435ecc3a6a/?utm_term=.62d2039356d6). September 25, 1994. Web.

2. *Ulysses*, Joyce, pg. 240, line 11

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