**A CITY’S DEATH BY FIRE…. Derek Walcott**

**About the author**: Born on the island of Saint Lucia, a former British colony in the West Indies, poet and playwright Derek Walcott was trained as a painter but turned to writing as a young man. He published his first poem in the local newspaper at the age of 14. Five years later, he borrowed $200 to print his first collection, *25 Poems*, which he distributed on street corners. Walcott’s major breakthrough came with the collection *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960*(1962), a book which celebrates the Caribbean and its history as well as investigates the scars of colonialism and post-colonialism. Throughout a long and distinguished career, Walcott returned to those same themes of language, power, and place. His later collections include *Tiepolo’s Hound*(2000), *The Prodigal*(2004), *Selected Poems*(2007), *White Egrets*(2010), and *Morning, Paramin*(2016). In 1992, Walcott won the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Nobel committee described his work as “a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment.”

Since the 1950s Walcott divided his time between Boston, New York, and Saint Lucia. His work resonates with Western canon and Island influences, sometimes even shifting between Caribbean patois and English, and often addressing his English and West Indian ancestry. According to *Los Angeles Times Book Review* contributor [Arthur Vogel sang](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/arthur-vogelsang), “These continuing polarities shoot an electricity to each other which is questioning and beautiful and which helps form a vision altogether Caribbean and international, personal (him to you, you to him), independent, and essential for readers of contemporary literature on all the continents.” Known for his technical control, erudition, and large canvases, Walcott was, according to poet and critic Sean O’Brien, “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.”

Many readers and critics point to *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 O’Brien who also described it as an ars poetica, concerned “with art itself—its meaning and importance and the nature of an artistic vocation.” In reviewing Walcott’s *Selected Poems* (2007), poet [Glyn Maxwell](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/glyn-maxwell) ascribes Walcott’s power as a poet not so much to his themes as to his ear: “The verse is constantly trembling with a sense of the body in time, the self-slung across metre, whether metre is steps, or nights, or breath, whether lines are days, or years, or tides.”

Walcott was 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 experience, often dealing with the socio-political and epistemological implications of post-colonialism and drawing upon various forms such as the fable, allegory, folk, and morality play. With his twin brother, he cofounded

the Trinidad Theater Workshop in 1950; in 1981, while teaching at Boston University, he founded the Boston Playwrights’ Theatre. He also taught at Columbia University, Yale University, Rutgers University, and Essex University in England.

In addition to his Nobel Prize, Walcott’s honors included a MacArthur Foundation “genius” award, a Royal Society of Literature Award, and, in 1988, the Queen’s Medal for Poetry. He was an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. He died in 2017.

**Summary of the Poem:** The poem A City’s Death by Fire by Derek Walcott is literally about a city being destroyed by a fire. This is a very lyrical poem that shows expression of sadness and loss that is brought on by the destruction of the city. The speaker is identified several times in the poem by the first person pronoun ‘I’, but it is a bit ambiguous as to who the speaker really is. It seems to be written in the point of view of a bystander, either that saw the events of the poem take place, or arrived shortly after it all to witness the aftermath of the fire. Either way, he observes all the details of the burned city with a certain incredulity and bewilderment. The narrator says “faiths that were snapped like wire” and “under a candles eye that smoked In tears”. This all is said to be due to the city’s death by fire which portrays a dark image of sadness and sorrow.

     The personification in the title makes the poem all the sadder because it makes one feel for the city in a way one wouldn’t if this information was released as a news bulletin. Each line about the severity of destructions makes one feel as if it were a living thing that had died. It can be guessed in a way, when all the buildings in a city burn down all the history and memories in those buildings go down with them.

     The imagery in this poem is also very strong. The metaphors provide for connections to be made. The religious imagery is obvious in this poem and shouldn’t be over looked. Right in the beginning of the play the fire is referred to as the “hot gospeller” this suggests the origin of the fire has to do with the church and religion and maybe the fire is a metaphor itself for some destructive power that “killed” the city. The metaphor “hills that were flocks of faith provides a juxtaposition between the nature world and this “wooden world” the narrator speaks of. The nature world is immune to this fire and the city, this “wooden world” is flammable. So if we are to assume the origin of the fire is religion then it makes sense that the “hills that were flocks of faith were unharmed. The narrator even talks about walking through the rubble and seeing walls still standing. He personifies them by calling them “liars” which would also be sinners because lying is a sin. While at the beginning of the poem there is a sadness about what happened, yet now you get the feeling that maybe it wasn’t all bad.

     In short, the poem can be called a pro-religion poem that displays much symbolism of cleansing a world of sinners. Where the “wooden world” was our world and the “hills” is an enlightened world like heaven. The symbolism of cleansing and rebirth to start a new is all over the bible (i.e. Noah’s arch). It can be said that Walcott’s intention was to point out the unfaithfulness of some people in this world and to create another example of what could happen if all of us are unfaithful.

**Textual Questions:**

1. The title of the poem reads ‘A City’s Death…’rather than ‘A City’s destruction …What does the poet want to suggest by using such a metaphor?

 Ans: The title of the poem is apt and suggestive. Being a post-colonial writer the poet was sure of rebuilding the city though the destruction has been profound and seemingly beyond renovation. The title also evokes the sense of loss and sadness. Even if all the terrible destruction and devastation of the fire has crippled the people of the city, eventually normal life will begin again and people will live on with love, acting as a living testimony to what happened. The consummation of the city invokes our imagery. The personification in the title makes the poem all the sadder because it makes one feel for the city in a way one wouldn’t if this information was released as a news bulletin. Each line about the severity of destructions makes one feel as if it were a living thing that had died. It can be guessed in a way, when all the buildings in a city burn down all the history and memories in those buildings go down with them.

1. Explain the expression ‘ under a candle’s eye’…within the context of the poem?

Ans: There are a few symbols in the poem. The candle mentioned in line 3 is continually referenced to throughout the poem, through word choice and metaphors. The candle can be seen as a symbol for life; as it continues to burn and whittle away, it still gives off light and goes on. It can be connected back to the last couple lines of the poem, with the leaves and hills. Though the city has been destroyed but still some hope has been left for the readers and generations to come. In the midst of darkness a candle’s ‘eye’ suggests hope and renewal.

**Long answer type:**

**1:** comment on walcott’s distinctive use of imagery in the poem?

Ans: The imagery is dominant throughout the entire poem. The word choices and placement of the lines of poetry help to create image after image, as the speaker of the poem walks through the burned city. Images of burned buildings, ruined walls, and piles of rubble immediately spring to mind when Walcott describes the aftermath. The lines at the beginning and the end even give the readers specific pictures, even if they don’t focus on the fire. Walcott is a master and creating beautiful imagery and pictures through his word choice, structure, and tone. The clouds and the fire-like imagery associated with other images are also found in the poem. It’s like the pillar of fire in the Bible that guides the Israelites through the desert, symbolizing the hope and possibility of the future that the people of the city must have. He integrates simple words and common language into more formal and extravagant words, to create a unique blend that in many ways is similar to the goals of T.S Elliot. Walcott comes off to be a modernist/post-colonial poet, trying to create a unique art in the form of his poetry, while varying his work. In ‘A City’s Death By Fire’, Walcott uses the more serious tone, more formal language, and a different structure than some of his other works. He seeks to vary each of his works to produce a uniqueness and a specific image associated with it.