

James Davis

Teaching Derek Walcott's "The Spoiler's Return" (1981)

Walcott's "The Spoiler's Return" is a long satirical monologue from the point of view of The Mighty Spoiler (Theophilus Phillip), a calypsonian popular in mid-20th Century Trinidad, who is best known for the raunchy hit, "Bedbug." Back from the dead during Carnival season, the Spoiler perches on a bridge in his Port of Spain neighborhood of Laventille, where he condemns Trinidadian society and politicians. However, he also speaks with seeming omniscience about broader concerns of violence, censorship, and the function of satire. Walcott refers to a long Western tradition of satirists—including Juvenal, Rochester, and Swift—and Walcott's Spoiler speaks in the heroic couplets epitomized in Pope's verse. By pairing this form with the West Indian voice of his speaker, Walcott creates a tension that reflects the complicated role of the calypsonian. This poem could be taught in a variety of courses: a course examining the link between music and literature, a course on poetry and politics, or a creative writing workshop.

A.) Potential Course: CRW 2300—Poetry Writing: The Poetics of Humor

This would be a poetry workshop for undergraduates who have already taken an introductory poetry writing class or for juniors and seniors without this prerequisite who have demonstrated strong composition skills through a portfolio. As its focus, the course would examine humor as prominent and relevant force in contemporary poetry. Class time would be spent having students analyze the rhetorical considerations made in the construction of a successful humorous poem: speaker, occasion, audience, form, etc.

In an attempt to show the breadth of the catalog of current, funny poems, the course would be divided into several units, each focusing on various species of humorous poetry: narrative, absurdist, confessional, and satirical, among others.

The course textbook would be *Stand Up Poetry: an Expanded Anthology*, a collection of poems that emphasizes performability and accessibility. Model-poems likely to be examined from this text are Stephanie Brown's "Allegory of the Supermarket," Denise Duhamel's "Ego," Tony Hoagland's "My Country," Jeffrey McDaniel's "Play it Again, Salmonella," and James Tate's "How the Pope is Chosen." In order to consider poems published after the anthology or excluded for other reasons, supplementary poems would be discussed as well, such as Derek Walcott's "The Spoiler's Return" and epistles from Joe Wenderoth's *Letters to Wendy's*.

Writing assignments would be based on these model-poems: for example, after reading and discussing Tate's "How the Pope is Chosen," students would write their own absurdist explanations of a process. Students would also be required to discover an example of humor within the poems anthologized in *Stand Up Poetry* (one by a poet not already discussed in class) and give an in-class presentation on how this example fits into the rest of the poets' work, including a brief biography of the poet and a review of one of the poet's books.

B.) Goals for including “The Spoiler’s Return”

1. To be included as a strong, ambitious model-poem in the course’s unit on satire
2. To show students an example of satire that, although steeped in the imagery and concerns of a local culture, manages to appeal to a broad audience
3. To demonstrate the satirical effectiveness of a speaker other than a first-person stand-in for the poet him/herself.
4. To illustrate how form (in Walcott’s case, heroic couplets) can complicate and enrich the delivery of satire
5. N.B.: “The Spoiler’s Return,” because of its length and the particularity of its subject matter, will require more time and attention than will other poems in this course. The instructor should consider teaching this poem on its own rather than in conjunction with other, similar poems.

C.) Historical Context

This section is intended to provide the instructor with basic knowledge of two subjects that should be covered before analyzing the poem itself. The degree to which the instructor incorporates each into the lesson is up to him. The Walcott section provides a biographical sketch and covers some of the major critical responses to his poetry. The calypso section gives students an introduction to the form's history and defines the role of the calypsonian in very basic terms. If students wish to learn more on either subject, refer to the bibliography for relevant texts.

A brief biography of Derek Walcott:

Born on January 23, 1930 in Saint Lucia, Derek Walcott has come to be the most recognized name in Caribbean poetry today. Though he is also an accomplished playwright and the founder of the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, more critical attention has been paid to his poetry, and “Walcott see himself as, essentially, the poet” (Baugh 2).

As a man and an artist, Walcott embodies much of the racial and cultural mixture typical of his homeland and the Caribbean at large. His grandmothers were of African descent and his grandfathers were Caucasian: a Dutchman and an Englishman. While Walcott was educated in the Standard English that is the official language of Saint Lucia, he spent much of his childhood communicating in French Creole, which Saint Lucians speak in their day-to-day interactions.

He left Saint Lucia in 1950 to study at the University of the West Indies in Mona, Jamaica, where he received a B.A. in 1953 as part of the university’s first graduating class in liberal arts. Afterward, he taught and wrote for newspapers in Jamaica until he moved to Trinidad in 1958. Although Walcott had been writing poetry from an early age—a poem he published at fifteen provoked a strong censure from a Saint Lucian priest who criticized its “heretical pantheism and animism”—Walcott first earned major poetic renown with the publication of *In a Green Night* in England in 1962 (Ramazani et al, 496). He was

awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992.

Walcott's writing attempts to, "[w]ith varying degrees of discomfort and elation [...] embrace all his cultural influences—European, American, African, and the Creolized cultures of the West Indies" (Ramazani et al, 494). As a literary figure, Walcott has been forced to reconcile his love of the English language with the history of empire, slavery, and brutality inherent in it. His mother, the headmaster of a Methodist nursery school, owned a collection of English literary classics, which she encouraged her son to read. Among these works, Walcott found inspiration from W.H. Auden, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and others, particularly Irish writers, with whom he felt a bond as a subject of colonialism.

As his own writing developed, he considered how he could "both grieve the agonizing harm of British colonialism and appreciate the empire's literary gift" (Ramazani et al, 495). As a solution, much of Walcott's poetry borrows from other works of literature and operates through a certain kind of mimicry. For instance, Walcott's most famous work, the book-length poem *Omeros*, adapts Homer's *The Odyssey* and locates it in St. Lucia. The themes of struggle and discovery in the classical text take new meaning in the Walcott's New World setting.

Walcott's tendency to join opposites—to commingle Old World and New, African and European—is not merely a reflection of the poet's identity. Walcott sees this sort of opposition as generative, the "harmonious yet dynamic tension which is the paradox of life" (Baugh 7). Critics have accused him variously of being derivative or too original:

Postcolonial critics sometimes charge that Walcott's openness to the British canon is the linguistic equivalent of colonial nostalgia and cultural assimilation. Meanwhile, Western critics [...] tend to feel that he has not "assimilated" the Western tradition fully *enough*. (Terada 44)

What Walcott aims to achieve is neither mimicry nor authenticity, however. His poetry's "betweenness" is "neither a synthesis nor a separation, but a state of being that incorporates difference within itself" (Terada 9). The poet believes that—for any poet and especially a Caribbean poet—any claims to pure originality are dubious; the Caribbean's links with its colonizers are inseparable. The only way an artist can create anything authentic is to grapple with the multiplicity of influences surrounding him and express these influences in through an individual voice.

A brief history of calypso:

Calypso is a Trinidadian musical form with a complex history. Simply put, it is a lyrical ballad form usually sung by an individual man (a calypsonian) accompanied by a guitar, drums, and/or other instruments. Over time, calypso has developed into a form of journalism: Trinidadians spread news through songs invented and delivered with "the highly prized skill of extemporizing" (Mason 21). Calypsos are typically associated with Carnival, a Trinidadian street festival similar to Mardi Gras, during which calypsonians compete against each other to earn the title of Calypso King.

The genre defies simple classification, however. Even the etymology of "calypso" arouses disputes

among scholars, some claiming the French patois *carrousseaux* (a drinking party) as the root, others claiming the Spanish *caliso* (a tropical song), and still others claiming the African Hausa word *kaiso* (the equivalent of “Bravo”). Calypso has been sung by both men and women, in French creole and English, as paeans to slave masters and as attacks against the government (Mason 21).

Many notable calypsos, however, have taken the form of satire. Using Carnival as an opportunity to express dissent, Calypsonians (often lower-class black men) perform songs “in a style of scurrility [...] that deliberately unmask[s] the real disrespect that the never truly humble underclass [feels] for their social overlords” (Rohlehr 166). A very early calypso, sung in French creole during the 19th century, celebrated the tarring and feathering of a white medical official who insulted a black coworker. In general, calypsos have “focussed on the elite itself, to unmask implied grossness beneath its surface of social superiority” (Rohlehr 170).

Another key component of many calypsos is sex, which grew in popularity as a theme after the U.S. occupation of Trinidad during World War Two; wealthy American G.I.s would patronize calypsonians and came to expect a degree of playful raunchiness in the lyrics. Besides appealing to popular tastes, Calypsonians sing about sex in frank terms in order to promote “naturalness, fertility, [and] unpretentious acceptance of one's sexuality” (Rohlehr 179). Also, sex can be used as a way for the calypsonian to assert his masculinity and as a way to respond to upper-class notions of decency.

Claiming Trinidad's “most eloquent expression was in musical form,” patriots tried to distinguish the island's culture from that of its British colonizers during the 1930s and set up calypso as a national symbol (Neptune 20). With this increased national attention to calypso came increased international attention, and by the early thirties popular calypsonians such as Attila and Lord Beginner were performing and recording in the United States and Europe. Calypso made its way to the United States famously in the case of the Andrews Sisters' appropriation of the Lord Invader calypso, “Rum and Coca Cola.” Though Invader eventually received compensation for the Sisters' recording, this incident demonstrated how calypso can be both a means of national expression and a resource for foreign exploitation.

Though its international fame has diminished, calypso continues as a strong force in Trinidadian culture. Calypsonians still use their songs as reactions and satires against current events. But perhaps the best way to understand calypso is to listen to an example. (See Section D).

D.) Relevant Primary Texts

This section is intended to familiarize the students with the two operative voices of “The Spoiler's Return”: that of the calypsonian and that of the classical satirist, i.e. Rochester. The two sections identify the authors' pieces and where they can be found on the Internet (a music file for the calypso and a web page with original text for the poem). Then, a brief analysis is included to help the instructor identify key themes germane to Walcott's poem, followed by a list of questions to help guide student discussion.

Theophilus Philip (The Mighty Spoiler), “Bedbug” (1954)

Music: http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/rosenber/music/01_Bedbug.wma

Analysis:

The Mighty Spoiler's most popular calypso, "Bedbug," is charming, clever, and risqué in its themes. On the surface, the song tells a simple story: the singer, imagining his possible reincarnations after death, wishes to come back as a bedbug so he can bite women in their sleep.

What complicates this simple trope is the singer's choice of women to bite. In his parasitic reincarnation, the Spoiler preys on "no ordinary people" but rather the "social and respectable" ladies of the upper class 1.) because they have more meat to feast on than do the stringy, undernourished females of the working class and 2.) because he would achieve a vicarious nobility in his upwardly mobile bloodsucking, crowning himself "King Bedbug the First."

This sort of satire is typical of calypso, expressing populist, lower-class values and attacking the elite with humor and subtlety. This particular calypsonian may seem out of place in "The Spoiler's Return," since Walcott's Spoiler is considerably more caustic than the singer of "Bedbug," but the subject matter of "Bedbug" allows Walcott both to explore the theme of reincarnation in his poem, and to make the allusion to Rochester.

Also notable in this calypso is the Spoiler's use of the word "bite." One of the defining characteristics of calypso is the use of *picong*, a word that derives from the French *piquant*, which describes something as spicy or biting. (The French word for an insect sting is a *pique*.) Thus, when the Spoiler explains that it's "only big fat woman he going to bite," he implies that the main aim of his satire is the comfortable, over-nourished upper class.

Possible questions:

1. What do you make of the singer's choice of women in the poem? (This could lead to discussion both of class concerns and of calypso's appreciation of naturalness and uninhibited sexuality.)
2. Why is reincarnation important in this song? (This could lead to a discussion of the calypsonian's quest for a certain type of immortality. One could also discuss here "King Bedbug the First"—how the Spoiler lends nobility to a lowly creature and what this has to say about the calypsonian's role at large. Also, one might mention that there is a sizable Indian population in Trinidad, and that this may have something to do with reincarnation's presence in the song.)
3. How do you think this song might be catering to a U.S. audience? (One could mention how sex was partly a strategy to get North American audiences' patronage. The mention of hot dogs and hamburgers may also be an appeal to U.S. sensibilities.)
4. What is the significance, beside the obvious, of the word "bite" in this poem? How does it function as a form of critique? (Here, the instructor would introduce the concept of *picong* in calypso as laid out above.)

John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, "A Satyr against Reason and Mankind" (1675)

Text: <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/mankind.html> and attached

Analysis:

As far as satires go, Rochester's "Satyr against Reason and Mankind" takes on perhaps the largest target available to the genre. Within the poem, Rochester attacks every human contrivance to greatness and distinction, from scholarship ["Books bear him up awhile, and make him try / To swim with bladders of philosophy" (20-21)] to religion ["This supernatural gift that makes a mite / Think he's an image of the infinite" (76-77)] to poetry ["For wits are treated just like common whores: / First they're enjoyed, and then kicked out of doors" (37-38)].

And it is just this scale that makes the satire such a success. A satire that attacks literally everyone is bound to draw more of an audience than one that picks on a specific person. Even Rochester is implicated in his own satire: for a satire that claims to be against reason, the poem is very logically and methodically organized. Therefore, the overwhelming pessimism and cynicism in the poem must not be taken at face value.

Possible questions:

- 1.) How does this poem use the subject of reincarnation differently than the Mighty Spoiler does in "Bedbug"? How are the two treatments similar? (One might discuss how both pieces seem to value animals over men, or how both poets seem to value desire over the pretenses of status, decency, etc.)
- 2.) Why does the poet choose such a broad target for his satire? Are we to take his claims against learning and reason at face value? (Here, the instructor could encourage students to explain how the poet himself is implicated in the satire and what effect this has on his credibility and the audience's understanding of the poem.)
- 3.) Compare the poet's tone to that of the Mighty Spoiler. Are there differences besides the level of diction? (Ideally, this would transition into a discussion of "The Spoiler's Return" by having the students examine the two different deliveries of satire, and then having them pay attention to how Walcott uses both the Mighty Spoiler's and Lord Rochester's voices.)

E.) Lesson Plan for "The Spoiler's Return"

Discussion questions:

1. What are your initial reactions to "The Spoiler's Return"? Did you think it was funny? difficult to understand? How does it function as a satire?
2. In the poems we've examined thus far in class, we've tried to identify the targets—implicit or explicit—of the poets' satire. At whom or what does Walcott aim his attack? What are the charges he lays against them?

3. “The Spoiler’s Return” is spoken through the voice of an identified and real historical personage: The Mighty Spoiler (Theophilus Philip), a popular calypsonian who performed in the mid-20th century. Why does Walcott use this specific speaker? Why might it be a good idea for a poet to deliver his satire through a voice other than his own?

4. Walcott’s Spoiler speaks through heroic couplets, a form dating back to Pope, Milton, Shakespeare, and beyond. Why? What is the poet’s intent in placing this classical form in a contemporary setting? Moreover, how does he get away with it without making the poem sound stilted or irrelevant?

5. Lines 39-44 cite the first six lines of Rochester’s “A Satyr against Reason and Mankind” (1675), a link to which is here: <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/mankind.html>. Look the poem over and consider how Walcott marries Rochester’s form to the Spoiler’s voice.

6. As evidenced by its wealth of local geography (Laventille, Port of Spain), national celebrities (Attila and Commander, other calypsonians; V.S. Naipaul, an Indo-Trinidadian author), and native terminology (limers, bohbohl, picong), this poem is steeped deeply in Trinidadian culture. Why, then, is this poem read by non-Trinidadian readers? What are Walcott’s strategies to make this poem appealing to a broader English-speaking audience? If you were to write a satire on Florida or the Southern United States, how could you make the poem relevant to readers in the Pacific Northwest, or Australia, for that matter?

Assignment

1. Using “The Spoiler’s Return” as a springboard, write a satire from the point of view of a dead cultural or historical personage. Choose a contemporary topic for your speaker to address, one with which he/she would have no familiarity, but one which would presumably interest him/her. What might Walt Whitman have to say about the Matthew Shepard murder? How would Pluto, Roman god of the Underworld, respond to the death of Pluto, the no-longer-a-planet?

2. Don’t assume that, like Walcott’s Mighty Spoiler, your poem’s speaker has to be likable. Walcott encourages the reader to agree with the Spoiler’s attacks on Trinidadian society, but by choosing a disagreeable speaker, you could turn your poem into a satire against the speaker him/herself. What might Jefferson Davis’s ghost say after rising from the grave to see Barack Obama as president of the United States?

3. Put some thought into how you will present your satire on a formal level. Walcott has his Spoiler speak in heroic couplets to link the working-class calypsonian to the great satirists of the Classical tradition (Juvenal, Pope, Rochester, etc). Your choice of form need not be as specific (or difficult) as the heroic couplet, but it should to some degree complement the issues tackled in your satire.

F.) Bibliography

These texts provide biographical information and critical perspectives on Derek Walcott:

1. Baugh, Edward. *Derek Walcott*. Cambridge: University Press, 2006.

2. Terada, Rei. *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992.

These texts provide historical information and critical perspectives on calypso:

1. Mason, Peter. *Bacchanal! The Carnival Culture of Trinidad*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998.
2. Neptune, Harvey. *Caliban and the Yankees*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007.
3. Rohlehr, Gordon. *A Scuffling of Islands: Essays on Calypso*. San Juan, Trinidad: Lexicon Trinidad Ltd., 2004.

These are supportive primary texts used to lead into discussion of "The Spoiler's Return":

1. Philip, Theophilus. "Bedbug." 1954.
2. Wilmot, John, Earl of Rochester. "A Satyr against Reason and Mankind." Ed. Jack Lynch. Rutgers University, Newark, NJ. 3 Nov. 2008 < <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/mankind.html>>.

This is the main textbook for the class:

Webb, Charles Harper, ed. *Stand Up Poetry*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002. 32-33.

This is where to find Walcott's poem:

Walcott, Derek. "The Spoiler's Return." *The Fortunate Traveller*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1981.