**POEM - 1Ramanujan’s Poem A River Analysis**

**Ramanujan’s poetry** expresses an **Indian sensibility** sharpened and conditioned by Western education. He shot into prominence with the publication of his first volume of verses **The Striders**. The poem ‘**A River**‘ was published in 1966. There is an organic relation between **Ramanujan’s images** and his family as is evident in his poetry. **The river** celebrated in the poem is the **Vaigai** which flows through the heart of Madurai. The poem is about truth, the reality of the river and the kind of **relationship between the present and the past**. In Madurai, the poets of the past sang of the city, its temples, and of the river as full.

“**A River**” is a poem on the **Vaigai** which flows through Madurai, a city that has for about two thousand years been the seat of Tamil culture. As an evocation of a river, the poem succeeds admirably. At the same time the river becomes a point of departure for ironically contrasting the relative attitudes of the old and new Tamil poets both of whom are exposed for their callousness to suffering, as a result of the floods.

Every summer **the river** dries to a trickle and the poets sang only of the floods. When there are floods, they are in fact destructive, causing deaths and damages to property. But the present day poets of Tamil still echo the old poets and ignore reality. It is seen to be a satire on sensation loving poets who write only on events which excite them, such as floods, unmindful of the havoc and suffering which they cause.

According to Verghese,

*“The poet’s essentially Indian sensibility has been heightened, sharpened and conditioned by his Western education and by his contacts with Western culture.”*

This sharpened sensibility is fully expressed by the present poem. In **Madurai, the city of temples** and poets who always sang of cities and temples (not of human beings), flows the river called **Vaigai** which dries in every summer, baring the sand-ribs, straw and women’s hair clogging the water gates, with the wet stones sparkling like sleepy crocodiles, the water buffaloes lounging in the sun. But no one sang of the river that dried. The poet sings only of the floods. **The dry river** is then contrasted with the river in flood which carried of three village houses, one **pregnant woman** and a couple of cows named **Gopi and Brinda** as usual. The poets still sang, but followed the old tradition of old poets and sang only of floods.

Ramanujan thus satirizes the absence of human concern in these poets:

*“but no one spoken*

*in verse*

*of the pregnant woman*

*drowned with perhaps twins in her*

*kicking at blank walls*

*even before birth”*

**The height of irony** is reached when Ramanujan refers to the comment of one who was there for a day when they had the floods He notices that the river has water enough to be poetic about only once a year. But then in the first half hour, it carries away quite a few things including pregnant woman expecting identical twins with no moles on their bodies, with different coloured diapers to tell them apart.

**The poet’s tone** is casual and detached. His irony is pungent and the structure is based on the balance of opposites which heighten the irony of the whole poem, which is remarkable for its vivid, **visual imagery**:

*“every summer*

*a river dries to a trickle*

*in the sand baring the sand-ribs*

*straw and women’s hair*

*clogging the watergates*

*at the rusty bars”*

**This cameo-like picture** reveals not only an eye for minutest details, but an ability to communicate such details with photographic exactness. Telling use of repetition has been made in lines like the following:

*“City of temples and poets*

*Who sang of cities and temples”*

In **Ramanujan’s poetry**, **imagery** is the most important vehicle of communication. Thus the image of:

*“straw and women’s hair*

*clogging the water gates*

*at the rusty bars…”*

brings to the forefront not only the total dryness of the river, but also the emotional and spiritual sterility of poets, who seek only poetic subjects and are entirely indifferent to the fact of human suffering.

Ramanujan wants to convey that the poets could do nothing practical or effective to prevent people’s misery resulting from the floods in **the river**. The poets could only write poems on the subject of floods, but could not render any aid to the afflicted people. **The flood** sweeps away three village houses, one pregnant woman and a couple of cows, just as it used to do in the past.

**The tragedy** is repeated every time **the river** becomes flooded. The cows have been named- Gopi and Brinda- to impart another realistic touch to the picture. No one writes of the pregnant woman drowned with perhaps twins in her. **Ramanujan’s poem** is in part an answer to such “poetic myth making.”

POEM 2

# Analysis of Poem "Ruins of a Great House" by Derek Walcott

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Derek Walcott

## Derek Walcott and a Summary of Ruins of a Great House

Ruins of a Great House focuses on history, colonialism, literature and corruption through power.

It's a poem that reveals Walcott's ambivalence towards the culture of Great Britain, at its most dominant in the 18th and 19th centuries when slavery was a hugely profitable business.

The British colonised much of the Caribbean during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, setting up vast plantations worked by black slaves subjected to abominable cruelties.

Walcott is quite naturally repelled by the actions of the British towards native African peoples yet has to reconcile the fact that he writes in and is heavily influenced by the English language.

So it is that throughout the poem, various quotes and paraphrases from English writers are inserted, the effect of which is to both heighten awareness and sharpen contrast.

The poem also explores the inevitable tensions arising between master and slave, perpetrator and victim, history and legacy, writer and conscience. Walcott uses:

* Metaphor. The metaphorical use of a ruined plantation house as the former empire underpins the narrative.
* Metonym. The lime fruit is a metonym for the British Empire. Lime plantations were particularly profitable and useful because lime fruits helped combat the scourge of scurvy aboard British naval ships.
* Allusion. The English language and culture as expressed by notable writers, such as Donne, Blake and Kipling, and explorers, Hawkins, Raleigh and Drake, is used to create a sense of irony and antipathy.

Derek Walcott was born in 1930 in St Lucia in the British West Indies and has been exploring the roots of his culture in his poetry by using the English language. As a black poet (and dramatist), he has had to wrestle with the issue of versifying in English, the language of those who enslaved many of his people.

Ruins of a Great House presents the reader with vivid imagery and stark contrast. Here is an initially objective speaker detailing the ruinous state of a house, going back through time, becoming personal (in first-person) in an attempt to fathom out just what it is he feels and thinks.

There is anger, reasoning and finally compassion, an acknowledgment that yes, those slaves who lived and worked here were subject to appalling injustices, yet those who were cruel came from a country that had also once been a colony of the Romans.

It's one of Walcott's earlier poems, written in 1956 and published in his breakthrough book In A Green Night in 1962.

**Ruins of a Great House - Epigraph**

The epigraph (the short quotation before the start of the poem proper) is from Sir Thomas Browne (1605-82) an English writer and polymath, who wrote the book Hydriotaphia, Urn-Burial, in 1658, detailing the discovery of ancient Roman burials and coals from funeral pyres in his native land.

Walcott chose this quote because it highlights the nature of death and the idea of colonisation - the Romans took over Albion (Britain), the British took over the Caribbean.

## Ruins of a Great House

though our longest sun sets at right declensions and makes but winter arches, it cannot be long before we lie down in darkness, and have our light in ashes. . .

Browne, Urn Burial

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## Line by Line Analysis of Ruins of a Great House

Ruins of a Great House is a free verse poem and has no set end rhyme scheme or regular metrical beat.

The first ten lines are pure observation, image upon image piling up as the speaker moves through the ruins.

**Line 1**

So the reader is initially introduced to stones, which are scattered about - disjecta membra (scattered fragments in latin) probably inspired by Horace's disjecta membra poetae (limbs of a dismembered poet) - an early literary reference, one of several embedded throughout this poem.

**Line 2**

The great house was once inhabited by girls who perhaps flitted around the lights at night like moths but are now part of the same dust once lit by candles. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust...

**Line 3**

There are lizards living in these ruins and they can literally sharpen their claws on once were the walls of the house. Nature has taken over again following the brief interruption by empire.

**Line 4**

Cherubs are winged unearthly beings, from the bible stories. Two are said to have guarded the entrance to the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve lived. Here they are shrieking, in pain, from fear, because they're stained - with what is uncertain. It could be the actual residue of some substance, but more than likely is the stain of past cruelties and horrors, and guilt.

**Lines 5 and 6**

The first example of enjambment - when a line runs on into the next without punctuation but maintaining sense - sees old ruts of a track now covered by cow dung.

So this is certainly a picture of former glory - the ruins are scattered, the place now left to lizards and moths, the entrance stained, the track fit only for droppings.

**Lines 7 and 8**

And three crows, the harbingers of doom and evil doings, are in the eucalyptus trees, whose branches creak as the heavy birds settle down for the roost. Enjambment again.

**Lines 9 and 10**

For the third time enjambment is in use - building up some momentum as the line breaks take the reader on...muck/Of...trees/And...before the pause for nose/The.....

Here are limes, the green fruit full of vitamin C that helped keep the British navy afloat and free from scurvy (a disease which weakens the system and eventually leads to death in extreme cases). Plantations made profits from selling them and used slaves brought from Africa to work them.

This is a powerful line because the limes are dead - personification bringing the image to life - and the stench gets right into the nose and quickens (makes more active) the leprosy of empire....that is some statement.

Leprosy is also a disease, a serious one sometimes, and involves disfigurement and disability if left untreated. Is that the inference here? The idea that empire was contagious and if touched meant certain doom for some...

**Lines 11 and 12**

This is a paraphrase of a line from Blake's poem Night, the theme of which is good versus evil. Walcott has extended it a little but the sentiment remains - here the speaker is suggesting that when empire is around you can say goodbye to freedom and happiness.

## Analysis Line by Line of Ruins of a Great House

**Line 13**

The speaker continues to describe the ruins as he makes his way through them.

Marble is a white, sometimes streaky stone, used for building and decoration. Greece is one of the biggest producers and many of its ancient structures and statues are made of finest marble.

Faulkner's South refers to the novelist William Faulkner, known for his novels and stories of the southern states of America.

The reference to Greece implies that here is an ancient culture now defunct. Faulkner had a love/hate relationship with the south which resonates with the speaker.

**Line 14**

Deciduous trees are those that lose their leaves every year but now they are no more.

**Lines 15 - 18**

The tone begins to shift slightly as the speaker focuses in on another ruinous aspect of the house and grounds.

There are some trees remaining but the reader is left to guess what they might be. A rash of trees suggests a not too healthy grouping, with dead leaves nearby.

Note the enjambment again which encourages the reader to run on from line to line as the tone changes. Now there is a spade, used for digging up or burying - the metal spade will ring (make a sound) against the hard bone.

The last line is inspired by Milton's Paradise Lost, so here we have an animal or a human buried at a time when the slave plantation was thriving as an evil business.

**Rhyme and Slant Rhyme in Ruins of a Great House**

Although essentially a free verse poem there are several examples of full rhyme and slant rhyme throughout, suggesting some connection between the cultures of a dual nature - harmony and disharmony.

## Ruins of a Great House Analysis Line by Line

**Lines 19 - 20**

The dead limes mentioned earlier are now confirmed as the fruit the plantation was created to produce. The silt, fine soil, now gathers at the river's edge.

**Lines 21**

The imperious rakes refers to the arrogant but idle men of fashion who once strutted around the estate with their girls.

**Line 22**

As the river flows on it seems to wipe out all thoughts of hurt. The speaker obviously feels some kind of pain as he works his way through the ruins - he knows something horrible occurred but senses that, despite the evil of the past the present somehow heals.

**Lines 23 - 26**

The speaker becomes a person...note the first use of 'I'. The speaker becomes part of the ruined landscape, becomes active by climbing over the ironwork. This crafted protection kept wealth and privilege intact, perhaps gave the owners a false sense of moral superiority...they felt no guilt....how could they living with marble, fine stone, big trees and profit.

Nature has taken over, the grille ironwork helpless to stop the worm and the mouse, two common creatures - the word rent implying that the worm takes out something from the estate, and the word cavalry is military in origin, as if the mice are running to rescue.

**Lines 27 - 31**

The wind in the lime trees reminds the speaker of a death rattle, of empire, and backs this up with reference to Rudyard Kipling, one time known as the Poet of Empire.

Kipling, as an imperialist, upheld the process of colonisation, seeing it as the 'white man's burden', with the bible and the sword the main weapons of subjugation.

## Line by Line Analysis of Ruins of a Great House

**Lines 32 - 36**

Now the speaker speeds up, close to or on a green lawn, with low walls, thinking all the time about the situation he finds himself in. He knows of the cruelties of the past, seems to be weighing up and judging the cultural dilemma within.

He gives three examples of English explorers and naval men, known as the Sea Dogs - two of whom, Hawkins and Drake, were definitely involved in the slave trade. The speaker sees them as murderers and poets - Raleigh was certainly a poet but the other two not.

The fact that such a nation could produce both criminals and writers confuses matters for the speaker, who uses English, yet whose ancestors were treated so badly.

**Lines 37 - 38**

The stench of limes becomes a metonym for all the horrid deeds perpetrated by the British, their system fuelled by the slave trade, their heroes villains, their galleons (ships) writing the death warrants of countless African slaves.

**Line 39**

One of the simplest lines in the poem. A straightforward sentence, with caesura (pause). Men come and go, the rotten things they do remain.

**Lines 40 - 42**

The idea of death intensifies, this time blown by the wind that disperses the ash (ashes to ashes) yet causes the mind's ember to glow or cools the orange glow? The speaker's are burning (red?) as he thinks of Donne (1572 - 1631), a well known metaphysical poet who wrote his Meditations following severe illness - see below for more detail.

## Ruins of a Great House Analysis Line by Line

**Lines 43 - 50**

The speaker is angry as he pictures a slave in the lake - the emotions affecting him must be intense as they compete with a more thoughtful and cooling compassion, which is based on reasoning.

Albion is an ancient name for Great Britain, invaded many times over the centuries, and itself a colony of the Romans for around four hundred and fifty years. The speaker is trying to reconcile the facts of the past with his current feelings of anger for misdeeds and abuse.

Donne's words ('part of the continent, piece of the main') precede those of Shakespeare (nook-shotten) as the speaker goes back in his mind to those far off times when Britain and its inhabitants were likewise subject to foreign rule and disputes. They too paid a price.

**Lines 51 - 53**

The final three lines conclude with the speaker's compassion coming to the fore - there isn't forgiveness but there is a kind of understanding, based on Donne's idea that no man is an island and that every man's death affects everyone else.

This recognition of humanity's plight comes as a surprise. Past atrocities have to be faced, abuse and death admitted, and those who misused their power brought to book.

Yet how can these wounds be fully healed when there are so many reminders of a past rotten regime in one's homeland and that is continuing somewhere else in the world right at this moment.

Perhaps this is the strength of the poem - it makes the reader think about the history of power and domination and abuse on a local and global scale.