

Derek Walcott  
20th Century Literature: Poetry

# Missing the Sea

By Rachel Leow

*Something removed roars in the ears of this house,  
Hangs its drapes windless, stuns mirrors  
Till reflections lack substance.*

*Some sound like the gnashing of windmills ground  
To a dead halt;  
A deafening absence, a blow.*

*It hoops this valley, weighs this mountain,  
Estranges gesture, pushes this pencil through a thick nothing now,*

*Freights cupboards with silence, folds sour laundry  
Like the clothes of the dead left exactly  
As the dead behaved by the beloved,*

*Incredulous, expecting occupancy.*

Derek Walcott  
*The Castaway*

Write a critical analysis of *Missing the Sea*, and comment on how far it is typical of Walcott's poetry.

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At one level, *Missing the Sea* is concerned with the lack of something familiar. Because its presence is so sorely missed, the persona exhibits a great deal of confusion in describing his loss: the *absence* of something tangible (in this interpretation, the sea) transforms into something tangible in itself. The lack of the sound of the sea, in the persona's mind, is not merely the lack of noise as dark is merely the lack of light, but an actual *sound* in itself – an *audible silence*. In *Missing the Sea*, the silence takes on a distinct and tangible character through the way in which Walcott handles its representation and role. This paradoxical effect – utilized as a central theme throughout the poem – is the most unique and striking feature of *Missing the Sea*.

The first words of the poem – “Something removed” – are indicative of the intangibility of the subject, since it is something that is not there. Bearing in mind the title of the poem, the reader may quickly draw the conclusion that this “something” is the sound of the sea.

The thematic paradox becomes apparent with the very next word – “roars”. Two literary devices are at work here. Firstly, the paradoxical juxtaposition of two such incongruities (how can something removed roar?) effectively introduces the concept of an “audible silence” that *Missing the Sea* revolves around. The word “roars” is normally associated with a deafening noise, but with the suggestion that it is the silence that is deafening, it creates instead a sense of profound hollowness. Secondly, the personification of this absence (a paradox in itself) amplifies the sense of bereavement that becomes increasingly apparent in the poem, since it is far more natural to feel the loss of a live human than an inanimate object. These two devices complement each other. By conveying the feeling that this “something removed” is alive, and juxtaposing this on the sense of hollowness, Walcott manages to garner increased empathy from the reader, who may thus begin to fully appreciate the depth of his persona’s loss.

This suggestion – that the silence is alive – is amplified through contrast with the sense of lethargic lifelessness conveyed by the imagery in the first stanza. In a house where “drapes” hang “windless” and unmoving, and mirrors “lack substance”, the personified silence is the only indication of life. The paradox here, of course, is that the lifelessness of the house is caused by the living silence itself!

The second stanza creates more paradox. The silence is definitively described as a sound – “Some sound...”, which is then said to have “ground to a dead halt”. Not only does this continue the personification, it also creates a paradox in that it is difficult to imagine the lack of a sound stopping (surely that means that the sound has returned). The form of the line “To a dead halt” is stylistically symbolic of an actual halt – it is the shortest line in the poem, and conveys a sense of being cut off abruptly. Enjambment is used in these first two lines to heighten the “shock” of this brief second line; the reader automatically ‘launches’ into the second line, only to find that it stops almost immediately. The effect is that the reader will almost unconsciously lay emphasis on the two short, sharp syllables of “dead halt” (since “to a” are both unstressed syllables and will therefore be passed over quickly). This results in an auditory realization of literary meaning, since the reader will actually vocally come to a “dead halt”! The stanza concludes with an oxymoron – “deafening absence” – a subtle word play on the commonly-used oxymoron “deafening silence” to make it unique as well as pertinent to his subject of concern (the absence of something).

The next three stanzas comprise only one long sentence without full stops; the result is that it becomes increasingly difficult to trace the subject of the sentence, and the reader risks becoming lost in the predicate. This may be a stylistic attempt on Walcott’s part to communicate the confusion of his persona, as he is deliberately ambiguous in using the

subject "It" to begin the third stanza (instead of "some sound" or "something", which is structurally expected given the repetition of the pattern in the previous two stanzas), and failing to even begin the fourth and fifth stanzas with any indication of subject at all. It may even convey a sense of loss for the reader, as the subject of the sentence becomes increasingly inaccessible (and therefore, "missing" the silence rather than the sea!).

In the persona's context, however, this loss of subject probably indicates an increasing confusion as to the source of his bereavement. Even from the beginning, the ambiguity of "something" demonstrates a lack of certainty about what he is missing; by the third stanza, he is even more bewildered as to just what "it" is (this uncertainty is not mirrored in the clear, unambiguous title of the poem). It is this confusion that Walcott seeks to communicate to the reader.

The three stanzas are also rich with paradoxes. The overwhelming emphasis on verbs and 'action words' pertaining to the subject – "hoops", "weighs", "estranges", "pushes", "freights", and "folds" – underscores the paradox of an intangibility that can perform actions at all. An assonant oxymoron in the final line of the third stanza echoes the ending of the second stanza – "a thick nothing" (how can "nothing" be thick?). The line "freights cupboards with silence" is also a contradiction in terms, for two reasons: firstly, that it is impossible to "freight" something with an intangible nothing; and secondly, that if we trace the subject of the sentence, we find that it would read (in meaning): "Silence freights cupboards with silence". The final stanza is the ultimate paradox – this tangible silence is "expecting occupancy" by, we may deduce, the return of the sound of the sea; but in doing so, it is inviting its own destruction, since if the sound of the sea returns, it can no longer sustain itself as a silence.

This final line – emphasized all the more by its structural isolation from the rest of the poem – leaves the reader with a suggestion of another, more macroscopic level to the poem, most notably with its reference to "occupancy", which we may interpret as *colonial* occupancy. Walcott's characteristic concern with the historical origins of his Caribbean homeland, and the effect of its colonization and decolonization, makes this a thoroughly plausible interpretation. Reading the poem in this light, it may be seen that this "something removed" is a reference to the removal of British colonial hegemony from the islands (the sea is a common association with Britain and her navy), and that the persona sees this removal as something that made his history insubstantial. The line "reflections lack substance" is telling – it suggests that his culture was merely a "reflection" of the colonizing power; once this power left, it became, as observed earlier, lifeless. The line "a thick nothing now" also takes on new meaning if "now" is treated as a noun, and thus becomes a reference to the "nothingness" of their history. The omnipresent influence of the colonizer is alluded to in the third stanza – everything has

been affected by its loss: the physical “valley” and “mountain”, the insubstantial “gesture”, and even Walcott’s own art (“this pencil”). Walcott suggests in the penultimate stanza, echoing the first, that everything seems frozen and unchanging – “the clothes of the dead left exactly as the dead behaved” – and, by inference, that his culture is in stasis and stagnation (“sour laundry”).

The confusion portrayed through the persona by Walcott, therefore, takes on a somewhat different meaning. It conveys, instead, the inner turmoil of the persona in deciding whether or not the removal of the colonial power was for the best. The suggestion throughout the poem is that it has made his culture incomplete, and therein lies the paradox: the independence of a decolonized state is supposed to make it *greater* than it was before, and according to the persona in *Missing the Sea*, this has not been the case. However, the final line suggests, as observed earlier, that if the colonizing power returns, it will bring about inevitable self-destruction.

Insofar as Walcott is a postcolonial writer, this interpretation fits in well with his characteristic concerns, and musings on the effect of decolonization can be found in many of his poems, such as *The Conqueror* and *Parades, Parades*. It is also typical of Walcott’s poetry in its almost effortless melding of two different levels of subject concerns – personal loss and cultural deprivation. Walcott is also known for his clever auditory manipulation through literary device, as observed earlier in the line “To a dead halt”, and *Missing the Sea* is rich with the inimitable imagery and distinctive language so unique to his style of writing – “gnashing of windmills”, “stuns mirrors till reflections lack substance”, “thick nothing now”. To this extent, *Missing the Sea* is quite distinctively a Walcott poem. However, it is the thematic paradox, expounded so exhaustively upon in this essay, that really distinguishes *Missing the Sea*, and this is *not* typical of Walcott’s poetry. It is a true measure of Walcott’s brilliance as a poet that he is able to step outside even his own convention to create poems as fresh, unique and different as *Missing the Sea*.