

# CATHERINE WELDON IN *THE GHOST DANCE*: A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

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*An excerpt from Derek Walcott's 2002 play The Ghost Dance will be subjected to stylistic analysis to uncover the multilayered linguistic devices used by the author to depict the profound link between the main character of the play, Catherine Weldon, and the Native American struggle against white expansion in the West of North America in the 1890s.*

## 1. Introduction

In his description of the possible variants of what he defines as “discourse architectures” of drama, Short (1996:169) identifies prototypical drama as manifesting at least two levels of discourse:

1. Addresser 1 (playwright)/ Addressee 1 (audience and/or readers)

2. Addresser 2 (characters)/ Addressee 2 (characters)

and underlines that the second level of discourse, namely character(s)-to-character(s) talk, is *embedded* in the first level of discourse, that between the playwright and the readers/audience (ibid.).

He further distinguishes between this two-level discourse architecture and a three-level structure, where a third, intermediate level is created between playwright-readers/audience on the one side, and character(s)-character(s) on the other, namely narrator-narratees. The insertion of a narrator clearly distances the playwright from the audience/readers, and strengthens the fictional aspect of the play (ibid.).

Short also claims that “in well-constructed dramatic dialogue everything is meant by the playwright, even when it is apparently unintended by the character” (Short 1996: 178), although he also

concedes that it might be possible to make inferences which the writer did not apparently intend.

However, if a) the play is “well-constructed” and shows a two-level structure rather than a three level architecture, and b) the analysis to which it is subjected is a stylistic analysis, the possibility of drawing inferences unintended by the playwright decreases greatly, because stylistics is focussed on a detailed and thorough investigation of the linguistic choices made by authors to create and convey meaning in their texts, thus guiding their readers towards logical interpretations of those texts (ibid.).

With regard to which specific object of analysis should be selected when subjecting a dramatic text to stylistic exploration, Short (1981) pointed out that accuracy in the analysis of a play is almost impossible to obtain when considering a particular staging of that play rather than its script, unless there is the absolute certainty that all those who will read the analysis have seen that very same performance. This is because, although the script and the performance are both essential to the final dramatic effect, all performances are different, so that the script of the play remains the only “stable” text which can be accurately analysed. In addition, in his later work on drama (cf. Short 1998), while underlying that performance should not be neglected or belittled in any way, he brings the argument further by claiming that a detailed linguistic analysis of the script of the play might in fact lead to a profound understanding of drama by showing that scripts are indeed very rich in terms of indications as to how the play should be staged.<sup>1</sup>

This being the premise, the aim of this article will be to analyse, through stylistics (Culpeper et al. 1998; Douthwaite 2000; McIntyre 2006; Simpson 1993; Short 1996), one extract from the script of *The*

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis of the script VS analysis of the performance debate is ongoing. McIntyre, for example, has recently suggested that a compromise might be that of analysing a recorded performance of a play, such as a film, because it represents as stable a text as the script (cf. McIntyre 2008). Focusing on this debate is, however, beyond the scope of my investigation. Suffice it to say that the stance adopted by Short (1981) and Short (1998) will also be adopted in this article.

*Ghost Dance* (2002), a two-act play by Derek Walcott, in order to identify what linguistic choices have been made to delineate the commitment to and involvement in the Native American cause of Catherine Weldon, the main character of the play, based on the white woman who abandoned her life in the East and travelled to the Dakotas in 1889 in order to (unsuccessfully) try and help Sitting Bull and the Sioux, by acting as Sitting Bull's secretary and interpreter (Pollack 2002).

Although the insertion of this historically-grounded figure in Walcott's works has received some scholarly attention (Bensen 1994; Wollard 2009), very little consideration has been given to the *linguistic* choices made by the author/playwright to create the strong connection between Catherine Weldon and the Native American struggle in *The Ghost Dance*, which is precisely what this article aims at investigating in a systematic and detailed way through stylistics.

## 2. The play

Although *The Ghost Dance* was first staged in 1989, and its final and revised script was completed in 1995, it was published only in 2002 (Walcott 2002). This play is therefore the result of a long process of reworking. In this light, it is also noteworthy that *The Ghost Dance* does not represent Catherine Weldon's first appearance in a work by Walcott. She had also been introduced in the famous 1990 poem *Omeros*, which was the last book Walcott published before being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992 ([http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-bibl.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-bibl.html); 5.11.2014).

In fact, just as Walcott reworked the entire 2002 play, he also re-defined and developed the figure of Catherine during the years between *Omeros* and *The Ghost Dance*: in the previous work, she was one of the many invited guests appearing every now and then throughout the poem; in the latter work, she becomes the main character.

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In particular, in *Omeros* her figure is introduced as a device to recall the Native American genocide during the colonizing enterprise carried out by the US Government. In turn, this genocide is compared on more than one occasion (cf. Walcott 2003: 278; 352) with the massacre of the Aruaks, the indigenous population of St. Lucia, Walcott's native island. Therefore, the presence of Catherine in *Omeros* allows Walcott to explore an issue which is of paramount importance in postcolonial literature: the (re)construction of an accurate collective memory through the reference to (sometimes, the uncovering of) the disastrous consequences of colonization – of any colonizing enterprise – among which the annihilation of entire peoples and of their cultures cannot but be listed. In this specific case, the fate of the Aruaks is compared to that of the Native Americans: both populations had been living on their lands for hundreds of years before European colonization reached those very same lands and took possession of them.

Therefore, in *Omeros*, Catherine's story is a cameo<sup>2</sup> which allows Walcott to include this tragic parallelism among the many themes traced in the poem and which offers him the opportunity to present Catherine as his guide in his journey through the Dakotas and his alter-ego (Walcott 2003: 300; 352); at the same time, she is presented as an "eye-witness" of the Native American genocide whose words are able to construct and convey the idea that time and history are unstoppable forces destined to repeating themselves in a tragic circularity (cf. Zurru 2010).

However, approximately in that same period (notice that *The Ghost Dance* was staged for the first time in 1989, one year before the publication of *Omeros*), Walcott must have decided that Catherine's story on the one hand and the Native American history on the other deserved more than a cameo, and wrote a two-act play focused on the Native American religious movement *The Ghost Dance* (see below) and whose main character is Catherine Weldon.

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<sup>2</sup> Hamner (1997: 94) considers the insertion of the figure of Catherine Weldon in *Omeros* as further evidence of Walcott's interest in bringing peripheral characters to the centre, so much so that he defines the whole poem as an "epic of the dispossessed".

Unsurprisingly, Walcott himself describes *The Ghost Dance* as a play which deals with “disenfranchisement and deprivation” (Walcott 2003, foreword). It is this disenfranchisement and this deprivation, which seem to echo the disenfranchisement and deprivation of all the victims of colonization, that Walcott describes through Catherine’s words and actions in the play.

In the following section a brief excerpt taken from the last but one conversation involving Catherine is presented (the argumentation built up in this exchange is reinforced in the final conversation, but no significant new information is added.)

3. **The Text**

MCLAUGHLIN

[29] Where will you be going now, Mrs. Weldon?

CATHERINE

[30] I wish it were in those white hills to join them.

MCLAUGHLIN

[31] What would be the point of that? [32] You’d freeze to death.

CATHERINE

[33] Hallucinatory autumn, phantom spring,  
the immaculate annihilation of deep winter,  
to summer, sitting by the door, a distant cousin,  
shucking cobs in a basin, the wife I was,  
golden and ripe, growing up in the Dakotas,  
with a brown firm husband, coming through the corn  
with a brace of partridge over his shoulder,  
to that girl, drowsing in midsummer’s fire.

[34] I know that he’ll not come through the charred corn  
with a brace of partridge over his shoulder;

[35] I have arrived at that natural acceptance,

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[36] through nature, [37] not through Progress. [38] I can stand now

at the dead centre, [39] at the heart of Time  
where Time itself becomes a Ghost Dancer,  
[40] and everything that seemed surely insubstantial  
returns, [41] and that is the joy of the Ghost Dance,  
[42] that they, [43] the Sioux, [44] if they believe in nature,  
[45] must first die to return. [46] Just like the seasons.  
[47] I was mad once. [48] But this bright interval  
is as lucid as a shaft of summer light  
on a cabin's kitchen floor, [49] when I was  
what Lucy called me, [50] "Bright Hair Who Loves Us."  
(Walcott 2002: II, 8; 243-44)<sup>3</sup>

#### 4. **The Text: contextualisation**

*The Ghost Dance* owes its title to the homonymous phenomenon which, as the narrator Omeros himself claims in the 1990 poem (Walcott 2003: 368), "tied the [Indian] tribes into one nation" between 1890-91. This was a religious movement which spread among the Native American tribes of the Plains, predicting that they should dance in order to meet their recently dead relatives and their ancestors, while waiting for the arrival of a messiah who would pave the way for the apocalypse, namely a wave that would destroy every trace of human life apart from those of the Native Americans (Pollack 2002). Despite the similarity of the basic concepts of this religion with those of the Catholic belief,<sup>4</sup> its rapid spread among

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<sup>3</sup> Sentences have been numbered for ease of reference. Since only [35]-[50] will be subjected to stylistic scrutiny for reasons of space, in [35]-[45] and [48]-[50], given the length and complexity of the internal structure of these sentences, each segment between commas is also numbered.

<sup>4</sup> A similarity (and paradox) which Catherine unsurprisingly underlines in the play: "First, we preach the Resurrection and the life,/ of a Second Coming, of a pale-faced Messiah/ [...] / When they go a little further, as all converts do,/ [...] / you turn and call them crazy" (Walcott 2002: 226). In

the Native Americans of the Plains was viewed with great suspicion by the white population. Not only was this religious belief creating common ground among the tribes, but it was also accompanied by the belief that, if the Native Americans wore the “Ghost Shirts”, they would be insensitive to bullets (cf. Pollack 2002: 114). This soon became an easy excuse for the American army to attack, because they were afraid of an uprising possibly deriving from this new belief.

This being a necessarily brief overview of the historical context against whose backdrop the play is set, the excerpt presented above is a conversation between Catherine and James McLaughlin, the white agent of the Indian police (cf. Walcott 2002: 119) who was in charge of Sitting Bull’s reservation. This conversation takes place soon after Sitting Bull’s death, when both Catherine and McLaughlin are leaving the reservation.

## 5. **The text: General features of the passage**

Due to limitations of space, only [35]-[50] will be scrutinised.

This portion of the text represents the final part of Catherine’s turn (Herman 1998: 24) in the conversation she is having with James McLaughlin. Unsurprisingly, she is speaking in the first person. What stands out, however, is that the deictic item “I” is deployed four times in a relatively brief segment. Although she makes two third person references (McIntyre 2006: 96), namely “they, the Sioux” and “Lucy”, Catherine clearly represents the deictic centre (ibid.: 92) of the turn. Furthermore, since person deixis is to be listed among the indicators of viewpoint in dramatic texts (ibid.), this recurrence of the first person deictic “I” indicates that it is from her own point of view that Catherine is speaking.<sup>5</sup>

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this respect, it is significant that in the play the same actors who perform the church congregation also perform the ghost dancers.

<sup>5</sup> Bensen (1994: 119-20) also points out that, although the story told in *The Ghost Dance* is the story of Sitting Bull, Kicking Bear and, by extension, of the Native American tribes, it is Catherine who tells *their* story through *her* viewpoint.

At a general level, the syntactic structure of this portion of the text appears to be “chopped up”. This impression is created through a range of foregrounding devices (Douthwaite 2000). First of all, the choppiness of clauses from [35] to [46] is created on a graphological level,<sup>6</sup> by the commas continually interrupting the flow of the sentence (cf. Douthwaite 2000: 277 ff.). This operation creates a number of phrases rankshifted up (ibid.) to the level of clause or sentence, which, as we shall see shortly, will turn out to constitute examples of foregrounding; coordination is another important foregrounding device employed: the subsequent clauses, [40] and [41], exhibit the repetition of the conjunction “and” in clause initial position, which gives the impression that the two clauses are conveying two connected ideas of equal importance.<sup>7</sup> As we shall see in detail in the following section, however, this is far from being the case, since [41] constitutes, in actual fact, an anaphoric reference to [40]. All these devices create foregrounded structures: the phrases [36], [37], [39], [50] are foregrounded by having been rankshifted up to the level of clause, while [46] is upshifted to the level of sentence, and the coordinated clauses [40]-[41] are foregrounded by virtue of showing a parallel<sup>8</sup> initial structure through conjunction (*viz.* parallelism). Therefore, while the overall style of the above passage is clearly not conversational (formal language, metaphors, syntactic length and complexity are more often associated with writing than with speech; cf. Short 1996: 185), the style of [35] to [46] appears to be conversational, reproducing the flow of the character’s words.

The turning point is represented by [47]. This very short, simple, grammatically correct, declarative sentence in the past tense, expressing something which no longer exists, namely Catherine’s

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<sup>6</sup> McIntyre (2006: 52) also points out that graphology, and graphological deviation in particular, can be used in texts, including dramatic texts, to create particular viewpoint-related effects.

<sup>7</sup> On the topic of equivalence and subordination in connection with information distribution and rankshift see Douthwaite (2000: 286 ff.)

<sup>8</sup> Parallelism and deviation represent the main high-order foregrounding devices (ibid.: 37).

madness, is indeed followed by a linguistic style which is less conversational. [48]-[50] is a complex sentence, as defined by Arts and Arts (1982), which is divided into three clauses only, while the preceding sentence [38]-[45] had been divided, through the deployment of commas, into six clauses. I now turn to a more detailed account of the text.

## 6. **The text: A closer analysis**

[35] is a main clause containing an anaphoric reference, “that”, referring back to the death of Catherine’s husband reported in [34] (“I know that he’ll not come through the charred corn/ with a brace of partridge over his shoulder”). The third constituent of this clause is the prepositional phrase (PP) “at that natural acceptance”, where the prepositional complement (Arts and Arts 1982: 125-126) “that natural acceptance” is assigned end focus (Douthwaite 2000: 314), which makes it more salient, thus pushing the inevitability of Catherine’s reaction to her husband’s death to the foreground. To be precise, the PP occupies end focus by dint of the inclusion of the comma immediately following it, which “detaches” [36] (“through nature”) from [35], upshifting this second PP to the level of verbless clause (Arts and Arts 1982: 164). This choice shows the combined action of two foregrounding devices. On the one hand, as is usually the case with upshifting (Douthwaite 2000: 283), the insertion of the comma turns the sentence into a marked structure (the unmarked version being “I have arrived at that natural acceptance through nature”), which therefore constitutes an instantiation of deviation (ibid.: 37); on the other hand, rankshift impacts on information value, namely on the degree of importance of the information conveyed by a certain linguistic structure, by impacting on information distribution, and, more specifically, on segmentation (ibid.: 283-287). In other words, Douthwaite (ibid.) traces the relation between rankshift and foregrounding starting from the premise that the salience of a certain piece of information is not so much linked to content, but to the way that information is presented, or packaged, in the text. In particular, given that the information

conveyed by those segments which are higher on the rankscale is weightier than the information conveyed by those segments which are lower down the rankscale, then, as a general principle, the information value of a segment which is upshifted from a lower level (e.g. phrase) to a higher level (e.g. clause) is increased.

In addition to what has been stated above, the repetition of the lexemes “natural”, as premodifier of the Head Noun “acceptance” in [35], and “nature” in [36], strengthens the idea of the inevitability (*viz.* the naturalness) of human resignation before death. Indeed, as was implicit in the preceding argument, [36] and [37] are two PPs upshifted to the level of verbless clause whose syntactic structure is parallel but oppositional, one representing the negation of the other. They clarify that what helped Catherine accept her faith was nature, not progress, and, in so doing, create a mutually exclusive relation which a) reminds readers of the opposition between “Native Americans”<sup>9</sup> and “Westerners”<sup>10</sup> underlying the whole play and b) clarifies with whom Catherine sides.

However, [36] and [37] do not constitute the only segments in the text analysed where Catherine’s alliance with the Native Americans is referred to and brought to the forefront. In fact, it is precisely around this extra meaning (Fowler 1996: 92 ff.) that the remaining portion of the text revolves.

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<sup>9</sup> Although Catherine regularly uses the term of address “Indian[s]” throughout the play, the term “Native American[s]” will be used in this article, unless Catherine’s (or Walcott’s) words are quoted. The rationale behind this choice is not to disrespect or distance myself from Walcott’s selection and deployment of this term in his literary work, but to avoid using a term of address which might be perceived as negatively value-loaded, hence inappropriate, in a scholarly article. It goes without saying that no value-judgement is meant to be attached to this term.

<sup>10</sup> The term of address “Westerners” is employed here as a synonym of ‘white population’, in order to underline their sharing of the set of cultural, social and moral values, as opposed to the values of the Native American tribes, typical of the so-called “Western world”, although technically the Native Americans were the people occupying the western part of North America in 1890-1891. No value-judgement is meant to be attached to this term, which is exclusively used as a referring expression.

We now turn to the linguistic devices employed to create it. [38]-[45] is the longest sentence in the extract considered and has an extremely complex structure. As in [35], the grammatical subject in [38] is the person deictic “I”. Catherine is therefore the person who performs the action described in the clause. However, the action described is that of standing, which involves immobility – an action which denies action. This, in turn, further recalls Catherine’s impossibility to fight against what is one of the most natural phenomena in life, namely death, except through a “natural acceptance”. Notwithstanding that, the dynamic modality (Palmer 2001: 10) expressed in [38] is meant to underline that “the natural acceptance” arrived at by Catherine has in actual fact strengthened her ability to face “Time” and to “stand at [its] heart”. This is further underlined by the fact that the proximal time deictic adverb “now” (Simpson 1993: 14), which is the counterpart of the distal time deictic “then” (ibid.) – namely “before I arrived at that natural acceptance” – is given graphological salience (Douthwaite 2000: 207). It occupies end-position in the line thanks to the clause having been “interrupted” by the enjambement and the subsequent PP (“at the dead centre”) having been placed in line-initial position in the following line. In this way, the deictic adverb is made to foreground the idea of a newly-gained consciousness which has arisen from the adherence to a natural lifestyle, such as that of the Native Americans’, in opposition to a more progress-driven approach to life, such as that of the Westerners.

[39] is a PP realising exactly the same function as the PP in [38], namely adverbial. Multiple realisation (ibid.: 346-347) thus constitutes parallelism. This device creates a striking effect, since the noun “heart” is usually synonymous with “life”, rather than with “death” (the fact that “dead centre” is an idiomatic expression meaning “the exact centre” should not prevent us from noticing the oxymoron created between both denotative and connotative meanings of “heart” and “dead”). More specifically, [39] is a PP upshifted to the level of verbless clause with the wh- clause as postmodifier of the Head (“heart”) of the noun phrase (NP) “the heart” which realises the prepositional complement. As mentioned

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above, the fact of having raised a phrase to the level of clause increases the value of the information conveyed by that grammatical unit, namely that the abstract entity “Time” has been turned into a human subject, into a “Ghost Dancer”. However, distinctions of value can be identified within the phrase itself, since the postmodifier – the *wh*- clause “where Time becomes a Ghost Dancer” – has been downgraded to the level of word (see Douthwaite 2000: 279), thereby diminishing the information value of that clause. However, this downgrading operation is fully offset by having made the clause graphologically salient through its occupying an entire line, thereby restoring a relationship of equality between the two elements. In addition, the “synonymity” of the two entities “Time” and “Ghost Dancer” is further underscored on a graphological level through the use of capital letters unrequested by the graphological/syntactic/lexical system of the English language (“Time”, “Ghost Dancer”).

[40] and [41] are two coordinated main clauses with a parallel initial structure (since, as pointed out above, both begin with the coordinating conjunction “and”), and are thus presented as two related pieces of information having the same information value. In actual fact, the structure built up through these coordinated clauses is ambiguous, since [40] might be related to either [39], (“where Time itself becomes a Ghost Dancer, and where everything that seemed surely insubstantial returns”), or to [41]. In turn, the demonstrative pronoun “that” in [41] is both an anaphoric reference to clauses [38]-[39] and [40], and a cataphoric reference to [42]-[45]. Since a pronoun cannot perform both operations at the same time (Saussure [1916] 1983), this implies that the clause is syntactically ill-formed, hence foregrounded.<sup>11</sup> The foregrounding operation is further developed in [42], where the repetition of the

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<sup>11</sup> It could be argued that this could simply be a “grammatical mistake”. However, given that Derek Walcott is a Nobel Prize winning writer and that this play certainly exhibits the “well-constructed dramatic dialogue” referred to in the Introduction (also, but not exclusively, in consideration of the long process of reworking it was subjected to), it is reasonable to deduce that it was a purposeful choice.

demonstrative pronoun “that” is employed as an anaphoric reference to the subject of the preceding clause. [42] to [45], indeed, represent the explanation of the subject of [41], and could cover the function subject itself: “That they, the Sioux, if they believe in nature, must first die to return is the joy of the Ghost Dance”.

[42]-[45] is thus a repetition of the subject of [41]. Furthermore, it is attributed greater information value by having been foregrounded through having been assigned a position which it usually does not occupy (since the subject in an English sentence generally precedes the predicator (Arts and Arts 1982), it does not follow it). In addition, if we look at the internal structure of the clause, we can note that [43] constitutes an inner parallelism because, being an instantiation of apposition, it is itself a “repetition” of the preceding subject “they”, just as the clause in which it is inserted, [42]-[45], is, structurally speaking, a “repetition” of [41]. Stated differently, the structure built by [42] and [43] does not so much exhibit multiple realisation, but is redundant. Indeed, multiple realisation, by definition, implies that a clause or phrase function be realised more than once in the same sentence by different linguistic elements rather than by the repetition of the same linguistic (ibid.: 346). Furthermore, either [42] or [43] could cover the function subject, and one can replace the other, implying that the insertion of [43] does not respond to any syntactic requirement. In other words, the NP “the Sioux” is assigned far greater importance than it would have if the preceding pronoun “they” had not been employed, so that the importance Catherine attaches to this people is highlighted (*viz.* foregrounded).

[44] is a subordinate clause which, together with [43], splits the that-clause “that they must die to return” into two parts, detaching the subject from the predicator. By repeating the subject (“they”) of the that-clause [42] in [43], and by interrupting that very same that-clause through the insertion of the subordinate clause [44] (“if they believe in nature”), the final part of the that-clause ([45]) does not graphologically appear to have a subject. This foregrounding operation highlights [45], giving the information it contains inordinate importance, an operation which is bolstered by its

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occupying the graphologically important beginning of the line. It can in fact be concluded that the oxymoron “must first die to return” represents the key concept of the sentence.

At this point, if we consider co-text, we realise that both lexemes “die” and “return” had already been employed: “*dead centre*” ([38]) and “everything that seemed surely insubstantial *returns*” ([40]). We then realise that “the dead centre”, which is presented in a relation of synonymy with “the heart”, was not a purposeless choice at all. “Time” is “turned” into a dead entity in order to allow “everything that seemed surely insubstantial” to return, the latter representing a reference to the spirits of dead people for whose *return* the Ghost Dance was performed. In other words, what the passage suggests is that Time itself cannot return before having been turned into a ghost, for only after death can the Ghost Dance be danced and the dead (Time included) allowed to return.

Stated differently, not only does the fact of turning the concept of time into a figure which is so bound to the Native American culture underscore once again Walcott’s tendency to celebrate, by having the marginalised move to the centre, the “dispossessed” (Hamner 1997), but it also makes the stance the character has adopted obvious. This device makes it crystal clear on which side of the fence Catherine stands: she has embraced the Native American cause completely, and adopted their concepts to describe even her own reality.

[46] offers a confirmation of this reading. In this case, a phrase is rankshifted up to the level of sentence, thereby increasing its information value greatly. Other foregrounding operations here include: a) the only content word is “seasons”; b) the sentence occupies the end of the line; c) brevity (in stark contrast with the lengthy complexity of [38]-[45]); d) “seasons” occupies end focus and is the last word in the line. Together, these four devices render the lexeme “seasons” perceptually salient. In other words, the reader is being invited to give great importance to the entire segment, and to pay particular attention to the lexeme “seasons”.

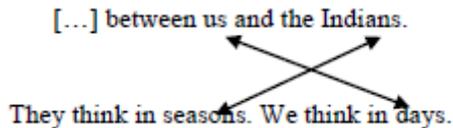
The fact that Catherine speaks of “seasons”, is indeed a confirmation of her adherence to the Native Americans’ lifestyle,<sup>12</sup> in this case to their way of interpreting the passing of time. This thesis is supported by the co-text: earlier in the play Catherine had

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<sup>12</sup> It might be argued that the deployment on the part of Catherine of this culture-bound concept is, in actual fact, a stereotyped formula meant to describe the Native American tribes as “exotic” people. I believe, however, that this is not the case. Walcott, as a writer typically considered to be postcolonial, and who, beyond labels, has experienced colonialism first hand, writes about and against many and diverse forms of imperialism and colonialist quest and conquest. As mentioned in section 2 above, the native population of Walcott’s home island was exterminated during French and English colonialism in the Caribbean. By the same token, the native American tribes were pursued, forced to travel westwards and to leave the places they had been living in for hundreds of years, or, to paraphrase Catherine, hundreds of winters (in some cases, as during the so-called “Trail of Tears”, the forced trip westward brought about the death of thousands of Native Americans; cf. <http://www.cherokee.org/AboutTheNation/History/TrailofTears/ABriefHistoryoftheTrailofTears.aspx>; 5.11.2014); their number has been reduced dramatically and their identity has been almost completely erased by the US government, namely by an ex colonized country which has “inherited [its] empire’s sin” (Walcott 1990: 354), by colonizing and forcing another people to live in small reservations, because Americans were afraid of its “incivility” and, more importantly, wanted to take possession of its lands. Catherine, however, is not presented by Walcott as being part of the latter group, in spite of the fact that Walcott believed her to be an American woman coming from Brooklyn (she came, in fact, from Switzerland – cf. Pollack 2002). He presented her first in *Omeros* and then in *The Ghost Dance* not because she was part of the colonizing group, but because she tried to oppose that very same colonizing group she was born into, siding with the Sioux, living in the reservation with them, helping Sitting Bull understand the exact nature of the government’s “proposals” to purchase their lands, acting as his interpreter and his secretary (Pollack 2002). For all these reasons, I believe that her deployment of the Sioux “tongue” in Walcott’s works is the confirmation of her deep understanding of their lifestyle, of her will to help, support and, possibly, save them, rather than the evidence of any “exotic view” of them she might have.

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claimed “Time is the difference between us and the Indians. They think in seasons. We think in days” (Walcott 2002: 148). This claim is made by Catherine while talking to McLaughlin in a previous exchange. Here, just as in the extract which is being examined, a clear-cut opposition is expressed between Catherine’s and McLaughlin’s (hence the Westerners’) and the Native Americans’ notions of time. More specifically, two quite different spans of time are referred to through linguistic means. To start with, the two sentences which follow the sentence “Time is the difference between us and the Indians”, namely “They think in seasons. We think in days”, have exactly the same structure (subject + predicator + complement, with the nouns “seasons” and “days” realising the function prepositional complement), but the sequencing of the information (Douthwaite 2000: 287) is reversed in comparison to that of the PP “between us and the Indians”, thus building a chiasmus:



“[s]easons” and “days” are then syntactically linked and directly compared, in order to make the difference more transparent: months against hours (the implicit suggestion being that the Western time is accelerated and more rapidly “consumed”).

Readers are thus implicitly led to consider that Native Americans divide their existence into spans of time constituted by three months, each possessing order and fixed, predictable characteristics (the heat being typical of the summer and the snow being typical of the winter, taking the Dakotas into account, obviously), according to the natural sequence of the seasons. Westerners are instead implicitly depicted as having shorter lives in one sense, divided into short spans of time rapidly following one another, in a situation where no exact prediction can be made, for days cannot share the same general degree of expectation that can be

assigned to seasons (summer days are usually sunny and hot, but rain cannot be excluded *a priori*).

Intertextuality provides further evidence. Catherine expresses a similar view in *Omeros*, when she claims that “Life is so fragile. It trembles like the aspens. All its shadows are *seasonal*, including pain” (Walcott 2003: 308; my emphasis). Here again “seasonal” evokes the difference between the Native American and the Western notion of time expressed in the passage from *The Ghost Dance* above.

It should be clear by now that the deployment of the lexeme “season” on three different occasions on the part of Catherine is an reiterated sign of her adherence to the Native American culture, despite the fact that she formally includes herself together with McLaughlin in the “us” linked the Western idea of time, and despite (or maybe, because of) the fact that the encapsulation of time is one of those highly culture-bound concepts which, more than many other cultural elements, distinguish one culture from another.

As previously suggested [47] represents a turning point, further confirming our thesis. Indeed, Catherine claims she had been mad once, and we may hypothesize that distal time deictic “once” (which is reinforced by the predicator in the past tense “was”) means “before I shared the Native American way of life”.

[48] begins with a contrastive conjunction and marks the switching to the present tense (“*But* this bright interval *is* [...]”), which signal a change in respect of [47]. Even without going too deeply into the analysis, it can be observed that in the last part of the extract the distinction between the madness of the past and the consciousness of the present is achieved at the lexico-pragmatic level, with the construction of the opposition madness/brightness reached through a number of positively value-loaded lexemes and phrases: “bright interval”, “lucid”, “shaft of summer light”, “Bright hair”.

In particular, [50] represents the most salient part of the sentence. First of all, it is foregrounded graphologically, by the inverted commas, by the comma preceding it in [49] and by being the final clause in the sentence (hence highly salient); secondly, it is

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foregrounded syntactically, since it is realised by an NP upshifted to the level of clause. [50] also represents the Native American name that another character of the play, a Native American girl converted to Christianity named Lucy, has given Catherine. Brightness is thus part of this name. The adjective “Bright” is indeed the premodifier in the NP ‘Bright hair’, which is a synecdoche for Catherine herself. The fact that this figure of speech might also constitute a reference to Catherine’s bright hair being one of the elements which distinctively marked her as a white woman living among the Native Americans does not counterpoint this argument, since the denotational meaning of the premodifier in [50] is strengthened by the semantic field of brightness built in [48]-[50]. By calling herself by her Native American name and by linking it to the positively value-loaded description of her life among them (“as lucid as a shaft of summer light on a *cabin’s kitchen floor*, when I was [...] ‘Bright Hair Who Loves Us.’”), which led her to brightness and away from madness, Catherine further confirms her total involvement with the Native American cause, in spite of the inevitability of their fate.

It is also interesting to notice that the system of reference to this character diverges in the two works to a great extent. While in *Omeros* essentially two terms of address are employed (“Catherine” and “Catherine Weldon”), in *The Ghost Dance* many more terms are used instead: “Catherine”, “Catherine Weldon”, “Mrs. Weldon”, “Mrs. Catherine Weldon”, “Kitty”, “Kitty Weldon”, “Lady from the East”, “The Bright Hair Who Loved Us”, “Bright Hair Who Loves Us”.

Since the name of a person is an integral part of that person’s identity, it is logical to hypothesise that, through this device, Walcott intended to build a more complex character in *The Ghost Dance* than that he had constructed in *Omeros*, the many traits of whose identity could not be defined by two names (this reading being supported by Walcott turning her into the main character of the play).

Furthermore, we should also consider that Walcott might have been aware of the name Sitting Bull gave Catherine, namely *Toka heya mani win*, “Woman walking ahead” (Pollack 2002). Walcott

performs the same operation: he gives *his* Catherine a name. But, rather than underscoring her courage in walking ahead of her time in order to help Sitting Bull,<sup>13</sup> as the latter did, Walcott stresses what he probably thought was the reason that led the real Catherine to try and help Sitting Bull and his people: the love she felt for them. The same love that encouraged her to leave her home, and the certainty of a life in the East, to go westwards in the desperate attempt to beat the time that was walking ahead and the progress that required Native Americans' lands to be "requisitioned" and the Native Americans themselves to be "assimilated".

## 7. Conclusion

The figure of Catherine Weldon is referred to by Derek Walcott in two of his works. In both cases she acts as the means through which Walcott describes the Native American genocide by the American Government, the historically-grounded reference to the tragic consequences of any colonising enterprise being an issue of paramount importance in his writing, so much so that the motivation for his Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992 was "for a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, *sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment*" ([http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-facts.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-facts.html) my emphasis; 5.11. 2014).

While in *Omeros* she is Walcott's guide and alter-ego and needs to be reassured by the narrator about the ending of the tragedy ("See, it's finished. It's over Catherine, you have been saved"; Walcott 2003: 368), in *The Ghost Dance* she is turned into a complex main character, whose name possesses many variants corresponding to the many traits of her highly developed personality. More importantly,

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<sup>13</sup> In order to help Sitting Bull, Catherine performed a number of actions which were considered aberrant at the time, from leaving her son in Brooklyn the first time she travelled to the Dakotas to living in Sitting Bull's cabin with the rest of his family and wives. For these actions Sitting Bull gave her the name "woman walking ahead", while the press of the time labelled her as "Sitting Bull's white squaw" (Pollack 2002).

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she becomes the character who delineates the gulf between the Native American and the Western ways of interpreting reality (e.g. the (inevitable) passing of time), and, in so doing, declares her complete adherence to the Native Americans' natural lifestyle, which allowed her to gain a new perspective that she puts in stark contrast to the madness preceding her coming to the Dakotas.

To sum up, the stylistic analysis of the extract from *The Ghost Dance* selected for scrutiny in this article showed that a rich array of foregrounding devices were deployed by the author to outline the deep involvement with the Native American cause of the main character of the play, which mirrors the unconditional commitment of the real Catherine Weldon to this struggle, which ultimately led her to abandon the East and move to the West to live among the Sioux and try, albeit unsuccessfully, to protect and save them.

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