Ti-Jean and His Brothers Themes, Symbols and Characters

Pride vs. Humility

Ti-Jean and His Brothers is a fable set in the Caribbean in which the Devil poses a challenge to three brothers. The Devil promises to grant wealth and property to whichever of the brothers is able to make him angry. But the other side of the deal is that the Devil will eat the brothers whom he is able to make angry. Ti-Jean, the youngest of the three brothers, is the only one who successfully defeats the Devil in this challenge. His older brothers, Mi-Jean and Gros Jean, only lose to the Devil because of their pride—they want to prove that they can succeed at the impossible tasks the Devil assigns them, whereas Ti-Jean doesn’t care about proving to himself or others that he is capable of completing such tasks. By highlighting the difference between Ti-Jean’s humble nature and his brothers’ pride, Walcott emphasizes the importance of humility.

In disguise, the Devil sends Gros Jean to work on a sugar plantation, where the Devil himself is the owner. Proud of his legendary strength, Gros-Jean wants to prove that he can endure the plantation’s strenuous working conditions. When Gros Jean takes a smoke break from his hard work, the Devil, disguised as the Planter, comes up to Gros Jean and criticizes him for taking a break. Gros Jean, who doesn’t know that the Planter is the Devil in disguise, wants to earn the praise of his boss and wants him to acknowledge how much he has already accomplished, saying, “I do more work than most, right?” Here, Gros Jean makes it evident that he wishes to be recognized for his hard work and superiority to others. Prior to this moment, he has continuously bragged about his “arm of iron,” thinking that his strength will promise him success. But the Planter continues to hint that Gros Jean isn’t working hard enough, manipulatively telling Gros Jean to go ahead and have his smoke but then reminding him, “the harder you work the more” the Planter himself makes—implying that the Planter will value him more if he works even harder. Ultimately, Gros Jean becomes angry because the Planter won’t acknowledge how much work he has already done. In this way, Gros Jean’s pride—his identification with being strong, and with being able to get his work done—causes him to stay in a frustrating work environment simply because he wants to prove his superior strength. If Gros Jean weren’t attached to proving how strong and hardworking he was, he wouldn’t be upset at the Planter’s implication that he should work more. Therefore, Gros Jean’s pride leads to his undoing. He gets angry with the Planter—the Devil in disguise—and so loses the bet, because the Planter’s implication that he should work even harder wounds his pride.

Mi-Jean is harder for the Devil to beat, but ultimately the Devil is able to take advantage of Mi-Jean’s pride surrounding his intellect. Mi-Jean resolves not to speak to the Devil at all in order to protect himself from getting angry. However, when the Devil begins to talk about his belief that “A man is no
better than an animal,” Mi-Jean gets defensive. Always reading, Mi-Jean thinks of himself as an intellectual, and it is clear that he is attached to his identity as an intelligent person. At the Devil’s insistence that man is no more intelligent than animal, Mi-Jean eventually loses his temper, arguing with the Devil that man is, in fact, divine. His pride causes him to defend the idea that is the basis of his sense of self-worth, which ultimately leads him to lose the Devil’s challenge.

Ti-Jean, the youngest of the brothers, is unattached to any particular identity—he has neither particular strength nor particular intellect, and so he is not burdened by the desire to prove them. This humility is what allows him to defeat the Devil. When Ti-Jean leaves home to try and beat the Devil, his mother worries for him. “Never proven your self / In battle or in wisdom / I have kept you to my breast,” she tells her youngest son. Here, Ti-Jean’s mother worries that because he has no specific talents, he will be unable to face the Devil. However, his two older brothers lost to the Devil precisely because they had “proven” themselves in battle and wisdom, respectively, and were attached to the idea of beating the Devil with those skills. The fact that Gros Jean and Mi-Jean had proven themselves led them to be prideful, which made them vulnerable to the Devil’s manipulation. The Devil tries to make Ti-Jean angry by assigning him impossible menial tasks, such as counting all of the sugar leaves on his plantation. Gros Jean’s inability to perform a similar task makes him angry, as he prides himself on his strength and wishes to prove his ability to the Devil. However, Ti-Jean has no such attachment, and instead orders the workers on the plantation to burn it down. Because Ti-Jean is not preoccupied with proving himself to the Devil or measuring up to the standards the Devil creates for him, he does not get angry like his brothers. His lack of response, in turn, angers the Devil—and so Ti-Jean wins the bet.

Walcott demonstrates the dangers of pride in the play by showing it as what causes the two older brothers to succumb to the Devil’s manipulation. Gros Jean and Mi-Jean’s pride leads them to want to prove that they measure up to the standards and expectations set by the Devil. Their egos are so inflated that they don’t stop to wonder whether it’s really worth it to try and prove themselves to the Devil. However, Ti-Jean’s lack of pride allows him to discern that he doesn’t actually need to prove himself to the Devil, and to see that the whole system the Devil set up is unfair and needs to be destroyed.

**Colonialism and Racism**

In Ti-Jean and His Brothers, Derek Walcott tells a fable about three young men challenged to defeat the Devil. The Devil makes a bet with the three brothers: they are to try to make him angry. If they succeed, the Devil will grant them wealth and property. If they fail, the Devil will eat them. The play is set in an unspecified place in the Caribbean, and Ti-Jean and his brothers seem to be of black, Caribbean descent. Throughout the play, Walcott characterizes the Devil as a racist (presumably white) colonizer, and the brothers as the victims of his racist oppression. In this way, he emphasizes the evils of colonialism and highlights the danger that living under and accepting these systems poses to colonized and formerly colonized peoples.
One of the Devil’s disguises is as the Planter, the owner of a large cotton and sugar cane plantation in the Caribbean, where colonial slave owners were notorious for their violence and brutality. When Ti-Jean’s brother Gros Jean goes to work for the Planter, the Planter mistreats him in ways that have both racist and colonial undertones. Gros Jean describes the plantation where he works, saying that it is “estate-like [...] sugar, tobacco, and a hell of a big white house where they say the Devil lives.” Here, Walcott paints the stereotypical image of a slavery plantation. Sugar and tobacco were the most common goods to be farmed at slave plantations, and the allusion to the “big white house” or master’s house implies that the Devil is a slave master—and that Gros Jean is a slave rather than an employee. Gros Jean decides to take a smoke break, and the Devil, unhappy that Gros Jean is not being productive, manipulatively tries to get him to continue working. During this conversation, the Devil confuses Gros Jean’s name several times, calling him Charley, Hubert, and, most notably “Gros Chien.” Consistently mistaking someone’s name is, at best, a clear sign of disrespect. In this context, the Devil’s inability to distinguish Gros Jean from the other works is likely also racist, as all of the workers on the plantation are black. Finally, chien is the French word for “dog,” and so in calling Gros Jean by this name, the Devil implies that he does not fully recognize Gros Jean’s humanity. By drawing readers’ attention to the Devil’s racism, Walcott highlights the evils of the colonial system that allows white plantation owners to disregard the humanity of their black slaves.

Similarly, when Mi-Jean speaks with the Devil—who at that point is disguised as the Old Man—the Old Man frustrates Mi-Jean by comparing him to an animal. Mi-Jean gets into a debate with the Old Man about whether animals and humans are equal in intellect or not. Mi-Jean passionately defends the superiority of human beings, while the Old Man suggests that humans and animals are equally lacking in intellectual capacity. When he notices Mi-Jean is getting upset, the Old Man says, “Descendant of the ape, how eloquent you have become! How assured in logic! How marvellous in invention! And yet, poor shaving monkey, the animal in you is still in evidence...” Here, Walcott’s choice to have the Old Man refer to Mi-Jean as a monkey is an intentional reference to racist ideologies that compare black people to apes and suggest that black people have not reached the same stage of evolution as white people. Like the Planter’s interactions with Gros Jean, the way that the Old Man treats Mi-Jean has clear echoes of racist stereotypes. By painting the Devil in his various disguises as a quintessential racist—and making it clear that, under colonialism, the brothers have no way to escape his degrading treatment—Walcott indicates that racism and colonialism are every bit as evil as the Devil himself.

For both Mi-Jean and Gros Jean, the Devil’s racism is what leads to their deaths: Mi-Jean becomes upset that the Old Man implies that he is equal to an ape, and, in getting angry, loses the bet with the Devil. Similarly, Gros Jean becomes upset with the Planter for various reasons, one of which is the fact that the Planter’s racism prevents him from remembering Gros Jean’s name. Through the brothers’ fates, Walcott casts racism and colonialism as systems that literally endanger the lives of black Caribbean peoples. By drawing readers’ attention to the Devil’s racism, and by positioning the Devil as a colonizer in the Caribbean, Walcott emphasizes the evils of racism and colonialism.
The Power of Faith

The antagonist of Ti-Jean and His Brothers is the Devil himself, who challenges three young men to a dangerous bet. Ti-Jean and his two older brothers live in poverty, and the Devil promises them that whoever among them can cause him to lose his temper will receive wealth and property. However, if the Devil succeeds in making one of the brothers angry, he gets to eat him. As the three brothers navigate this challenging situation, they demonstrate varying understandings of religion and faith. While Ti-Jean has an understanding of faith that gives him courage and strength to face the Devil, his two brothers have more negative understandings of religion that end up limiting them. Through demonstrating the ways in which Ti-Jean’s faith helps him to beat the Devil, Walcott stresses the power of steadfast religious belief even in the face of bleak circumstances.

Gros Jean and Mi-Jean’s faith seems to depend upon external evidence of God acting in their lives, and therefore their belief in God wavers when this evidence is missing. However, Ti-Jean has a faith that is deeper than either of his brothers’, one that doesn’t depend on external evidence of God’s care or love. At the beginning of the play, Ti-Jean’s family is lamenting their poverty. Ti-Jean’s faithful mother tells her boys to “Wait, and God will send [them] something.” But neither Gros Jean nor Mi-Jean is convinced. Gros Jean responds, “God forget where he put us,” and Mi-Jean says, “God too irresponsible.” In both cases, the brothers feel that God is not present in their lives—either because he simply forgot to care for them, or because he is aware but incapable of caring for all of his creations. What’s important about the both brothers’ insistence that God is not engaged with their lives is that they assume God’s presence manifests as something material. In other words, in order to have faith, both Gros Jean and Mi-Jean need to see external evidence that God is real, present, and benevolent.

Ti-Jean, on the other hand, has a faith stronger than that of his brothers. His belief in God doesn’t depend on any external circumstances. Rather, he says, “Whatever God made, we must consider blessed.” This suggests that Ti-Jean is able to accept the world as it is, without assuming that bleak circumstances are reason to give up belief in God, or evidence that God does not exist. Ti-Jean’s faith is something that he learned from his mother, who tries to impart lessons of faith to each of her sons before they leave. Ti-Jean is the only one who listens. When Gros Jean leaves home to go and fight the Devil, his mother tells him, “Praise God who make all things,” and Gros Jean insists that he already knows this. However, immediately after he leaves, he comes across Frog, one of the talking animals who dwell in the forest nearby. Frog offers each of the brothers advice as they depart. Gros Jean says to Frog, “Get out of my way, you slimy bastard! How God could make such things?” This reflects the fact that, contrary to what
he told his mother, he does not “already know” to praise God and all of the things that he has made. What’s more, he demonstrates that he thinks himself superior—for being human, for being a strong man—to other creations that God has made. This demonstrates again that Gros Jean’s relationship with God is material—he judges animals for their appearance and is preoccupied with his place in a superficial hierarchy.

By contrast, Ti-Jean demonstrates that he does appreciate all of God’s creatures. Because he genuinely values God’s work and maintains his faith, he stops to talk to Frog and the other creatures instead of insulting or ignoring them, as Mi-Jean and Gros Jean have done. The creatures tell Ti-Jean to beware of the Old Man who tricked both of his brothers—and who turns out to be the Devil himself. Because Ti-Jean knows that the Old Man is really the Devil in disguise, he sees through his manipulations and is eventually able to defeat the Devil. In this way, Ti-Jean’s willingness to believe in God and to put the spiritual teachings he has learned into practice helps to save his life.

Gros Jean and Mi-Jean are concerned with external manifestations of God’s love, and don’t have faith if they don’t see such evidence. While they are looking for this evidence, however, they forget to put into practice the spiritual teachings their mother has passed on to them, which causes them to lose their lives—had they truly appreciated all of God’s creatures, like Ti-Jean does, it’s likely that the animals would have warned them, too, about the Devil. However, Ti-Jean is willing to trust so deeply in God that he doesn’t need material evidence of God’s work, and therefore is able to put into practice important spiritual teachings. This, ultimately, enables him to defeat the Devil, demonstrating the power of faith.

**Ti-Jean and His Brothers Symbols**

The sugar cane and cotton plantation that the Planter owns symbolizes colonial rule in the Caribbean. Sugar cane and cotton were commonly grown on Caribbean plantations, and the cruelty with which plantation owners treated the people who worked producing these products was notorious. When Gros Jean goes to work for the Planter, his choice to work on the plantation represents more broadly Caribbean and black men’s choice to participate in the colonial system. Ti-Jean, instead of counting all of the sugar cane on the plantation as the Planter has asked him to do, demands that the plantation workers burn down all of the crops and the master’s house. This represents not just the destruction of the singular plantation, but rather is a cry to dismantle the system of colonialism that imprisons and mistreats the Caribbean population.
Ti-Jean and His Brothers Characters

**Ti-Jean**

The youngest of three brothers and the protagonist of the play, Ti-Jean grows up in poverty raised by a single mother on a cold mountain somewhere in the Caribbean. While his oldest brother, Gros Jean, is known for his strength, and his middle brother, Mi-Jean, is known for his intellect, Ti-Jean is still really a child, and hasn’t developed any particular skill set when the play begins. When the Bolom—the horrifying ghost of an aborted fetus who is a servant of the Devil—appears outside of his family’s home to announce that the Devil has a challenge for the three boys, Ti-Jean is the only member of the family with enough courage to go outside and meet the Bolom. Ti-Jean demonstrates great courage again when he goes to meet the Devil for the challenge, which his two older brothers have failed at. The conditions of the challenge are that whoever makes the Devil angry will win property and riches, but if the Devil is able to provoke anger in one of the boys, he will eat that boy alive. As Ti-Jean is leaving for the challenge, his mother worries that, having neither strength nor great intelligence, Ti-Jean has no weapon to defeat the Devil. But Ti-Jean has something that his brothers don’t: faith in God. Because he respects God and all of his creatures, Ti-Jean takes time to speak with Frog on his way to meet the Devil. (Both of his brothers came across Frog, as well, but either insulted or ignored him.) Rewarding Ti-Jean for his kindness, Frog warns him that the Old Man, Papa Bois, is the Devil in disguise. Ti-Jean cleverly defeats the Devil by burning down his plantation, and refusing to complete the menial tasks the Devil has assigned him. Through his defeat of the Devil, Ti-Jean demonstrates resistance, faith, and courage.

**Mi-Jean**

Gros Jean’s younger brother and Ti-Jean’s older brother. Mi-Jean is an intellectual. He always has his head buried in a book, and because of this isn’t very good at fishing, or doing any other practical task. After Gros Jean loses the challenge to the Devil, it is Mi-Jean’s turn to go forth and see if he can make the Devil angry before the Devil makes him angry. Like Gros Jean, Mi-Jean insults Frog, whom he meets on his way to find the Devil. When Mi-Jean finds the Devil, disguised as the Planter, the Planter tasks him with chasing after and tying up an old goat, which Mi-Jean does successfully. Knowing that the Planter is the Devil in disguise, Mi-Jean resolves not to speak with him—this way, the Planter will never know if Mi-Jean is angry. But when the Planter implies that man is no more intelligent than animals—meaning that Mi-Jean’s intellect may be no greater than the goat he is trying to capture—Mi-Jean loses his cool. He enters into a heated debate with the Planter about man’s superiority over animals, and, losing his temper, he also loses the challenge. Like Gros Jean, Mi-Jean’s ego is ultimately his downfall.
Gros-Jean

Mi-Jean and Ti-Jean’s older brother. Gros Jean is very strong, proud of his so-called “iron arm.” He is the first to leave home in order to accept the Devil’s challenge—Gros Jean is to make the Devil angry before the Devil can make him angry. As he leaves his family home to find the Devil, he comes across Frog in the forest, and wonders at how God could make such ugly creatures. Soon after that, Gros Jean comes across the Old Man, and asks him what the quickest path to success is. The Old Man tells him that money is what’s most important, and that working for the white Planter is the fastest way to riches. Gros Jean follows the Old Man’s directions to the plantation, where the Devil, disguised as the Planter, is his boss. After two days straight of work with no rest, Gros Jean wants to take a smoke break, but the Planter passive aggressively tries to encourage Gros Jean to keep working—after all, the harder Gros Jean works, the more the Planter will profit. Frustrated that the Planter doesn’t acknowledge how hard Gros Jean has already worked—and how much faster he is able to work than others, due to his strong arm—Gros Jean loses his temper with the Planter, and in doing so loses the challenge to the Devil. Like Mi-Jean, Gros Jean’s downfall is his ego.

Devil / Planter/ Old Man

The play’s antagonist, the Devil has two disguises: the Planter and the Old Man, also called Papa Bois. According to the Bolom, one of the Devil’s assistants, the Devil longs to feel a human emotion but is unable to. This is why he challenges Gros Jean, Mi-Jean, and Ti-Jean to a challenge—he wants to see if anyone can provoke anger in him. The Devil easily beats Gros Jean and Mi-Jean at the challenge, by taking advantage their big egos to make them angry. But humble, faithful, and rebellious Ti-Jean proves impossible for the Devil to beat, as Ti-Jean refuses to play by the Devil’s unfair rules. When disguised as the Planter, the Devil is a white man who owns a sugar cane and cotton plantation, where he employs many black Caribbean workers for low wages and subjects them to difficult working conditions. When Gros Jean goes to work for the Planter, he complains about having received no rest or pay for two days straight, which speaks to the brutal conditions colonized peoples worked under during colonial rule. Walcott’s choice to make the Planter one of the Devil’s disguises suggests that he believes the systems that the Planter represents—colonialism and capitalism—are evil. Papa Bois, on the other hand, in Caribbean folklore is usually depicted as a benevolent spirit of the forest, but in this play Walcott chooses to link him with the Devil. Perhaps because of the positive qualities generally attributed to Papa Bois in Caribbean cultures, both Gros Jean and Mi-Jean blindly trust the Old Man, while Ti-Jean, thanks to a tip from Frog, recognizes him as the Devil.
Ultimately, the Devil, disguised as the Planter, loses the challenge to Ti-Jean when Ti-Jean tells him that he has destroyed all of his property. Through his characterization of the Devil, Walcott highlights the evils of materialism and, by contrast, the importance of humility and faith.

**Mother**

Gros Jean, Mi-Jean, and Ti-Jean’s impoverished single mother. The boys’ mother is deeply faithful, believing that God will provide her starving family with food and stressing the importance to each of her boys to respect all of God’s creatures before they go off to meet the Devil. The mother’s piousness suggests her resilient spirit: she has lost her husband and lives in abject poverty, but she still has steadfast faith in God. Ti-Jean is the only one of her sons to have absorbed this lesson, and it is through his own faith in God, as well as his humility, that he eventually defeats the Devil.

**Bolom**

The ghost of an aborted fetus, the Bolom is one of the Devil’s assistants. When the Devil wants to pose a challenge to Mi-Jean, Ti-Jean, and Gros Jean, it is the Bolom who shows up at their house to deliver the message. The boys’ mother longs to give the Bolom the love and care that his own mother, who aborted him, wasn’t able to, but the Bolom is so hurt and traumatized by his experience with his own mother that he rejects this. But when Ti-Jean beats the Devil, the Bolom begs Ti-Jean to ask the Devil to grant him life, and he does. At the end of the story, the Bolom is finally born, and it is implied that he goes to live with Ti-Jean and his mother.

**Frog**

Frog is a creature who lives in the forest. The story is framed by Frog’s narration—he opens the play by describing the shadow of Ti-Jean in the moon, once he has beaten the Devil and been placed in the skies by God. All three brothers cross paths with Frog on their way to meet the Devil for the challenge. The three brothers’ different approaches to interacting with Frog demonstrate their different understandings of God—while all three boys have been taught to respect all of God’s creatures, only Ti-Jean treats Frog with respect, while Gros Jean and Mi-Jean insult the animal. This suggests that only Ti-Jean truly has respect for all of God’s creatures, and indeed, he is rewarded for his faith: Frog gives Ti-Jean the advice he needs to recognize the Old Man as the Devil in disguise.