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PANTOMIME

a play by Derek Walcott • 1978

ACT TWO

Confession, Confrontation, Compromise — the Castaways Guest House, Tobago

Harry Trewe & Jackson Phillip

SETTING THE SCENE

Where Act Two Picks Up

FROM ACT ONE

- Harry proposed a race-reversed Robinson Crusoe pantomime — Jackson as Crusoe, Harry as Friday.
- Jackson's improvisation turned sharply political: empire, mimicry, “immigrant Fridays.”
- Harry panicked (“we might commit Art”) and ordered the game stopped.
- Act One ends in silence: Jackson forbids Harry to help him, and Harry obeys.

ACT TWO, AT A GLANCE

TIME

Noon — the same day, a few hours after Act One

PLACE

Same gazebo, edge of the cliff

CAST

Only Harry Trewe and Jackson Phillip

TENSION

The unresolved power reversal from Act One's ending

ARC

Argument → confession → crisis → fragile compromise

The Cold War Continues

- Harry reads in a deck chair; Jackson hammers loudly, fixing the sundeck — deliberately noisy, “vindictive” hammering.
- Jackson keeps interrupting Harry's rest: a mock “Creole acting” voice, a “black seagull” impression, a reprise of the Crusoe calypso.
- Harry finally snaps and demands he stop — the morning's power struggle hasn't cooled at all.

THEMES IN PLAY

- Resentment — performed through noise and mimicry rather than words
- Performance — Jackson uses caricature (a slavery-era accent) as a weapon
- Compromise — not yet reached; both men still guarding position

“The most sarcastic hammering I've ever heard.”

An Uneasy Truce

2

- Harry names the hammering for what it is, and proposes they talk “man to man” over drinks.
- Jackson brushes it off — he's “already forgotten” the morning — and offers to finish his shift and leave Harry alone.
- Harry pushes further: he confesses “the terror of emptiness,” the unbearable boredom that drove him to propose the pantomime at all.
- Jackson gently confronts Harry about his isolation: the staff have watched him wander the grounds grieving his wife and son.

KEY LINE

“You would get your hair cut by phone.”

Jackson's dry joke lands a real diagnosis: Harry has withdrawn so far from human contact that even a haircut — the most minimal, ordinary kind of touch — feels like too much.

Jackson proposes Harry must play “Thursday” properly if he wants real equality — Harry resists: “Aha, you bastard!”

“Man to Man” — What Real Equality Costs

- Jackson names the tell: Harry's lip visibly twitches whenever Jackson addresses him without “Mister.”
- His point: they are “faking their roles all the time” — real man-to-man talk would require Harry to feel that discomfort and stay in it, not just tolerate a joke about it.
- Jackson suggests real equality isn't a performance either man can simply decide to have — it has to actually cost the person with power something.
- Harry, unsettled, admits the morning's improvisation affected him more than he showed, and proposes they try the pantomime “straight” this time — not mockery, not melodrama.

THEME: COMPROMISE

Walcott shows that “equality” demanded without discomfort is just another performance. Jackson insists that if the master-servant hierarchy is to be genuinely undone — even briefly — the one who holds power has to feel the loss of it.

Two Visions of Robinson Crusoe

HARRY'S MONOLOGUE

- Sincere, overwrought, poetic — Crusoe as a man consumed by loneliness, longing for wife and child.
- Really Harry's own grief in disguise: exile, a dead son, a wife who left.
- Mode: English tragedy — interior suffering as the defining human truth.

JACKSON'S VERSION

- Practical, resourceful, faith-driven — Crusoe wrestling a goat to the sand, “feeling like a million dollars because he have faith!”
- Points out what Harry left out: the goats — survival, not just sorrow.
- Mode: Caribbean resilience — faith and practicality as the defining human truth.

The turn: Harry blurts that the son in the monologue “is dead” — confusing fiction with his own grief. Jackson corrects him flatly: “*Robinson Crusoe's son isn't dead. Harry's son is dead.*”

What the Two Monologues Reveal

Two competing modes of storytelling

Harry's version is European, tragic, and interior — grief as the defining human experience. Jackson's is practical, spiritual, and forward-looking — survival and faith as the defining human experience. Walcott compresses the play's larger argument into one scene: whose cultural form actually carries more truth?

Who owns the narrative

Robinson Crusoe is itself a colonial text — a white man “mastering” an island and eventually a native. By having Jackson understand Crusoe's psychology better than Harry, its co-author, Walcott quietly strips the colonizer of any natural authority over his own culture's story.

Jackson refuses complicity in denial

Throughout the play Jackson keeps declining to let Harry hide from grief inside performance and irony. This is the sharpest instance: he uses the fiction itself as a scalpel — “Harry's son is dead” — cutting through evasion rather than indulging it.

Setting up the Ellen scene

This confrontation is the first crack in Harry's denial. It is what makes the play's later emotional climax possible: Jackson forces Harry to face Ellen directly (via the photograph role-play) rather than displacing his grief onto a fictional castaway.

The Mask Slips: Insult and “Independence”

THE INSULT

- Small frictions escalate — sarcastic clapping, sniping.
- Harry, irritated, calls Jackson an “ape” and says Black people “just came down from the trees.”
- The remark is real — excused afterward as “just improvisation,” exposing the racism underneath Harry's liberal self-image.

THE BATHROOM ARGUMENT

- Harry offers Jackson his private bathroom instead of the servants' quarters.
- Jackson refuses — sardonically comparing sudden “privileges” to colonies granted independence “too quickly,” before people are ready.
- He insists on his usual five minutes at the servants' quarters, unwilling to accept charity dressed up as equality.

Alone: Drink, Water, and the Icepick

- Left alone while Jackson is offstage, Harry drinks heavily.
- He flips the table over and back — echoing Jackson's earlier “boat” business from Act One.
- He removes his shirt and pours melted ice water over his head, disheveling himself.
- He sees an icepick — the same detail from Jackson's earlier story about stabbing a racist tormentor's hand — and drives it into the table.
- He hides beneath the table, the icepick at his feet, as the scene ends in tense ambiguity: is this play, or something darker?

Confrontation: The Dead Parrot

- Jackson returns, finds Harry under the table with the icepick — and, wary, exits and re-enters fully in Crusoe costume with a hammer tucked in his waistband for protection.
- He throws Harry a box: inside is the hotel's parrot — dead. Jackson has killed it himself.
- A bitter, racially charged argument erupts: Harry claims Jackson's people “create nothing, only imitate”; Jackson retorts that the era of colonial ownership is over.
- Both men grab at props — the goatskin hat, the hammer, the icepick — each asserting ownership, until Jackson suddenly defuses it by mockingly dropping to his knees, over-performing servile “forgiveness.”

Symbol watch: the parrot — a colonial relic (named for the hotel's old German owner) — becomes a stand-in for inherited prejudice Jackson chooses to destroy himself.

Harry's Confession

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1

The “war story” about knocking out a sergeant was invented — violence actually makes him sick.

2

He doesn't even believe in ownership, and thinks his own rigidity is exactly why his wife left him.

3

He doesn't believe Jackson's icepick story either — he suspects Jackson is a genuinely kind man who hides it behind a tough performance.

Two performers finally step outside their performances — briefly, honestly.

The Ellen Role-Play

- Jackson fetches a photograph of Harry's ex-wife, Ellen, and holds it up like a mask, speaking in her voice.
- Through “Ellen,” he provokes Harry to finally confront the truth: their son died in a crash Ellen caused while drunk — and she left Harry afterward.
- Harry explodes at the photograph:

“You're a silly selfish bitch and you killed our son!”

- Jackson-as-Ellen leaps onto the ledge as if to jump — echoing Act One's mock-suicide joke, now weighted with real danger.
- Panicked, Harry shouts for her to stop and says he forgives her — then confesses the real motive for the pantomime: Ellen once played Crusoe to his blackface Friday and “wiped the stage” with him.

Catharsis — and a Retreat Back to Comedy

REAL GRIEF

- Jackson gently steers Harry back into the actual Crusoe monologue.
- Reaching the line about his son, Harry breaks down crying — genuinely, not performing.
- Jackson recognizes the difference; Harry admits it, then dissolves into laughter through the tears. Jackson laughs with him.

BACK TO DENIAL

- They lighten the mood with goat wordplay — “goat to bed,” “e-goat-istical.”
- Harry insists he's fine: “things like this have happened before, and they can happen again” — minimizing what just happened.
- Jackson names it plainly: Harry is making “a mole hill out of a mountain” — but lets it go rather than pushing further.

The Final Exchange

- Jackson declares that everything that's happened has convinced him to return to his true calling — calypso — and come out of retirement as a performer.
- He sings his earlier song, about “a Limey named Trewe” who came to Tobago needing Jackson's help to put on a show, “man to man.”
- Imagined music and audience applause fill the stage — the pantomime, at last, actually happening.

As Harry moves to join in, Jackson stops him — and, addressing him now as “Robinson,” says:

“Starting from Friday, we should talk about a raise.”

The lights fade out on that line.

Why the Ending Matters

Recognition ≠ Equality

Harry and Jackson reach real emotional understanding — but Walcott refuses to let that stand in for actual equality between them.

Compromise, Not Resolution

The play doesn't resolve the colonial hierarchy; it shows two men negotiating a livable, if imperfect, way to coexist inside it.

Economics as the Final Word

Jackson's request for a raise insists that social/emotional equality must be followed by economic equality — symbolism without money changes nothing structural.

The Title, Reconsidered

“Pantomime” also means performance and mime silently gesturing at meaning — the play ends with Jackson literally directing the scene, holding the final word.

Themes Running Through Act Two

1

Isolation

Harry's grief-driven withdrawal ("haircut by phone") is finally named and briefly broken open.

2

Performance

Nearly every confrontation happens through a role — Crusoe, Ellen, "Thursday" — rather than direct speech.

3

Mimicry

The "ape" insult and the independence joke both turn on who imitates whom, and why it matters.

4

Postcolonialism

Ownership fights over the hat, hammer, and icepick literalize the argument over who controls the island's story.

5

Resentment

Vindictive hammering, sarcastic clapping, and the dead parrot all channel anger sideways, through objects and noise.

6

Compromise

The final ask for a raise insists compromise must be material, not just emotional or symbolic.

*“Starting from Friday,
we should talk about a raise.”*

— Jackson Phillip, closing the play

Discussion: Does the play's ending resolve the colonial power imbalance between Harry and Jackson — or only renegotiate its terms?