

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Power and Conflict
Checking Out Me History - *John Agard*



CHECKING OUT ME HISTORY

John Agard

Brief Summary

The speaker is recounting all of the historical figures he was taught as a child, he then lists all of the figures from black history who were not mentioned. He resolves to discover more about his own heritage.

Synopsis

- The speaker begins to list the historical figures he is told about
- In the next stanza, in italics, the speaker talks about Toussaint L’ouverture, a figure of the Haitian revolution
- In the next stanza, the poem reverts to plain text and lists further white figures. This pattern repeats until the last stanza
- Finally, the speaker concludes by stating that despite not being taught about members of black history, it is okay as they are researching their history themselves.

Summary

Context – Agard was educated under colonial rule meaning that he was educated on eurocentric history, not his own heritage.

Structure - Italics is used to separate the distinct stanzas regarding european history and figures in black history.

Language – The Creole language is used // Agard also uses emphatic repetition to create an aggressive tone

Key Points – The final stanza marks a turning point // the narrator resolves to take control of their education.

Context

John Agard (1949-)

Agard was born in Guyana and received a British education due to the country being colonised up until 1966. He was therefore given a eurocentric view of history whilst being denied his own cultural identity.

Guyana was originally a Dutch colony, part of the Dutch West Indies Company, during this time, Africans were sold as slaves to America and the Caribbean. Agard’s formative years were lived under British rule, however, eventually he saw his country become independent and realised how much of his identity he was deprived of.

Checking out me history

The poem was inspired by reading a school textbook which claimed that West Indian history began with Columbus. It was published in the collection “Half caste and other poems” which was focused on both culture and racial identity. Agard published the collection after living in Britain for approximately 30 years. The poems were intended to be universal to apply to all people living under oppression and being denied their cultural identity.



Checking Out Me History

The use of repetition here creates an accusatory tone, showing the speaker's anger

Dem tell me
Dem tell me

Wha dem want to tell me

Bandage up me eye with me own history
Blind me to me own identity

Dem tell me bout 1066 and all dat
dem tell me bout Dick Whittington and he cat
But Toussaint L'Ouverture
no dem never tell me bout dat

This has injury-like connotations which imply that the speaker feels he has been hurt by his sheltered upbringing

The italics used here highlight the two accounts of history being distinctly separate.

*Toussaint
a slave
with vision
lick back
Napoleon
battalion
and first Black
Republic born
Toussaint de thorn
to de French
Toussaint de beacon
of de Haitian Revolution*

Dem tell me bout de man who discover de balloon
and de cow who jump over de moon

Dem tell me bout de dish ran away with de spoon
but dem never tell me bout Nanny de maroon

This phrase from the semantic field of childhood implies that the speaker feels he has lost his childhood and is stuck in the past.

*Nanny
see-far woman
of mountain dream
fire-woman struggle
hopeful stream
to freedom river*

Dem tell me bout Lord Nelson and Waterloo
but dem never tell me bout Shaka de great Zulu
Dem tell me bout Columbus and 1492
but what happen to de Caribs and de Arawaks too

Dem tell me bout Florence Nightingale and she lamp



and how Robin Hood used to camp
Dem tell me bout ole King Cole was a merry ole soul
but dem never tell me bout Mary Seacole

*From Jamaica
she travel far
to the Crimean War
she volunteer to go
and even when de British said no
she still brave the Russian snow
a healing star
among the wounded
a yellow sunrise
to the dying*

Dem tell me
Dem tell me wha dem want to tell me
But now I checking out me own history
I carving out me identity

References

There are numerous references throughout the poem:

- **Toussaint L'Ouverture** led the revolution by black slaves against the French colony of Haiti and led to their freedom. Haiti became the first nation to free itself from slavery. L'Ouverture is a symbol of rebellion and resistance and could be interpreted to be an inspiration to Agard to resist the oppression he is subjected to.
- **Nanny de Maroon** was the female leader of the Jamaica maroons who escaped from slavery in Jamaica after being taken from Ghana. She was a renowned outstanding military leader and most knowledge of her came from oral tradition which Agard is continuing by including her in his poem.
- **Shaka de great Zulu** was one of the most influential military leaders of the Zulu kingdom in South Africa.
- The **Caribs** are indigenous people from the lesser Antilles (a group of islands in the Caribbean sea). They were forced out of their homes by the British and French.
- The **Arawaks** were the indigenous people of the greater Antilles who were mostly wiped out by old world diseases (for example, smallpox) or driven out by the Caribs.
- **Mary Seacole** is now a well known figure in history for her groundbreaking work improving hygiene in hospital wards in Crimea. She fought against oppression in order to help others and returned to live in poverty. Seacole is less well known than Florence Nightingale but arguably did more than her which is an example of everyday, casual racism.



Structure

Dual structure

The division between the stanzas through Agard's **use of italics** shows the separation between the history he was taught and black history.

Repetition

The **repetition** of *“Dem tell me”* mirrors rote learning and it could be inferred that Agard had to rote learn the history he was taught due to its lack of personal relevance to him. It also creates an **oppressive tone** to the teaching of history.

Each stanza begins with *“dem tell me”* which shows how colonial control has dominated his life in the same way it dominates the poem. The **repetition** could also be interpreted to allude to Agard's emphatic desire to have his message heard.

Rhyme

The **rhyme scheme** ties together the sections concerning white and black history, showing how Agard is attempting to end segregation through literary unification. Throughout a stanza, the rhyming is the same: *“balloon”*, *“moon”*, *“spoon”* and *“maroon”*. This makes each stanza predictable and the listener is waiting for the next line.



Stanza organisation

Each stanza ends with a reference to a black historical figure which shows their significance to Agard. Alternatively, this could be interpreted to symbolise how these figures are given less prominence. Black history is given separated, dedicated stanzas which could be seen to symbolise it finally receiving the respect and significance it deserves. The **rich imagery** in these stanzas **juxtaposes** with the almost **childish lexis** in the other stanzas to show the beautiful and complex nature of black history.

Enjambment

The **connective “But”** is used to tie together black and white history implying that they cannot be separated and black history cannot be ignored. The overflowing sentences also show that the speaker is attempting to express too much emotion to be constrained to a single line. This shows how much Agard cares about the subject matter which has impacted him as a person.

The ending

The **volta “but now”** marks a turning point in the poem as the speaker switches from referring to *“Dem”* to *“I”*. This shows him taking ownership of his own identity and making the poem about himself rather than them.

“I carving out me identity”

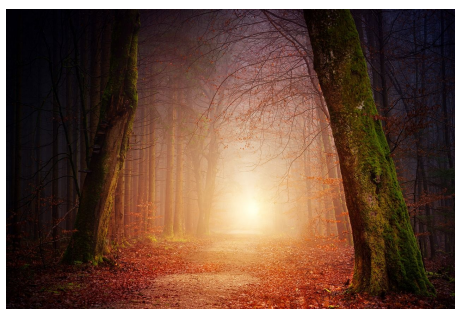
This final stanza also contrasts with the introduction. The phrase *“I carving out me identity”* contrasts with *“Blind me to me own identity”*. This shows how the poem shows the speaker's journey to resolution.



Dem tell me
Dem tell me wha dem want to tell me
But now I checking out me own history
I carving out me identity

The use of **“I”** in the ending also acts to conclude the sentiment throughout the poem that colonialism has had a large effect on individuals as people.

Language



Motif of light

In the stanzas regarding black history, there are frequent references to **light imagery**. Agard refers to Toussaint L’ouverture as **“de beacon to de Haitian revolution”**, Nanny de Maroon as **“fire-woman”** and Mary Seacole as **“a healing star”** and **“a yellow sunrise”**. It can be inferred that the speaker associates these figures with light due to their emotional significance to him. This also shows that they are a **source of guidance** for him and the importance of teaching children about these people.

“De beacon to de Haitian revolution”

Metaphors

Agard repeatedly uses **violent metaphors** to show the cruelty of colonialism. The line **“blind me to me own identity”** emphasises the deliberate nature of the abuse inflicted by colonial control. This also implies that his education has changed the way in which he views the world now.

The **active verb** used in **“I carving out me identity”** creates the impression that this is an ongoing process. This also has painful connotations which shows that this process is a painful one, implying that he feels pain at having his identity withheld from him for so long. The **verb “carving”** has connotations of wood which shows how the speaker no longer has the neural plasticity of a child so changing his worldview is long and difficult.

Non-standard phonetic spelling

Creole is the native language of an area which has arisen from attempting to speak two different languages. This is present in the **non-standard phonetic spelling** in **“dem”**, **“de”** and **“bout”**.

This shows how the speaker is resisting the traditions of the English language and the restrictions imposed by colonial rule. Agard’s use of **phonetic spelling** emphasises that that this poem is a form of **oral poetry**. Normally Agard writes in standard English so this makes this poem stand out in the collection.



Punctuation

Agard uses no punctuation in *Checking Out Me History*. Punctuation can be interpreted to be a set of rules to restrict communication so Agard's refusal to include it shows his intention to allow the listener to interpret the poem in their own way and attach their own identity to it.

The lack of punctuation also shows the poems **theme of resisting oppression**. Without punctuation, the reader is unsure of the intonation, allowing the poem to be interpreted in different ways.

Tone

An angry tone is created through the frustrated repetition of *“dem tell me”*, implying that the speaker feels that no one is listening to him.

Agard simultaneously creates a **childish tone** through the use of a **simple rhyme scheme** with **simple rhyming couplets**. It could be that Agard is trying to get children to engage with the poem however, it is more likely that he is implying that the one dimensional eurocentric view of the world is childish.



Comparisons

Ozymandias

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| Similarities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agard uses lexis from the semantic field of injury to show how colonial era teachers <i>“Blind [him] to [his] own identity”</i> showing the pain inflicted by oppression of identity. Similarly, Shelley shows someone who has been stripped of their identity as Ozymandias' works are now <i>“lone and level sands”</i>. |
| Differences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whilst in Agard's poem, the speaker is able to resolve to make a change and research his own history, Shelley's description of <i>“legs of stone”</i> implies that corruption in power is permanent and will persevere. |

The Emigrée

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|--------------|--|
| Similarities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The violent connotations of <i>“Bandage up me eye with me own history”</i> allude to the conflict between Agard's speaker's culture and the one being inflicted on him by colonial rule. There is a similar conflict |
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| | |
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| | <p>shown in Rumens' poem by the aggressive undertones of "I am branded by an impression of sunlight".</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poets attach great emotional significance to their cultural identity. Agard's repetition of "Dem tell me" shows the anger the speaker feels at having had his heritage hidden from him. Likewise, Rumens appears to have maternal feelings towards her former home and this is shown by the childlike lexis of "I comb its hair and love its shining eyes". The importance of language is seen in Rumens' work in "child's vocabulary" which shows the speaker desperately clinging to the language of their childhood. Similarly, Agard uses a Creole language to represent the different cultures which have influenced him. |
| Differences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In <i>Checking out me history</i>, the speaker demonises his childhood through his angry tone and the separation of the stanzas to show how he was not educated sufficiently. Contrastingly, Rumens uses light imagery in "an impression of sunlight", "The white streets" and "It tastes of sunlight" to present a dreamlike, idealised childhood. |

