

Checking out Me History

Key Learning: to explore the context and meaning of the poem.

John Agard

- Afro-Guyanese playwright, poet
- People are inhabitants of Guyana who are of Sub-Saharan African descent, generally descended from slaves brought to the Guianas to work on sugar plantations.
- Studied in a British school.
- He is very proud of his background and his poems explore this pride and aim to educate people about his life and his roots as well as challenging racism and other negative attitudes/views.

So...what could the poem be about?

Checking out Me History

This poem draws on Agard's experience to make us look at the way history is taught, and at how we conceive our identity as we learn about cultural traditions and narratives. It becomes clear that Agard had to follow a history curriculum biased towards whites, especially British whites, so that he learned about mythical, nursery rhyme characters instead of living black people from the past. He challenges this view of history and cites some major black figures to balance the bias and create a basis for his own identity.

Structure - how is it written and why?

Structure

Checking Out Me History alternates between **two structures**, marked by two different fonts. The first uses the repeated phrase "Dem tell me" to indicate the white version of history, mostly written in *rhyming couplets*, triplets or quatrains. Interspersed are the stories of three black historical figures: Toussaint L'Overture, Nanny de Maroon and Mary Seacole, told using **abbreviated syntax** with words missed out, shorter lines and an irregular *rhyme scheme*.

John Agard does this to reflect his own identity and show he is proud of his identity. This is done by explicitly marking sections of 'white history' and 'black history.'

Poetry reading

John Agard very often wrote his poems in his own dialect/accents.

Why?

To show how proud he was of his identity and where he came from.

Repetition of 'dem' referring to the teachers that taught him history.

The use of his own dialect reflects his pride.

Metaphorical - the idea that they do not learn about his history and so it's almost as if it's been covered up and not explored.

Dem tell me

Dem tell me

Wah dem want to tell me

Bandage up me eye with me own history

Blind me to me own identity

He's in a British school he will learn about British history.

He is unable to learn about his own identity but that's what's important to him.

Reference to the battle of Hastings in 1066 and Dick Whittington
- conquering of England and an English politician, (all parts of
English History.)

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

Reference to African
History. A black Slave
Who Defeated Napoleon,
(a French leader.)

He is never told about his
history.

Contrasts between white and black history.

Shows his history is important to him. He has not been taught about it at school but he knows about Toussaint.

Repetition of his name shows strong feeling towards him. He is so very important.

Toussaint

A slave

With vision

Lick back

Napoleon

Battalion

And first Black

Republican born

Toussaint de thorn

To de French

Toussaint de beacon

Of de Haitian Revolution

Metaphors links to nature to emphasise how great and influential he was.

A beacon is referring to light and the idea that Toussaint is illuminating the poet's true historical identity.

English nursery rhyme.
Reference to the idea
that all he learns is
English.

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 about Nanny de maroon

Jamaican national hero that was
born in Ghana. Someone who
escaped slavery after being
transported to Jamaica. This is
someone he can relate to, someone
he wants to learn about.

He knows a lot about
these heroic figures
although he has never
been taught about them.
Shows his passion and
pride towards his own
identity.

Imagery again
linked to
nature to
show how
precious
Nanny de
Maroon
is/was.

Fire links to
the idea of
light -
illuminating
John Agard's
true identity.

Nanny
See-far woman
Of mountain dream
Fire-woman struggle
Hopeful stream
To freedom river

Metaphor - reference to Nanny de
Maroon and others becoming free from
slavery. This is what is important to
John Agard.

Verb struggle links to the
idea of Nanny De Maroon's
journey not being easy -
this is why the poet
admires her so much and is
so proud of his identity.

Could reflect anger as to
why she isn't studied when
she is so powerful and
great.

A British flag officer
in the navy - became
an inspirational leader
in United Kingdom.

A battle in
which Britain
took part.

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

Italian explorer -
even this is
important in History,
but the History of
the poet seems
irrelevant and
unimportant as they
do not learn about it
in schools.

Minority groups from the Caribbean.
Poet is questioning why they seem
unimportant.

Poet could also be questioning if
people know about these groups
because he does and believes other
people are ignorant to his
culture/identity.

One of the most
influential
monarchs in the
Zulu (African)
Kingdoms.

References to the
famous English nurse
and folk hero

Potentially ambiguous verb here: Robin Hood camped outside as an outlaw but could also be a reference to “camp” as effeminate – Robin Hood was often depicted in movies wearing a short green tunic and red tights. Agard is satirising traditional English cultural icons here.

Dem tell me about Florence Nightingale and she lamp
And how Robin Hood used to camp
Dem tell me bout ole King Cole was a merry old soul
But dem never tell me bout Mary Seacole

Another reference to
a Nursery Rhyme
Character

Mary Seacole – black Jamaican nurse who set up her own hospital during the Crimean War.

Referring again to
Mary
Seacole. Someone he
feel passionately
about.

Emphasising her
journey/struggle.

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

Contrasts show how important she was in helping the wounded
and dying people. She should be celebrated.

Metaphor - to
emphasise how
strong and
wonderful Mary
Seacole is. Why do
they not learn
about someone so
influential?

Positive imagery
surrounding her.

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

They are British and
so want to learn about
British icons/leaders
as that's what's
important to them.

He takes it upon himself to educate himself about his
background if others won't.

He tries to educate other people by 'metaphorically'
carving his identity.

Key Question:

How does John Agard feel towards how history is taught?

- You must use evidence to support your ideas.
- You must label any poetic devices/techniques.
- You must aim to put in at least two detailed comments per piece of evidence.
- Talk about how he feels and what he thinks should be taught and why.