

Edexcel English Literature GCSE

Poetry: Conflict Collection

Half-caste - *John Agard*

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HALF-CASTE

John Agard

Brief Summary

The speaker is discussing the term “**half-caste**” which is attributed to him as a result of his mixed race heritage. The comparisons he makes highlight the ridiculousness of the term’s usage. The overall tone of the poem is sarcastic and biting, arguably as the result of years of criticism.

Synopsis

- The poem begins by establishing the speaker’s assigned identity
- They then question this and begin to compare the term to other examples of liminality to show how ridiculous it is
- He then directly ask what it means
- The end of the poem allows the speaker to conclude that they have more depth to them than this label and are not to be defined by it

Context

John Agard (1949 - present)

Agard moved from Guyana to England in 1977, his father is from Guyana and his mother is Portugese. His love of language stemmed from his childhood love of cricket commentary and he eventually began to create his own.

Half-Caste and other poems (2005)

The collection explores multiple race issues faced by black and mixed race people living in the United Kingdom. The poem is a reflection of the feelings evoked in Agard as a result of being labelled “**half-caste**” upon moving to the UK.



Half-caste

The poem begins with an insincere apology to establish the sarcastic tone

This use of phonetic spelling creates an authentic voice for the speaker

This phrase is repeated throughout the poem to show the speaker directly challenging the presumptions made by society

Here the speaker is calling out the hypocrisy of him being criticised for being mixed race when British culture is based on a combination of others

Excuse me

standing on one leg

I'm half-caste

Explain yusef

wha yu mean

when yu say half-caste

yu mean when picasso

mix red an green

is a half-caste canvas/

explain yusef

wha u mean

when yu say half-caste

yu mean when light an shadow

mix in de sky

is a half-caste weather

well in dat case

england weather

nearly always half-caste

in fact some o dem cloud

half-caste till dem overcast

so spiteful dem dont want de sun pass

ah rass/

The idea of somebody standing on one leg implies that they are not fully stable or secure in their identity

This use of visual, colour imagery creates a disjunct image and adds to the uncomfortable tone. It could also be interpreted that beauty is created by the mixing of races

Agard creates a beautiful image from something typically mundane (overcast weather).

Sibilance is used to create a harsh tone along with the use of pathetic fallacy which adds to the sense of



Auditory imagery is used here to create a greater impression of the beauty of being part of two cultures

The rhythm and alliteration of this phrase creates a lighthearted tone to this section

The discrepancy between the previously used "I" and now "you" shows the speaker's sense of isolation and distance from those insulting

explain yusef
wha yu mean
when yu say half-caste
yu mean tchaikovsky
sit down at dah piano
an mix a black key
wid a white key
is a half-caste symphony

Explain yusef
wha yu mean
Ah listening to yu wid de keen
half of mih ear
Ah looking at u wid de keen
half of mih eye

and when I'm introduced to yu
I'm sure you'll understand
why I offer yu half-a-hand
an when I sleep at night
I close half-a-eye
consequently when I dream
I dream half-a-dream
an when moon begin to glow
I half-caste human being
cast half-a-shadow
but yu come back tomorrow
wid de whole of yu eye
an de whole of yu ear

hostility felt by the speaker

These lines are particularly humorous, implying that having parents of different races gives him a split personality

Beautiful visual imagery is used here to juxtapose the insulting connotations of the term

This repetition of "whole" contrasts with the ending "half". This serves to conclude the poem with the sentiment that the speaker is sufficient as he is





and de **whole** of yu mind

an I will tell yu
de other **half**
of my story

The title “Half-Caste”

The title solely being this phrase implies that this is what the speaker believes completely defines them

Half-caste

This is a term used as an insult for people of mixed race



Perspective

It is clear from the start of the poem that the speaker is exasperated by the way they are treated by others for their race. The first stanza begins with an assertive **“excuse me”** which could symbolise the speaker’s previous politeness in the face of racism, shifting to them beginning to challenge those who insult him. The second and third stanzas also begin with the harsh **consonant “ex”** sound by the speaker demanding **“explain yusef”**, showing them to be adopting the **interrogative style** to try and find a response as to why they are being treated unfairly.

This frustration is likely to be characteristic of a speaker who has become increasingly resentful of their treatment with age. There is further evidence of the speaker not being young from the suggestion that much of the poem is **retrospective**. It is clear that he is looking back with hindsight by demanding the subject of the poem explain **“wha yu mean”**, implying that the phrases attributed to him have been used repeatedly over time. This **jaded tone** is more prominent later in the poem in the sarcasm used in **“I half-caste human being // cast half-a-shadow”** which shows a dark kind of humour able to make some light of the ridiculousness of the situation.

Structure

The poem begins with a **three line stanza** to emphatically introduce the topic of the poem, it also ends with a three line stanza, creating the sense that the speaker has found some sort of resolution in the process of writing the poem. The middle stanzas are much longer, suggesting that their content is more of a **passive stream of consciousness** than anything else, unrestricted by the speaker.

Language

Much of the language used is **contrasting**. The **juxtaposition** between **“light an shadow”** as well as **“overcast”** and **“sun pass”** implies that the speaker feels that aspects of his character are at odds with themselves. The poem ends however, with the **repetition** of **“whole”** which concludes by providing the resolution of the speaker becoming at ease with their identity.

Throughout the poem, the speaker appeals to the listener’s senses. The **colour imagery** in **“red and green”** is discordant and creates discomfort in the listener. There is further **sensory imagery** used in **“black key”** and **“white key”** which is also contrasting. **Auditory imagery** is used in the description of the **“half-caste symphony”**. This depicts the speaker’s identity in a beautiful way, highlighting the incorrectness of the previously used dissonant descriptions.



Agard uses **Caribbean dialect** throughout to **highlight this aspect of his heritage**. He frequently spells you, “**yu**” and makes the demand “**explain yusef**”. He combines the assigned identity of “**half-caste**” with his own dialect in his reference to himself as “**I half-caste human being**” and “**half-caste till dem overcast**”. This shows that through language, the speaker is able to take ownership of his identity.

