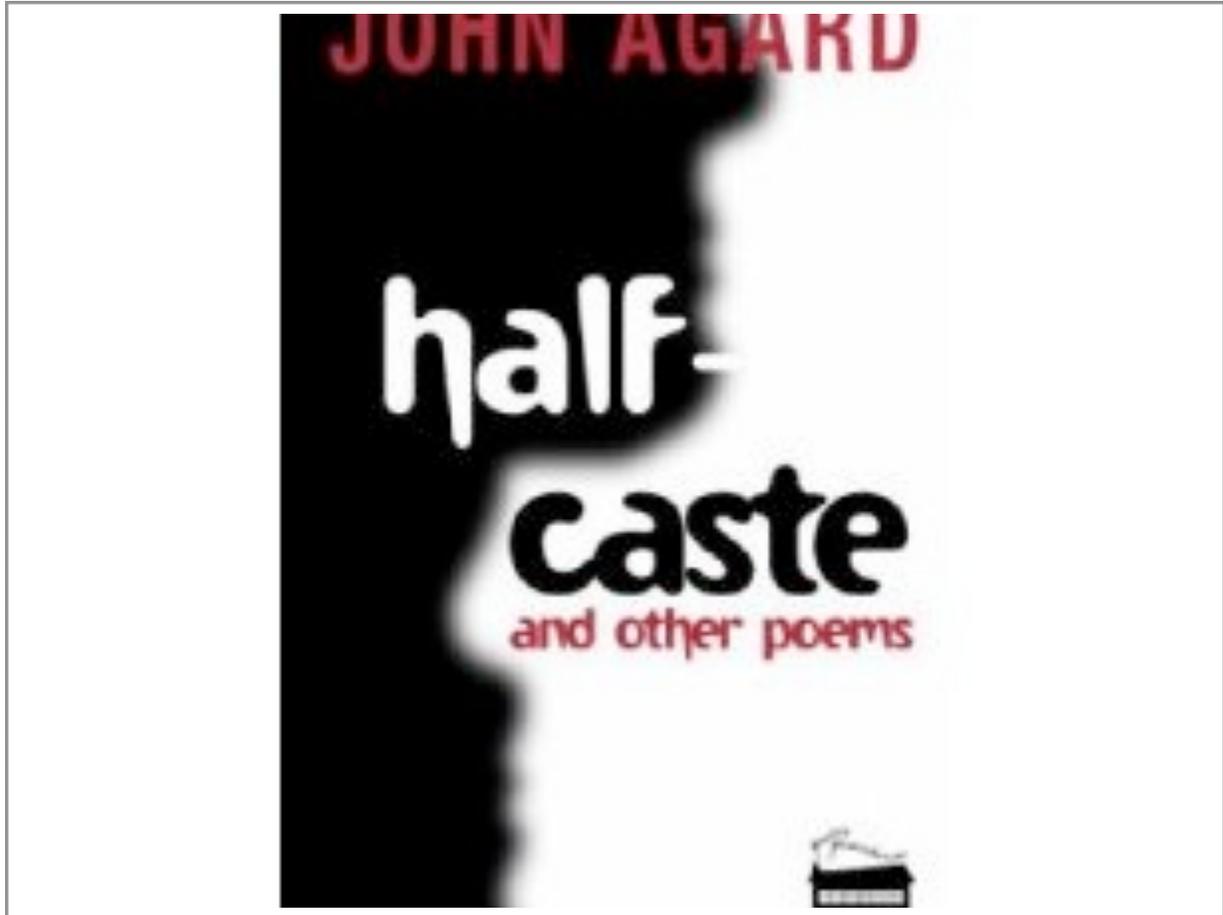


# Half-Caste

*John Agard*



Apple Inc.

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*1st Edition*

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# Context

*John Agard*



Playwright, poet, short-story and children's writer John Agard was born on 21 June 1949 in British Guiana (now Guyana). He is mixed race, with a Guyanese father and a Portuguese mother.

He worked for the *Guyana Sunday Chronicle* newspaper as sub-editor and feature writer before moving to England in 1977, where he became a touring lecturer for the Commonwealth Institute, travelling to schools throughout the UK to promote a better understanding of Caribbean culture. He won the Paul Hamlyn Award for Poetry in 1997 and has travelled extensively throughout the world performing his poetry.

One of the things he enjoys about living in England is the wide range of people he meets: 'The diversity of cultures here is very exciting'.

However, one of the things he doesn't like is the view of racial origins, which is implied in the word 'half-caste', still used by some people to describe people of mixed race. The term now is considered rude and insulting.

## *The term 'half-caste'*

The term 'half-caste' was commonly used before the 1980s to describe a person of mixed race. Although the term is still used by some people, the associations that the word "caste" has with racial hierarchy mean that it is now widely viewed as offensive.

The word "caste" comes originally from the Latin word "castus," which meant "pure." From the Latin came the Portuguese word "casta," which meant "race." This word was used from the 16th century to describe Indian society, in which different "castes" of people were placed in a hierarchy, with the lowest being viewed as "untouchables." This means that the word "caste" is clearly associated with a system in which people are ranked by their ethnic background.

Another reason that the term is offensive is that it reminds people of the days of slavery, in which terms like "half-breed," "mulatto" and "quadroon" were used to divide people up into categories and label, effectively, "how black they were."

The term "half" something also implies that a person is only "half-made" or half-completed. Mixed race footballer Jodi McAnuff dislikes the term, saying that "it means you're half of something, like there's something missing." It is this idea that John Agard explores in his poem.

*Want to know more?*

Read the article about mixed race people's views about the term - <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/blog/2006/oct/28/colourblind>

Read more about why the term is offensive - [http://www.intermix.org.uk/features/FEA\\_22\\_half.asp](http://www.intermix.org.uk/features/FEA_22_half.asp)

# Poem

Excuse me  
standing on one leg  
I'm half-caste.

Explain yuself  
wha yu mean  
when yu say half-caste  
yu mean when **picasso**  
mix red an green  
is a half-caste canvas?  
explain yuself  
wha yu mean  
when yu say half-caste  
yu mean when light an shadow  
mix in de sky



**Picasso** = very famous twentieth century painter. Note that Agard does not use a capital letter.

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 don't want de sun pass  
ah rass?

explain yuself  
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?

← "ah rass" - Creole term meaning "my arse."

← "tchaikovsky" - Famous Russian classical composer.

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

← "keen" - in this case, it means 'sharp, quick.'

cast half-a-shadow  
but yu must come back tomorrow  
wid de whole of yu eye  
an de whole of yu ear  
an de whole of yu mind.

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

**John Agard**

*Listen to Agard read the poem at*

*<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTt4GAjPh58>*

***Want to know more?***

Load this link on your computer (it may not work on iPods as it is a flash video). At the end of the video John Agard talks about this poem and why he wrote it: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips/10299.flv>

## *Podcast*

Listen to the GCSE Podcast on “Half-Caste.” This is a very valuable resource which will give you lots of information and ideas about interesting aspects of the poem.



Link - [www.gcsepod.co.uk/vle/essa](http://www.gcsepod.co.uk/vle/essa) (Log in here)

## *S.M.I.L.E. Analysis*

Remember, to analyse a poem we need to look at:

-Structure

-Meaning

-Imagery (similes, metaphors, personification)

-Language

-Effect on the reader



## *Meaning*

Meaning is a good place to start when thinking about a poem, as here you can discuss the principal theme(s) of the poem and what you think the poet is trying to do.

***Meaning - Key points:***

- In this poem, which was written for performance, John Agard is ridiculing the term “half-caste,” and aiming to show that the term is offensive and makes little sense.

- He is challenging his audience to open their minds, addressing the readers / listeners in a very direct way (e.g. “explain yusef,” “ah listening to yu wid de keen half of my ear”).

- The tone of the poem veers between argumentative and humorous - although Agard is clearly making a serious point here, he uses humour throughout the poem (e.g. “yu mean tchaikovsky / sit down at de piano / an mix a black key / wid a white key / is a half-caste symphony?”)

### ***Exploration - Meaning***

Who do you think Agard is talking to? Who does he ask to “explain yusef?”

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What do you think is the overall tone of the poem?

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Why do you think Agard chose to use humour to put across his message in this poem?

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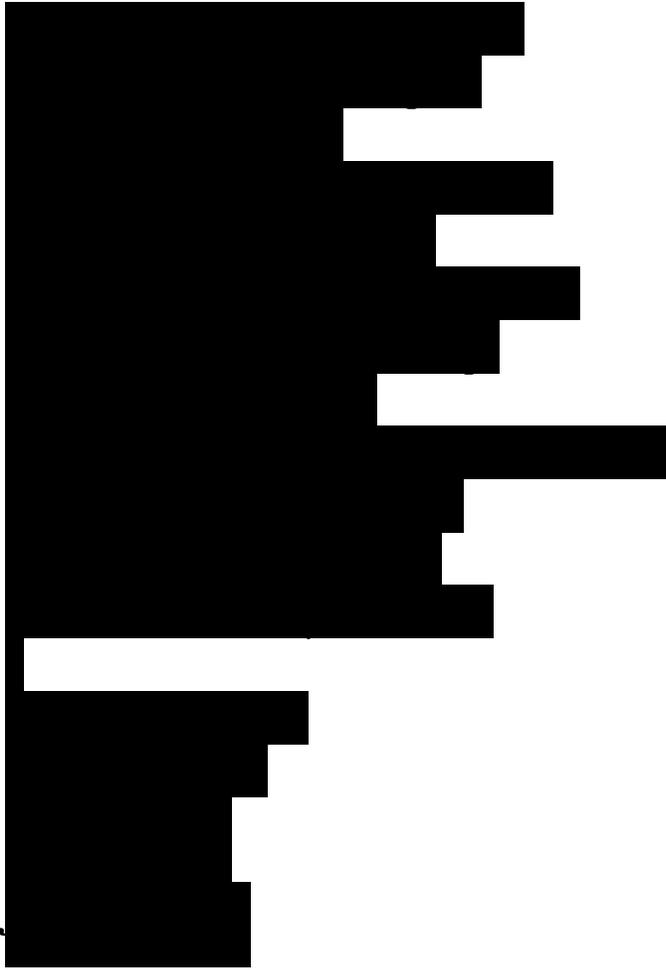
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## *Structure*

Look at the shape of the poem. Is there anything that stands out to you?







### *Structure - key points:*

- The poem looks like “half” of a picture - the other half is absent. He hasn’t told us yet “de other half of my story.”
- The poem is divided into two main halves:
  - In the first half of the poem Agard uses a series of humorous metaphors to show that the word “**half-caste**” is meaningless.
  - In the second half of the poem Agard talks sarcastically about being “half” a person. He then ends by asking the reader to come back “**wid de whole of your mind.**”
- He repeats key phrases e.g. “**Explain yusef**” and “**half-caste**” to emphasise his message.
- The short lines and lack of punctuation make the poem feel aggressive and confrontational.
- The poem does not rhyme in a structured way, but at times Agard uses rhyme and half rhyme to build up rhythm e.g.:

“half-**caste** till dem over**cast**  
so spiteful dem don’t want de sun **pass**  
ah **rass?**”

- The use of repetition and rhyme / half rhyme, along with the short lines, give the poem a rhythm that belongs to the tradition of Caribbean street poetry. It is designed to be heard, not read.

*Structure - Exploration*

Analyse some of the techniques that Agard has used to create rhythm and flow within “Half Caste.” Give examples from the poem.

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*Imagery*



“yu mean when Picasso  
mix red an green  
is a half-caste canvas?”



“yu mean when light an shadow  
mix in de sky  
is a half-caste weather?”



“yu mean tchaikovsky  
sit down at dah piano  
an mix a black key  
wid a white key  
is a half-caste symphony?”

*Imagery - Exploration*

What is the significance of these metaphors? What do they aim to show?

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## *Language*

### *Language - Key Points*

- The poem is written in a mixture of standard English (e.g. “Consequently, when I dream I dream half a dream”) and a Caribbean dialect (e.g. “yuself,” “wid,” “de” and the rude term “ah rass”).
- He uses direct speech and personal pronouns to address his listeners (“I,” “you”).
- Agard does not capitalise the names of the famous people he mentions (e.g. “picasso,” “tchaikovsky”).
- He does not use standard English grammar and punctuation in the poem.

### *Language - Exploration*

Why might Agard mix standard English and Caribbean dialect? How does this relate to the theme of the poem?

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Why do you think Agard doesn't capitalise "picasso" and "tchaikovsky"?

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What point is the poem making on the links between language and identity?

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*Effect on the reader*

*Effect on the reader - exploration*

Did you think that the poem was effective in getting Agard's message across? Why or why not?

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How do you feel after reading / listening to this poem?

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# Sample Exam Question Part A

3. a) “Explore how the writer presents his ideas about conflict due to different identities in “Half Caste.”

Use examples of the language from the poem to support your answer. (15 marks).

NB - In the exam, you would have about 30 minutes to complete this question.

*Write an answer to this question and email it to me.*

## Comparison

*The obvious poem to compare “Half Caste” to is “The Class Game” by Mary Casey. This is another poem in which the author speaks quite confrontationally to people who she feels are judging her. We will look at this poem in class.*

## Sample Exam Question - Part B

*Answer EITHER 3(b)i OR 3(b)ii*

3 b) (i) Compare how the writers of “Half Caste” and “The Class Game” present their views about conflicts due to prejudice and discrimination (15 marks)

3 b) (ii) Compare how the writers of “Half Caste” and one other poem of your choice from the Clashes and Collisions collection present their views about conflict in any setting. (15 marks)

Use examples from the language of **both** poems to support your answer.

NB - In the exam, you would have about 30 minutes to complete this question.