Half-Caste

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
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/
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/
Explain yuself
wha yu mean
Ah listening to yu wid de keen
half of mih ear
Ah lookin at yu 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 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

The context of the poem

John Agard came to England from Guyana in 1977. Like many Caribbeans, he is himself of mixed race - his mother is Portuguese but born in Guyana and his father is black. 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 many people to describe people of mixed race. The term now is considered rude and insulting. Find out more about the word 'caste'.

What the poem is about

The speaker in the poem ridicules the use of the term 'half-caste' by following the idea through to its logical conclusion:

- Should Picasso be seen as second-rate because he mixed a variety of colours in his paintings?
- Should the English weather be scorned because it is full of light and shadow?
- Should Tchaikovsky's music be seen as inferior because he used both the black notes and the white notes on the piano?
- Is someone who is called a 'half caste' only half a person?

The poet asks the listener to begin to think in a more open-minded way.

FOOTNOTES

Picasso: a famous 20th century Spanish painter
Tchaikovsky: a famous 19th century Russian composer
rass: a rude expression

How the poem is written

Structure and sound
The poem is written is five stanzas of varying lengths. Look carefully at the gaps between the stanzas (lines 38/39, 47/48 and 50/51). Why do you think that the poet left these gaps, when the sentence seems to run on into the next stanza? The lines throughout the poem are quite short, perhaps to hammer home the message.

Language and imagery
When you read the poem you will notice that certain phrases (e.g. Explain yuself, half) are repeated or echoed, which builds up a pattern in the language. Do you think that this repetition is a successful way of strengthening the impact of his argument?
The poem relies on **comparisons** to make us see how stupid it is to judge things that are in contrasting colours as only *half* worthy. He uses examples of great and famous artists (Picasso and Tchaikovsky). What is the effect of this? He also uses the weather as an example of something that is full of contrasting colour. Think about what the poet is doing when he uses the phrase *overcast* (line 20). It sounds like the same word as *caste* with an 'e', but is actually an entirely different word. Do you think this adds to the **humour** of the poem? Agard himself says: 'I think humour can be very powerful. Humour breaks down boundaries, it topples our self-importance, it connects people, and because it engages and entertains, it ultimately enlightens.'

The poet has decided **not to use Standard English** in this poem.
- He doesn't use the standard form of **punctuation**. This is partly because it's a poem that is written to be performed aloud. Agard has said: 'Sometimes I think no punctuation can be effective because if the words are floating in space it gives the reader a chance to punctuate with their own breath...'
- He uses the **lower case** where Standard English would use capital letters. Even proper names - like *picasso*, or *tchaikovsky* - are written in this way. What effect does this create?
- He writes in a form of **Caribbean dialect** - *yu* instead of 'you', for example, or *dem* for 'them'. Why do you think Agard chose to write *Half-Caste* in 'non-standard' form?

**Tone**

Try reading the poem aloud. What sort of tone should it be read in?
- **Angrily**, as a warning to everyone who uses the term *half-caste*?
- **Apologetically**? The poem seems to start with an apology: *Excuse me...* Think about why that might be.
- **With humour**?
- **Pleadingly**, as he tries to make people understand?

Or, are there changes of tone in the poem?

Listen, if you can, to Agard's reading of this poem on the BBC TV programme *Roots & Water: Poems from Other Cultures and Traditions*, and decide what tone of voice is he using.

Finally, **why** do you think the poem was written?

**An explanation of 'caste'**

'Cast' is an old-fashioned word meaning the racial group you are born into. A 'caste system' is a class system based on racial origins - like the system of apartheid in the old South Africa. So the word 'half-caste' (like 'half-breed') implies rejection and disrespect.

**John Agard's comments on the poem**

'This imposition of half, half on a person's total human complexity implies that some sort of 'purity' has been subverted. A child of mixed race is a tangible, loving
expression of human beings from different cultural backgrounds getting together - that should be seen not as something threatening, but as something enriching...