

Reading poems from other cultures: 6. *Half Caste*

This audio bite is about *Half Caste* by John Agard.

ALIX: John Agard, the poet who wrote *Half-Caste*, is of mixed race, with a black father and a white mother. He doesn't want to be thought of as half a person, which the term half-caste implies. So the poem makes fun of the idea that mixing things is wrong. It also carries a serious message about racism – we should not judge people by their race, skin colour or culture. And we shouldn't use words that insult other people.

ELIOT: The poem starts with an unusual idea – the poet is standing on just one leg because he is 'half-caste'. Then the poet makes a number of comparisons which make the idea of half a person more and more ridiculous. For instance, if a painter uses two colours, is it a half-caste painting?

ALIX: Or if someone plays black and white keys on a piano, is it a half-caste symphony? And he says that because it's often cloudy in England, English weather must be half-caste.

ELIOT: So by the end of the poem we know that this idea of being just a half is silly. He really is a whole person, and other people should treat him not as someone different, someone to look down on, but as himself.

ALIX: The comparisons in the poem are very clear. He picks out two famous people, Picasso, a painter, and Tchaikovsky, a composer. These are well-known and we can't really believe they only did something that was half good. He also changes English expressions to include the word 'half' – so he only offers us 'half a hand', shuts 'half an eye' and has only 'half a shadow'.

ELIOT: These contrasts make fun of English culture. But the poet shows he is proud of his own culture by the language he uses. The poem is written in the language of his community, a Caribbean dialect and accent. For instance he says 'dat' in place of 'that' and 'wid' in place of 'with'. The spelling is also different, so he writes 'you' as 'Y – U' and the grammar is non-standard as well. For instance, he keeps saying, 'Wha yu mean' when in standard English we'd write, 'What do you mean?'

ALIX: On top of this, he uses very few capital letters and almost no punctuation. So it's sometimes not easy to see when a sentence starts and when it finishes. This is probably because the poem is meant to be performed – it's not meant to be read silently. It also has lots of rhymes, like 'mean' and 'keen', or 'understand' and 'hand'. And it repeats words, especially the word 'half' so it's hard to forget what it is about.

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ELIOT: And at the end of the poem he wants us to look, listen and think of him using the whole of our bodies. And if we do that, he will tell us the other half of his story. So it's like he's telling us that there's more we should know, but we'll only know it if we are open-minded.

ALIX: *Half-Caste* is about the use of a particular term to describe mixed race people. It makes fun of this by using the idea of 'a half' and applying it to well-known people, things and expressions. These contrasts make the term 'half-caste' ridiculous.

There is a serious message here. People of different races and cultures should be treated equally. This is made clearer by the poet using non-standard English. He makes it easier for us to remember his message by repeating ideas and words, and by using rhyme.

Half-Caste has a lot to say about identity. Because of this, you can easily use it to write about how individuals see themselves, or about living in different cultures. It would also be an excellent choice if you wanted to write about how language can be used in unusual ways in poetry.