

## Literature Paper 2 Section B: Anthology Poetry

### Learning compendium

#### 'Checking Out Me History' Agard

##### Key ideas

\*The poem draws upon the experiences of the poet Agard. He was born in Guyana (formerly British Guiana) in the Caribbean. He moved to the UK in the late 1970s.

\*Agard's purpose is to make the reader consider the way in which we are taught history and how we conceive our identity.

\*The poet had to follow a history curriculum which was biased towards whites and/or is Eurocentric. In his poem he challenges this view and cites some major black figures to balance the bias and create a basis for his own identity.

\*The poem also challenges racist attitudes which are often unthinking.

##### STOP-CHECK!

1. What is Agard's main purpose in his poem?
2. What was the poet's view of the history curriculum he was taught?
3. How does the poem aim to challenge the view of history presented to the poet?

##### Form and structure

Written in free verse.

It is a dramatic monologue which sounds like a speech about non-European history: the poet teaches the reader his 'history'.

The poem alternates between two structures which are marked by two different fonts.

##### Repetition

Repetition of 'Dem' emphasises how the poet doesn't identify with the people/teachers who taught him history. It could also be linked to Agard's cultural background and his ancestors.

'Dem tell me/ Dem tell me/ Wha dem want to tell me'

The poet replaces the 'th' with 'd' in order to suggest his Caribbean dialect. The use of phonetic spelling could emphasise how he sees his identity as different (to the history he has been taught).

The use of phonetic spelling and grammar could also portray the poet's refusal to adhere to normal spelling rules and grammar. This could be representative of the poet's refusal to adhere to conventional history.

##### Uses of rhyme

The stanzas which describe the history the poet was taught at school create the style of a nursery rhyme. The poet uses the tone of the poem to convey that the history he was taught in school was like a nursery rhyme or made up story to him.

'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' (lines 22-24)

The cumulative effect of sections of rhyme could represent the poet's increasing anger/ indignation at what he sees as ignoring aspects of history. This is combined with the use of enjambment which also builds up indignation of the poet.

'Dem tell me bout 1066 and all dat

dem tell me bout Dick Whittington and he cat

But Toussaint L'Ouverture

no dem never tell me bout dat' (lines 6-9)

The poet juxtaposes British history with his own history. When referring to British history, one of the examples he cites is of a pantomime in order to make it look trivial in comparison to his own examples.

##### Italics/ irregular rhyme

The combination of use of italics, short verses and irregular rhyme could be viewed as creating a drum beat. This could be viewed as reflective of Caribbean traditions of music and verbal passing/ oration of stories.

*'From Jamaica*

*she travel far*

*to the Crimean War*

*she volunteer to go...*' (lines 40-44)

### STOP-CHECK!

1. Why does the poet use a dramatic monologue as the form of the poem?
2. How does the poet allude to his Caribbean dialect and why does he do this?
3. When is the tone/style of a nursery rhyme used?
4. How does the poet show his anger and indignation?

### Language

#### Imagery- metaphors/ use of light

"Hopeful stream to freedom river" - natural imagery suggests the power of the figure (Nanny de Maroon). She is described as a spiritual person. She is also associated with hope and liberty.

The poet's use of natural imagery for women could represent mother nature and/or showing the power of women.

'Mary Seacole...

a healing star...

a yellow sunrise'

Jamaican Mary Seacole described as a 'healing star' which suggests images linked to light, hope and warmth. Seacole is seen as a mythological creature (metaphor). The poet creates a contrast between Florence Nightingale with her "lamp" and Seacole as a "star" (The star shines brighter). In general the non-European historical figures are described in a more vivid and realistic, memorable way. Light imagery is used to represent them as beacons of hope (which contrasts to the duller descriptions of the European historical figures).

#### Metaphors of blindness and metaphor of identity

The source of the poet's anger and indignation is that he believes that his view of history and himself have been distorted. He feels that his education kept his true identity hidden from him. He was unable to learn about his heritage even though it is an important part of who he is.

'Blind me to me own identity' No light shed upon his own identity/ feels that he has been forced to learn an 'alien' history.  
'Bandage up me eye with me own history' Bandages are usually white therefore he has been blinded by the 'white' history.

'I carving out me identity' - last line reflects the fight/ struggle the poet has to create his own identity/ history against the 'norm'. The connotations of the verb 'carving' also suggestive of trying to create something that won't fade or be forgotten.

### STOP-CHECK!

1. Why are non-European historical figures linked to light?
2. Why is Seacole described as a 'healing star'?
3. What is the meaning of 'Bandage up me eye with me own history'?
4. Why does the poet feel angry about his education?
5. What are the connotations of the verb 'carving'?

### Feelings and attitudes

Questioning/ cynical

The speaker of the poem poses the question: what is history? It is based on a person/ people's perceptions.

Celebration/ rebellion

The poet uses the poem in order to celebrate unknown historical figures- celebrating their work and lives.

Anger/ defiance

There was a conflict between what the poet was allowed to see and what he wasn't.

### Themes

Outsider

Racism/ discrimination

Identity- personal identity- who each individual is and/or collective identity- how different minorities have been marginalised through education.

Presentation of childhood.

**STOP-CHECK!**

Create spider diagrams for each 'feeling and attitude' and theme, explaining how each one is represented in the poem. Use the other sections to help you.

**Compare with...**

'Emigree' (Theme of outsider/ tension between cultures/ identity)

'London' (Power of establishments e.g. the church, education and power of people)

'Ozymandias' (Power of people)

'The Prelude' (Identity, autobiographical, how a childhood experience had a profound impact)

**STOP-CHECK!**

Without looking, write down the poems you could compare with 'COMH' and how you could compare them.

**Key quotations**

'Dem tell me/ Dem tell me/ Wha dem want to tell me'

'Bandage up me eye with me own history/Blind me to me own identity'

'Dem tell me bout ole King Cole was a merry old soul

but dem never tell me about Mary Seacole'

'But now I checking out me own history/ I carving out me identity'

**STOP-CHECK!**

1. Learn the key quotations.

Challenge: can you learn the other quotations referred to on the compendium?

**Glossary**

Toussaint L'Ouverture- a ruler who led the slaves to victory in the Haitian revolution.

Nanny de Maroon- leader of the Maroons (runaway slaves), who led Jamaican resistance against the British Lord Nelson- officer in the Royal Navy who died during the Battle of Trafalgar

Shaka- influential Zulu leader and warrior.

Caribs and Arawaks- Caribbean people whose islands were invaded by Europeans.

Mary Seacole- Jamaican nurse who helped the sick in the Crimean War.

**Useful You Tube Videos**

The NTS English teachers recommend you watch one of the following videos in order to develop your knowledge further or gain a different perspective.

Mr Bruff video link= [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mj1bMk\\_E7GQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mj1bMk_E7GQ)

OR

Stacey Reay video link= <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJO8AKLHESM>