Half-Caste

SUMMARY

Well pardon me, over here standing on just one leg because I'm "half-caste."

Explain yourself—what do you actually mean when you call me "half-caste"? Is it like when the famous artist Picasso mixed together red and green paint—would that canvas then be considered half-caste? Explain yourself—what do you actually mean when you call me "half-caste"? Does it mean that when sunlight and clouds mix in the sky, that creates half-caste weather? If that's how it works, then the weather in England is almost always "half-caste." In fact, some of those clouds over England are so half-caste, you could say that they are *over*cast. Some of those clouds are so mean and hateful, they won't let sunlight pass through at all. Yeah right. Explain yourself—what do you actually mean when you call me "half-caste"? When the composer Tchaikovsky sat down at the piano and played both the black and the white keys, was he creating a half-caste symphony?

Explain yourself—what do you mean? I'm listening to you with the good half of my ear. I'm looking at you with the good half of my eye. And when I meet you, I have no doubt you'll realize why I only offer you half of my hand to shake. And when I sleep at night, I only close half of an eye. As a result, when I dream, I dream only half of a dream. And when the moon starts shining, I only cast half a shadow because I'm only half a person. You're going to have to come back here tomorrow.

And when you do bring your whole eye, your whole ear, and your whole mind.

Only when you do that will you get to learn the other half of my story.

THEMES

THE IGNORANCE AND ABSURDITY OF RACISM

The poem consists of the speaker responding to being deemed "half-caste," a derogatory term used to refer to people of mixed race. The speaker provides a tongue-in-cheek exploration of what this label actually means, wondering whether the idea of being "half-caste" is like a canvas covered with multicolored paints or the mixture of clouds and sun in the sky. In doing so, the poem reveals both the ignorance and absurdity of racism, which seeks to distill the complexity of human identity into a simple matter of black and white.

The speaker uses a series of metaphors when clarifying what it means to be "half-caste" in order to accomplish two things: first, these metaphors subvert the idea of being mixed race as something negative, and second, they underscore just how ridiculous it is to apply this label to a human being. The speaker wonders whether the artist Picasso mixing red and green paints creates a "half-caste canvas," or if the classical musician Tchaikovsky playing both the black and white keys of a piano is "a half-caste symphony." Both ideas are silly; no one would ever refer to painting or music as being "half" of anything. Beyond pointing this out, the speaker also reclaims the term, in a way, by associating being "mixed" with highly respected art and music.

The speaker also compares the state of being "half-caste" to cloudy weather via a pun on a sky being called "overcast." The speaker notes that if such weather is "half-caste" then the "England weather"—notoriously cloudy and rainy—is "Nearly always half-caste." The response emphasizes the absurdity and superficiality of relying on simplistic labels to characterize music, art, or the natural world.

The speaker's joking reply regarding the weather operates on another level as well. By identifying a shared trait (a mixing) with the English sky, the speaker emphasizes the speaker's *own* Englishness. This counters any attempt to classify the speaker as something other or foreign—something that doesn't belong and demands explanation.

Taking a different tactic, the speaker argues that being called "half-caste" implies that the speaker is only "half" a person. The speaker opens the poem by taking the term "half-caste" literally, joking that being half-caste means the speaker is stuck "standing on one leg." The imagery suggests a person who is lacking in some way—incomplete—and thus underscores the racist thinking behind the term "half-caste." This idea of only being half a person is reiterated later when the speaker says, "I half-caste human being / Cast half-a-shadow."

If the speaker is only half a person, then it follows that the speaker casts only "half" a shadow. By the same token, the speaker can only listen with "Half of mih ear" and look with "Half of mih eye"—in other words, the speaker's racist questioner deserves only half of the speaker's respect and attention. The speaker thus again cleverly subverts the idea of being "half-caste," which leaves no room for a full, multifaceted human identity. Only if the speaker's questioner is willing to "come back tomorrow" with "de whole of yu ear / An de whole of yu mind"—that is, if a person is willing to look beyond racist labels and treat the speaker like a full human being—will the speaker "tell" the "other half" of the speaker's "story."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-56

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Excuse me ...
... I'm half-caste

The poem opens with a tercet, a three-line stanza, that serves as the speaker's introduction. The speaker (who is never named nor gendered in the poem) seems to be responding to some unseen party who has deemed the speaker "half-caste"; this other party—addressed in the second person throughout the rest of the poem—can also be understood as a stand in for society itself.

The term "half-caste" is inextricable from ideas of racial hierarchy. The word has roots in the Latin term *castus*, meaning chaste or pure. The idea of being "half-caste" thus suggests a muddying of racial purity, and also brings to mind derogatory terms like "half-breed," "mulatto," or "quadroon"—deeply offensive labels that attempt to categorize people based on their amount of black ancestry. The word "caste" itself is perhaps most often associated with the social stratification of India, where traditionally people have been born into strictly segregated castes that reflect cultural ideas of purity.

The speaker responds to the idea of being "half-caste" by employing humorous imagery that depicts a literal "half" person, with only one leg to stand on. The poem thus immediately sets the stage for the theme it will explore—the absurd manner in which racism boils people down to little more than labels of black or white, leaving no room for a more nuanced human identity.

The first three lines of the poem have no punctuation, which allows for a variety of interpretations when it comes to the speaker's tone. The "Excuse me" could be a statement of genuine confusion or mishearing, but, as the poem goes on, it becomes clear that the speaker is only *pretending* to be ignorant of the implications of being called "half-caste." The initial stanza, viewed in this light, feels defiant and biting—a sarcastic response to a racist label, akin to saying something like, "Seriously?"

These opening lines do not fall into any established order in terms of rhyme, meter, or formal verse. They consist of a brief declarative sentence, split over three lines. The lack of consistent rhyme, meter, or form will be carried throughout the entirety of the poem. In the lines to follow, a Caribbean Creole dialect is employed, however, lines 1-3 are written in so-called "proper" English.

This introductory tercet is complemented by a concluding tercet. The only two stanzas of equal lengths, stanzas 1 and 4, thus serve to book-end the exploration of half-caste that occurs in stanzas 2 and 3. Stanzas 2 and 3 are 27 and 19 lines each, respectively. This unevenness allows the mirroring of the three-lined introductory and concluding stanzas to stand out.

LINES 4-6

Explain yuself ...
... yu say half-caste

In lines 4-6, the speaker employs the rhetorical device of aporia, expressing pretended uncertainty or doubt as a way of making a point. The speaker introduces the question—of what is meant by the term "half-caste"—in order to pave the path for the tongue-in-cheek exploration to come. The use of the phrase "Explain yuself" suggests an aggressive tone, as this phrase would generally be used in an imperative, commanding manner to demand a person explain a certain action—usually something bad or wrong. The speaker is forcing society to reckon with its use of this term.

These lines begin the poem's use of Caribbean Creole dialect, with the use of "yuself" instead "yourself," "Wha" instead of "What," and "yu" instead of "you." The speaker establishes a unique voice distinct from that of European English, just as the poem itself—with its free verse stanzas and lack of punctuation—breaks from established European poetic traditions. This takes on new resonance when considering the context of the poem's writing: John Agard grew up in the West Indian country of Guyana when it was still a British colony. The poem's language and form is a way of rejecting and questioning that colonial authority.

By reflecting the sounds of spoken Caribbean Creole language, this further encourages a lyrical, song-like reading of the poem. The lack of constricting form, rhyme, or meter supports this reading.

LINES 7-9

yu mean when ...
... a half-caste canvas/

Lines 7-9 compares the term "half-caste" to the artist Picasso mixing red and green paint on a canvas. Pablo Picasso was a famous Spanish painter and sculptor who lived from 1881-1973, and a Picasso painting would be very highly valued. The metaphor, comparing the idea of being "half-caste" to a piece of art by a widely respected and admired famous artist, suggests a positive connotation for the term. The speaker is reclaiming the term, in a way, by subverting its negative connotation. Recall the definition of "caste" this guide mentioned earlier: "half-caste" implies an offensive muddying of racial purity, but here the speaker likens the concept to the creation of art.

Note how there are no question marks in the poem, despite the speaker's continued use of the poetic device aporia. Again, the speaker rejects traditional European grammatical forms,

choosing instead to write the poem exactly as the speaker wants to write it. The lack of punctuation also emphasizes that these are rhetorical questions—the speaker isn't actually looking for an *answer*.

Lines 7-9 also use enjambment to drive the reader forward. The reader is left hanging, wondering what being half-caste might have to do with Picasso, until the word "Mix" is introduced at line 8. It then becomes clear that what a "half-caste" person and a Picasso painting would share is the "mixing" (of races or of paints).

For a moment, this *may* seem logical. However, when the question concludes by slapping the "half-caste" label onto the canvas, the comparison becomes utterly illogical—as the term "half-caste" is never used to describe inanimate objects. And, of course, mixing red and green paint creates a *new* color—not a color anyone would refer to as "half red" or "half green." The speaker is slyly comparing their own body to a work of art, while *also* making the point that applying this label to a person is just as silly as applying it to a painting.

LINES 10-12

explain yuself ...
... yu say half-caste

Lines 10-12 consist of an exact, word-for-word repetition of lines 4-6. Again, the speaker pushes for an explanation of "half-caste," demanding that society think more critically about the implications of this offensive term. The speaker will repeat the lines "Explain yuself / wha yu mean" two more times in the poem, turning this into a sort of refrain. This also allows for some regularity in terms of emphasis throughout a poem that otherwise doesn't adhere to any consistent meter, rhyme, or form.

This repetition further suggests that people often throw the term around haphazardly, without really thinking through what they're saying—or without *caring* about what they're saying. The speaker keeps returning to this imperative to *force* whoever is questioning the speaker to reckon with the weight of their words. The repetition of the phrase again suggests an aggressive tone, revealing the speaker's frustration.

LINES 13-18

yu mean when ...
... nearly always half-caste

Lines 13-18 introduce another metaphor to explore the meaning of "half-caste," this time comparing the term to cloudy weather where "light an shadow / mix in de sky." In other words, the speaker is asking if a day where clouds block some sunlight could be considered "half-caste." The use of enjambment again places emphasis on the word "mix," making it clear that this is the key trait shared by a cloudy sky and a "half-caste" individual:

yu mean when light an shadow
mix in de sky

The speaker employs humor, joking that if this is the case, then the weather in England—notoriously cloud and rainy—is "nearly always half-caste." The fact that the speaker mentions the English weather suggests that the poem takes place in England, where the poet himself lived (although there is no other indication for this being the setting within the poem itself).

This humorous comparison serves another purpose as well, namely to emphasize the speaker's *own* Englishness. It's a statement of belonging and counters any attempt to classify the speaker as something different, other, or foreign—something that doesn't belong. A racist point of view might equate Englishness with being white; in fact, the speaker humorously and rather ironically points out that being "mixed"—just like the English sky—is perhaps even *more* true to English identity.

LINES 19-23

in fact some ...
... ah rass/

Lines 19-20 builds on the weather metaphor introduced in the previous lines. The speaker is making a pun on the word "overcast," which means cloudy. If "half-*caste*" weather is a mixture of clouds and sun, then one could say that totally cloudy weather is actually "over*caste*." This is because, the speaker continues, the clouds become so spiteful—malicious or filled with ill-will—that they don't want to let any sunshine through at all.

This is followed up with the phrase "ah rass," a Caribbean Creole expletive used here to express frustration and anger. The phrase essentially translates to "my arse" ("my ass") in British English, which is likewise an offensive expletive used to express doubt or skeptical disbelief. The use of the term here demonstrates annoyance and frustration. Although the speaker makes the argument regarding the ignorance and absurdity of racism, the fact that this argument still needs to be made—again and again, as evidenced by the repetition of the demand "Explain yuself"—is frustrating.

The end rhyme of "pass" and "rass" ties these lines together in a cohesive unit, emphasizing the emotion that they encompass. For the reader, this is a reminder that—all jokes aside—the theme of racism addressed by the poem "Half-Caste" is not to be taken lightly.

LINES 24-26

explain yuself ...
... yu say half-caste/

Following the speaker's frustrated declaration of "ah rass," the poem returns to what essentially is its refrain—another exact, word-for-word repetition of lines 4-6 and 10-12. This

reiterates the question at hand, and what the whole poem is about—that is, what is meant by the term "half-caste." The result is to set the stage for the speaker's continued subversive exploration of the term. The question will again be answered by yet another carefully chosen metaphor, which will be used in a similarly subversive manner as the previous comparisons to a Picasso painting or overcast weather.

From a structural standpoint, the exact, word-for-word repetition of these three lines again serves to give the poem some symmetry. As previously pointed out in this guide, this allows for some regularity in a poem that otherwise does not adhere to any consistent formal rules in terms of poetic meter, rhyme, or formal verse. From a thematic standpoint, the repetition of the demanding phrase "explain yuself" also suggests that prevalence and persistence of racism: again and again, the speaker must come up with arguments and construct new subversive attempts to address the term "half-caste" and explore its continued meaning in modern society.

LINES 27-32

yu mean when ...
... a half-caste symphony/

The final lines of this stanza turn to another comparison to attempt to explain what "half-caste"might mean. This time, the speaker compares the term to a symphony that mixes black and white piano keys—something that, really, any musician does when playing the piano. The specific allusion here is to the composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, considered the most popular Russian composer of all time. Like a Picasso painting, a Tchaikovsky symphony would be highly respected. The metaphor, comparing "half-caste" to a piece of music by a widely admired famous composer, once again suggests a *positive* connotation for the term "half-caste." The speaker is reclaiming the term in a way by subverting its negative connotation; a piece of music that relied solely on the white keys or black keys of a piano would be decidedly simplistic and boring!

These lines again make use of enjambment to drive the reader forward, pushing readers down the page. The reader is left hanging, wondering what being half-caste could possibly have to do with Tchaikovsky, until the word "mix" is once again introduced:

> yu mean when **tchaikovsky**
> **sit** down at **dah**
> **piano**
> **and mix** a black key

It then becomes clear that what a "half-caste" person and a Tchaikovsky symphony would share is the "mixing" (of races or of piano keys). As with the Picasso metaphor, for a moment, this may seem logical. In this case, the metaphor seems to be even more relevant as it employs the colors "black" and "white" (instead of red and green) which are commonly used as labels for race. However, when the phrase concludes by slapping the "half-caste" label onto the symphony, the comparison devolves into absurdity—no one would ever actually use the term "half-caste" to talk about a piece of music. It's an absurd way to talk about art, and, it follows, it's an even more absurd way to talk about something as nuanced and complex as human identity.

LINES 33-41

Explain yuself ...
... offer yu half-a-hand

Lines 31-32 consist of yet *another* word-for-word repetition of the phrase "Explain yuself / Wha you mean." In this case, however, the last part of the question—"when yu say half-caste"—is cut off. The phrase consists of just two lines and drops the conclusion. In this sense, the start of this stanza serves as a transitional point, introducing a new train of thought while still providing a brief reminder of what is at stake: an exploration of the term "half-caste."

In the third stanza, the speaker stops using the kind of metaphors seen in the second stanza and instead employs a different tactic to undermine the term "half-caste." The speaker now argues that being called "half-caste" implies that the speaker is only "half" a person. This idea was already presented, in a very literal sense, in the opening tercet, when the speaker described themselves as "Standing on one leg."

Now, the speaker further plays with the idea of being literally "half" of a human being, and in doing so underscores how calling someone "half-caste" implies that they're somehow not a full, complete person. The speaker ironically embraces this idea, taking it to its presumable conclusion: if the speaker is only *half* a person, the speaker can only listen with *half* an ear and *half* an eye. On a symbolic level, this suggests that whomever the speaker is talking to isn't receiving—and doesn't deserve—the speaker's *full* respect and attention. This reading is supported by the fact that the speaker only offers "half-a-hand" upon being "introduced to you." Shaking hands with someone upon meeting them is a sign of respect; to only offer someone "half-a-hand," then, implies a clear *lack* of respect.

The speaker thus continues to challenge the established order of racist thought and the use of racist slurs like "half-caste" by subversively suggesting they do not warrant respect. The repetition of the word "keen" in this section further ties these lines together. The word "keen" can mean to have a sharp, cutting edge or point (like a knife's blade) or to be intellectually sharp (smart). The word's repetition here allows the speaker to slyly affirm the intelligence of their own argument and point-of-view.

LINES 42-49

an when I ...

... cast half-a-shadow

The speaker continues building on the idea of being half a person. The speaker is described closing only "half-a-eye" when going to sleep at night and casting only "half-a-shadow" when the "moon begin to glow." This half-shadow calls to mind the one-legged being the speaker presents in the poem's opening stanza, and reiterates the insulting nature of the term "half-caste"—which denies the "whole" of the speaker's humanity.

The wording of "close half-a-eye" further calls to mind the idiom "to sleep with one eye open," which suggests that a person is under threat. The phrase means that a person stays awake or sleeps lightly to keep their defenses up—that they remain alert, wary, and cautious. This again lends a note of seriousness to the poem, suggesting the "half-caste" individual must be on guard—presumably against the dangerous, racist thinking that informs the use of a term like "half-caste."

Another pun—similar to overcast/overcaste—is seen in the phrasing "I half-**caste** human being / **cast** half-a-shadow." These moments of playing with language reiterate a point the speaker makes previously with the metaphors, namely that racist language is rooted in ignorance and that buying into racist slurs, or labels, is generally absurd. Just as it's silly to label a painting or symphony as "half-caste," it's likewise silly to label a person "half-caste." The playful puns emphasize the meaningless nature of such words.

LINES 50-53

but yu must ...
... of yu mind

So far, the speaker has provided a tongue-in-cheek exploration of the term "half-caste." Through the use of carefully chosen metaphors, humor, word play (puns), and a literal depiction of a "half" person, the speaker has unveiled the illogical nature and absurdity of a racist term like "half-caste." The word "But" marks a shift, as the speaker now places the onus on *others* to see and treat the speaker as a "whole" person. The word "tomorrow" points to the future, suggesting that racist thought and language must be left in the past now that the speaker has made an argument as to its absurdity. The repetition (technically diacope) of the word "whole" in these lines further serves as a call for the speaker, the "half-caste" individual, to be seen as a "whole" person.

Having established that racist language is illogical and not worthy of respect, the speaker turns the tables on those who use the term "half-caste" and, in doing so, imply that people like the speaker aren't full human beings. The speaker has already made it clear that such people aren't worthy of the speaker's respect. The speaker now offers a challenge to any individual who would still buy into the term "half-caste," pushing them to approach the speaker with an open mind instead of reducing the speaker to a shallow and derogatory label.

LINES 54-56

an I will ...
... of my story

The poem's final tercet mirrors the first, breaking a short declarative statement over three short lines. Enjambment keeps up the pace, as the reader is left wondering at the end of each line: "tell yu" [what?] / "De other half "[of what?]. Even the final words—"my story"—leave the reader wondering and curious; what might that story *be*?

The final lines of the poem make it clear that only if the speaker's questioner deigns to "come back tomorrow" with "de whole of yu ear / An de whole of yu mind"—that is, if this person is willing to look beyond racist labels and treat the speaker like an actual human being—will the speaker "tell" the "other half" of the speaker's "story." Those who would use the reductive and racist term "half-caste" don't deserve the "whole" of the speaker's identity.

This is the speaker's humorous trick and the poem's great accomplishment. By exploring the meaning of the term "half-caste," the speaker reveals the illogical and absurd nature of racism, arguing that such terminology is at odds with the complexity of human identity. Although the speaker is technically reflecting on themselves, a half-caste individual, throughout the entire poem, the speaker has not revealed a single *detail* about their actual life story. The reader can infer that the speaker has some Caribbean background due to the use of Creole dialect, and that the speaker may be located in England due to the English weather joke—but that's about it. Ultimately the speaker has proven that, when a person is viewed only through the racist lens of a label like "half-caste," they are essentially reduced to little more than skin color. Their full story will never be known.

SYMBOLS

CLOUDS AND SUNLIGHT

In "Half-Caste," cloudy weather symbolizes ignorance while the sunlight represents enlightenment—specifically, a knowledge of the absurdity of racism.

This symbol appears as the speaker metaphorically compares being "half-caste" to cloudy weather. The speaker describes "light and shadow" mixing in the sky and suggests that some clouds are "so spiteful" that they won't let the sun pass. Given that the speaker is describing the English sky, the statement suggests that the people in England are like these spiteful clouds. They are so ignorant that they carry on racist ideas, refusing to acknowledge how absurd racism is. As a result, England remains overcast. Without the clouds of racism, it would be a brighter, better place.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-22:** "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"

POETIC DEVICES

APORIA

"Half-Caste" makes use of aporia throughout. The speaker's exploration of what it means to be "half-caste" is set up entirely under the guise of pretended uncertainty or doubt. The speaker already *knows* that the term "half-caste" refers to a mixed race individual, but the speaker nevertheless pushes for a more thoughtful contemplation of the term's racist implications. The speaker isn't looking for a literal answer, but rather to lay bare the fact that this label is, like racism itself, inherently absurd and illogical.

Specific instances of aporia are highlighted through rhetorical questions. The repetition of the phrase "Explain yuself / wha yu mean / when yu say half-caste" is the most obvious, as it again and again lays the groundwork for the speaker to respond with a subversive answer. This question, in fact, becomes a sort of refrain throughout the poem.

The responses to these queries serve to cast further doubt over the label "half-caste." The speaker rhetorically asks whether a Picasso painting that mixes different colors would be a "half-caste canvas," whether music that makes use of a piano's black and white keys would be a "half-caste symphony," and whether partly cloudy skies constitute "half-caste weather." These suggestions, of course, are ridiculous—no one would use the term "half-caste" to describe music, art, or the natural world. Why then, the poem suggests, is it used to describe human beings? The poem's aporia is thus used to inform a subversive Q&A, in which the "answers" reveal just how absurd the "half-caste" label is in the first place.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Explain yuself"
- **Lines 5-6:** "wha yu mean / when yu say half-caste"
- **Lines 7-10:** "yu mean when picasso / mix red an green / Is a half-caste canvas/ / explain yuself"
- **Lines 11-12:** "wha yu mean / when yu say half-caste"
- **Lines 13-15:** "yu mean when light an shadow / mix in de sky / is a half-caste weather/"
- **Lines 24-32:** "explain yuself / wha yu mean / when yu say half-caste/ / yu mean when tchaikovsky / sit down at dah / piano / and mix a black key / wid a white key / is a half-caste symphony/"
- **Lines 33-34:** "Explain yuself / Wha yu mean"

IRONY

The entirety of the poem "Half-Caste" could be read as ironic, in the sense that the poem shakes up common perceptions of the "half-caste" label. This is seen in the use of metaphors comparing being "half-caste" to an admired artwork or symphony, which suggests a positive instead of the usual negative connotation. The speaker turns the "half-caste" slur on its head by applying it to these famous inanimate objects, which are generally respected.

The metaphor comparing the term "half-caste" to cloudy weather (where "light an shadow / Mix in de sky") offers a new angle in terms of irony, by questioning common perceptions about nation, specifically what it is to be "English." In emphasizing the speaker's own Englishness, this humorous comparison counters any attempt to classify the speaker as something different, other, or foreign—something that doesn't belong. A racist point of view might equate Englishness with being white but the speaker, with a hint of irony, humorously points out, being "mixed"—just like the English sky—is what's *truly* English. The speaker makes a point that the way things *seem* are in fact very different from how they actually are.

The speaker also uses irony to reveal just how ignorant racism ideas of racial purity are. When the speaker says things like "I'm sure you'll understand," the speaker is actually being ironic—poking fun at the stupidity of racist attitudes by taking them to their supposedly logical conclusion. The speaker isn't *actually* offering respect to this racist listener, but rather calling that listener ignorant and prejudiced.

The same thing happens when the speaker says "consequently when I dream / I dream half-a-dream" and "I half-caste human being / cast half-a-shadow." The speaker is not being serious here; instead the speaker is saying just the opposite of what these lines suggest on the surface: the speaker is a *full* human being with *full* dreams just as valid as anyone else's.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** "yu mean when picasso / mix red an green / Is a half-caste canvas/"
- **Lines 13-22:** "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"
- **Lines 27-32:** "yu mean when tchaikovsky / sit down at dah / piano / and mix a black key / wid a white key / is a half-caste symphony/"
- **Lines 39-49:** "an when I'm introduced to you / 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"

METAPHOR

The poem has three significant metaphors, which all serve the same purpose: to demonstrate just how absurd the "half-caste" label is, and to highlight the ignorant nature of the racism that informs this term.

The poem's first metaphor compares being "half-caste" to a Picasso painting that mixes red and green paint on the canvas. The allusion to the famous and respected Spanish painter Pablo Picasso subverts the traditionally negative association with the term "half-caste" by associating it with something positive. At the same time, it suggests the label is silly; no one would say that mixing colors of paint creates "half" of anything. Rather, it just adds dimension to a work of art.

Later, another metaphor compares being "half-caste" to a Tchaikovsky symphony that involves playing both the black and white keys on a piano. The allusion to the Russian composer likewise subverts the traditionally negative term "half-caste" with something positive—something that is admired and respected. And again, at the same time it highlights how absurd this label is; pretty much all piano music uses both the black and white keys. Music that doesn't would be decidedly simplistic and boring.

Finally, another metaphor compares being "half-caste" to cloudy weather where "light an shadow / mix in de sky." This humorous comparison emphasizes the speaker's Englishness (since the sky in England is quite often cloudy), asserting a sense of belonging.

In each of these cases, the speaker ultimately demonstrates how shallow and useless the term "half-caste" actually is. Applying this term to art, music, or the weather actually tells you nothing meaningful about any of these things. While they all share a trait of being *mixed* in some way, it'd be extremely odd to define them has "half" of anything. Instead, they are simply whole entities made up, like most things, of various parts—just as human beings have nuanced identities that shouldn't be boxed in by labels related to skin color.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** "yu mean when picasso / mix red an green / Is a half-caste canvas"
- **Lines 13-15:** "yu mean when light an shadow / mix in de sky / is a half-caste weather"
- **Lines 27-32:** "yu mean when tchaikovsky / sit down at dah / piano / and mix a black key / wid a white key / is a half-caste symphony"

ALLUSION

The poem makes use of allusion in two instances, both times within the context of a metaphor. One allusion is made to Spanish painter Pablo Picasso, who lived from 1881-1973 (primarily in France). Picasso is famous for his cubist pieces, such as "Les Demoiselles D'Avingon," which shows five female figures with angular and disjointed (non-realistic) bodies and mask-like faces. A second allusion is made to Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (anglicized as Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky). Considered the most popular Russian composer of all time, he lived from 1840-1893. His work include a number of symphonies and he also wrote the music for the ballet *The Nutcracker*. Both of the allusive references are to well-known and respected artists. By comparing being "half-caste" to the widely admired works of such creators, the speaker reclaims the term, in a way—presenting the idea of being "half-caste" in a positive light.

In the case of the Picasso reference, the speaker may also be hinting at the speaker's *own* subversive creativity. Some of Picasso's work, notably his non-realistic cubist art, was considered shocking and outrageous for its time. He was a subversive artist. The speaker, too, might be considered a subversive poet—breaking the traditions of European poetry and grammar and instead writing verse in Caribbean Creole (a language that, itself, is a kind of mixture). And just as Picasso broke down familiar physical forms in his art, the speaker is breaking down a common term (and, in doing so, showing it to be rooted in ignorant and illogical racism).

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "picasso"
- **Line 27:** "tchaikovsky"

REPETITION

In a poem that adheres to no strict rules or consistency in terms of formal verse, rhyme scheme, or meter, repetition serves to create a cohesive work. The most obvious example is in the phrase "Explain yuself / wha yu mean / when yu say half-caste." This appears, almost identically, four times throughout the poem—making it a kind of refrain. This repetition allows the speaker to repeatedly employ the rhetorical device of aporia, expressing pretended uncertainty or doubt as a way of making a point. The repeated use of the phrase "explain yuself" suggests an aggressive tone, as this phrase is generally used in an imperative, commanding manner to demand a person explain a certain action—usually something they've done bad or wrong. This implies that it's a negative thing to be "half-caste" and that it's something that needs to be explained. Through the resulting explanation, the speaker is able to act subversively, for example through metaphors that compare being half-caste to positively viewed objects.

The repetition of this demanding phrase "Explain yourself" also suggests that prevalence and persistence of racism. The speaker must continually come up with arguments and construct new subversive attempts to address the term "half-caste" and explore its meaning in modern society.

Repetition of the word "half" is also seen throughout the poem and not only within the word "half-caste." The word drives home the idea of a "half" person by referring to, for example, "half" an eye, hand, ear, or shadow—all building up the imagery of a physically "halved" person. This half person can only cast "half-a-shadow" and dream "half-a-dream." The repetition of "half" throughout the poem is countered by the repetition of "whole" in lines 51-53:

> wid de whole of yu eye
> an de whole of yu ear
> and de whole of yu mind

This phrase, "de whole of yu," can be classified as anaphora, and is meant as a sharp critique of the speaker's interlocutor. The speaker is implying that, in calling the speaker half-caste, this questioner has reduced their *own* humanity. As such, only when this person comes back with an open mind, with their eyes and ears fully open, will they be worthy of the speaker's respect.

Other smaller moments of repetition appear throughout, often dovetailing with examples of parallelism. The speaker presents each of the metaphors in the second stanza in the exact same way, beginning with "yu mean when" and ending with "is a half-caste [insert noun]." In the third stanza, again uses repetition and parallelism, insisting:

> Ah listening to yu wid de keen
> half of mih ear
> Ah looking at u wid de keen
> half of mih eye

This underscores the speaker's point—that, taking the idea of being half-caste literally and to its logical conclusion suggests that the speaker is only half a human being, with only half an eye and ear to offer. The repetition of "keen" meanwhile—which means clever or sharp—emphasizes the speaker's wit and self-assurance.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "half-caste"
- **Lines 4-7:** "Explain yuself / wha yu mean / when yu say half-caste / yu mean when"
- **Line 9:** "Is a half-caste canvas"
- **Lines 10-13:** "explain yuself / wha yu mean / when yu say half-caste / yu mean when"
- **Line 15:** "is a half-caste weather"
- **Line 18:** "half-caste"
- **Line 20:** "half-caste "
- **Lines 24-27:** "explain yuself / wha yu mean / when yu say half-caste/ / yu mean when"
- **Line 30:** "black key"
- **Line 31:** "white key"
- **Line 32:** "is a half-caste symphony"
- **Lines 33-38:** "Explain yuself / 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"
- **Line 41:** "half-a-hand"
- **Line 43:** "half-a-eye"
- **Lines 44-45:** "when I dream / I dream half-a-dream"
- **Lines 48-49:** "half-caste human being / cast half-a-shadow"
- **Lines 51-53:** "wid de whole of yu eye / an de whole of yu ear / and de whole of yu mind"

COLLOQUIALISM

The entire poem is written using Caribbean Creole, as is the case with much of the poet John Agard's work. The speaker has a clear and unique voice that, on the one hand, suggests that this person is of Caribbean descent, and also is a means of subverting the traditions of English poetry. Creole itself is a mixture of various tongues that synthesize into a new language. It—like the speaker, like Picasso's paintings, and like a symphony—is thus a mixture of various elements that, together, create a new whole. In using Caribbean Creole to write this poem, the speaker asserts the *poetry* of that language—asserts that it, too, is worthy of being used in literary verse.

A more specific example of colloquialism within that Creole is seen in the words "Ah rass." This expletive expresses frustration and anger, and roughly translates to "my arse" ("my ass") in British English. The speaker basically expressing doubt, skepticism, or —saying something like, "Seriously? Yeah right." Coming directly after the speaker's joke regarding the English weather, the expletive "ah rass" also brings a sense of anger to an otherwise humorous moment. This is a reminder that, although the speaker offers moments of levity through absurdist metaphors and joking puns, the theme that the poem deals with is serious.

Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- **Line 23:** "ah rass"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment plays a central role throughout the poem. The poem has no standard punctuation, and phrases regularly spill over from one line to the next. Because of the lack of punctuation, it's possible to interpret some lines as being either enjambed or end-stopped, depending on how you read them.

That said, what's important to take away here is that the poem's use of enjambement broadly reflects its content. The poem breaks down the idea of being "half" of something and, fittingly, many of its lines are split into parts. In lines 2-3, for example, the phrase "Standing on one leg / I'm half-caste" is inverted from the expected word order, which would place the pronoun "I'm" at the front. The fact that the phrase "divides" this declaration of identity into two parts reflects the speaker's perceived half-ness.

Enjambment also amps up the pace of the poem, keeping the reader guessing and driving the poem onwards from one line to the next. Take the start of the third stanza, for example: "Ah listening to yu wid de keen ..." The reader is left wondering "with the keen *what*?" The next line employs a similar tactic: "Ah looking at u wid de keen ..." Again, the reader is left wondering "with the keen *what*?" This builds anticipation throughout the third stanza.

By contrast, the lines addressing the speaker's interlocutor towards the end of the poem feel distinctly end-stopped:

> wid de whole of yu eye
> an de whole of yu ear
> and de whole of yu mind

Though these lines do indeed build upon each other, each line itself is a clear, self-contained unit/thought—the lines could easily end with periods. This reflects this person's conception of themselves as a "whole" person. When the speaker then returns in the poem's final stanza, the enjambment returns too—literally breaking up the speaker's promise to tell "de other half / of my story" into two parts.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "mean / when"
- **Lines 7-8:** "picasso / mix"
- **Lines 8-9:** "green / Is"
- **Lines 11-12:** "mean / when"
- **Lines 13-14:** "shadow / mix"
- **Lines 14-15:** " sky / is"
- **Lines 16-17:** "case / england"
- **Lines 17-18:** "weather / nearly"
- **Lines 19-20:** "cloud / half-caste"
- **Lines 21-22:** "de / sun"
- **Lines 25-26:** "mean / when"
- **Lines 27-28:** "tchaikovsky / sit"
- **Lines 28-30:** "dah / piano / and"
- **Lines 30-31:** " key / wid"
- **Lines 31-32:** "key / is"
- **Lines 35-36:** "keen / half"
- **Lines 37-38:** "keen / half"
- **Lines 40-41:** "understand / why"
- **Lines 42-43:** "night / I"
- **Lines 44-45:** "dream / I"
- **Lines 46-47:** "begin / to"
- **Lines 47-48:** "glow / I"
- **Lines 48-49:** " being / cast"
- **Lines 50-51:** " tomorrow / wid"
- **Lines 54-55:** "yu / de"
- **Lines 55-56:** "half / of"

PUN

In lines 13-21, the speaker compares the state of being "half-caste" to cloudy weather. A pun is implied by labeling the weather "half-caste" and then referring to it as "overcast." One could easily say the weather is "overcaste." This wordplay reiterates the speaker's humorous tone at this point of the poem and complements the joke the speaker is making about the English weather.

The pun also functions to further the speaker's agenda of questioning the meaning of the term "half-caste." The speaker has already made the point that labeling a piece of art or music, or an element of the natural world, "half-caste" is absurd. With the overcast/overcaste pun, the speaker encourages further reflection on the way people use language and the inherent emptiness of language itself. Words only have meaning because *people* ascribe a certain meaning to them. One could just as well say the sky is "overcaste" as say it's "overcast." Similarly, racist language only gains meaning from people with spiteful and ignorant thinking, who ascribe negative connotations to words like "half-caste." Throughout the poem, the speaker shows how empty a word like "half-caste" actually is by subverting its usually negative connotations. The pun offers yet another example of how language is a human construct—one that can be challenged, questioned, and revised.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-22:** "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"
- **Lines 48-49:** "I half-caste human being / cast half-a-shadow"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used throughout the third and fourth stanzas, uniting these two otherwise asymmetrical units stylistically. The repetition of /ck/ sounds is particularly prominent. There is, of course, the repetition of "half-caste" but also words like picasso, sky, cloud, cast, and key. Even tchaikovsky has multiple /ck/ sounds. These sharp, punctuated notes are contrasted by the rounder /d/ sounds of the Caribbean creole dialect, which also allows for a great deal of consonance. The words [I'm, and,

that, them/those/they, the, the, my, what, with, and you] become [Ah, dat, dem, de, dah, mih, wha, wid, yu]. The contrasting consonance of the /ck/ and /d/ sounds works to support the poem's theme, suggesting the schism of the "half-caste" speaker, represented as two halves instead of a whole human being. On one hand, the speaker appears to have a background—for instance Afro-Caribbean—in which this round, singing dialect appears with its /d/ sounds. On the other hand, the speaker is in England, confronted by the harsh term "half-caste" with its /ck/ sounds.

The repetition of /x/ sounds emphasizes the demanding refrain the speaker faces again and again: The demand for explanation. The first three stanzas of the poem start with Excuse, Explain, Explain, spinning the narrative of the poem. The half-caste speaker must first introduce their character and then explain themselves, repeatedly. Consonance thus supports the poem's cohesiveness as a unified story. The repetition of mix also speaks to the overarching theme, the question of what half-caste really means. In the speaker's tongue-in-cheek exploration, the one characteristic identified again and again that "half-caste" shares with a painting, symphony, or nature, is the mixing.

Consonance also serves to emphasize moments in which the speaker's emotions appear to be heightened. In lines 20-22, for example, the speaker concludes the metaphor of the overcast sky, in which sun and clouds mix, on a note of exasperation, remarking of some clouds that they are

> half-caste till dem overcast
> so spiteful dem dont want de
> sun pass

The speaker's words take on an almost angry tone here, condemning the spiteful clouds that won't let the sunshine pass—the clouds and sunlight serving as symbols for ignorance and enlightenment, respectively. The surge of consonance in these lines reflects the sudden shift from joking observation to frustration, as /s/ and /d/ and /ck/ repeat in rapid succession. Consonance thus also supports the shifting mood of the poem at this point.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Excuse"
- **Line 3:** "caste"
- **Line 4:** "Explain"
- **Line 6:** "caste"
- **Line 7:** "picasso"
- **Line 8:** "mix"
- **Line 9:** "caste canvas"
- **Line 10:** "explain"
- **Line 12:** "caste"
- **Line 14:** "mix," "sky"
- **Line 15:** "caste"
- **Line 16:** "case"
- **Line 18:** "caste"
- **Line 19:** "cloud"
- **Line 20:** "caste," "overcast"
- **Line 21:** "so spiteful dem dont"
- **Lines 21-22:** "de / sun pass"
- **Line 23:** "rass"
- **Line 24:** "explain"
- **Line 26:** "caste"
- **Line 27:** "tchaikovsky"
- **Line 30:** "mix," "black key"
- **Line 31:** "wid," "white key"
- **Line 32:** "caste," "symphony"
- **Line 33:** "Explain"
- **Line 35:** "keen"
- **Line 37:** "keen"
- **Line 40:** "understand"
- **Line 41:** "half," "hand"
- **Line 43:** "close"
- **Line 44:** "consequently"
- **Line 46:** "an when moon begin"
- **Line 48:** "half-caste human"
- **Line 49:** "cast half"
- **Line 50:** "come back"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is seen regularly throughout the poem. The term "half-caste" itself is assonant, with its quick repetition of /ah/ sounds. Note how the word itself is divided into two separate halves with a hyphen, yet unified through assonance—subtly reflecting the speaker's identity.

As with the poem's use of consonance, assonance in the poem also serves to emphasize moments of heightened emotion on the speaker's part. This is seen, for instance, in lines 22-23, with "pass" and "ah rass" (which, of course, echo the assonant /ah/ in "half-cast" and "overcast" that appears shortly before this moment).

To that end, the end of the third stanza is heavily assonant—more so than the rest of the poem. Fittingly, this is the moment when the speaker takes the label "half-caste" to its absurd conclusion, rapidly listing off various troubles related to supposedly being "half" a person. Here's a closer look at the assonance in lines 44-50, which are littered with /eh/, /ee/, /ah/, /oo/, and /ow/ sounds:

> 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

The assonance here helps adds to the sonic intensity of these lines, reflecting the frustration and anger that flows beneath them.

The poem's central demand for explanation, which appears in almost identical fashion in four separate instances, arguably makes use of assonance as well, though this due to the repetition of the words "yuself" and "yu." In any case, the overwhelming repetition of these words, with their /ah/ and /yu/ sounds, brings the subject of the poem—the "half-caste" speaker—to the foreground. It suggests shows just *how* overwhelming this repetition is and speaks to one of the speaker's main arguments—when a person is labeled with a racist term like half-caste, there is no room to explore their whole identity and story as an individual. It becomes difficult to read beyond the accusing reminder, "you [are] half-caste."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "half-caste"
- **Line 6:** "half-caste"
- **Line 9:** "half-caste"
- **Line 12:** "half-caste"
- **Line 15:** "half-caste"
- **Line 18:** "half-caste"
- **Line 20:** "half-caste," "overcast"
- **Line 22:** "pass"
- **Line 23:** "ah," "rass"
- **Line 30:** "black," "key"
- **Line 31:** "key"
- **Line 32:** "half-caste symphony"
- **Line 34:** "mean"
- **Line 35:** "keen"
- **Line 37:** "keen"
- **Line 40:** "understand"
- **Line 41:** "hand"
- **Line 42:** "I," "night"
- **Line 43:** "I," "eye"
- **Line 44:** "consequently," "dream"
- **Line 45:** "dream," "half," "dream"
- **Line 46:** "when," "moon," "begin"
- **Line 47:** "glow"
- **Line 48:** "half-caste," "being"
- **Line 49:** "cast half," "shadow"
- **Line 50:** "but yu must come," "back tomorrow"

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem makes use of juxtaposition to highlight difference in two notable instances. First, there is the metaphor that compares "half-caste" to a symphony made by mixing black and white piano keys. The black/white keys in this instance can be seen to represent black/white races, reflecting the discussion of "half-caste" at hand. On a piano, each of the white keys is a whole, unaltered, natural musical note, corresponding to a specific pitch. The smaller black keys represent an alteration to one of these notes—specifically with the pitch raised or dropped just a half-step. One reading of the piano key metaphor could suggest that the black/white juxtaposition is thus also a half/whole juxtaposition, affirming a racist viewpoint that equates whiteness with wholeness and blackness with an inferior state of half or "less than" whole.

The poem also creates a juxtaposition between the speaker's presumed "half" of a body and the listener's "whole" body. The speaker repeats the word "half" in many variations throughout the poem in relation to the speaker's own self: half-caste, half-a-hand, half-a-eye, half-a-dream, half-a-shadow. The clearest juxtaposition is related to the speaker saying:

Ah listening to yu wid de keen
half of mih ear
Ah looking at u wid de keen
half of mih eye

Later, the speaker repeats the word "whole" in reference to the *listener's* ears and eyes. This creates an explicit juxtaposition between the *speaker* being considered being "half" of a human being and the *listener* being considered a "whole" person:

wid de whole of yu eye
an de whole of yu ear
and de whole of yu mind

The final three lines of the poem then bring back the word "half," again juxtaposing the conception of the speaker's identity against that of the poem's listener:

an I will tell yu
de other half
of my story

The speaker does not say outright "I will tell you my whole story" but instead offers "the other half" of the speaker's story. With this sly wording, the speaker upholds their own mixed identity (which, as has been shown, has positive traits shared with, for instance, Picasso paintings and Tchaikovsky symphonies) while also asserting their right to be seen as a whole, complete person.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 27-32:** "yu mean when tchaikovsky / sit down at dah / piano / and mix a black key / wid a white key / is a

half-caste symphony/"

- **Lines 35-38:** "Ah listening to yu wid de keen / half of mih ear / Ah looking at u wid de keen / half of mih eye"
- **Lines 51-56:** "wid de whole of yu eye / an de whole of yu ear / and de whole of yu mind / an I will tell yu / de other half / of my story"

VOCABULARY

Half-caste (Line 3, Line 6, Line 9, Line 12, Line 15, Line 18, Line 20, Line 26, Line 32, Line 48) - A noun or adjective used to refer to a person of mixed race. The term is now considered derogatory and a racial slur.

Caste (Line 3, Line 6, Line 9, Line 12, Line 15, Line 18, Line 20, Line 26, Line 32, Line 48) - A societal division marked by difference, for example in wealth, profession, or (in the case of the poem) race.

Picasso (Line 7) - Pablo Picasso was a famous Spanish painter and sculptor who spent most of his adult life in France (living from 1881-1973). Picasso is especially famous for his cubist pieces, such as "Les Demoiselles D'Avingon," which shows five female figures with angular and disjointed (non-realistic) bodies and mask-like faces.

Spiteful (Line 21) - Malicious. A person that is full of spite is full of hatred and ill will.

Ah rass (Line 23) - A Caribbean Creole expletive used to express frustration and anger. The phrase essentially translates to "my arse" ("my ass") in British English, which is likewise an expletive used to express doubt or skeptical disbelief. For example, if a person says they aren't coming into school because they're sick, one might respond with, "My arse! You're just being lazy."

Tchaikovsky (Line 27) - Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (anglicized as Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky). Considered the most popular Russian composer of all time, he lived from 1840-1893. His works include a number of symphonies (a symphony is a musical work written for an orchestra). He also wrote the music for the ballet *The Nutcracker*.

Keen (Line 35, Line 37) - An adjective, meaning smart or sharply perceptive. The adjective can also be used to describe something with a fine edge or point, or with a sharp or cutting impact. For example, a knife can have a keen blade or a person can have a keen sense of sarcasm.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Half-Caste" does not follow any specific poetic form. The poem sometimes appears differently depending on where you read it, but the print version that appears in the original UK edition of *Half-Caste* consists of five stanzas of various lengths. The poem begins and ends with a tercet (a three-line stanza), which gives the poem some symmetry despite the lack of regular formal structure. (In the printed version of the poem, the second-to-last stanza is also a tercet.) By book-ending the longer stanzas, the two tercets serve as an introduction and conclusion that appropriately reflect their respective content (an introduction from the speaker versus a farewell from the speaker). The irregularity in terms of form is complemented by the irregular meter and rhyme scheme. In other words, the poem is free of formal poetic constraints on every level. It makes its own rules.

METER

"Half-Caste" does not adhere to any formal rules in terms of poetic meter. Instead, it's written in free verse. This, combined with the lack of a clear rhyme scheme and stanzas of varying lengths, makes the poem overall feel quite different from formal European poetry—the kind likely taught in schools where the poet John Agard grew up in colonial British Guyana. The poem also mimics the rhythms of spoken Caribbean Creole. It feels conversational, like the speaker really is interrogating someone who has just deemed the speaker "half-caste."

RHYME SCHEME

The poem does not employ any regular, consistent rhyme scheme. Again, it's written in free verse. There are some perfect end rhymes and slant rhymes that pop up here and there, however. For example, take "mean"/"green" in the first stanza (which are also echoed by "keen"/"dream"/"being" in the third). Look too at lines 20-23:

> half-caste till dem overcast
> so spiteful dem dont want de
> sun pass
> ah rass

The rhyme here feels especially sharp because it comes at the end of a pun and includes the speaker's frustrated cry of "ah rass." In a moment of heightened emotion, then, the speaker's language itself becomes heightened, more poetic.

Later, "tchaikovsky" rhymes with "key" and "symphony." Toward the end of the poem there's also:

> I'm sure you'll understand
> why I offer yu half-a-hand

Again, the speaker's language becomes more poetic when the speaker is frustrated and expressing disrespect towards those who have deemed the speaker half-caste.

The stanzas include a fair amount of consonance and assonance that adds to their sense of rhythm and musicality in the absence of a regular rhyme scheme. The poem relies on repetition as well to imbue it with a subtle sense of structure. In this way, the poem feels controlled yet not too stiff and formal; it feels like an actual conversation the speaker might have.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is identified as a person who is "half-caste," but no further details are provided. The speaker could be male or female, and the speaker's "half-caste" identity could technically consist of any mix of races. The use of Caribbean Creole dialect, however, suggests the speaker is of Caribbean heritage—like the poet himself, who was born in Guyana. The joke about the English weather further suggests that the speaker is located in England. Given the author's background—John Agard was born in Guyana in 1949 and moved to England in 1977—the speaker likely represents the author himself. What's clear above all is that the speaker is someone whose identity defies overly simplistic and reductive classification.

Through the speaker's tongue-in-cheek exploration of the meaning of the slur "half-caste," the speaker wants to demonstrate the ignorance and absurdity of racism. In the speaker's eyes, the reductive term "half-caste" leaves no room for a full, multifaceted human identity. The label distills the complexity of humanity into a simple matter of black and white.

Despite the tongue-in-cheek humor of such instances in the poem, the speaker's attitude is ultimately one of frustration, as is made clear by the exclamation "Ah rass" in line 22. The aggressive repetition of the demanding phrase "explain yuself" likewise sets an antagonistic tone—underscoring that, however humorous the poem's tone may be, this is a serious issue.

SETTING

The speaker's joke about the English weather suggests that the poem takes place in England. The fact that the term "half-caste" is generally used as a slur in England (and not, for example, in the United States) supports a reading that contextualizes the poem in this setting. Additionally, the poem's author, John Agard, spent much of his adult life in England. That said, the poem's message about the ignorance and absurdity of racism applies to a variety of countries and contexts.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Agard was born in 1949 in Guyana (then known as British Guyana) and moved to England in 1977. Agard's work frequently deals with topics relevant to his own background, such as colonialism, identity, and racism. "Half-Caste" was published in 2005 as part of a mixture of old and new poems.

In its thematic exploration and style, Agard's work frequently follows in the footsteps of other Caribbean poets who lived in countries impacted by colonial rule. Derek Walcott is one notable example. Born in the former British colony of Saint Lucia, Walcott's breakthrough work, *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960*, is a collection of poems that deals with the Caribbean and the negative impact of colonialism. Walcott won the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1988. Agard won the same award in 2012, becoming the second person of color to receive the honor. He noted his pleasure to share the honor with Walcott, among others.

Aside from exploring themes of Caribbean identity and colonialism, another characteristic Agard shares with Caribbean poets like Walcott is his stylistic rejection of formal rules of poetry. Like much of Agard's work, "Half-Caste" doesn't play by the rules in terms of rhyme, formal verse, or meter. Even "proper" English is rejected in favor of Creole. Colonial poets have often rejected the strict poetic forms of their colonizers. Other poets, writing in similar contexts of oppression, have also used language subversively. For instance, poets of the Harlem Renaissance, like Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, deal with themes of racism and use slang in a similarly subversive manner (see, for example, Hughes's "Mother to Son" or Cullen's "Uncle Jim").

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Agard grew up in British Guyana while the country was still under British colonial rule. Located on the northern mainland of South America, the colony was coveted as a source of sugarcane production. It passed hands among colonial powers many times, and slaves were forced to cultivate the sugarcane crops. In 1970, Guyana was proclaimed a cooperative republic of the British Commonwealth and elected a president via National Assembly. In its early years, the country's transition to democracy was marred by issues such as election fraud. Agard would have been old enough by this time to follow the tough transition of Guyana—and other former colonies—to independence, and recognize the difficult aftermath of colonization.

Given that Agard spent much of his adult life in England, he undoubtedly would have encountered the term "half-caste" and been familiar with its racist connotations. Asked in an interview with *The Telegraph* if he had ever confronted racial prejudice in Britain, he responded,

> Well let's put it this way, I've never been arrested by the police, or experienced any physical confrontations, as such. But any black person living in

> England would be deceiving themselves if they said they'd never experienced even just subtle racism—a changing in the tone of someone's voice, for instance. The sooner we can face the fact that Western education is entrenched with preconceived notions of other societies, the better. It's healthy and liberating to question those perceptions.

The origin of the word "half-caste" itself is problematic. The word comes from the Latin *castus*, meaning pure. To refer to someone as half-caste thus is essentially calling them impure.

The word can be linked to other similarly racist terms used throughout colonial history, such as mulatto (a person who is half black and half white), quadroon (a person who is one-quarter black and three-quarters "European"), and half-breed (any mixed-race person). As with "half-caste," these words diminish the individuals they label by describing them as "less than" whole. By labeling people in terms of their "ratio" of racial heritage, these words also speak to the racist obsession with miscegenation—commonly used to describe (in a negative sense) the mixing of races through sexual intercourse. The racist argument is that this results in a lack of racial purity.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Biography of John Agard — Learn more about the poem's author. (https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/john-agard)
- John Agard Reads "Half-Caste" Aloud — John Agard reads his poem "Half-Caste" and talks about race. (https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/audio/2014/oct/13/john-agard-poetry-podcast-half-caste-diversity-race)
- John Agard Reflects on Racism — An interview with John Agard in which he speaks on his own experiences with racism in England. (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/9922672/John-Agard-I-feel-an-empathy-with-the-bad-characters.html)
- A Guide to Creole — Learn more about the history of creole languages like that portrayed in the poem. (https://www.britannica.com/topic/creole-languages)
- A Brief History of the Term "Half-Caste" — The abstract of this paper offers a quick overview of the term's development and history as a derogatory slur. (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/johs.12033)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN AGARD POEMS

- Checking Out Me History

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