Checking Out Me History

SUMMARY

The speaker repeatedly says how British colonizers taught students only what they—that is, the British—wanted those students to know.

The British education system essentially hid colonized people's history from them, in effect blinding people like the speaker to their true identities.

British educators taught colonized students about the Battle of Hastings, which was fought in 1066, and other irrelevant stuff like that. They taught students about Dick Whittington, who, according to British folklore, rose from poverty with the money he made from selling his cat to a rat-infested country. But the British educators never bothered to teach students about Toussaint L' Ouverture.

Toussaint was a visionary man who rose up from slavery. He beat back the battalions of the French Emperor Napoleon, which is how Haiti gained independence from the French and became the first black democracy in the Americas. Toussaint was a metaphorical thorn in France's side, and the powerful leader of the Haitian Revolution.

The speaker says more about was taught by the British, this time alluding to even more trivial things like the man who invented the balloon and popular English nursery rhymes. But the British never told the speaker about Nanny de Maroon.

Nanny was a visionary woman known for escaping slavery and founding her own town for other escaped slaves in the mountains of Jamaica. Nanny was a brave, ferocious fighter. Her actions provided a source of hope for other enslaved peoples, like a stream that flowed into a deeper river of freedom.

The British taught the speaker about Horatio Nelson, who was regarded as one of the greatest sea warriors in British history, and the Battle of Waterloo, which took place in Belgium in 1815 and marked the end of the Napoleonic wars and victory for the British. But the British never taught the speaker about Shaka de great Zulu, one of the most important monarchs from the Zulu Kingdom in Africa. The British taught the speaker about how Cristopher Columbus came to America in 1492, but they never mentioned what became of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean who were mostly killed and displaced after Columbus's arrival.

The British taught the speaker about Florence Nightingale, an English social reformer who gained fame as a nurse during the Crimean War. They even taught the speaker about mythological figures like Robin Hood and ole King Cole. But the British never taught the speaker about Mary Seacole.

Mary Seacole was from Jamaica and had to travel on her own a great distance to the site of the Crimean War. When she first volunteered to go to the war she was denied by the British War Office. However, the undeterred Mary Seacole still traveled independently to cold, snowy Russia, where she helped heal the wounded troops and gave hope—like a bright sunrise—to sick and dying men.

The speaker repeats the opening line of the poem, lamenting how the British only taught colonized students what they wanted to teach them. Now, however, the speaker is learning the history of the speaker's own people, and by doing so the speaker is creating an identity.

THEMES

COLONIALISM, HISTORY, AND IDENTITY

The speaker of "Checking Out Me History," implied to be a person living under British colonial rule, tells readers what students learned under the British education system and what they didn't—mainly, anything about African and indigenous history. Throughout the poem, the speaker juxtaposes the sometimes frivolous British and Euro-centric history taught in colonial schools with powerful African, indigenous, and Caribbean figures such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nanny de Maroon, and Mary Seacole.

These people, the poem argues, had been ignored or purposely omitted from colonial education, as the British instead chose to glorify their own historical figures (like Christopher Columbus and Florence Nightingale) and to even teach fictional tales about things like "how Robin Hood used to camp." The speaker argues that this was a deliberate form of oppression on the part of the British, in that prevented colonized people from learning about their own pasts—something, the poem argues, that is essential when establishing an identity.

The poem begins with the speaker listing some of the things taught in colonial schools, such as "bout 1066" and "bout Dick Whittington and he cat." The first line is reference to the Battle of Hastings, fought in 1066 between the Norman-French army and the English. The second line references English folklore about a man named Richard Whittington, who, legend has it, became rose from poverty with the money he made from selling his cat to a rat-infested country.

These are the sort of things that students in British Guyana (where the poet himself was born) would be taught in their colonial schools—that is, they are prominent moments in *British* history but, the poem implies, they aren't that relevant to these Guyanese students. In fact, it "blinds them" to their own

identity because it's being taught at the expense of more relevant history.

To that end, the next line reveals what is *not* being taught. For example, although the speaker learned the (most likely) made-up tale of Dick Whittington, the speaker did *not* learn about Toussaint L'Ouverture, the most important figure of the Haitian revolution. Haiti was the first colony to overthrow a European colonial power, abolish slavery, and found a black democracy in the Americas. As such, it's likely that the British and other colonial powers omitted L'Ouverture from their teachings out of fear that other oppressed peoples might learn from his example—and rise up against their colonial masters. Denying colonized peoples access to their history, the poem implies, is thus a calculated form of oppression. Doing so prevents colonial subjects from finding inspiration in their own pasts and from asserting an identity separate from that of their colonizers.

By refusing to teach people like the speaker about relevant historical figures and events, British educators denied colonized students a part of their identity. And in order to reclaim that identity, the speaker argues that the colonized peoples must reclaim their *history*. According to the speaker, the colonial education cannot be trusted because it does not have the interest of colonized peoples in mind; as the speaker says, the British only "tell me wha dem want to tell me." And the key to fighting back, the poem argues, is for colonized people to learn "check out" their own history.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-53

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Dem tell me ...
... to tell me

The speaker opens by establishing a narrative voice, as well as presenting the main problem of the poem. There are no specifics yet—it's not clear who "dem" refers to or who the speaker is—but the gist of these lines is still clear: some group of people is telling the speaker *only* what that group wants the speaker to know. In other words, the poem implies that something is *missing* from what the speaker is hearing, that the speaker is not getting the whole story.

The poem also notably opens with repetition: the first line ("Dem tell me") is repeated twice in a row, an instance of epizeuxis (which will reappear later in the poem as anaphora). This immediate repetition adds a sense of emphasis to the speaker's assertion—that these people are deliberately and adamantly controlling what the speaker learns. This repetition also suggests the speaker's sense of annoyance at only being taught only what the speaker's educators wish to teach.

When considered within the broader context of the poem, "dem" almost certainly refers to colonial powers of some sort. The poet, John Agard, grew up in Guyana when it was still a British colony, and the poem's dialect (its use of words like "dem" in place of "them," "wha" for "what," etc.) is Caribbean creole. As such, it's reasonable to assume that this "dem" refers to the British colonizers and that the speaker is someone who, like the poet himself, has grown up in the West Indies. The poem's later reference to both British and West Indian history supports this. For now, though, things remain vague.

LINES 4-5

Bandage up me ...
... me own identity

The speaker's educators aren't just telling the speaker only what they want the speaker to know; they're also actively blinding the speaker to the speaker's "own identity." Beyond being limited and misleading, then, the poem argues that the colonial education system acts as a powerful enabler of oppression; it cuts people off from their heritage, and in doing so cuts people off from knowing who they are and where they come from.

The speaker turns to metaphor to convey this idea, comparing that colonial education system to having one's eyes bandaged up. When a person doesn't know their own history, the speaker implies, that person doesn't know who they really are.

The alliteration and consonance of these lines on the /b/, /n/, and /d/ sounds supports this link between history and identity, drawing a sonic connection between the words "**b**an**d**age and "**b**lind." Assonance of the long /ee/ sound further links the words "histor**y**," "identit**y**," and "m**e**"—again underscoring the important connection between knowing one's past and being able to form an identity of one's own. Finally, repetition plays an important role here as well, with the diacope of "me" and "me own" repeatedly drawing readers' attention to and centering the speaker and the speaker's point of view.

LINES 6-9

Dem tell me ...
... me bout dat

In the third stanza, the speaker explains some of the specifics that were taught in British schools. The speaker opens with an allusion to the Battle of Hastings, which was fought in 1066, between the Norman-French army of William, Duke of Normandy, and the English army under King Harold Godwinson. This was an important battle for the British, and its mention here implies that "dem," the people who are doing the teaching in the poem, are indeed British. For the speaker, however, this old battle holds little relevance. The last part of line 6 ("and all dat") conveys a dismissive tone towards the

subject matter being taught, implying that other dates and histories were also taught but aren't even worth mentioning.

The speaker continues explaining what was taught in colonial schools by referencing English folklore about Richard Whittington, who according to legend, rose from poverty with the money he made from selling his cat to a rat-infested country. Notice the juxtaposition between the serious Battle of Hastings and the trivial folklore of Whittington, both of which the British felt the need to teach in their colonial schools at the expense of local students' history.

Indeed, in the next line the speaker reveals what has been omitted from the colonial education. In particular he mentions the story of Toussaint L'Ouverture, a Haitian who rose from slavery to fight against the French during Napoleonic times to help win Haiti's independence. Although L'Ouverture was a hero for colonized peoples and undoubtedly one of the most important men of the century, especially in the Caribbean, he was left out of the British curriculum. The speaker does not say why L'Ouverture was left out of the curriculum, but the last line of this stanza—"No dem never tell me bout dat"—rings with defiance and attitude. Of course, reading between the lines, it's safe to assume that L'Ouverture wasn't taught in colonial schools for two reasons.

1. The British rulers probably didn't care much about, or assign much importance to, the history of people of color.
2. Learning about a man like L'Ouverture might empower the speaker and other colonized people, encouraging them to revolt against their British colonizers.

It can be noted that this stanza, which discusses what was taught in colonial British schools and what was left out, is written as a quatrain with clear end rhymes, a common technique used in English and European verse. In this quatrain, the end rhyme takes the pattern of AABA (the rhymes being "dat," "cat," and then "dat" again). There are three other quatrains in this poem (stanzas 5, 7, 8) that contain similar rhyme patterns and subject matter, suggesting that the speaker turns to a familiar, simple poetic form when talking about the British education system. The speaker also uses anaphora with the repetition of "dem tell me." This enhances the speaker's sense of irritation, annoyance, and even anger towards the educators.

LINES 10-21

Toussaint ...
... de Haitian Revolution

Right away, it's clear that the fourth stanza looks a lot different from the first three. It contains many more lines, and many of these lines consist of a single word or two. As a result, the discussion of Toussaint L'Ouverture *literally* takes up more space on the page than does "1066 and all dat." In fact, "Toussaint" gets an entire line devoted simply to his name, underscoring his significance for the speaker.

Again, Toussaint L'Ouverture was the leader of the Haitian revolution. In line 18, the speaker metaphorically compares L'Ouverture to a "thorn" in the French—in other words, he caused a big headache for the French, to say the least, for his refusal to bow to their colonial authority. Throughout the stanza, the speaker paints L'Ouverture as a visionary who was able to beat the armies of Napoleon and establish the first black democracy in the Americas, a feat the speaker clearly respects. In lines 20-21, the speaker again uses metaphor to compare Toussaint to a light illuminating the significance of the Haitian revolution. This is likely why he was not taught in schools, since the British wouldn't want their colonial subjects learning about the Haitian revolution for fear it might inspire another uprising.

In telling the story of L'Ouverture, the speaker's voice cascades down the page with clear enjambment. This helps the poem pick up speed and intensity, reflecting the speaker's passionate response to L'Ouverture. The stanza is overflowing with assonance and consonance as well, adding a sense of musicality and rhythm that nevertheless remains unpredictable. Note the many repeated sounds in lines 11-18, for example—/v/, /l/, /k/, /b/, /p/, /n/, /r/:

A slave
With vision
Lick back
Napoleon
Battalion
And first Black
Republic born

The use of rhyme in this stanza is also interesting and exciting. While there are perfect rhymes like "back" and "Black," and "born" and "thorn," these rhymes are interspersed with slant rhymes like "vision," "Napoleon," "Battalion," "beacon," and "Revolution." Whereas the previous stanza, which described what the British taught in school, is composed in a more sing-song, nursery-rhyme-like rhythm, the voice that is established is unique and is not confined to any European standard or poetic meter. Thus this stanza functions to establish the speaker's identity much in the same way that learning about the speaker's own history does.

LINES 22-25

Dem tell me ...
... Nanny de Maroon

The fifth stanza is again a simple quatrain with clear end-rhymes, similar to stanza 3. The subject matter is similar to stanza 3 as well: here the speaker explains that the English

taught about the man who "invented the balloon," and even less-important things like the words to popular English nursery rhymes ("de cow who jump over de moon" and "de dish ran away with the spoon"). By showing that the British weren't just teaching important historical dates, but even childish nursery rhymes, the speaker suggests that colonial peoples were being bombarded with English propaganda and cultural conditioning through their education.

All four lines in this stanza have hard end-rhymes ("balloon," "moon," "spoon," "Maroon") that create a predictable and sing-song feel. By now it's clear that when discussing what was taught in British schools the speaker will use simple, predictable rhythms based on established European forms. Notice that the speaker also continues the anaphora of the phrase "Dem tell me," which serves not only to maintain the rhythm of the poem but also to express the speaker's irritation at what was being taught.

Just as in stanza 3, the fourth and final line of this stanza (line 25) switches from talking about British history to mentioning another important figure from Caribbean history who was left out of the textbooks: this time, the speaker mentions Nanny de Maroon. Nanny de Maroon was the leader of the Jamaican Maroons (Jamaicans who descended from African slaves). She famously founded her own colony in the hills of Jamaica to help escaped slaves. In 1976 she was officially recognized as a National hero of Jamaica. She's clearly an important figure in Caribbean history, yet she was not taught in British schools—again highlighting the oppressive nature of the colonial education system.

LINES 26-31

Nanny ...
... To freedom river

This stanza has a lot in common with stanza 4. Once again, the entire stanza is dedicated to praising a figure who was left out of the British education syllabus. In this case, it's the aforementioned Nanny Maroon. And also like the opening of stanza 4, the first line of this stanza is dedicated to that person's name alone ("Nanny"), which places special significance on her place in the poem and as a historical figure.

This stanza again makes clear use of enjambment ("Nanny / See-far woman / Of mountain stream"), figurative language ("See-far woman"), and a free-verse style enhanced by assonance and internal rhyme. All of these techniques are employed by the speaker in order to sing Nanny's praises in a unique voice distinct from that used in the stanzas focused on figures from British history.

Note the interesting metaphors in this stanza as well. For example, in line 27, the speaker calls Nanny a "see-far woman," meaning a woman with vision; a visionary. The speaker also calls her a "fire-woman" in line 29, which could allude to the fact that the Jamaican Maroons were known as fierce fighters who had to struggle for their freedom. The phrase "mountain dream" refers to the fact that Nanny lived in the mountains of Jamaica; "hopeful stream" alludes to the way that she represented the hope of freedom for her people. These evocative turns of phrase elevate the figure of Nanny de Maroon, making her seem almost like a mythical hero.

Aiding in this is again the heavy use of consonance and assonance, particularly of long /ee/ and humming /m/ sounds:

See-far woman
Of mountain dream
Fire-woman struggle
Hopeful stream
To freedom river

This is an extremely musical-sounding stanza, but the placement of these sounds is more complicated than the simple, straightforward end-rhymes seen in the previous stanza with "balloon," "spoon," "moon," and "Maroon." Once again, the speaker uses a unique, more nuanced voice when discussing figures from Caribbean history.

LINES 32-35

Dem tell me ...
... de Arawaks too

In stanza 7, the speaker makes more allusions to dates and figures that were taught in colonial schools. This time the speaker mentions Horatio Nelson, who was regarded as the greatest naval warrior in British history. The speaker also references the Battle of Waterloo, which was fought in Belgium in 1815. It marked the end of the Napoleonic wars and victory for the English and Prussians. This is another piece of history that was important to the English, but not so much for the colonial subjects who were under British control.

In line 33, the speaker mentions the historical African figure Shaka kaSenzangakhona (a.k.a., Shaka Zulu), who was one of the most influential monarchs of the Zulu Kingdom in southern Africa in the early 19th Century. Line 34 is then a reference to the year Christopher Columbus "discovered" America, which of course, was taught in colonial schools. But the next lines asks what happened to the "Caribs" and "Arawaks," the indigenous groups that inhabited the Caribbean at the time of Columbus and his men's arrival. The answer (which is not stated overtly in the poem)—that they were decimated by disease and death brought on by the colonizers—questions the significance of Columbus and the celebrated date 1492.

The stanza is another quatrain (four lines) with clear end-rhymes ("Waterloo," "Zulu," "1492," "too"), thus continuing the rhythmic pattern established by stanzas 3 and 5. (A reminder: when the speaker talks about British colonial education, the poem tends to follow simple, straightforward form.) The speaker also continues to make use of anaphora based around

the phrases "dem tell me bout." The continued use of the creole dialect in the stanzas that discuss British education allows the speaker to convey both the nursery rhyme rhythms of European verse while still maintaining the speaker's own original voice.

LINES 36-39

Dem tell me ...
... bout Mary Seacole

This marks the poem's final quatrain written in a nursery-rhyme-like style. Line 36 references Florence Nightingale, an English social reformer known for serving as a nurse during the Crimean War. She often visited soldiers at night, earning her the nickname "the lady with the lamp." She was celebrated as a hero in England and her legend was taught in schools, even colonial schools. In lines 37 and 38, the speaker claims colonial students were also taught the legends of Robin Hood and King Cole, two figures from British folklore. It's clear that the speaker is annoyed by all of the trivial British history that was taught in colonial schools and wishes to learn instead about the speaker's *own* history.

Once again, the turn of the quatrain appears in the fourth line (line 39), when the speaker concludes by stating who was left out of the curriculum—in this case, Mary Seacole. Mary Seacole, like Nightingale, was a nurse during the Crimean War. However, unlike Nightingale, who was praised by the British, Seacole was never mentioned, likely because she was a black Jamaican. The last line works to set up the following stanza, where the speaker will elaborate on the feats of Seacole.

Like stanzas 3, 5, and 7, the stanza makes use of heavy end rhymes ("lamp," "camp," "soul," "Seacole") and anaphora ("dem tell me bout," "dem tell me bout") to build a rhythm that sounds childlike. In fact, the poem directly alludes to a British nursery rhyme in line 38, with "ole King Cole was a merry ole soul." The lyrics of the "Old King Cole" nursery rhyme the speaker is referencing begin: "Old King Cole was a merry old soul, and a merry old soul was he."

LINES 40-45

From Jamaica ...
... the Russian snow

This stanza is similar to stanzas 4 and 6 in that it is also written in a free-verse style with heavy enjambment, unpredictable rhyme patterns, and figurative language. Also like in stanzas 4 and 6, the subject matter focuses on one historical figure from the Caribbean who was left out of British schools, in this case Mary Seacole.

However, unlike stanzas 4 and 6, this stanza opens not with the name of the historical figure the speaker wishes to illuminate (as previously done with "Toussaint" and "Nanny"), but by revealing where she was *from*—"From Jamaica." Here the country takes on great importance, since Seacole, who performed heroic acts during the Crimean War (much like the famous Florence Nightingale) was not celebrated during her lifetime most likely *because* she was Jamaican and not British.

Seacole was a nurse and businesswoman from Jamaica who traveled on her own a great distance to the site of the Crimean War in order to nurse sick and wounded soldiers. The speaker says that when she volunteered to serve even after being denied by the British War Office; the speaker states that Seacole was undeterred by the British's rejection and boldly traveled independently to Russia.

The stanza contains 10 lines, again literally granting this figure from Caribbean history more space than the figures from British history whom the speaker mentions. And those lines are once again heavily enjambed:

> From Jamaica
> She travel far
> To the Crimean War

As with the stanzas about Nanny de Maroon and Toussaint L'Ouverture, the enjambment here gives this stanza a stronger, faster rhythm then the longer-lined quatrains that proceeded it. The words flow down the page with energy and excitement. The speaker also again makes use of unpredictable end rhymes (interspersed with slant rhymes) to create a diverse rhythm: far/war/star and go/no/snow. The varied poetic techniques used in these lines highlight the importance of Mary Seacole, a woman who, like Florence Nightingale, was a hero.

LINES 46-49

A healing star ...
... To the dying

The figurative language used to describe Seacole at the end of this stanza is charged with meaning and feeling. Seacole is metaphorically compared to a "star" that heals people—and, indeed, she did heal people during the Crimean War, where she volunteered as a nurse and spent her own money taking care of soldiers. And for the unfortunate soldiers who didn't make it and died in her care, the speaker says Seacole was like a "yellow sunrise."

This metaphor could be interpreted in a number of ways, but perhaps the speaker is saying that her warmth provided hope and comfort to these men in their final hours. Taken together, the imagery of the "star" and the "sunrise" presents Seacole as a person who brought light and warmth to people during dark (the war) and cold times (the war was fought in the Crimean Peninsula, which has a very cold climate, especially when compared to Jamaica). The speaker's affection and respect for Seacole are clear in these lines.

It can also be noted that the last four lines of this stanza don't rhyme at all, unlike the proceeding lines. This makes them stick out rhythmically from the rest of the stanza. The speaker also

develops a steady iambic (da-DUM) meter in these lines, the familiar pace of which might reflect the calming comfort offered by Seacole to the soldiers:

A healing star
Among the wounded
A yellow sunrise
To the dying

Roughly speaking, this is iambic dimeter (meaning there are two iambs per line). Technically the final line here is made up of trochees (stressed-unstressed), but, given that the previous line ends ("A yel | low sun | rise") ends with an extra unstressed syllable and is then enjambed, these lines still *sound* iambic. Written as a single line (which is how they'd be read aloud, again given that line 48 is enjambed) they scan like:

A yel | low sun | rise To | the dying

The assonance here adds to the gently rhythmic sound as well:

A healing star
Among the wounded
A yellow sunrise
To the dying

Note the long and short /i/ sounds, plus the /uh/ and /oo/ sounds, which imbue these final lines of the stanza with a sense of cohesion and musicality.

LINES 50-53

Dem tell me ...
... out me identity

In the final stanza the speaker repeats the opening line of the poem, lamenting how the British only teach what they want to teach—not what the students have a right to learn. The line is repeated using a combination of epizeuxis and diacope ("Dem tell me / Dem tell me wha dem want to tell me"), where the repetition varies slightly in order to keep the rhythm fresh and surprising—without letting the reader forget that the British are very much in control of the speaker's formal education.

Line 52, however, reveals the speaker is now learning the history of the speaker's *own* people ("checking out me own history"), and by doing so the speaker is "carving out"—creating—their "identity." This line, which contains within it the title of the poem, is the answer to the poem's implied problem: if colonial schools don't teach comprehensive and accurate history, students must "check" it out for themselves. And, of course, this is in part what the speaker has been doing all along by relating stories of important figures from Caribbean history.

While the last stanza is again a quatrain, it lacks the sing-song quality of the quatrains used to describe figures from British history. Instead of easy end rhymes, the speaker employs repetition ("me," "me") and slant rhymes ("history," "identity") throughout this stanza. The poetic techniques form and shape the speaker's distinct voice similar to the way that learning one's history can help form and shape one's identity.

SYMBOLS

LIGHT AND VISION

The important Caribbean figures that the speaker chooses to talk about are all described in figurative language focused on light and vision. Light, of course, is necessary for sight, so the two symbols are deeply intertwined in the poem. When colonized individuals like the speaker study these figures, that knowledge can help those colonized individuals better understand who they themselves are and begin to shape their own identities. Light and vision thus represent hope, inspiration, and the possibility of understanding oneself.

For example, in stanza 4 Toussaint L'Ouverture is called "a slave / With vision." In other words, he was a visionary who foresaw a better life for his fellow Haitians and rose up to lead the Haitian Revolution in the late 18th century. At the end of the stanza, he is compared to a "beacon"—that is, a fire or light set up as a sort of signal. L'Ouverture is a man who became a source of hope and inspiration for his contemporaries to rise up against slavery, and who also functions as modern day inspiration for people suffering under an oppressive rule.

In stanza 6, Nanny de Maroon is also painted as a visionary, a woman who can "see-far." This vision allows her to not only escape up from slavery but also to help others do the same; her *vision* is again tied to *hope* (mentioned here by the "Hopeful stream" of line 30).

And finally, in stanza 9, Mary Seacole is called a "healing star" and a "yellow sunrise." She is another inspirational figure directly linked to light, and also to the possibility inherent in the dawning of a new day. Comparing Seacole to a "star" and "sunrise" further highlights her similarity to Florence Nightingale "and she lamp"; this is an allusion to the fact that Nightingale often tended to the wounded at night, and was thus referred to as "the lady with the lamp." Tying the symbol of light to Seacole underscores that she, too, deserves a place in history for the sense of healing and hope she imparted to soldiers.

For the speaker, these figures are all "beacons" of light shining through the darkness of history, providing hope and illuminating the way for modern colonized peoples to break free from their oppression. The speaker also argues that the knowledge of these figures and their deeds can help colonized

people begin to construct their own identities. In this way, the figures presented in stanzas 4, 6, and 9 are like lights illuminating the forgotten or hidden histories of colonized peoples themselves.

To that end, the opposite of not learning one's history in this poem is connected directly to darkness and blindness. This is why the speaker says the British "Bandage up me eye with me own history / Blind me to me own identity." The British are denying the vision and light the speaker needs to understand who the speaker is.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "Bandage up me eye with me own history / Blind me to me own identity"
- **Line 10:** "Toussaint"
- **Lines 11-12:** "A slave / With vision"
- **Lines 20-21:** "Toussaint de beacon / Of de Haitian Revolution"
- **Line 27:** "See-far woman"
- **Line 36:** "Florence Nightingale and she lamp"
- **Lines 46-49:** "A healing star / Among the wounded / A yellow sunrise / To the dying"

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The speaker uses repetition throughout. The first two lines are in fact simply a repetition of the phrase "Dem tell me," an example of epizeuxis. This same phrase then is repeated as anaphora (with some slight variations) at the start of various lines throughout the entire poem. This accomplishes a few things. Most obviously, this implies the speaker's frustration with the British, and never lets the reader forget that the British colonizers are in control of the speaker's formal education. The repetition of the phrase "Dem tell me" almost makes the reader feel as if they are in school too, listening to a British teacher repeat things over and over again.

This notion of meaningless repetition is underscored by the circularity of the following phrase, created by its use of diacope:

> Dem tell me
> Wha dem want to tell me

The British are not really *teaching* the speaker anything, and the speaker is never given a chance to *ask* questions. Also note that the poem's first and final stanzas are almost exactly the same—except, of course, for the fact that the speaker follows the "Dem tell me" in the final stanza with a powerful declaration: "But now I checking out me own history / I carving out me identity." This change after so much repetition underscores the speaker's newfound defiance.

There's a different form of repetition in the poem too, which is tied to the names of the figures from Caribbean history whom the speaker mentions. "Toussaint" is named four times in the poem, and "Nanny de Maroon" twice. This underscores the importance of these figures to the speaker. Note how Toussaint's name is even turned into anaphora:

> Toussaint de thorn
> To de French
> Toussaint de beacon
> Of de Haitian Revolution

This figure is at once a pain the side of the French and a source of hope and inspiration to Haitian slaves and other oppressed peoples. The duality created by this use of anaphora highlights the subjective nature of historical narratives: were the French teaching the speaker's history class, they probably would not paint a very rosy picture of Toussaint L'Ouverture despite the fact that he was a hero to so many. This repetition is thus another subtle jab at the biased and blinding nature of colonial education.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Dem tell me / Dem tell me"
- **Line 3:** "Wha dem want to tell me"
- **Line 6:** "Dem tell me bout"
- **Line 7:** "Dem tell me bout "
- **Line 8:** "Toussaint L'Ouverture"
- **Line 10:** "Toussaint"
- **Line 18:** "Toussaint de thorn"
- **Line 20:** "Toussaint de beacon"
- **Line 22:** "Dem tell me bout de"
- **Line 24:** "Dem tell me bout de"
- **Line 25:** "But dem never tell me," "Nanny de Maroon"
- **Line 26:** "Nanny"
- **Line 32:** "Dem tell me bout "
- **Line 33:** "But dem never tell me"
- **Line 34:** "Dem tell me bout "
- **Line 36:** "Dem tell me bout"
- **Line 38:** "Dem tell me bout "
- **Line 39:** "But dem never tell me"
- **Line 50:** "Dem tell me"
- **Line 51:** "Dem tell me ," "wha dem want to tell me"

COLLOQUIALISM

The speaker has a unique diction throughout the poem, marked by the use of a creole dialect common to the Caribbean. Instead of using the typical spellings for common English words like "them," "what," "the," and "about," the speaker uses "Dem," "Wha," "de," and "bout." The speaker also turns to colloquialism in moments, such as using the phrase "Lick back" to mean

"fought back against" or "defeated," and "all dat" to casually dismiss British teachings.

Broadly speaking, this diction signals to the reader that the poem's speaker is likely someone from the Caribbean (and indeed, the poet himself was born in Guyana). Note that this isn't meant to be taken as incorrect English, but rather simply a unique vernacular—one different from, but no less valid than, that used by the colonizers in charge of the speaker's formal education. Using dialect throughout the poem thus reflects the speaker's identity, and it also acts as another way of rebelling against the British authorities: by using dialect, the speaker is choosing to reject the Queen's English, much in the same way that the speaker is choosing to reject colonial education.

Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "Dem tell me / Dem tell me / Wha dem want to tell me"
- **Line 4:** "Bandage up me eye with me own"
- **Line 5:** "me own"
- **Line 6:** "Dem tell me bout 1066 and all dat"
- **Line 7:** "Dem tell me bout," "he cat"
- **Line 9:** "No dem never tell me bout dat"
- **Line 13:** "Lick back"
- **Lines 22-25:** "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 / But dem never tell me bout Nanny de Maroon"
- **Line 32:** "Dem tell me bout"
- **Line 33:** "But dem never tell me bout"
- **Line 34:** "Dem tell me bout"
- **Line 35:** "de Caribs and de Arawaks"
- **Line 36:** "Dem tell me bout Florence Nightingale and she lamp"
- **Lines 38-39:** "Dem tell me bout ole King Cole was a merry ole soul / But dem never tell me bout Mary Seacole"
- **Line 41:** "She travel far"
- **Line 43:** "She volunteer to go"
- **Lines 50-51:** "Dem tell me / Dem tell me wha dem want to tell me"
- **Line 52:** "I checking out me own"
- **Line 53:** "I carving out me"

ENJAMBMENT

There is no punctuation at all in the poem, which might make identifying enjambment confusing for some readers. Why doesn't the speaker use punctuation? On a formal level, the lack of traditional grammar and punctuation suggests a breaking with the strict European poetic and linguistic traditions that would have been taught in British colonial schools. This lack of punctuation doesn't mean every line is enjambed, however. Lines 4 and 5, for example ("Bandage up me eye with me own history / Blind me to me own identity"), are very much end-stopped given that both express clear, concise units of thought.

The quatrains that focus on the British and what they teach are also all end-stopped (with one exception—more on that later). Each line in these stanzas is self-contained and finishes off with a clean, clear end rhyme—making these quatrains feel rather simple and childish, especially when seen next to the heavily enjambed stanzas that focus on figures from Caribbean history.

In the fourth stanza, for example, the use of enjambment makes the story of Toussaint L'Ouverture literally take up more space on the page. The fact that each line has only one to four words has added the effect of making each word feel more powerful and meaningful. It also increases the pace of the poem as readers' eyes are encouraged to rapidly trail down the page. The same can be said of the stanzas focused on Nanny de Maroon and Mary Seacole, lending the discussion of these figures a sense of freedom and energy that the quatrains devoted to British teachings lack.

Line 39 is arguably enjambed as well. Though "But dem never tell me bout Mary Seacole" is a self-contained thought, the next line—the start of the next stanza—actually completes the thought: she's not just "Mary Seacole," she's "Mary Seacole / From Jamaica." Regardless of the exact terminology used to describe what's going on here, it's clear that 39 is incomplete without line 40; its meaning crosses over a whole stanza break, much like Mary Seacole had to journey all the way from Jamaica to Russia to volunteer as a nurse.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "me / Wha"
- **Lines 11-12:** "slave / With"
- **Lines 13-15:** "back / Napoleon / Battalion"
- **Lines 16-17:** "Black / Republic"
- **Lines 18-19:** "thorn / To"
- **Lines 20-21:** "beacon / Of "
- **Lines 27-28:** "woman / Of"
- **Lines 30-31:** "stream / To"
- **Lines 39-40:** "Seacole / From"
- **Lines 41-42:** "far / To"
- **Lines 46-47:** "star / Among"
- **Lines 48-49:** "sunrise / To"

METAPHOR

The speaker only uses metaphor when talking about about important historical figures from Caribbean history, such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nanny de Maroon, and Mary Seacole. The stanzas focused on British history are thus not just simpler on a formal level, but they thus also lack the imaginative imagery of the stanzas focused on Caribbean figures. The fact that metaphor is only used to describe the Caribbean figures, and not the British ones, demonstrates the speaker's level of

respect for people like L'Ouverture.

The first use of metaphor comes when the speaker compares L'Ouverture to a "thorn" in the side of the French. It is likely that France, the great colonial power, initially saw L'Ouverture and the Haitians as a small problem akin to a "thorn." That is, of course, until the "thorn" became a very big problem and Haiti successfully won their independence.

In line 27, Nanny the Maroon is described as a "See-far woman," meaning a person with vision who could see into the future. This is significant because at the time when most people who looked like Nanny in Jamaica were slaves. Nanny fought to maintain her freedom and help other slaves gain theirs, and the work she did in her life was thus visionary. In line 29, the speaker also calls Nanny a "Fire-woman." This could reference the fact the Maroons were known for being vicious fighters, as well as the fact that Nanny's path was not without significant struggle.

In lines 46-49, Mary Seacole is compared to a "star" and a "yellow sunrise" for the troops of the Crimean War. Since Nanny volunteered as a nurse, she is presented as a person who shined light during dark times, and, like the sunrise, who gave the troops hope for another day.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Bandage up me eye with me own history"
- **Line 18:** "Toussaint de thorn"
- **Lines 27-28:** "See-far woman / Of mountain dream"
- **Line 29:** "Fire-woman struggle"
- **Lines 30-31:** "Hopeful stream / To freedom river"
- **Lines 46-47:** "A healing star / Among the wounded"
- **Lines 48-49:** "A yellow sunrise / To the dying"

CONSONANCE

Much of the consonance in the poem is due to repetition and dialect. Because the speaker swaps out words like "the" and "them" for "de" and "dem," the /d/ sound clearly echoes throughout the entire poem. This helps establish the speaker's unique voice—one distinct from that of the British colonizers. The repetition of "tell me" also results in quite a few /t/ and /m/ sounds throughout. These common sounds make pretty much the *entire* poem feel consonant, so, for the sake of simplicity and clarity, we're focusing this guide's discussion on specific moments that are more than the result of repetition and dialect.

Often consonance is used to draw connections between words or to emphasize certain ideas in the poem. For example, note the /b/, /n/, and /d/ sounds of "blind" and "bandage" in the second stanza. These words are linked to "identity" as well. These are strong, insistent sounds that draw readers' attention to the deeply oppressive nature of colonial education. Later, the unmistakeable consonance between "Mary Seacole" and "ole King Cole," with his "merry ole soul," actually serves to highlight the stark *difference* between these two figures: the consonance is rather ironic here, given that King Cole is a figure from a British nursery rhyme and Mary Seacole was a volunteer nurse from Jamaica who helped soldiers in the Crimean War.

Also note the intensity of the consonance in the stanzas that discuss important figures from Caribbean history. Take the /s/, /l/, /v/, /b/, /p/, /t/, and /n/ sounds of the fourth stanza:

> Toussaint
> A slave
> With vision
> Lick back
> Napoleon
> Battalion
> And first Black
> Republic born

This stanza is rich with consonance (and assonance for that matter), in effect elevating the speaker's language when it comes to talking about a heroic figure from Haitian history. The hardness of the /b/, /p/, /t/, and /k/ sounds in particular creates sounds not so unlike hoofs on the ground, or swords clashing—that is, the sound of war and battle.

The style of consonance that is used in stanza 6 about Nanny de Maroon is softer. In this stanza, /n/ and /m/ sounds weave their way throughout the lines, with a humming, soothing effect. Since Nanny was not just a warrior, but a figure who provided care, love and hope of freedom to slaves, it makes sense that when she is described the sounds are soft and comforting. The soft /f/ sounds here have a similar effect, and also serve to add emphasis to Nanny's vision, struggle, and quest for freedom:

> Nanny
> See-far woman
> Of mountain dream
> Fire-woman struggle
> Hopeful stream
> To freedom river

The speaker uses the most consonance when talking about Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nanny de Maroon, and Mary Seacole because the speaker wishes to present these characters in the best possible light. Consonance makes the language of these stanzas feel nuanced and literary, allowing the speaker to show reverence and respect to these important people who have been left out of the British history books. It's like the speaker is painting their portraits in the most beautiful, poetic way possible.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “Bandage”
- **Line 5:** “Blind,” “identity”
- **Line 7:** “Dick Whittington,” “cat”
- **Line 9:** “No,” “never”
- **Line 10:** “Toussaint”
- **Line 11:** “slave”
- **Lines 12-13:** “vision / Lick back”
- **Line 14:** “Napoleon”
- **Line 15:** “Battalion”
- **Line 16:** “Black”
- **Line 17:** “Republic,” “born”
- **Line 18:** “Toussaint,” “thorn”
- **Line 19:** “French”
- **Line 20:** “Toussaint,” “beacon”
- **Line 21:** “Haitian Revolution”
- **Line 22:** “balloon”
- **Line 23:** “moon”
- **Line 24:** “spoon”
- **Line 25:** “Nanny,” “Maroon”
- **Line 26:** “Nanny”
- **Line 27:** “far ,” “woman”
- **Lines 28-31:** “mountain dream / Fire-woman struggle / Hopeful stream / To freedom”
- **Line 32:** “Lord Nelson,” “Waterloo”
- **Line 33:** “Shaka,” “Zulu”
- **Line 34:** “Columbus”
- **Line 35:** “Caribs,” “Arawaks”
- **Line 36:** “Florence Nightingale,” “lamp”
- **Line 37:** “camp”
- **Line 38:** “ole King Cole,” “merry ,” “ole soul”
- **Line 39:** “Mary ,” “Seacole”
- **Line 40:** “From Jamaica”
- **Line 41:** “travel far”
- **Line 42:** “Crimean War”
- **Line 43:** “volunteer”
- **Line 44:** “even,” “British,” “said”
- **Line 45:** “She,” “still,” “brave,” “Russian,” “snow”
- **Line 46:** “healing,” “star”
- **Line 47:** “wounded”
- **Line 48:** “yellow,” “sunrise”
- **Line 49:** “dying”

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used all throughout the poem. As with the poem's use of consonance and alliteration, much of this is simply due to repetition; for example, the soft /eh/ sound of "Dem tell" appears quite often due to the anaphora of this phrase.

The quatrains that focus on British teachings have clear end rhymes based on assonance as well. This predictable use of shared sound is part of what lends these stanzas their nursery-rhyme-like quality. For example, note the /oo/ assonance in the fifth stanza, with "balloon," "moon," "spoon," and "Maroon." And, of course, the assonance of the phrase "ole King Cole was a merry ole soul" sounds like a nursery rhyme because it is literally taken from a real British nursery rhyme! Assonance in these stanzas, then, makes them feel simple and childish.

By contrast, the assonance of the stanzas focused on figures from Caribbean history is less predictable, creating a sound and rhythm distinct from those other quatrains. Once again, this reflects the speaker's respect for these figures.

Stanza 4, for instance, makes use of the repetition of the soft /ah/ from "back," "Battalion," and "Black." Words like "vision," "Battalion," "beacon," and "Revolution" also share the same ending vowel (and consonant) sounds. This assonance adds to the stanza's musicality, creating a sort of syncopated rhythm that, again, is very different from that in the quatrains.

Also note the internal rhyme created by assonance in the stanza about Nanny de Maroon:

> Of mountain dream
> Fire-woman struggle
> Hopeful stream
> To freedom river

The long /ee/ sound weaves in and out of the lines, adding a sense of complicated musicality distinct from the predictable, plodding sound of the British-focused quatrains.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “Dem tell me / Dem tell me”
- **Line 3:** “dem,” “tell me”
- **Line 4:** “me,” “eye,” “me,” “history”
- **Line 5:** “me,” “me,” “identity”
- **Line 6:** “Dem tell,” “dat”
- **Line 7:** “Dem tell,” “Dick Whittington,” “cat”
- **Line 9:** “dem never tell,” “dat”
- **Lines 12-15:** “With vision / Lick back / Napoleon / Battalion”
- **Line 16:** “Black”
- **Line 17:** “born”
- **Line 18:** “thorn”
- **Line 20:** “beacon”
- **Line 21:** “Revolution”
- **Line 22:** “Dem tell,” “balloon”
- **Line 23:** “moon”
- **Line 24:** “Dem tell,” “spoon”
- **Line 25:** “dem never tell,” “Maroon”
- **Line 28:** “dream”
- **Line 30:** “stream”
- **Line 31:** “freedom”
- **Line 32:** “Dem tell,” “Nelson,” “Waterloo”
- **Line 33:** “dem never tell,” “Zulu”
- **Line 34:** “Dem tell,” “1492”

- **Line 35:** “Caribs,” “Arawaks,” “too”
- **Line 36:** “Dem tell,” “lamp”
- **Line 37:** “camp”
- **Line 38:** “Dem tell,” “ole,” “Cole,” “merry,” “ole soul”
- **Line 39:** “dem never tell,” “Seacole”
- **Line 43:** “go”
- **Line 44:** “no”
- **Line 45:** “snow”
- **Line 48:** “sunrise”
- **Line 49:** “dying”
- **Line 50:** “Dem tell me”
- **Line 51:** “Dem tell me,” “dem,” “tell me”
- **Line 52:** “me,” “history”
- **Line 53:** “me identity”

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker often juxtaposes figures from British history with figures from Caribbean history in order to highlight the vast gaps in the colonial education system.

In stanza 3, for example, the speaker juxtaposes a battle that took place in 1066 and the folk tale of Dick Whittington against Toussaint L'Ouverture. Putting these dates and historical figures side by side reveals just how biased the British education system is: it prioritizes a thousand-year-old battle and a folk story above teaching Caribbean students about the leader of the Haitian Revolution—something objectively more relevant to those students' own lives.

The speaker uses a similar technique in each of the other quatrains that discuss colonial education. Stanza 5, for instance, mentions the inventor of the balloon and then devotes two lines to a nursery rhyme ("de cow who jump over de moon"). Such topics seem utterly trivial when the final line of the stanza then mentions Nanny de Maroon—the national hero of Jamaica who, in the 18th century, helped free an estimated 1000 slaves and even established a community for these formerly enslaved people on the island.

The same technique is used again in stanza 8, where Robin Hood and "ole King Cole"—again, figures from legend and nursery rhyme—are taught at the expense of Mary Seacole, a Jamaican nurse who volunteered in the Crimean War. Mary Seacole is also juxtaposed against Florence Nightingale, a British nurse who, quite famously, worked as a nurse during the Crimean war as well. Bringing up Nightingale—likely a familiar name to many of the poem's readers—allows the speaker to highlight the sheer racism of colonial history; Seacole's name is less known simply because she was Jamaican.

Overall, then, the speaker uses juxtaposition to emphasize that the colonial education system is more focused on spreading its own culture and propaganda than in educating students about figures far more relevant to their own history.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-9:** “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 22-25:** “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 / But dem never tell me bout Nanny de Maroon”
- **Lines 32-35:** “Dem tell me bout Lord Nelson and Waterloo / But dem never tell me bout Shaka de great Zulu / Dem tell me bout Columbus and 1492 / But what happen to de Caribs and de Arawaks too”
- **Lines 36-39:** “Dem tell me bout Florence Nightingale and she lamp / And how Robin Hood used to camp / Dem tell me bout ole King Cole was a merry ole soul / But dem never tell me bout Mary Seacole”

ALLUSION

The poem is littered with allusions to historical figures and dates from British, Caribbean, and African history. The first allusion appears in stanza 3 (line 6), when the speaker mentions being taught about the year 1066. This is a reference to the Battle of Hastings, which was fought between the Norman-French army of William, Duke of Normandy, and the English army under King Harold Godwinson. Though this was an important battle for the British, it hardly seems relevant to students like the speaker, living far from the British mainland 1,000 years later. The following line contains a reference to Dick Whittington, who, according to British folklore, made a fortune by selling his cat to a rat-infested country. Again, not so relevant to the speaker.

Finally, the end of this stanza—and the entirety of the next—alludes to Toussaint L'Ouverture, a general whose leadership during the Haitian Revolution helped Haiti throw off French colonial rule (hence the mention of "Lick[ing] back" the famous French leader Napoleon Bonaparte). The Haitian Revolution ended, in 1804, with Haiti's establishment as a sovereign state—one free from slavery and governed by people of color.

Some of the other historical references in the poem include the British naval officer Horatio Nelson, famous for his many victories again Napoleon; the 1815 Battle of Waterloo, where Napoleon was finally defeated; and Christopher Columbus landing in the Americas in 1492. (The speaker notably follows up this allusion to Columbus with one to the Caribs and the Arawaks—some of the indigenous peoples decimated after the Europeans' arrival.)

There are allusions to more non-historical figures from English folklore as well, such as Robin Hood, the legendary outlaw, and Ole King Cole, a character from a nursery rhyme (whose opening lyric—"Old king Cole was a merry old soul and a merry

old soul was he"— is quoted almost exactly in the poem).

Florence Nightingale is, of course, a reference to the famous British nurse who worked during the Crimean War; she was often called "the lady with the lamp" because she would tend to soldiers at night. This allusion is then juxtaposed against the reference to Mary Seacole, a Jamaican woman who similarly volunteered as a nurse during the Crimean War and who is metaphorically compared to a star and a sunrise.

There are other allusions in the poem as well, but what's worth noting overall is that, while many people and events from British history are referenced, these are never explained in-depth. In fact, sometimes they even receive a dismissive addendum, such as in line 6 where the speaker says, "Dem tell me bout 1066 and all dat." The final part of the line, "and all dat," conveys the speaker's irritated and dismissive tone towards the allusion. Sure the speaker has learned about 1066 and events related to it, but there is no need to go into detail, since the details of distant British history are not important to the speaker.

By contrast, important Caribbean figures, like Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nanny the Maroon and Mary Seacole, each receive an entire stanza dedicated to explaining who they were. The poem itself, then, is a way of filling in the gaps in British colonial education.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Lines 10-21
- Line 22
- Line 23
- Line 24
- Line 25
- Lines 26-31
- Line 32
- Line 33
- Line 34
- Line 35
- Line 36
- Line 37
- Line 38
- Line 39
- Lines 40-49

VOCABULARY

Dem (Line 1, Line 2, Line 3, Line 6, Line 7, Line 9, Line 22, Line 24, Line 25, Line 32, Line 33, Line 34, Line 36, Line 38, Line 39, Line 50, Line 51) - Them. The spelling of the word reflects the speaker's dialect.

Wha (Line 3, Line 51) - What. The spelling of the word reflects the speaker's dialect.

1066 (Line 6) - This is an allusion to the Battle of Hastings, which was fought on October 14, 1066, between the Norman-French army of William, Duke of Normandy and the English army under King Harold Godwinson, and is often held up as a key moment in the history of England.

Dat (Line 6, Line 9) - That. The spelling of the word reflects the speaker's dialect.

Dick Whittington and he cat (Line 7, Line 27) - An allusion to English folklore about Richard Whittington (1354-1423), who, according to legend, rose from poverty with money he made from selling his cat to a rat-infested country.

Toussainnt L'Ouverture (Line 8, Line 10, Line 18, Line 20, Line 29) - Toussant L' Overtoure rose from slavery to become the leader of the Haitian revolution at the turn of the 18th century.

Lick back (Line 13) - This expression means "to defeat."

Napoleon (Line 14) - Napoleon Bonaparte, the infamous French military leader who successfully waged war across Europe in the late 17th and early 18th century. He ruled as Emperor of France from 1804-1814.

First Black Republic (Lines 16-17) - This is a reference to Haiti, which liberated itself from colonial French rule and became a sovereign state in 1804.

Beacon (Line 20) - A light or fire that is lit to provide guidance. It can also mean a source of inspiration.

Man who discover de balloon (Line 22) - This is an allusion to Michael Faraday, the British scientist who invented the first rubber balloon in the early 19th century.

Nanny de Maroon (Line 25, Line 26) - Nanny of the Maroons (1686-1755) was the leader of a community of former slaves in Jamaica. The Maroons fought against the British in for many years, and in 1976 she was officially recognized as a national hero of Jamaica.

See-far woman (Line 27) - This is a poetic way of saying a woman with vision.

Fire-woman struggle (Line 29) - This could be a reference to the fact the Maroons were known as vicious fighters and fought against the English for many years.

Lord Nelson (Line 32) - Horatio Nelson (1758-1805), often regarded as the greatest naval warrior in British history.

Waterloo (Line 32) - An allusion to the 1815 Battle of Waterloo, which marked the end of the Napoleonic wars and British victory over the French.

Shaka de great Zulu (Line 33) - Shaka kaSenzangakhona (1787–1828) was one of the most influential kings of the Zulu Kingdom in southern Africa. He was known for his many military achievements.

Columbus and 1492 (Line 34) - 1492 is the year Christopher Columbus is credited with "discovering" America. He first landed in the Bahamas on a small island he named San Salvador.

Caribs and de Arawaks (Line 35) - Indigenous peoples from the Caribbean. They were mostly killed and displaced when European colonizers arrived.

Florence Nightingale (Line 36) - Nightingale (1820-1910) was an English social reformer famous for her service as a nurse during the Crimean War.

Robin Hood (Line 37) - A heroic outlaw from English folklore.

King Cole (Line 38) - A character from a British nursery rhyme.

Mary Seacole (Line 39) - A Jamaican business woman and nurse, known for voluntarily traveling to the site of the Crimean War to care for wounded soldiers. While her works were initially ignored (likely because she was Jamaican), today she is celebrated in Jamaica.

Crimean War (Line 42) - The Crimean War was fought between the Russian Empire and an alliance between France, Britain, Sardinia, and the Ottoman Empire from 1853 and 1856. The Russian Empire lost the war.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is written in free verse, with the occasional use of rhyming quatrains (four-line stanzas). The poem contains 10 stanzas and a total of 53 lines. These stanzas vary greatly in length—some as short as 2 lines, others as long as 12.

There is a pattern to this seeming chaos. The speaker uses long, free verse stanzas to praise characters from African and Caribbean history (such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nanny de Maroon, and Mary Seacole). These stanzas are marked by short lines with frequent enjambment and internal rhyme. When talking about Caribbean history—that is, the speaker's own history—the speaker thus noticeably breaks with established European forms.

The speaker then turns to the more traditional rhyming quatrains to describe what was taught in the British education system. Compared to the free verse stanzas, these feel simple and childish. In this way, even the form of the poem, or the play between its two forms, serves to question and undermine British colonialism.

METER

The poem has no formal meter; it's written in free verse. This keeps the tone conversational, and—as with the poem's overall form—represents a break with European poetic traditions that relied heavily on meter. Writing without meter is a way to establish the speaker's unique voice and to subtly rebel against colonialism, given that traditional, metered poetry is likely what the speaker would have been taught within the British colonial education system.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem often uses rhyme, but there is no overarching rhyme scheme given that the stanzas are often structured very differently from one another. There's a clear contrast, however, between the end rhymed quatrains that describe colonial teachings, and the free-flowing, unpredictable rhymes found in the stanzas describing figures from Caribbean history.

The quatrains rely on perfect rhymes, many of which are based on one-syllable words. Take the eighth stanza:

> Dem tell me bout Florence Nightingale and she lamp
> And how Robin Hood used to camp
> Dem tell me bout ole King Cole was a merry ole soul
> But dem never tell me bout Mary Seacole

Other quatrains are even simpler, relying on a single rhyme sound (i.e., "spoon," "balloon," "moon," Maroon"). This makes all the quatrains sound straightforward, sing-songy; they come across like nursery rhymes.

The stanzas focused on Caribbean figures are much more complicated—relying on a mixture of full, slant, and internal rhymes to create a rich, unpredictable tapestry of sound. Look at the stanza focused on Toussaint L'Ouverture. There are perfect rhymes between "back"/"Black" and "born"/"thorn," as well as slant rhymes between "vision," "Napoleon," "Battalion," "beacon," and "Revolution."

The stanzas about Nanny de Maroon and Mary Seacole feature similarly complex rhyme schemes. Take the stanza focused on Seacole. There's slant rhyme between "far," "War," and "star," broken up by three perfect rhymes between "go," "no," and "snow." Add consonance and assonance, and these all become extremely musical stanzas that defy the established, predictable rhythms of traditional poetry—allowing the speaker to establish a distinct voice, separate from that of the British colonizers.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is likely a young person living in a British colony in the Caribbean, or a person of that colonial background who is living in England. The speaker uses a strong dialect typical of the region, and repeatedly implies that figures from Caribbean and African history are part of the speaker's *own* history. As such, the speaker is likely someone of African or indigenous heritage currently living under British colonial rule.

The poet, John Agard, grew up in British Guyana, and the poem is likely based on his own experiences. That said, the speaker isn't given an age nor gender, and isn't necessarily meant to be

taken as Agard himself; rather, the speaker seeks to give voice to the many young people who have grown up under colonial rule, and who have been denied access to their own histories.

SETTING

The poem takes place in a British colony in the Caribbean. The speaker uses dialect from the region and repeatedly references important figures from the region's history—figures the speaker resents not being taught about in school. Since the references to what *was* being taught in school all relate to British history, it's fair to assume the speaker lives in a country that has been specifically colonized by the English. And since the poet, John Agard, is from British Guyana, it's likely this poem is set in British Guyana during the early to mid 19th century, before Guyana gained its independence from Britain in 1966.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Agard was born in 1949 in British Guyana (currently Guyana). He grew up in the capital of Georgetown, and when he was young, he fostered his love of language by listening to cricket commentary on the radio.

Agard's work often touches upon themes of colonialism, identity, and Caribbean culture. Similar themes can be found throughout Caribbean poetry, which is often deeply tied to the history of the region—a history marked by brutal colonialism and enslavement. This poetry also often focuses on themes related to exile, the natural landscape, and tradition. Other famous Caribbean poets include Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, and Linton Kwesi Johnson.

In 1998, Agard won the Paul Hamlyn Award for Poetry. He has also been awarded Casa de las Americas Prize (1982), the Cholmondeley Award (2004), the CLPE Poetry Award (2009), and the Queen's Medal for Poetry (2012). Besides numerous poetry collections, Agard has published many children's books as well.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Agard grew up in British Guyana at a time when the country was under British colonial rule. The colony, which changed hands between the French and English in the early 19th century, had been a primary producer of sugarcane until the late 1800s, when the decline in sugar cane prices shifted focus towards farming, forestry, and mining. Slavery was brutally upheld throughout the Caribbean through the mid-19th century as well—something referenced in the poem's allusion to Toussaint L'Ouverture. L'Ouverture was a former enslaved person who became a leader of the Haitian Revolution, which established Haiti as a free, sovereign state in 1804.

Although "Checking Out Me History" was not published until 2005, the themes of the poem (which are found throughout Agard's work) focus on one of the main issues of the century: colonialism and colonized people's fight for independence. The latter half of the 20th century, when Agard was coming of age, saw many colonized countries gain that independence, including Jamaica (1962), Antigua and Barbuda (1981), Barbados (1966), Belize (1981), and, of course, Guyana itself in (1966). As an Afro-Caribbean poet growing up in a time when many nations were fighting for independence, Agard's work naturally took on the themes of colonialism, independence and freedom, and Afro-Caribbean identity.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Further Analysis of Agard's Work — The author Daljit Nagra analyzes "Checking Out Me History" as well as other poems by Agard. (https://www.bl.uk/windrush/articles/close-readings-of-john-agards-checking-out-me-history-flag-and-half-caste)
- More by John Agard — A critical perspective, full biography, and bibliography of Agard from the British Council. (https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/john-agard)
- The Poem in Performance — Another reading of "Checking Out Me History," this time in a live setting. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1ttafRqM8w)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to the poem read by Agard himself. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/class-clips-video/poets-in-person-checking-out-me-history-john-agard/zm3sgwx)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN AGARD POEMS

- Half-Caste

HOW TO CITE

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