

Checking out me history essay



**ASSIGN
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Checking Out Me History alternates between two structures, marked by two different fonts. The first uses the repeated phrase “ Dem tell me” to indicate the white version of history, mostly written in rhyming couplets, triplets or quatrains. Interspersed are the stories of three black historical figures: Toussaint L’Overture, Nanny de Maroon and Mary Seacole, told using abbreviated syntax with words missed out, shorter lines and an irregular rhyme scheme. Agard uses variations in spelling to suggest Caribbean dialect, especially replacing ‘ th’ with ‘ d’.

This stresses the importance of carving out his “ own identity”. There is repetition – particularly of “ Dem tell me” – throughout the poem, creating a sense of rhythm. End rhyme is heavily used, emphasised by adapted sections of nursery rhymes: the dish who ran away with the spoon, and Old King Cole, for example. In the “ Dem tell me” sections the poet refers to nursery rhyme characters and other non-historical people, like Robin Hood or the cow who jumped over the moon.

Even “ 1066 and all dat”, which might appear to be an historical reference, is probably citing a humorous book (published in 1930) famous for its irreverent parody of histories of England. There’s a suggestion that the version of history taught to the poet is not exactly accurate even before you consider that black people have been completely left out. The sections on individual black historical figures contain stronger imagery, with use of nature metaphors to powerful effect. Toussaint L’Overture is a “ thorn” and a “ beacon”.

Nanny de Maroon is linked with a mountain, fire and rivers. Mary Seacole is described in dramatic imagery as a “ healing star” and a “ yellow sunrise” to the patients she treats. All three are associated with light – “ beacon”, “ fire-woman” and “ star” – suggesting that they play metaphorical roles, illuminating the poet’s true historical identity. What kind of tone does the poem have? Like the structure, the tone also divides into two. The “ Dem tell me” sections have an accusatory, rebellious tone to them, created by repetition and short lines at the beginning.

Whereas the sections on Toussaint L’Overture, Nanny de Maroon and Mary Seacole are celebratory in tone, emphasised by images of nature and using epic (out of the ordinary) vocabulary – words like “ vision”, “ see-far” and “ star”. It is a poem that challenges us to consider the meaning of history, how we come to know about the past and accept versions of history. The poet might be provoking us to “ check out” our own histories, particularly if they include periods or important figures not taught in schools.