

Listen Mr. Oxford Don by John Agard

John Agard's *Listen Mr. Oxford Don* is a poem which looks at issues of language, ethnicity and immigration in a subversive and comical style. The poem is composed of nine stanzas of irregular length, rhyme and rhythm and the poet uses various poetic devices to subtly emphasise his frustration with the superior attitude of the "Mr Oxford Don" with regards to immigrants like himself. Since the representatives of the "Queen's English" condemn foreigners such as himself for their use of language, Agard's rebellion will be a verbal one. The poem is written phonetically to reflect a Caribbean accent, and is best appreciated when read aloud.

Analysis of *Listen Mr. Oxford Don*

In the first stanza, Agard distinguishes between the two contrasting figures in the poem to make clear what he is rebelling against. The first is the eponymous Mr. Oxford Don, a fictional character who serves to represent academia and the dictionary, and the second is the speaker, who represents an uneducated immigrant. Crucially, the principal difference between the two is their use of the English language, and this is the poem's main theme.

Lines 4 and 5, Agard uses a half-rhyme in the two verbs to make a clear separation between those who graduate and those who immigrate, as if implying that they are mutually exclusive. Subversively, however, Agard himself undermines this by being both an immigrant from Guyana and a highly-respected poet.

It is also important to notice the mention of Clapham Common in London, one of the most multi-cultural cities in the world.

The second stanza begins to build some tension; its repetition creating a rhythm that seems to mimic the footfalls of the "man on de run". With this expression together with the word "dangerous", the poet is playing on the common notion that speakers of an "incorrect" English are threatening criminals. However, the expression "on de run" refers more to a state of instability and change. As an immigrant in the UK, the speaker belongs neither to his native country nor to his new one, a problem aggravated by language.

Agard will impose this new identity through the words of his poem. He uses violent imagery: "gun", "knife", "axe", "hammer" in order to violently and effectively establish it. Words are converted into weapons to emphasise their power and to show that a verbal rebellion is much more effective and long-lasting than a physical one. In this way, he looks at the ownership of language, pointing out that it can be used in a number of different ways for a number of different purposes depending on who is using it.

As well as demonstrating the power of words, Agard also explores their flexibility. The style of English that the poem is written in, although replete with grammatical and orthographical errors, is nonetheless understandable. The poet pushes the limits of understanding in order to underline just how creative and manipulative we can be with words without detracting from their comprehensibility.

The "jail sentence" points once more to the dynamic nature of words. Referring again to the issue of ownership of language, the speaker indicates that he is only armed with "human breath", a universal weapon possessed by all.

In this way, with *Listen Mr. Oxford Don* John Agard democratises language, seeming to say that the "Queen's English" is not the exclusive property of the Oxford Don and whatever the "offence", it can be an "accessory" for all, regardless of a person's cultural heritage.