

Text 1



Listen Mr Oxford Don



John Agard was born in Guyana in 1949. He moved to England in 1977 and has lived there ever since. He often reads his poems or children's stories, sometimes to the sound of a flute or drums. He is a prominent voice of Caribbean culture in Britain.



Culture Flash

Afro-Caribbeans

1% of Britons are of black Caribbean (or West Indian) descent.

Oxford is known for its university, which publishes the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The OED is regarded as the most authoritative English dictionary in the world.

Clapham Common is an area in South London.

Word help

1. = university professor

2. /grædʒuət/ *obtenir un diplôme*

3. = assaulting

4. *hache*

5. *écraser*

6. /ʀaɪə/ *faire une émeute*

7. *souffle, respiration*

8. *entailler*

9. *cogner*

Me not no Oxford don¹
me a simple immigrant
from Clapham Common
I didn't graduate²

5 I immigrate

But listen Mr Oxford don
I'm a man on de run
and a man on de run
is a dangerous one

10 I ent have no gun
I ent have no knife
but mugging³ de Queen's English
is the story of my life

I dont need no axe⁴
15 to split / up yu syntax
I dont need no hammer
to mash up⁵ yu grammar

I warning you Mr Oxford don
I'm a wanted man
20 and a wanted man
is a dangerous one

Dem accuse me of assault
on de Oxford dictionary /
imagin a concise peaceful man like me /
25 dem want me serve time
for inciting rhyme to riot⁶
but I tekking it quiet
down here in Clapham Common

I'm not a violent man Mr Oxford don
30 I only armed wit mih human breath⁷
but human breath
is a dangerous weapon

So mek dem send one big word after me
I ent serving no jail sentence
35 I slashing⁸ suffix in self-defence
I bashing⁹ future wit present tense
and if necessary
I making de Queen's English accessory/to
my offence

Mangoes and Bullets, JOHN AGARD, 1985.



A man airs his views from a stepladder at "Speaker's Corner" in London's Hyde Park.

OVERVIEW

- 1 Give information about the narrator. Who does he address?
- 2 Describe the language used in this poem:
 - formal English;
 - standard English;
 - non-standard English.
- 3 What is the aim of this poem:
 - to show that the English language is not just the Queen's English?
 - to show that immigrants are not criminals?

ZOOM IN

- 1 Translate the following sentences into standard English. Explain the "mistakes".
 - **me** a simple immigrant (L. 2);
 - I **ent** have **no** gun (L. 10);
 - **Dem** accuse me (L. 22);
 - I **tekking** it quiet (L. 27);
 - I **only** armed **wit muh** human breath (L. 30).
- 2 **First stanza**
 - a. Who does "Mr Oxford don" symbolise:
 - British people?
 - teachers?
 - people who write dictionaries?
 - b. Show the differences between the narrator and the don.
- 3 **Stanzas 2 to 5**
 - a. Find an equivalent for "a fugitive".
 - b. List the weapons the narrator does not use.
 - c. Identify the narrator's three "crimes".
- 4 **Stanzas 6 to 8**
 - a. Find two equivalents for "to go to jail".
 - b. Identify four more "crimes".
 - c. Show that language is seen as a person.
 - d. "Dem accuse me" (L. 22) Who are the accusers?
 - e. Name the weapon used by the narrator.

- 5 Considering the poet's weapon and his "crimes", explain why he is a threat to the Oxford don.
- 6 What can the Oxford don do against the poet?
- 7 All the following adjectives can describe the poem. Find a justification for each one.
provocative – engaged – humorous – ironic
- 8 Imagine why the poet feels the need to assert his right to speak his own language.

ZOOM OUT

- 1 Does the poet reach his goal? What is the impact such a poem may have?
- 2 Comment on these lines from another John Agard poem:
"What gives a you
I-identity
Is it the skin
Or the colour of the speech?"
- 3 It is often said that "the pen is mightier (= stronger) than the sword". Do you agree?

WATCH YOUR WORDS

Language & Identity: to speak properly • **unrepentant:** *impénitent, qui ne regrette rien* • to be proud of > pride: *la fierté* • roots: *les racines* • to deny one's identity: *renier son identité*

A dangerous man: a fugitive • to take sb hostage • to provoke sb • to dare do sth: *oser faire qqch* • **menace** /menis/ = threat > to threaten /θretn/ • to shock = to offend > an offence • a weapon /wepən/ : *une arme* • harmless ≠ harmful = dangerous

Prejudice: to be discriminated against = *être victime de discrimination* • to look down upon sb = to despise sb: *mépriser qqn* • to feel superior to sb