***Flag* by John Agard**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwrupfLA1wU> Analysis

**Context**

John Agard was born in British Guiana (now called Guyana) in the Caribbean, in 1949. He moved to the UK in the late 1970s where he began educating people about Caribbean culture. He has been writing poetry since the age of 16 and is as well-known for his powerful and entertaining performances of his work as for the work itself.

He often uses his own Caribbean style of speaking in his poems to give **full expression to the voice of his homeland**.

**Subject matter**

Flag explores **how national symbols bind nations together** – and in doing so also **force people apart**. For Agard this power is a dangerous illusion. Flags do not represent anything real at all. Nations are merely "imagined communities". While growing up in 'British' Guyana, for example, Agard was taught all about British history and was meant to identify with British culture – even though hot tropical Guyana, however, could not be more unlike cold, rainy Britain.

**Form and structure**

**Form**

Flag is written in a tight, regular form. It has five *stanzas*, each with three lines. The middle line of each stanza is shorter than the other two. The form therefore mimics the shape of an old medieval flag. The three lines are like the three stripes of many national flags today.

The first and third lines of the first three stanzas rhyme. This suggests a bond between the two voices in the poem. This structure then breaks in the third stanza, where "field" and "bleed" don't rhyme. It is gone by the final stanza which ends on a *rhyming couplet*. This shows how the 'argument' of the poem has been developing and building towards a conclusion and the characters are going in different directions.

**Structure**

**The poem is built around a conversation between two voices** – one that asks the child-like question of each opening stanza; the other, perhaps Agard himself, who responds in the next two lines. In the first four stanzas the response is the same, with the line "It's just a piece of cloth" echoing throughout the poem.

There is a sense that the poet and the questioner are on some kind of journey – each time they discuss a flag in a different place. The subject matter becomes more personal each time, though, changing from a general discussion of a "nation" (line 3), to focus on actual "men" (line 6), then specific examples of men ("the coward" in line 9) before focusing on the person asking the questions: "you" (line 12).

**Language and imagery**

**This poem is built around clashing ideas and images.** This is reflected not just in the structure (the question-answer style of the stanzas) but in the sounds and words Agard uses.

**Sound**

**The first sound is the rise and fall of the question and answer:** the voice naturally rises at the beginning of each stanza with the question, only to be brought down with the poet's clear, simple answer.

Another important **contrast** is in the **soft sounds of the flag** ("fluttering", "unfurling", "rising", "flying"). These are drowned out by the **short, sharp, hard sounds** that are emphasised by the use of *alliteration*: "nation/knees" (stanza one); "guts"/"grow" (stanza two).

*Repetition* is also key, particularly the line "It's just a piece of cloth". It is also as if the poet is trying to deny the symbol of its power – which he then has to accept. His companion wants a flag and the final two lines sound like a kind of defeat.

**Imagery**

Agard contrasts positive, poetic language with harsh and heavy words. So "fluttering" and "breeze", or "rising" or "flying" and "field" are always brought down to earth with the very ordinary, dull, repeated "cloth".

This dull piece of "cloth" is the source of all the action and energy in the poem. It is seen "fluttering", "unfurling", "rising" and "flying" – and its effects on people and nations are also active. The flag: "brings", "makes", "dares" and "will outlive".

This action and energy has negative consequences, though – a defeated country ("on its knees"), affecting the "guts" of men, which while meaning bravery also means their bloody insides. This association is made clear in the next stanza ("the blood you bleed").

The anger or defeat of the poet is expressed in a final, violent image. He suggests it is very simple to get one ("just ask") but not easy to control its power.

**ttitudes, themes and ideas**

This poem seems to be built on the idea that *nationalism* [**nationalism**: *Strong feelings of identification with your nation or the political view that your nation is superior.*] is a purely *abstract* [**abstract**: *Not concrete: an idea or concept. For example 'love' or 'evil'.* ] idea (an idea that exists in the head rather than in physical, concrete reality). He draws on views of countries as "imagined communities" – groups of people bound by myths, stories and flags. We are all human and yet certain individuals, powerful leaders, will create divisions simply by giving meaning to a limp and fluttering piece of cloth.

The poem is therefore about **the power of** *symbolism* [**symbolism**: *The use of symbols - ie, of images or things that represent something else, usually something abstract.*]. Agard admits that the flag is a powerful symbol – but he urges us to see it as just that: a symbol whose ideas are dangerous and an invention of mankind.

The word that is repeated most in the poem, for example, is "just". This therefore becomes the most important idea in the poem. It seeks to lessen the power of the flag.