

Edexcel English GCSE

Poetry: Conflict Collection No Problem - Benjamin Zephaniah

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No Problem

Benjamin Zephaniah

Brief Summary

This poem explores the racial abuse and discrimination the speaker (presumed to be Zephaniah) has experienced throughout his life. The speaker asserts that he is not the problem. The problem lies with those who perpetrate this abuse.

Synopsis

- The speaker explains how he was subjected to racist behaviour at school.
- He further explains how teachers as well as students were prejudiced towards him, “**pigeonholing**” him due to his race..
- The speaker repeats again how he is not the problem, and the problem lies with those who demonstrate their ignorance and hatred.
- The first stanza concludes with the speaker affirming that he knows he’s not confined by stereotypes; he is “**versatile**”. He also asserts his resilience; he’s determined not to let his experiences get him down. He greets everyone “**wid a smile**” and refuses to let their beliefs about him alter his self-perception.
- The second stanza displays the speaker’s awareness that the racism they’re experiencing is a societal issue which will affect him his whole life. However he’s not going to hold a grudge. He knows that he is not the problem, racists are.

Summary

Context – Addresses the speaker’s experiences of racism when they were at school

Structure - two stanzas // usually follows an ABCB rhyming scheme

Language – critical / dialect / humorous

Key Points – the speaker is explaining that despite their experiences of racism, they are aware that the issue lies with those being racist rather than the speaker themselves.

Context

Benjamin Zephaniah (1958-)

Zephaniah was raised in Jamaica and in Birmingham, England, but left school at the age of 14. In 1980 he published his first collection, just after moving to London. He holds a number of honorary degrees from UK universities. His work is often described as **very lyrical and rhythmic**, and is sometimes performed to music. Much of his work is shaped by political movements, environmental issues and international conflicts. However, his poetry often has a **humorous and hopeful tone**, and frequently uses the format of **parody**. He generally writes poetry targeted at adults, but has also written collections specifically for children. He has also written a number of novels.

Racism

Many of Zephaniah’s poems **address issues of racism**. This is true of ‘No Problem’. He writes from his own perspective about his experiences of racism - experiences that are the



result of growing up in England with Afro-Caribbean heritage. 'No Problem' specifically references the racism Zephaniah was subject to when going to school in Birmingham.

No Problem

This poem references the racist discrimination and bullying the speaker experienced throughout his life.

This reference to Timbuktu links to the previous line where the speaker notes he is a "born academic"; Timbuktu was historically established as a centre for scholarship and education in Africa. In the European colonial imagination it was also a place of mystery. By asserting that he can teach the reader about Timbuktu, an almost 'unreal' place (according to the colonial imagination), he suggests that, contrary to what they believe, he is the one with the knowledge.

This line suggests that the speaker has been restricted by stereotypes, which he has had to try and overcome.

Throughout the poem, the speaker shows his resilience, asserting that he is 'versatile' (i.e. multitalented) in spite of what people think. Likewise, he does not let racism get him down - he 'greet[s] yu wid a smile'. This seems poignant - despite what he has experienced, he puts on a brave and happy face for the world.

The speaker may feel the cumulative impact of his experiences with racism (racial trauma) more deeply as he gets older. Here the poem's tone shifts from optimistic to serious.

I am not de problem

But I bare de brunt

Of silly playground taunts

An racist stunts,

I am not de problem

I am a born academic

But dey got me on de run

Now **I am branded athletic,**

I am not de problem

If yu give I a chance

I can teach yu of **Timbuktu**

I can do more dan dance,

I am not de problem

I greet yu wid a smile

Yu put me in a pigeon hole

But I a versatile.

These conditions may affect

me

As I get older,

An I am positively sure

I have no **chips on me**

shoulders,

This line is a refrain repeated several times throughout the first stanza to reaffirm the fact that racists are the problem, not those subjected to racism.

The sibilance created by the repeated 's' sounds in 'silly... taunts/ And racist stunts' produces a hissing sound, suggesting the speaker's contempt of these shows of hatred towards him

The speaker discusses how he is labelled by his teachers as athletic, not academic, conforming to racist stereotypes that black people are naturally musical, rhythmic and athletic (and on the flipside, less intelligent and prone to criminality). The speaker argues he has been pigeonholed according to these stereotypes and that his true potential has consequently been overlooked.

We can interpret the idiomatic expression 'to pigeon hole' literally - perhaps the speaker also wants to communicate through this phrase that he has not been treated with the dignity that is normally awarded to humans.

Having a chip on your shoulder is an idiomatic expression that means you feel inferior to others or are angry/ have a grievance because you think you have been treated unfairly. The speaker asserts that he has no sense of inferiority - perhaps implicitly contrasting himself with those who racially abuse him. This leads to an interesting interpretation of the reason for his abuse: it seems



Explains how being black is not the issue (contrary to negative media portrayals of black people), that he is rising above the discrimination he has faced and the issue lies with racists and racist behaviour. He is following the refrain from earlier but switching out "I" for "Black".

Ends on a humorous and sarcastic tone, plays on the problematic statement "I'm not racist - I have black friends". The fact that the speaker is able to end the poem humorously - when the experiences he references are dark and heavy and may do lasting damage to him 'affect [him]/ As [he] get[s] older' - again shows his resilience.

Black is not de problem

Mother country get it right,

An just for de record,

**Sum of me best friends are
white**

as though those who abuse him feel inferior to him (or feel inferior in general), and so knock him down through racial abuse/ use him as a scapegoat.

Here the speaker asserts that this country is his home. The fact that he calls this country 'mother country' suggests that he was raised here and can also be read as an assertion that he belongs here just as much as anyone, despite what some racists might think.



The title

The title is ambiguous and **can be interpreted in multiple ways**. It can be connected to the assertion repeated throughout the poem that the black people are not **“de problem”** and should not be blamed for the racist abuse they have to endure. It can also act as a **testimony to the speaker’s resilience**. He shrugs off the **“taunts”**, **“racists stunts”** and stereotyping he experiences as best he can, greeting everyone **“wid a smile”**. It seems like he is determined to make light of the racism he faces - it is **“No Problem”**.

The opening

The poem opens on a line repeated frequently throughout the piece: **“I am not de problem”**. This **refrain** demonstrates that the speaker is aware that the racial abuse he experiences is not his fault; rather, it is the fault of those who are racist. By opening the poem with **the pronoun ‘I’**, this **indicates that the poem is personal**, informed by the poet’s own experience.

I am not de problem
But I bare de brunt
Of silly playground taunts
An racist stunts,
I am not de problem

Form

ABCB rhyming scheme

The poem follows an ABCB rhyming scheme, but doesn’t wholly rely on this, and will use **subtle or half rhymes** such as **“brunt”** and **“stunts”**. By choosing to not use full rhyme for the whole poem, Zephaniah may be showing the **disconnection and divide** between himself and other people caused by the repeated racism he has experienced.

Unlike an ABAB rhyme scheme, where alternate lines rhyme, the ABCB rhyme scheme feels **more natural** and less **overly poetic**. Together with the Caribbean-inflected language, this helps to create **a sense that the speaker is casually talking to you**, that this could be part of a natural conversation with him had you met him on the street.

Two stanzas

It could be argued **splitting the poem into two stanzas reinforces the sense of a divide** (between himself and others, on account of racism) that is present in this poem. In this way, **form is able to mirror content**.



There is also a **shift in tone** between the first and second stanza. **In the first stanza, the speaker communicates his positivity** in spite of all he has experienced; he is “**versatile**” and multitalented, and will not believe otherwise. He also greets everyone “**wid a smile**”. However, **in the second stanza, the speaker ponders on the enduring effects of this racist abuse**, wondering if it will ‘**affect [him]/ As he get[s] older**’. Nevertheless, the poem ends on a humorous note, playing on the defence common to racists that they cannot be racist because they have non-white friends. This humour again communicates his positivity and resilience in spite of everything. It also **unifies the two stanzas**.

Repetition

Zephaniah repeats the line “**I am not de problem**” every four lines throughout the first stanza. He also repeats this line with a twist at the end “**Black is not the problem**”. This could be interpreted as the speaker reassuring himself that he is not the issue, the ignorance of racists is. It may also make reference to the fact that black people are often **pathologised** and **criminalised** by the media and by other institutions. Often, black people are portrayed as criminals or as bad parents. By repeating that he and other black people are not the problem, the speaker **counters this portrayal of black people** as a problem to be solved.



Language

References to stereotypes

The speaker **frequently references the stereotypes he's been subject to** and how these stereotypes have constrained him and meant he couldn't fulfil his potential. For example, the lines in the first stanza: **"I am a born academic // But dey got me on de run // Now I am branded athletic"** suggest that teachers labelled him as unacademic and instead athletic, in line with racist stereotypes about black people being superior athletes but inferior scholars.

Phonetical spelling

Zephaniah intentionally spells words **phonetically**, for example **"de"** and **"yu"**. He also does not completely conform to proper grammatical rules, for example "If yu give I a chance" would correctly be phrased "If you give me a chance". This distinctive grammar and phonetic spelling **reflects the speech habits of many Afro Caribbeans**. His refusal to conform to 'proper' grammatical/spelling rules suggests his pride in this dialect. This pride is mirrored by the self-belief he exhibits in the poem "I am versatile" "I am a born academic". His distinctive use of language can also be read as a statement that individuals should not have to change their behaviour and language to conform to the white norm.

Direct address

Zephaniah also uses **direct address** to align the reader with the people he has experienced racial abuse and discrimination from. It is not "them" that put him in a **"pigeon hole"** (in accordance with their stereotypical beliefs about black people); it is **"yu"** the reader. As a result, the speaker reminds the reader that 'racists' are not a different class of people; the reader him/herself may hold racist beliefs. In this way, the speaker reminds the reader of the need to interrogate oneself about any possible racist beliefs they might hold.

The use of direct address makes the poem more powerful. Together with the **colloquial language**, it also makes it seem as though the speaker is talking to us in real life. We may have met the speaker in a park or in the street and this soliloquy is part of the conversation we are having with him.

Comparison

Half-Caste

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems use an Caribbean dialect in their poems, for example, Agard uses "yuself" and Zephaniah uses words spelt phonetically like "de" and "yu". Both use similar structural devices, such as the use of refrains and a repeated line / phrase. Both poems have racism as the key theme. They both use direct address to emphasise that they are trying to educate the reader.
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Differences

- Whilst 'Half Caste' does have a rhythmic feel, it doesn't have a specific rhyming scheme. In contrast, 'No Problem' uses an ABCB rhyming scheme.
- Agard uses **more specific language devices**, such as metaphor and comparisons, to convey his intentions.

