

By the end of studying the poem 'No Problem' by Benjamin Zephaniah I need to know:

Meaning: The speaker (poet) explores his own experiences of racial stereotyping, in England, but hopes for change.

Ideas: By establishing an emotional attachment to the speaker, the poet hopes the reader will reflect upon / challenge their own stereotypical views and those of society as a whole.

Benjamin's education was mixed. He suffered from racial abuse and the stereotypes of the day. He says that he was often dubbed a failure, and argues that it was the education system that failed him. His experiences inspired his poem 'No Problem'

Vocabulary	<p>Racism Discrimination Prejudice Inequality Racial stereotyping Autobiographical Prejudice Timbuktu - Timbuktu is a city located near the Niger River in modern-day Mali in West Africa . Timbuktu was an intellectual and spiritual capital throughout Africa in the 15th and 16th centuries. It's also a place that is synonymous with somewhere exotic, far-flung and foreign. Zephaniah uses this as a figure of mockery to mock the stereotyping of his race.</p>
Context	<p>Benjamin Zephaniah was born in Birmingham in 1958. His parents are Caribbean and his Jamaican heritage often influences his poetry. 'No Problem' explores his own experiences of discrimination and racism. It was published in 1996.</p> <p>He grew up in Jamaica and the Handsworth district of Birmingham, England, leaving school at 14. Later he was identified as being dyslexic. Benjamin Zephaniah's background seems unlikely for a poet: a dyslexic who left school unable to properly read and write. His teenage years of petty crime culminated in a prison spell. For a poet associated with protest literature, many of Zephaniah's poems are tempered by hope, humour and laughter.</p> <p>Zephaniah is writing at a time where challenging society's ideas is more common (in contrast to 'Cousin Kate' where challenging society's beliefs is more problematic). As a result, Zephaniah is able to be more direct in his criticism levelled at society than Rosetti is able to.</p>
Themes	<p>Oppression Hope - A theme throughout most of Zephaniah's poems. Racial stereotyping Conflict - Internal conflict - Man vs Society Discrimination Racism</p>
Deeper understanding	<p>Oppression - The speaker reveals the racism and adversity they have faced. They have battled abuse and limitations due to the colour of their skin, whilst growing up. Interestingly, however, he offers a jovial and relaxed perspective- this is because he is writing from the perspective of a teenage Zephaniah. He does, however, offer hints that if this does not change then he could grow bitter: 'these conditions may affect me as I get older'- offering a concerned view over the psychological impact this could have on him. The use of humour and rhyme throughout the poem do convey his current relaxed attitudes towards the racism and stereotyping he is subjected to.</p> <p>Hope - Despite past prejudice , the speaker remains hopeful. They know they are 'not the problem' and understand that change can exist if people 'get it right' and stop harmful racial stereotyping.</p>

Reading

Performance Poetry / Dub poetry

Watch /listen to the following clip on You Tube.

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

<p>Quotes</p>	<p>'I am not de problem' Ironic as there is a problem as we read on. Repetition of this phrase throughout the poem. Each refrain reveals another problem.</p> <p>'But I bear de brunt' Plosive 'b' mimics the physical blows landing as the speaker experiences playground bullying.</p> <p>'I am born academic' Zephaniah uses a declarative to highlight how he is naturally intelligent.</p> <p>'Now I am branded athletic' another challenge to the stereotype. Connotations to slavery are attached to 'branded' the individual experience of the speaker linked to a much wider issue. The language that 'dey got me on de run' reinforces how he is being forced into that stereotype. It alludes to the criminal stereotype - they are expected to be on the run from police, not academic therefore no opportunity for employment .</p> <p>'If yu give I a change' - Non standard grammar helps to create an authentic voice and makes the plea more heartfelt. It also reflects his pride in his culture- that he uses phonetic spelling to reflect his accent.</p> <p>'I can' Repetition of 'I can' implies that there is potential for change to happen.</p> <p>'But I am versatile' Defiance - the speaker resists the constraints society may place upon him.</p> <p>'Yu put me in a pigeon hole' Putting complex things into small restrictive places - stereotyping; yet he asserts how he is 'versailte' challenging the stereotype with an enthusiastic and light-hearted rhyme.</p> <p>'I can teach yu of Timbuktu'- Zephaniah mocks the narrow-minded views of society. The assumption that he is from 'Timbuktu' because he is black, even though he is from Jamaica.</p> <p>'I am positively sure' Double positive stresses the sincerity of the speaker. His informal language adds to the casual tone.</p> <p>'I have no chips on my shoulder' A powerful quote demonstrating moral defiance. The speaker does not demonstrate anger - which the reader might expect.</p> <p>'Black is not the problem' The move from 'I' now includes everyone who has been similarly oppressed , highlighting how widespread the issues explored in the poem are . This shift (volta) reflects how these issues are universal, but also highlights what is causing all of these issues- the colour of his skin.</p> <p>'Mother country get it right' Could be seen as a reference to ancestral motherlands which were colonised by the British, again referencing the oppression experienced or alternatively affection for England as the speaker's home. Also, his 'Mother country' is Britain so he is ordering British society to change. The fact he uses a collective, rather than speaks to an individual, reflects how he is trying to change society as a whole, it also makes his speech less aggressive. He isn't criticising an individual. Multiple interpretations must be explored.</p> <p>'Sum of me best friends are white' Parodies a typical excuse used to justify saying racially problematic things. The poet reduces it to a joke to expose how weak an excuse it is. Interestingly the last word in the poem is 'white'.</p>
<p>Terminology</p>	<p>Form - Use of personal pronouns throughout the poem highlight how this is a real story. The reader develops an emotional attachment to the speaker.</p> <p>Rhyming scheme - The poem has a regular ABCD rhyme scheme and looks at a new part of the problems experienced every four lines.</p> <p>Structure - The poem is split into two parts . The first stanza describes how the speaker has been affected by racist stereotypes. The second stanza looks to the future where the speaker hopes for change.</p> <p>Phonetic Caribbean English - The words are spelt phonetically (the way the sound when spoken aloud). This makes the speaker sound authentic and reveals how proud they are of their cultural heritage. The use of this 'voice' demonstrated their strength and defiance to conform to these stereotypes.</p> <p>Language of victimisation - by presenting themselves as a victim of racism, the speaker creates a sympathetic response and makes the reader question the impact of their own stereotyping.</p> <p>Language of defiance - The speaker repeatedly demonstrates how they are more complex than people expect them to be, and their demand for change emphasises their determination and spirit.</p>

Links to other poems:

'Half Caste' and 'The Class Game' Compare how speakers in these poems stand up for their different cultural identities. Also consider how all three poems are relatively modern- the free verse perhaps reflective of the freedom of speech afforded to the modern poets.

Loss of heritage and cultural identity can also be explored in 'What Were They Like?'

Cousin Kate- compare the freedom Zephaniah has with how much more subtle Rosetti has to be in her poem. This reflects the views and attitudes of the society at the time.