

BBC Learning English

6 Minute English

Poetry



Yvonne: This is '6 Minute English' and I'm Yvonne Archer - and thanks to Callum for joining me today. Hello Callum!

Callum: Hello Yvonne!

Yvonne: In today's programme we hear from a poet. But first – Callum, are you any good at writing poetry?

Callum: Umm, not really – no – not at all!

Yvonne: Well don't worry about it because we've a special interview with someone who is good at poetry. But first, a poetic question for Callum: Which is Britain's favourite poem? Is it

- a) "Oh My Luve's Like a Red, Red Rose" by Robert Burns
- b) "How Do I love Thee?" by Elizabeth Barratt Browning – OR...
- c) "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?" by William Shakespeare

Callum: Well I remember this competition but I don't remember the answer. I'm going to go for Shakespeare - "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day" because he's probably our most well known writer.

Yvonne: That's a good choice but - we'll find out whether you're right or wrong at the end of the programme.



Dave Neita is a barrister – a lawyer who speaks on behalf of people or organisations in the higher courts of law. But Dave is also a poet, and in his interview, he uses the words 'metaphors' and 'symbolism' – both very useful for talking in English about poetry. Callum – what can you tell us about 'metaphors'?

Callum: Well 'a metaphor' is a way of describing something or someone by using the qualities of something else. For example, in England we have very cold wind, it's so cold, we describe it as 'a biting wind' – 'a biting wind'. So that's a metaphor; it's not really biting, but we say 'a biting wind'.

Yvonne: Excellent. And what about 'symbolism'?

Callum: Well 'symbolism' is when we take an object, a shape or even an idea and we use that to represent something else that we want to talk about.

Yvonne: Okay, great! So here's an example of 'symbolism' as used in one of Dave's poems:

DAVE NEITA

Mind the Gap... mind the gap between the rich and the poor
If nothing is done, it will extend even more

Yvonne: 'Mind the gap' is an announcement and a sign that we often hear and see at London Underground train stations. They warn passengers to be careful when getting on and off trains and platforms because of the space between them. But what does the announcement and sign symbolise in that poem Callum?

Callum: Well here, Dave has used 'mind the gap' – to symbolise the gap or the difference in wealth between rich people and poor people. He's saying that there's a gap between them and he's giving us a warning that if we're not careful, that gap will get even wider.



Yvonne: So 'Mind the Gap' delivers a message from Dave about poverty.

DAVE NEITA

Mind the Gap... mind the gap between the rich and the poor

If nothing is done, it will extend even more

Yvonne: Now as we hear more from him, try to catch the three things he says poetry can communicate – which three things can poetry tell us about?

DAVE NEITA

Poetry can communicate feelings, thoughts and ideas by way of metaphors and symbolism.

But poetry can also tell stories and that is the flexibility of poetry; it lends itself to everyone to do with it as they choose.

Yvonne: Callum, which three things can poetry communicate?

Callum: Dave says that poetry can communicate feelings, thoughts and ideas.

Yvonne: Yes, and we also heard how poetry is flexible so it 'lends itself to' other things such as sending a message, as in 'Mind the Gap' - or even telling a story.

Before Dave came to England from Jamaica in 1995, he decided to write a letter to the Queen – except, his letter was really a poem which told his story! "Letter to the Queen" uses the word 'hospitality' and the term 'short notice'. Callum, what do we mean by them?

Callum: Well, if someone shows us 'hospitality', they make us feel welcome and comfortable. And 'short notice' is if you don't tell people you're going to do something until just a little bit of time before you do it. So for example, if you ask me to come to the '6 Minute English' studio only two minutes before we're due to record, you are giving me very 'short notice'.



Yvonne: As if I would! Okay, let's get an extract from Dave Neita's poem "Letter to the Queen"...

DAVE NEITA

When your people come down to Jamaica
We treat them like royalty
So when I come up to England
I'm expecting the same hospitality
I don't have anywhere to stay
Because I'm coming up on short notice
So please, I'm asking you to fix me up a place inna Buckingham Palace

Yvonne: I wonder whether Dave actually sent the Queen his poem?

Callum: Oh well, I doubt it – because I'm sure he didn't stay at Buckingham Palace when he arrived in England!

Yvonne: No – right. Now let's move on to the answer to today's big question. Which is Britain's favourite poem Callum?

Callum: Well, I wasn't sure. I guessed that it was "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?" by William Shakespeare because he's probably our most famous writer. Was I right – was I right?!

Yvonne: No you weren't – no you weren't! I guessed the same one at first – but anyway. It was actually "How Do I Love Thee?" by Elizabeth Barratt Browning. But that's all we've got time for today on '6 Minute English'. Do join us again for more.

Callum: Goodbye!

Yvonne: Goodbye!