



## Island Man and Praise Song for My Mother by Grace Nichols

### Before reading

- 1 As a class, brainstorm what the students know about Guyana and where it is. Don't confirm answers at this stage.
- 2 Students read *About the poet* to check their answers to *Before reading* 1. Make sure they know that Guyana is part of the Caribbean. Elicit other countries that form part of the Caribbean region. Students then work in pairs to discuss some of the major influences on Nichols' work and what they think the main themes might be. Discuss ideas as a class.

### Possible answers

Her Guyanese/Caribbean heritage, the contrast between Guyanese and UK life, life in the country versus the city, her country's folklores and myths, racial tension (see *Cultural information* below)

### CULTURAL INFORMATION

At the time when Grace Nichols moved to the UK, immigration was a key political issue, which was debated extensively under the government of the time. As a result, she was one of the first West Indian poets to write about some of the issues faced by people who had moved to the UK from a different culture.

- 3 Students read the titles of the poems and answer the questions in pairs. Discuss ideas as a class, but don't confirm answers at this stage.

### While reading

- 1 Students read the poems and check their ideas to the previous exercise.

### Answers

- 1 *Island Man* is from the Caribbean. The island in the title refers to the island where he is from, although it could also refer to the island he now lives on (the UK).
- 2 A praise song is a spoken or sung poem that praises someone. Its purpose is to recognise or honour that person.
- 2 Students now read the poems in more detail and answer the questions.

### Answers

- 1 He thinks of the island that he used to live on. When he wakes more fully, he remembers he is in London.
- 2 He doesn't like it. The author conveys this by the lines *island man heaves himself, Another London day*. This implies he has to force himself out of bed and that each day is repetitive.
- 3 In a positive light: it's a praise song, and she uses positive words (*sunrise, warm, replenishing*).

- 4 Either the poet is an adult looking back on her childhood, or her mother is no longer alive.
- 5 The poems are both reflecting on memories from the past (the man reflecting on his past life on the island, and Nichols reflecting on her mother's love).
- 3 Students now focus on the linguistic devices and imagery in the poems. If your class needs more support, ask them to do this in pairs or small groups.

### Answers

- 1 **Island Man:** nostalgic and happy in the dream (*wakes up to the sound of blue surf, his small emerald island*), but sad and bleak in reality (*comes back groggily groggily*), the man 'heaves himself' with great effort to face another city day.

**Praise Song for My Mother:** also nostalgic, but in a celebratory way. Nichols acknowledges her mother as the giver of life (*You were water to me ..., You were sunrise to me*) and the final line (*Go to your wide futures, you said*) ends the poem on an optimistic tone, suggesting the poet is free to explore whatever her future may bring.

- 2 **Island Man** uses contrasting imagery for the two locations – exotic, colourful descriptions for the Caribbean (*blue surf, wild sea birds, fishermen, sun, emerald island*) contrasting with bleak, noisy descriptions of London (*grey, metallic soar, surge of wheels, dull ... roar*).

**Praise Song for My Mother:** uses nature imagery (*water, moon, sunrise, fish, flame tree, crab, plantain*) to represent her mother, possibly to enhance the link with Mother Nature, and to emphasise that mothers are the givers of life.

- 3 **Island Man:** repetition of 'groggily' reinforces the idea of the man struggling (or not wanting) to wake from his dream, while repetition of 'muffling' emphasises the man's wish to drown out the noisy city sounds.

**Praise Song for My Mother:** repetition of 'You were ... to me' in each stanza reinforces the strong bond between mother and daughter, while repetition of 'replenishing' reiterates the mother's role of constantly providing for her daughter.

- 4 She uses 'fathoming' to describe her mother as deep, wise and understanding of her; she uses 'mantling' to describe her mother as protective.

- 5 **Island Man:** the stanzas about the island are unstructured, reinforcing its carefree relaxed nature, whereas the stanzas about London rhyme and are more structured, reinforcing the busy, monotonous city lifestyle.

**Praise Song for My Mother:** the first three stanzas of three lines each are very similar in format, but the final stanza is longer. This creates the effect of building up to a climax, reiterating the importance of all that her mother has given her, before ending with the final line set on its own, perhaps to signify the importance of her mother's greatest gift of freedom.



## After reading

- 1 In groups, students think about the major themes illustrated in these two poems and what insight it gives them into Nichols as a person.

## Possible answers

The poems cover the major theme of different cultures, and also traditional folklore (i.e. the use of a praise song). We could deduce that Nichols misses her old culture and maybe isn't entirely happy in the UK; also that she had great respect and love for her mother.

- 2 Students compare the structure of the two poems. If they are struggling with this, you could get them to practise reading the poems aloud.

## Answers

*Island Man* is less structured and has more of a free feel to it, particularly when describing the island, whereas *Praise Song for My Mother* has a clearer structure. This is probably because praise songs are part of oral tradition and are designed to be chanted or sung in unison.

- 3 Students now work through the steps to create their own praise song. If your class needs extra support, brainstorm some ideas for metaphors and suitable adjectives as a class.

## Follow-on task

Ask students to find another example of a praise song on the Internet for them to share in the next class.