



Island Man and Praise Song for My Mother by Grace Nichols

ABOUT THE POEMS

Island Man is a poem of contrasts that describes the past and present life of a Caribbean man who has left his peaceful life on a beautiful Caribbean island for a new life in a busy capital city (London).

As the title suggests, *Praise Song for My Mother* is a praise song – a traditional African poem that celebrates the person or people it is written about. Praise songs are part of oral tradition – they are not written down, but instead are chanted or sung and handed down from generation to generation.

ABOUT THE POET

Grace Nichols was born in 1950 in Guyana, a small country on the northern mainland of South America, which is part of the Caribbean region. She was born in the capital, Georgetown, but spent her childhood in a small village by the coast before moving back to the city with her family. After graduating from university, she became a teacher. Her job took her to some of the most remote parts of Guyana, which exposed her to many of her country's folklores and myths. In 1977, she emigrated to the UK where she has lived ever since.

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Island Man

(for a Caribbean island man in London who still wakes up to the sound of the sea)

Morning
and island man wakes up
5 to the sound of blue surf
in his head
the steady breaking and wombing
wild seabirds
and fishermen pushing out to sea
10 the sun surfacing defiantly
from the east
of his small emerald island
he always comes back groggily groggily
Comes back to sands
15 of the grey metallic soar
to surge of wheels
to dull North Circular roar
muffling muffling
his crumpled pillow waves
20 island man heaves himself
Another London day

Praise Song for My Mother

You were
water to me
deep and bold and fathoming
25 You were
moon's eye to me
pull and grained and mantling
You were
sunrise to me
30 rise and warm and streaming
You were
the fishes red gill to me
the flame tree's spread to me
the crab's leg/the fried plantain smell
35 replenishing replenishing
Go to your wide futures, you said

VOCABULARY FOCUS

wombing (line 7): enclosing

groggily (line 13): unable to think or move normally because of being so tired

surge (line 16): a sudden and great increase

North Circular (line 17): a large and busy road in London

muffling (line 18): making something quieter and less easy to hear

heave (line 20): move with great difficulty

fathom (line 24): a fathom is a measure of depth in an ocean; to fathom something is to understand something complicated

grained (line 27): when wood is grained, it is rough, not smooth

mantle (line 27): a type of coat or cloak that covers and protects the shoulders

plantain (line 34): a type of banana common in the Caribbean

replenishing (line 35): making something full again



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Before reading

- 1 You are going to read two poems written by Grace Nichols, a Guyanese poet. Where is Guyana? What do you know about it?
- 2 Read *About the poet* and check your answers. From the information given about Nichols, can you predict what the major influences on her work might be? What kind of themes do you think she writes about?
- 3 The titles of the poems are *Island Man* and *Praise Song for My Mother*. In pairs, discuss your answers to these questions.
 - 1 Who do you think *Island Man* is? Which island do you think the title refers to?
 - 2 *Praise Song for My Mother* is a traditional African praise song. What do you think a praise song is? What purpose might it serve?

While reading

- 1 Read both poems and *About the poems*. Check your answers to *Before reading* 3.
- 2 Read each poem in more detail and answer these questions.
 - 1 In *Island Man*, what does the man think of when he first starts to wake up? What happens when he wakes up more fully?
 - 2 What does he think about his current life? What words does Nichols use to convey this?
 - 3 In *Praise Song for My Mother*, how do you think Nichols views her mother? Find evidence for your answer.
 - 4 *Praise Song for My Mother* is written in the past tense. Why do you think this is?
 - 5 What do both poems have in common? Think about what the poet's intentions might have been in writing these two poems.
- 3 Read the poems again and answer these questions.
 - 1 Describe the tone of both poems. Find words or phrases to support your answer.
 - 2 Find and underline examples of imagery in both poems. How does the imagery help to convey island and London life in *Island Man*? What type of imagery does Nichols use in *Praise Song for My Mother*, and how does this reinforce the poem's message?

- 3 Why do you think Nichols uses repetition in the poems?
- 4 In *Praise Song for My Mother*, Nichols uses an unusual choice of words, especially *fathoming* and *mantling*. What do you think these two words mean in this context with regard to her mother?
- 5 Read each poem again aloud. What do you notice about the rhythm of each poem? Are there any rhythmic differences between the stanzas in each poem?

After reading

- 1 Think back to your predictions in *Before reading* 2. Which major themes are illustrated in these two poems? What insight do they give us into Nichols as a person?
- 2 Compare the structure of the two poems. Why do you think the structure of *Praise Song for My Mother* is as it is? Think about the nature of praise songs.
- 3 You are going to write a praise song for someone using the same structure as *Praise Song for My Mother*. Follow the steps below:
 - a) Think of someone you would like to praise.
 - b) Nichols uses metaphors to describe her mother (e.g. *You were water to me*) and uses the imagery of nature. Think of metaphors you could use about the person you have chosen to write about. Then think of imagery that could enhance your metaphors.
 - c) Think of three suitable adjectives that you can use in your metaphor that can equally describe the person in your praise song.

metaphor	adjectives
<i>water</i>	<i>deep, bold, fathoming</i>

- d) Now write your praise song. Write four stanzas, each stanza starting with 'You are/were ...'. Think of a final line to end your poem.
- e) Work in groups and read your poems to each other.