

# Praise Song for My Mother



## SUMMARY

The speaker compares her mother to immensely deep, powerful water.

Her mother was like the roughly-textured moon that watches over the earth, exerting a gravitational pull, its gaze all-encompassing.

Her mother was the dawn, the time when the sun rises and spreads light and warmth across the sky.

Her mother was the red breathing organ of a fish, the bright red canopy of a tree, and the ever-present scent of crab legs and fried plantain.

Her mother told her to venture forth into the wide world.

mother was the “sunrise,” suggesting that she was comforting, a reliable source of warmth and light. Light, like water, is essential to life; this metaphor thus further implies that the speaker’s mother was essential to her growth.

Indeed, the speaker’s mother provided her with everything she needed to become the person that she is today. She says that her mother was “the fish’s red gill,” perhaps hinting that she associates breath itself with her mother. She adds that her mother was “the flame tree’s spread”—an image suggesting shelter, warmth, and passion. And the speaker also associates her mother with “the crab’s leg” and the always-present “smell” of “fried plantain.” This implies that her mother was always providing for her, cooking for her, showing her love in tangible, practical ways.

The speaker’s mother ultimately gave her everything she needed in order to “go wide to [her] futures”: to step out on her own, into a future filled with possibilities. Thanks to her mother’s love and support, the speaker felt like she could do anything.



## THEMES



### THE NOURISHING POWER OF MOTHERHOOD

In “Praise Song to My Mother,” which Grace Nichols wrote upon the death of her own mother, the speaker fondly recalls her mother and reflects on what she meant to her. She [metaphorically](#) compares her mother to elements of nature such as water, the moon, and the sun in order to illustrate the profound impact her mother had on her life. Through these images, the speaker honors her mother’s nourishing love and dedication, implying that her steady presence, guidance, and support were integral to the speaker’s growth into the person she is today.

Throughout the poem, the speaker focuses on how her mother’s presence shaped and influenced her (the speaker’s) life. She says that mother was “water,” “moon’s eye,” and “sunrise” to her, suggesting that she was the speaker’s entire world. The specific natural metaphors the speaker uses convey that her mother was essential to the speaker’s development. She says her mother was “water,” / deep and bold and fathoming,” for example, suggesting that her mother’s presence felt as endless and nourishing as the ocean. At the same time, this image perhaps suggests that her mother felt a little unknowable or mysterious to the speaker—a figure larger than life.

Calling her mother “the moon’s eye,” meanwhile, suggests that she always watched over the speaker, influencing the speaker in much the same way as the moon exerts a gravitational “pull” on the ocean. And in describing her mother as “mantling,” the speaker suggests that her mother’s presence enveloped her, making her feel safe and loved. The speaker also says her

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-3

*You were ...  
... bold and fathoming*

The speaker of the poem addresses her mother directly. The past tense verb “were” suggests that the speaker’s mother has died and that the speaker is reflecting on the impact her mother had on her life. (Since Grace Nichols wrote this poem upon the death of her own mother, it’s safe to assume that the speaker is Nichols herself.)

The speaker begins with a [metaphor](#), saying that her mother was “water to me.” Note that “to me”: the speaker is specifically describing how her mother seemed *to the speaker herself*, presumably when she was young. “Water,” of course, is essential to life. As such, the metaphor immediately conveys just how essential the speaker’s mother was to her growth.

The speaker then elaborates on the metaphor by calling this water “deep and bold and fathoming.” This might suggest a few things:

- The mother’s presence felt endless, like a deep well of love, wisdom, and support.

- This line might also suggest that the speaker never fully understood her mother. Perhaps her mother was always a bit of a mystery to her, as mothers often are to their children. Her presence loomed so large in the speaker's life that the speaker could never hope to fully comprehend all her mother's depths.
- "Fathoming," meanwhile, is a [pun](#). As a noun, *fathom* refers to a unit of measurement used in relation to water depth; as a verb, *fathom* means to grasp or understand something. The speaker may not have understood everything about her mother, but the poem implies that her mother understood an awful lot about *her* (the speaker); her "fathoming" (i.e., understanding) stretched down "fathoms."
- Her mother was also "bold," suggesting, perhaps, that she was fierce in her support for the speaker (or fierce in general, like strong current).

[Polysyndeton](#) (the lyrical use of coordinating conjunctions: "deep **and** bold **and** fathoming") gives this line a noticeable rhythm that evokes the rise and fall of waves. It also creates a piling-up effect, subtly emphasizing the immensity of the influence that the speaker's mother had on her daughter's life.

This stanza introduces readers to the poem's form as well. There's no punctuation here, let alone any regular [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#). The use of [free verse](#) gives the poem a natural, organic feel, suggesting that this speaker is simply relaying what's in her heart—a true, deep-felt admiration for her mother. [Enjambment](#), meanwhile, keeps the poem flowing smoothly down the page, like water itself.

#### LINES 4-9

*You were ...  
... warm and streaming*

The speaker introduces another [metaphor](#) to describe her mother, this time comparing her to the "moon's eye." This suggests that the speaker's mother watched over her much like the moon (subtly [personified](#) here) looks down on the earth. Her mother also influenced her life just as the moon exerts a gravitational "pull" on the earth. "Grained," meanwhile, describes the pocked, cratered surface of the moon, and it might suggest that the speaker's mother was likewise textured: imperfect, yet still beautiful. Finally, the word "mantling" describes something that spills over or envelopes a surface, suggesting that the speaker feels her mother's presence all around her. The speaker's mother was a watchful, guiding light in her life.

The phrasing of this stanza mirror that of the first exactly: the speaker declares "You were [natural metaphor] to me," and line 6 once again uses [polysyndeton](#) ("pull **and** grained **and** mantling"). This [parallelism](#) grants the poem a gentle, predictable rhythm, making it more musical and memorable.

The poem's musicality makes sense: this is a "Praise Song," after all, a term that also can specifically refer to a traditional African poetic form that would have been memorized and recited aloud rather than written down.

The third stanza then follows the exact same grammatical structure as the first two and introduces yet another metaphor drawn from nature. Now, the speaker says that her mother was "sunrise." A "sunrise" suggests new beginnings, reflecting that the speaker's life began with her mother. Her mother was her dawn, the start of her life's journey.

The speaker expands on this metaphor, saying that her mother was "rise and warm and streaming." Like a sunrise, the speaker's mother radiated warmth. Her mother guided and supported her and illuminated her world, just as sunlight makes the world easier to navigate.

#### LINES 10-15

*You were ...  
... futures, you said*

The speaker begins the poem's second-to-last stanza much like the first three (though she will break from this pattern soon!). A "gill" is the organ fish use to breathe underwater, so the [metaphor](#) might suggest that the mother represents breath—and therefore life itself—to the speaker. Calling this gill "red" might make readers think of blood; it also simply makes the image more vibrant, emphasizing that the speaker's mother was an essential part of her life.

Note, however, that this metaphor feels distinctly smaller in scope compared to the previous three. The speaker's mother wasn't *just* vast entities like water, the moon, and the sunrise. The speaker has shrunk the poem's world, moving from outer space to a small part of a fish. In doing so, the speaker conveys that her mother influenced her life in ways both big *and* small.

The speaker then departs from the pattern of the previous three stanzas. Rather than elaborating on this gill metaphor, she introduces an entirely new metaphor: her mother was also "the flame tree's spread." A flame tree is so named for its bright red flowers, and this image thus echoes the "red" of the "fishes [...] gill." Again, the colors of the poem imply that the speaker's mother was a vibrant presence in her life. The mention of the tree's "spread"—the canopy of its branches and leaves—further suggests shelter and safety. It's as if the speaker thinks of her mother's arms as branches blocking out a harsh afternoon sun.

The speaker goes on to say that her mother was "the crab's leg / the fried plantain smell" that was always "replenishing" (renewing or refilling) itself. This suggests that her mother's love manifested itself in tangible, practical ways: she cooked for the speaker, keeping her full and healthy.

Note, too, that when combined, the "water" metaphor as well as the [imagery](#) of "fish[...]," "crab[...]," and "plantain" conjure up the poet's homeland of Guyana. Clearly, the poet associates her

mother with the place where she grew up and the abundance she experienced there.

In addition to the poem's use of [parallelism](#) and [anaphora](#) (the [repetition](#) of "You were" at the beginnings of stanzas), there is also [epistrophe](#) in the repetition of "to me" at the ends of multiple lines. This repetition conveys that the speaker isn't just broadly celebrating her mother's virtues; she's specifically describing the ways in which her mother was important to *her own growth and development*. The poem celebrates not just the speaker's mother, but the nourishing power of motherhood itself.

Indeed, the poem's prevalent use of gerunds ("fathoming," "mantling," "streaming," "replenishing") suggests the way in which the mother's love and care for her daughter continue to fortify the daughter even after she (the mother) is gone. The speaker feels her mother's presence, her guidance and support, "replenishing" itself continually. [Epizeuxis](#) ("replenishing replenishing") stresses this point: the speaker's mother may have died, but her love lives on, endlessly renewing itself.

The poem ends with a single line:

Go to your wide futures, you said

That the poem ends on the speaker's "futures" implies that the speaker understands she could not be who she is today were it not for her mother's love, guidance, and support. The plurality of the word "futures" further suggests that the speaker felt empowered by her mother to choose any path she liked. Her mother's nourishment ensured she could go after her goals, however bold they might be.

In the next stanza, muted /m/ alliteration ("moon's," "me," "mantling") fills the poem with a gentle, humming sound that conveys the speaker's reverence for her mother. That warm sound continues as consonance in the next stanza as well ("me," "warm," "streaming").

The poem's final stanzas are particularly musical. There's consonance of the /r/, /l/, and /p/ sounds, plus /f/ alliteration ("fishes," "flame," "fried," "futures"). Look at lines 10-14:

the fishes red gill to me  
the flame tree's spread to me  
the crab's leg/the fried plantain smell  
replenishing replenishing

There's [assonance](#) here too, via the short /eh/ sounds of "red," "spread," "leg," "smell," and "replenishing." This burst of sound makes the poem's final lines all the more vivid and intense.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "were / water"
- **Line 3:** "deep and bold and fathoming"
- **Line 5:** "moon's," "me"
- **Line 6:** "and grained and mantling"
- **Line 8:** "me"
- **Line 9:** "warm," "streaming"
- **Line 11:** "fishes red gill"
- **Line 12:** "flame tree's spread"
- **Line 13:** "crab's leg," "fried plantain smell"
- **Line 14:** "replenishing replenishing"
- **Line 15:** "futures"

## REPETITION

The poem is jam-packed with [repetition](#), which makes sense for a praise "song." The first three stanzas (and the start of the fourth) all follow the exact same grammatical structure: "You were / (noun) to me / (noun/verb) and (adjective) and (gerund)." This intense [parallelism](#) makes the poem all the more musical and song-like, creating a steady, building rhythm throughout.

Repetition has more specific effects in the poem as well. For example, the [anaphora](#) of "You were" at the beginning of stanzas 1-4 provides a strong rhythm while also foregrounding who this poem is for ("You" refers to the speaker's mother). The repetition of "were," meanwhile, hammers home the fact that the speaker's mother is no longer around.

The repetition of "to me" at the end of multiple lines is also an example of [epistrophe](#). This emphasizes that the speaker isn't just focusing on her mother's various attributes, but specifically what those attributes meant to her. That is, the speaker is specifically praising her mother for the ways that she loved, supported, and encouraged the speaker.

In the second-to-last stanza, anaphora lends the poem a sense



## POETIC DEVICES

### CONSONANCE

"Praise Song for My Mother" doesn't follow a steady [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#), but it's still a very musical poem. That's thanks in part to frequent [consonance](#) (as well as a few more specific moments of [alliteration](#)).

Most noticeable, perhaps, is the /ing/ consonance in the concluding words of stanzas 1-4: "fathoming," "mantling," "streaming," and "replenishing." All these /ing/ endings suggest that the mother's love and support *continue* to enrich the speaker's life even though her mother is gone.

Other moments of consonance help to bring the poem's [metaphors](#) to life. The thudding /d/ sounds of line 3, for example, subtly evoke the very depth being described. The /b/ of bold, while not an example of consonance, is similarly resonant and adds to the effect:

deep and bold and fathoming

of swirling momentum:

You were  
the fishes red gill to me  
the flame tree's spread to me  
the crab's leg/the fried plantain smell

The speaker is deviating from the form used in the first three stanzas here, and in doing so signals to readers that the poem is reaching its conclusion. Instead of slowing down to explore the metaphor more, as in previous stanzas, the speaker piles one metaphor on top of another. That anaphora adds to the building crescendo, ramping up the poem's intensity in its final moments.

Note that these lines also feature [asyndeton](#); the lack of any coordinating conjunctions between each of these [metaphors](#) speeds up the list further while also suggesting that this list is incomplete. That is, these are just a handful of the many things to which the speaker's mother could be compared. It sounds like the speaker could go on and on, that there is no end to the ways in which she could praise her mother.

This list reaches its climax with the [epizeuxis](#) of "replenishing replenishing" in line 14. Doubling this word mirrors what's being described; the poem's language replenishes itself, just as the speaker's mother continues to replenish the speaker.

The poem's final line is then the first in the poem to feature no repetition at all. It stands out starkly from the rest of the poem, making it feel as though the wave of emotion built up in the previous lines has crashed onto the shore. Having established what the speaker's mother meant to her, the speaker herself can move on to her "wide futures."

#### Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "You were"
- **Line 2:** "to me"
- **Line 3:** "and," "and"
- **Line 4:** "You were"
- **Line 5:** "to me"
- **Line 6:** "and," "and"
- **Line 7:** "You were"
- **Line 8:** "to me"
- **Line 9:** "and," "and"
- **Line 10:** "You were"
- **Line 11:** "the," "to me"
- **Line 12:** "the," "to me"
- **Line 13:** "the," "the"
- **Line 14:** "replenishing replenishing"

## POLYSYNDETON

[Polysyndeton](#) appears three times in "Praise Song for My Mother." In each instance, the device creates a steady, soothing

rhythm while also slowing the poem down.

Here's the first example, in line 3:

deep **and** bold **and** fathoming

Notice how different the line would feel had Nichols simply written "deep, bold, and fathoming." Not nearly as poetic! Those extra "ands" create little lulls between each descriptive word, stretching the line out and allowing the speaker (and reader) to spend more time considering what her mother was like.

The poem uses polysyndeton again in lines 6 and 9, where the device has a similar effect:

pull **and** grained **and** mantling  
[...]  
rise **and** warm **and** streaming

This polysyndeton is thus also part of the poem's broader [parallelism](#): the first three stanzas all feature the exact same phrasal structure.

#### Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "deep and bold and fathoming"
- **Line 6:** "pull and grained and mantling"
- **Line 9:** "rise and warm and streaming"

## METAPHOR

The speaker uses a series of [metaphors](#) to describe her mother. All of these metaphors relate to the natural world and convey the immense impact that the speaker's mother had on her life. Instead of simply saying that her mother loved and supported her, the speaker equates her mother with parts of nature both vast and small—everything from "water" and "sunrise" to the gills of a fish or the smell of "fried plantain." These metaphors suggest that the speaker's mother was, at least for a time, the speaker's *entire world*. Like water, sunlight, and air, she was essential to the speaker's growth and development.

Each metaphor offers up myriad connotations as well:

- Comparing her mother to a "deep and bold and fathoming" body of water, for example, suggests the immensity of her mother's presence in her life. Her love was "deep" like a well and "bold" like a strong current, perhaps. These lines might also suggest that the speaker could never fully know or understand her mother, even though her mother was able to "fathom[]" (or understand) her. In other words, her mother remains in some ways mysterious to her. (Note that "fathoming" is a [pun](#): a "fathom" is a unit used to measure water depth,

while "to fathom" something means to comprehend it.)

- In the second stanza, the speaker compares her mother to the "moon's eye." This suggests that, like the moon, her mother was always watching over her, a constant presence in her life. Her influence on the speaker's life was akin to the gravitational "pull" of the moon on the earth. She also calls her "grained" (or roughly textured), perhaps suggesting that her mother was *real*—that her flaws were visible and added to her beauty. Her mother's gaze was also "mantling," meaning that it spilled over the surface of the speaker's life, making her feel safe and cared for.
- The speaker goes on to say that her mother was "sunrise": the start of a new day. The speaker's life began with her mother. And, like the sunrise, her mother filled the speaker's life with "warmth," "streaming" light across the speaker's days.
- "The fishes red gill" associates the speaker's mother with the ability to breathe—and therefore with life itself—while the color "red" suggests lifeblood and vibrancy.
- "The flame tree's spread" suggests shelter and warmth, as if the mother always provided a safe place for the speaker to rest.
- And the always "replenishing" food—"crab's leg" and "fried plantain"—implies that the mother provided for the speaker in practical ways as well. Her love was *tangible*.

#### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 4-5
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 10-14

with bright red flowers. Its *spread* might describe the canopy of shelter it provides, or it might refer to the spreading of the flowers when they fall from the tree.

**Plantain** (Line 13) - A type of fruit similar to banana (and popular in the poet's native Guyana).

**Replenishing** (Line 14) - Renewing or refilling.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

Though the poem doesn't explicitly state that the speaker's mother has died, the use of the past tense ("You were") implies that this "Praise Song" is an [elegy](#). The poem also stems from the African tradition of praise songs, which typically use a series of short, descriptive phrases—often [metaphors](#)—to celebrate something. That's exactly what this poem does, with the speaker's mother being the subject of admiration.

Praise songs are also part of the oral tradition: poems that are memorized and passed down by word of mouth. As such, they don't have a set *written* form. Here, Nichols uses 15 lines of [free verse](#) spread out over five stanzas of irregular length. The [repetition](#)-packed short lines and stanzas help to evoke the rhythms and dramatic pauses that oral poets would use when reciting their poems aloud.

Visually, having the phrase "You were" occupy its own line at the beginning of stanzas 1-4 helps to emphasize that this poem is about a mother who is no longer present/alive. Meanwhile, concluding each of these same stanzas with long lines ending in gerunds ("fathoming," "mantling," etc) draws attention to the mother's continuing influence on the speaker's life.

### METER

The poem doesn't use any sort of regular [meter](#), but that doesn't mean it lacks rhythm. The poem's heavy use of [repetition](#) and [parallelism](#) makes it musical and memorable. Its language feels gently lyrical rather than rigidly controlled.

### RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "Praise Song for My Mother" doesn't use a [rhyme scheme](#). Technically, one might characterize the gerunds that end four stanzas ("fathoming," "mantling," "streaming," "replenishing") as rhyming, but the effect is pretty subtle. The lack of a predictable rhyme scheme, like the lack of a strict [meter](#), keeps the poem feeling free and flexible. There's plenty of music here, but it's not overly controlled.



## SPEAKER

Grace Nichols wrote this poem upon her mother's death, and it's safe to assume the speaker and poet are one and the same.

Yet because the speaker is reflecting on her mother's influence and celebrating who she was to her, she doesn't reveal much about herself. (Indeed, the speaker doesn't even need to be referred to as "she"—the poem works regardless of whether one interprets the speaker as a version of Nichols or not.) The only thing the reader really learns about the speaker is just how much her mother loved, supported, and shaped her throughout her life.



## SETTING

The poem takes place after the speaker has lost her mother. The past tense "You were" implies that her mother has died (or, maybe, is simply close to death); Nichols in fact wrote "Praise Song" following the death of her own mother. The presumably adult speaker uses this opportunity to reflect on the influence her mother had over the course of her life.

Beyond that, however, the poem doesn't have a specific setting. Its language is predominantly [metaphorical](#), with the speaker equating her mother to aspects of nature such as water, the moon, sunrise, etc.

The [imagery](#) in the fourth stanza might be read as both metaphorical and indicative of where the speaker grew up. The speaker says her mother was

the fish's red gill to me  
the flame tree's spread to me  
the crab's leg/the fried plantain smell  
replenishing replenishing

The speaker may have grown up somewhere close to the sea (thus eating lots of fish and crab), in a place where "plantain" is commonly eaten (since these foods were always being "replenish[ed]," it's safe to assume they were readily available). This was true for Nichols herself, who grew up in Guyana before later moving to the United Kingdom.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Grace Nichols published "Praise Song for My Mother" in her first poetry collection, *I is a Long-Memoried Woman*, in 1983. The collection explores the enslavement of African peoples who were brought over to colonized countries in the Caribbean. It won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize and was later adapted into a prize-winning film and BBC radio drama. Nichols has gone on to publish various poetry collections and novels and is now recognized as a major British poet, with her work being taught in UK schools as part of the AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance) Anthology. In 2007, she was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Nichols, who was born in Guyana but moved to England in 1977, was part of a generation of Caribbean poets whose work tackled issues related to race, isolation, and the immigrant experience in an era of intense racism and xenophobia in the UK. Her work draws on both Caribbean and American Indian culture, folklore, and oral traditions. Indeed, "Praise Song for My Mother" refers directly to the oral traditions of her African ancestors (praise songs being a common poetic form in many African cultures). Another example of a modern praise song is Tsitsi Ella Jaji's "[Praise Song for Patricia Jabbeh Wesley](#)."

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Grace Nichols was born in Guyana in 1950, at a time when the country was still a British colony. The British West Indies included many modern Caribbean nations, some of which remain part of the Commonwealth to this day. Guyana achieved independence from Britain in 1966.

Britain began colonizing the region in the 17th century and forcibly brought over millions of enslaved Africans to work on the islands. Even after decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, many people in the Caribbean continued to struggle economically as a result of centuries of colonialism and racism—which, in turn, pushed many to immigrate to the UK in search of economic opportunity. This was true for Nichols herself, who immigrated to the UK in 1977.

Although many of Nichols's poems (including the vast majority published in *I is a Long-Memoried Woman*) deal explicitly with this legacy of colonization and enslavement, "Praise Song for My Mother" contains no real historical references, instead focusing on the relationship Nichols shared with her mother. Nichols [has said](#) her mother was a

warm, intelligent, loving woman who was full of stories, anecdotes and songs from her own childhood. People loved being around her and I can't remember a single day when our home wasn't visited by some friend, neighbour or relative who had dropped in "just fuh minute" but ended up staying hours.

The poem reflects Nichols's admiration for her mother's "warm[th]," "intelligence," and "lov[e]" through a series of [metaphors](#) comparing her to aspects of nature such as water, the moon, and the sun.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Listen to the Poem Out Loud](#) – A recording of Grace Nichols reading "Praise Song for My Mother." ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YooAe4\\_vLvY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YooAe4_vLvY))

- [Learn More About the Poet](https://poetryarchive.org/poet/grace-nichols/) – A brief biography and additional poems by Nichols via the Poetry Archive.
- [An Introduction to Praise Songs](https://www.britannica.com/art/praise-song) – Read more about the African tradition of praise songs.
- [Nichols on Her Relationship to Poetry](https://englishassociation.ac.uk/interview-with-grace-nichols/) – An interview in which Nichols discusses her writing process, influences, and love for children's poetry.

#### LITCHARTS ON OTHER GRACE NICHOLS POEMS

- [Hurricane Hits England](#)
- [Island Man](#)



## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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### CHICAGO MANUAL

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