

Island Man



SUMMARY

Every morning the man from the Caribbean island wakes up hearing the sound of the blue ocean in his mind. The waves make a steady sound, alternately breaking on the shore and swirling as though they are holding him like a baby in a womb.

He can hear the wild birds around the island and the sounds of fishermen pushing their boats out to the sea. He can see the sun boldly rising from the east of his small island, which is the vivid green color of emeralds. He always comes back, though, to where he is now, slowly, dizzily emerging from his dreams.

He wakes up and comes back to the sand and gray, metallic sky in this new country. He comes back to the sound of rushing traffic and the monotonous roar of cars in the North Circle in London.

These sounds muffle and block out his dreams and the way his pillow, crumpled up, might have resembled the waves of his island home. The island man drags himself out of bed.

It's just another day in London.

the man's surroundings set in.

Whereas the poem earlier emphasized the vibrant, beautiful colors of the man's home island, rich with "blue" water and "emerald" green, it paints London as harsh, industrial, and absent of color; it is "grey" and filled with "wheels" and the grating "roar" of the city.

This split in the poem reflects the unpleasant split in the man's identity as he moves from one kind of "Island Man" to another (given that England is indeed an island!). The poem, then, makes clear that in coming to England, this man has lost a sense of comfort, familiarity, and even identity. And, since the man dreams of his home every night, he must experience this harsh sense of loss over and over again.

And yet, there's also a more optimistic way to read the poem: perhaps the vivid nature of the man's dream illustrates that he has never completely left his home behind. The vibrant depictions of the man's Caribbean home make clear that this home is still very much alive within him: the "wild seabirds," the fishermen, and even the rising sun seem immediate and present. The poem might suggest, then, that even though the man must "come[] back" to London and lose his home over and over, he also keeps his home alive through memory and can *return* to it again and again—if only in his dreams.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19



THEMES



IMMIGRATION, HOMESICKNESS, AND IDENTITY

"Island Man" describes a man who has immigrated to England but who still dreams of his home in the Caribbean each night. The poem speaks to the sense of homesickness and disorientation that many immigrants feel as they continually navigate two realities and cultural identities: the remembered comfort of their home, and the very different landscape of their new country, which can feel harsh and unwelcoming in comparison.

The vividness of the man's dreams of the Caribbean speaks to the strength of his memories and longing for home. When the poem begins, it certainly seems like this "island man" is in some sort of tropical paradise. The man wakes up each morning to "the sound of blue surf / in his head" as well as that of "wild seabirds" and "fisherman" going out to the ocean. The ocean waves, meanwhile, are "wombing," a made-up word that suggests that the man experienced his home like a kind of womb—a place of security and safety.

These images of the world coming to life under a bold sun are warm and inviting, which makes the revelation that the man is in England all the more of a letdown: the poem emphasizes that he always "comes back" to the humdrum reality of the "London day." The poem's tone abruptly shifts as "groggily" the reality of



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1

(for a Caribbean ... of the sea)

The poem begins with a dedication: it is for a man from a Caribbean island who now lives in England, but "who still wakes up to the sound of the sea."

England, too, is an island, but London itself isn't close enough to the sea to hear its sounds in the morning. This dedication thus implies that the "island man" wakes up hearing the "sound of the sea" as he heard it in his *home* island, his country in the Caribbean.

In other words, even though he is living in England, the man dreams of his home each night and wakes up still hearing the waves as they sounded in the West Indies. In a sense, then, the man must navigate two realities—two different "islands." The poem will go on to explore what that feels like.

LINES 1-5

*Morning ...
... breaking and wombing*

After the opening dedication, the poem itself begins with a simple, one-word opening line: "Morning." The scene set, the speaker tells readers that this "island man" arises with the "sound of the blue surf / in his head."

The vivid image of this "blue" ocean water conveys the vibrancy and beauty of the man's Caribbean home, but the speaker makes clear that this image exists only in the man's mind. He's not totally asleep anymore, but he hasn't totally become aware of his actual surroundings yet either; for a moment, it's as though his dream spills into reality, and he feels surrounded by the sights and sounds of the Caribbean.

The speaker continues to describe the waves, now saying that they're "breaking and wombing" in a "steady," back-and-forth movement. "Wombing" builds on the word "womb," and thus implies that the man experienced his country of origin as a place of comfort and security (like a womb). The [parallel](#) verbs "breaking and wombing," meanwhile, evoke that back-and-forth movement of ocean waves, which splash onto the shore and then draw back into the sea.

The sounds of these lines make their [imagery](#) all the more vibrant:

- For example, the [alliterative](#) /b/ sounds in "blue" and "breaking" tie the image together, suggesting that the color and sound of the ocean water are integrated and part of a comforting whole.
- The [sibilance](#) of "sound," "surf," and "steady" helps to conjure the hissing, hushing sound of ocean water.
- Finally, the poem's smooth [enjambment](#) and the alternation between longer and shorter lines create a push-pull feeling much like the in and out movement of the waves that the speaker describes.

LINES 6-10

*wild seabirds ...
... small emerald island*

The speaker continues to describe how the "island man's" Caribbean home appears in his dreams, or in the dreamlike moments between sleep and wakefulness.

Now, he hears "wild seabirds" overhead and "fishermen pushing" their boats out to the ocean. He can see the sun boldly, brightly shining down over "his small emerald island."

This description is full of vivid colors and [imagery](#), suggesting again that even though the man is far away from his home, he can still remember every aspect of it perfectly. The island seems warm and inviting, and the color "emerald" implies that it's filled with life.

By conjuring a valuable gemstone, this description also [symbolically](#) shows how valuable the man's "small [...] island" is to him. The "fishermen" might be humble and even poor, but the island as a whole is vivid, shining, and precious to the man who calls it home.

The fact that the speaker [personifies](#) the sun as rising "defiantly," meanwhile, might take on additional resonance when considering the poem's historical context. European and American powers colonized the Caribbean over centuries, and many people living in the Caribbean continue to experience poverty and oppression as a consequence of this colonialism. Yet the man sees resilience and boldness in the way that the sun continues to rise morning after morning above his homeland. This might speak to the man's pride in the ability of the people of his homeland to similarly rise and work each day.

Once again, the sounds of these lines add to their meaning. For instance, [assonant](#) long /ee/ sounds connect "sea," "defiantly," and "east," adding a feeling of powerful momentum. [Sibilance](#) continues to convey the soft, hissing sound of the ocean waves in words like "seabirds," "fishermen pushing," "sea," "sun surfacing," "east," and "small." Finally, soft /l/ sounds link "small emerald island." These soft /l/ sounds help to convey the gentleness and peace that the man experiences while dreaming of his island home.

LINES 11-13

*he always comes ...
... grey metallic soar*

The speaker describes how the man always wakes up from his dreams of the Caribbean, and "comes back" to the harsh reality of his new home in London.

Note how the actual form of these lines seems to illustrate what it feels like for the man to wake up each day. The large blank space after "he always comes back" signals a clear break in the poem. Then, the [repetition](#) of "groggily groggily" (an instance of [epizeuxis](#)) conveys a sense of the man struggling to fully emerge from the world of his dreams and the disorientation he feels while trying to adjust to his actual surroundings. Similarly, the repetition of "comes back" shows the effort involved in the man's waking up.

The speaker then describes what the man "comes back" to. Unlike the bright, vibrant colors of his island home, here in London the "sands" are "grey" and "metallic." The word "soar" suggests that the sky (which soars overhead) is likewise gray and absent of color. Altogether, the [imagery](#) conveys a scene that is monotonous, gray, and unwelcoming. The fact that there are "sands" (and beaches) in England as well only heightens the [juxtaposition](#) between the man's beautiful island home and his new reality.

Interestingly, however, these lines continue the poem's use of [sibilance](#), in "sands" and "soar." These hissing /s/ sounds convey

the presence of the ocean (which, after all, is a familiar part of the English landscape), but *also* emphasize the difference between these “grey” shorelines and the brilliant “blue” and “emerald” shorelines of the Caribbean.

The [alliterative](#) /gr/ sounds in “groggily groggily” and “grey,” meanwhile, create a harsh, guttural sound that communicates the harsh qualities of the man’s London surroundings.

LINES 14-15

to surge of...

... North Circular roar

The speaker continues to describe the man’s surroundings in London, to which he must “come[] back” every morning. Instead of the peaceful sound of waves in the Caribbean, he now hears rushing traffic and the “roar” of the North Circular Road, a major highway that forms a loop around central London.

The poem includes another big blank space here that mirrors the one that appeared before “groggily groggily.” That space builds up to the phrase “to surge of wheels,” and again conveys the man’s struggle to fully wake up from his comforting dreams and face his new reality. The word “surge,” meanwhile, emphasizes the speed of the traffic rushing by.

The “wheels” of cars, like the “metallic” sand and sky, seem both industrial and impersonal. The poem also subtly incorporates [parallelism](#) here, in the repetition of “to” (“to sands,” “to surge,” “to dull”). This repeated structure suggests that the man must keep reminding himself of where he lives now, and it also emphasizes the dull monotony of these London surroundings.

[Rhyme](#) and [consonance](#) also illustrate the harsh, grating quality of this setting. For example, the rhyme of “soar” and “roar” calls attention to the fact that this highway noise is all-encompassing, around the man and even over-head. The /r/ sounds in “North,” “Circular,” and “roar,” meanwhile, create a harsh, gritty feel that evokes the relentlessness of this industrial noise.

The poem’s mention to the North Circular Road is also relevant. While this is a major, and often majorly congested, highway around London, the road has also become known for the urban blight along its route, a problem that the city has done little to address. This detail, then, suggests that the man lives in an impoverished area on the outskirts of London, close to the highway and the unending noise that it creates.

LINES 16-17

muffling muffling ...

... crumpled pillow waves

The speaker says that the industrial noise of London “muffl[es]” or blocks out the peaceful sounds of the man’s dream. Where before he dreamed of ocean “waves,” now he is left with just a “crumpled pillow” and the harsh reality of his new home.

In these lines, the [epizeuxis](#) of “muffling muffling” recalls the

repetition of “groggily groggily,” again evoking just how difficult it is for the man to fully wake up and leave the dreams of his homeland behind. This repetition also suggests that the man experiences a kind of loss each morning. Even though he might dream of his home and the peaceful sounds of the sea and wild birds, sooner or later he must “come[] back,” and his memories are “muffl[ed]” by this unwelcoming new reality.

The speaker’s description of the man’s “crumpled pillow waves” is also striking, at once presenting a mundane object—a rumpled pillowcase—while *also* transforming that object into something fantastical, a pillow [metaphorically](#) made out of “waves.” The image, then, basically combines the man’s two realities: his Caribbean home and his London morning.

The clusters of [consonant](#) /m/, /p/, and /l/ sounds in “muffling,” “crumpled,” and “pillow,” and the [assonant](#) /uh/ sounds in “muffling” and “crumpled,” emphasize the man’s disorientation and confusion as he “come[s] back” to his present surroundings.

LINES 18-19

island man heaves ...

... Another London day

Finally, the speaker says, the “island man heaves himself” out of bed, to face “[a]nother London day.” Having come back from his memories of home, then, the man “heaves” or drags himself up.

Getting out of bed, the poem suggests, is a struggle, as it means leaving behind his dreams of home. The [alliterative](#) /h/ sounds in “heaves himself” create a sensation of heaving breathing, evoking the effort it takes for the man to drag himself out of bed.

Yet the poem also suggests that the man goes through this over and over again; this is “[a]nother” day in London, meaning the man experiences this sense of loss and disorientation each morning as he struggles to adjust to his new reality.

Interestingly, in these last lines the speaker also refers to the man once again as an “island man,” suggesting that no matter where he lives now, he still identifies as a man from the Caribbean islands. By this point, though, the phrase has acquired additional meanings. England is also an island, so the [repeated](#) phrase conveys the man’s dual identity: he is from the Caribbean, but he now lives on another island, and he must constantly navigate these two aspects of his experience. In another reading, the phrase could mean that the man himself feels like a kind of [metaphorical](#) “island,” alone and separate in England.

In a sense, the poem’s ending conveys *all* of these feelings simultaneously. The speaker suggests that the man is still an “island man” from the West Indies and that he keeps his home alive within him, as evidenced by the vividness of his dreams. At the same time, the poem’s ending shows the loss and struggle the man must endure on a daily basis, as he experiences the disconnect between his remembered home and the

unwelcoming reality of this new country.



SYMBOLS



THE ISLAND

While the island in the poem is literal—the man is from an actual Caribbean island and now lives in England (which is also an island!)—it is also [symbolic](#). Islands traditionally represent loneliness, separateness, and isolation, and the poem builds on all those connotations.

This symbolic meaning suggests that the phrase “island man” can be read in several ways:

- The phrase means that the man still identifies as Caribbean even though he now lives in London.
- It also suggests that the man is an “island man” in the sense that he now lives on another island, that of England.
- Finally, it can *also* be read as implying that the man feels emotionally like an island. Where he felt at home in the Caribbean, in England he is set apart and isolated. He seems to be alone throughout the poem, and he feels alienated from his new surroundings. The name “island man,” then, incorporates all of these meanings at once.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** “for a Caribbean island man in London”
- **Line 2:** “island man wakes up”
- **Line 10:** “his small emerald island”



EMERALDS

As rare gemstones, emeralds [symbolize](#) wealth, preciousness, and beauty. When the man describes his home island as “emerald,” then, he doesn’t *only* mean that it is vibrantly green: he’s also suggesting that his home is inherently precious and beautiful to him.

This symbolic meaning is especially important given that many people from the Caribbean migrate to the UK out of economic necessity. Additionally, the man describes humble “fishermen” in his home island, pushing their boats out to the ocean to make a living through difficult physical labor. Yet the word “emerald” implies that despite these economic hardships, the man’s island home has a preciousness all its own. The poem also suggests that the man’s true wealth lies not in his life in London, but in his ability to recall his home in such precise detail.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** “of his small emerald island”



GREEN AND GRAY

The poem emphasizes the difference between the man’s home in the Caribbean—which is “emerald” green—and his new home in London, which is “metallic” and “grey” (a British spelling of “gray”).

Since the color green is associated with living plants and trees, it usually [symbolizes](#) life, vitality, and vibrancy. By contrast, the color gray symbolizes dullness and monotony.

The poem draws on the symbolic resonances of both colors, implying that the man’s island home is vibrant and full of life—and that he felt a sense of vitality within it. London, on the other hand, is gray and industrial. It is both unwelcoming and monotonous.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** “his small emerald island”
- **Line 13:** “a grey metallic soar”



POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

The poem is full of vivid [imagery](#) that conveys the difference between the man’s former home in the West Indies and his current home in London.

The images of the Caribbean island that the man sees in his dreams are full of color and life: he remembers the “blue” ocean waves and the bright, “emerald” green color of the plants and trees. There’s sound- and touch-related imagery here too: the man can hear the “wild seabirds” calling and feel the warmth of the sun shining “defiantly” overhead. All this imagery creates the sense that the man’s home is full of vitality and beauty.

By contrast, the images of London seem monotonous and oppressive. The poem calls attention to the “grey metallic” color of the “sands” in this new place (which might be a reference to the city’s dirt and grime) and conjures an image of metal skyscrapers “soar[ing]” into the air. Adding to this unwelcoming atmosphere is the “roar” of traffic on the nearby highway.

Finally, the image of the “crumpled pillow waves” seems to collapse these two worlds into one: the peaceful “waves” that the man remembers from the Caribbean become the “crumpled pillow” of his present home on this dreary London morning. The imagery in the poem, then, helps to illustrate the way the “island man” must constantly navigate between two realities: his remembered home, and the harsh, unwelcoming

setting of his new one.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “the sound of blue surf”
- **Lines 6-10:** “wild seabirds / and fishermen pushing out to sea / the sun surfacing defiantly / from the east / of his small emerald island”
- **Lines 12-13:** “sands / of a grey metallic soar”
- **Line 14:** “surge of wheels”
- **Line 15:** “dull North Circular roar”
- **Line 17:** “crumpled pillow waves”

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem uses strong [juxtaposition](#) throughout to emphasize the contrast between how the man felt in his Caribbean home and how he feels now, living in London. The poem partly creates this juxtaposition through its [imagery](#): the images of the man’s home in the Caribbean are vibrant and colorful, while the images of London are gray and industrial.

The poem also uses juxtaposition in *what* it describes. Almost everything that is alive in the poem—the “seabirds,” the “fishermen,” and the “emerald” plant life—exists in the West Indies. London, by contrast, seems impersonal and lifeless, full of metal, concrete, and rushing traffic.

Finally, juxtaposition is built into the very form of the poem: the two opening stanzas use varied line lengths that illustrate the back-and-forth movement of the ocean waves. These stanzas are also longer, suggesting that the Caribbean is overflowing with life and beauty. As the man begins to wake up, though, the stanzas become shorter and more abrupt, conveying the harsh reality of the man’s surroundings in London.

The poem also incorporates large blocks of white space, before “groggily groggily” and “to surge of wheels.” This white space emphasizes the disconnect the man feels in this new place, which contrasts with the fluidity and beauty of his former home.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10
- Lines 11-19

METAPHOR

The poem uses two [metaphors](#) to illustrate the comfort the man felt in his Caribbean home and the sense of loss that he experiences each morning when he realizes that he is actually in London.

First, the man remembers the sound of the waves in the Caribbean as “breaking and wombing.” “Wombing” is a made-up word that builds on the word “womb.” By using this word, the poem suggests that the man’s island home is metaphorically like

a “womb,” meaning that he experienced it as a place of comfort, security, and safety.

This metaphor also implies that when the man wakes up each morning from his dreams of home, this waking is akin to being born. This “birth,” though, is a negative experience, as it means returning to his harsh current surroundings in London.

The poem uses a second metaphor in the complex image of “crumpled pillow waves.” Here, the speaker brings together two aspects of the man’s experience: his memory of waves in the Caribbean and his pillow in the present, which is “crumpled” in the morning. As the man wakes up, he realizes that his pillow isn’t actually “waves” at all. By metaphorically comparing the wrinkled pillow to “waves,” the poem shows the man’s disorientation, as he struggles to come back to his present reality.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “the steady breaking and wombing”
- **Line 17:** “crumpled pillow waves”

ANAPHORA

The poem uses [anaphora](#) to emphasize the dreariness of the man’s life in London. The speaker says that after his peaceful dreams of home, the man must always wake up and “com[e] back” to his unwelcoming current reality. The poem emphasizes this harsh awakening with the repetition of “to,” in “to surge of wheels” and “to dull North Circular roar.” (The word “to” also repeats in “to sands,” which technically isn’t an instance of anaphora since it appears mid-phrase and mid-line, but which still contributes to this overall rhythm.)

The [parallelism](#) of this list gives the anaphora even more emphasis: each repetition of “to” is followed by something present in England: the gray sand and sky, the rush of traffic, and the sounds of the nearby highway. Notably, everything that the man must come back to is unwelcoming and impersonal.

Throughout this list, then, the poem enacts what it’s like for the man to struggle to wake up each day. The anaphora of “to” creates a repetitive, monotonous rhythm that evokes the repetitiveness and monotony of the man’s London life.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** “to sands”
- **Line 14:** “to surge of wheels”
- **Line 15:** “to dull North Circular roar”

REPETITION

The poem uses different kinds of [repetition](#) to create emphasis and to evoke how the man feels about his identity and experience.

For one thing, the phrase “island man” appears in both the second line and the penultimate line of the poem. This repetition calls attention to the man’s complex identity: even though he now lives in England, the poem implies, the man is still an “island man”—a Caribbean man—at heart. At the same time, since England is *also* an island, making him an “island man” in a totally different sense.

Later, the speaker repeats the phrase “comes back” when describing how the man struggles to wake up each day and take in his current surroundings:

he always comes back [...]

Comes back to sands

The repetition here makes this “return” to reality—this daily journey away from the home of his dreams—feel all the more inevitable and inescapable.

Finally, the poem includes two moments of [epizeuxis](#): “groggily groggily” and “muffling muffling.” This repetition illustrates the man’s confusion as he wakes up; he is groggy and the noise of traffic outside “muffle[s]” the sound of his dreams. The repetition of these words helps the reader to experience the same sense of disorientation that the man himself feels.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “island man”
- **Line 11:** “comes back,” “groggily groggily”
- **Line 12:** “Comes back”
- **Line 16:** “muffling muffling”
- **Line 18:** “island man”

PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses subtle [personification](#) when describing how the sun rises in the man’s home country: the man remembers the sun “surfacing defiantly,” suggesting that the sun in the Caribbean was bold or defiant the way a person might be.

This personification has several effects. First, it contributes to the sense that everything in the man’s home island was vibrant and alive; even the sun seemed to have a more bold, vivid, and living presence there.

This personification can also be read [symbolically](#), as conveying the boldness and defiance of the Caribbean people themselves. Historically, the West Indies were British colonies, and hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans were forcibly brought to the Caribbean to work on plantations. Today, as a consequence of colonialism and slavery, many people in the West Indies continue to struggle economically—a key reason that people from the Caribbean may choose to migrate to the UK.

Within this context, the man’s recollection of the sun as

“defiant[.]” is significant. This personification suggests that the man sees the Caribbean island and the Caribbean people as a whole as “defiant” too, since they have survived continual oppression in many forms.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** “the sun surfacing defiantly”

ASSONANCE

Subtle [assonance](#) creates music in the poem and adds emphasis to important moments. For example, in the opening stanza, short /eh/ sounds link “head” and “steady” (these words are further linked by the [consonance](#) of the /d/ sounds at their ending, which create a [slant rhyme](#)). This assonance reinforces the sense that in his dreams, the man’s head is full of the even, reassuring sound of the ocean waves.

Then, as the man continues to recall his island home, long /ee/ sounds appear at the ends of lines, in “sea,” “defiantly,” and “east.” These long vowel sounds communicate the ease and peacefulness the man feels while remembering the Caribbean.

As the man begins to wake up, though, the sounds in the poem change. Both assonance and consonance link “soar,” “North,” and “roar.” This dense cluster of sounds makes the line sound almost like a tongue-twister. The effect is even more pronounced when considering the broader consonance of these lines, with all their /s/ and /r/ sounds:

[...] soar

to surge of wheels

to dull North Circular roar

This flurry of shared sound conveys the disorientation the man feels when returning to the harsh reality of his life in London, filled with the relentless rush of traffic.

Short vowel sounds appear again in “muffling muffling” and “crumpled.” Like the previous cluster of vowel sounds, these /uh/ sounds seem harsh and truncated, conveying the man’s experience of this “muffling” of his dreams.

Finally, in the poem’s last lines, long /a/ sounds connect “waves” and “day.” Here, the poem’s assonance helps to convey the dual nature of the man’s identity and experience. In his dreams, he remembers Caribbean waves; then he must wake up from these dreams again and again, to his present reality of “another London day.”

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “head”
- **Line 5:** “steady”
- **Line 7:** “sea”
- **Line 8:** “defiantly”

- **Line 9:** “east”
- **Line 13:** “soar”
- **Line 15:** “North,” “roar”
- **Line 16:** “muffling muffling”
- **Line 17:** “crumpled,” “waves”
- **Line 19:** “day”

ALLITERATION

The poem contains numerous moments of [alliteration](#). For example, in the opening stanza, /b/ sounds alliteratively connect “blue” and “breaking,” intensifying the description of the ocean and its crashing waves. Then, /w/ sounds link “wombing” and “wild,” emphasizing the comforting, wild landscape of the Caribbean.

Most prominently, the poem is full of [sibilance](#). These /s/ sounds appear throughout the opening two stanzas, in “sound,” “surf,” “steady,” “seabirds,” “sea,” “sun,” “surfacing,” and “small.” All this swishing sibilance creates a soft, hushed feel and evokes the gentle sounds of the ocean.

Interestingly, sibilance appears again as the poem describes the man’s new home in England. In the third stanza, /s/ sounds link “sands,” “soar,” “surge,” and “Circular.” These /s/ sounds recall the ocean sounds from earlier in the poem but have a different effect here: it’s as though the soothing sounds of the sea have been commandeered by the city, and now evoke the grating “roar” of traffic.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “sound,” “blue,” “surf”
- **Line 5:** “steady,” “breaking,” “wombing”
- **Line 6:** “wild,” “seabirds”
- **Line 7:** “sea”
- **Line 8:** “sun surfacing”
- **Line 10:** “small”
- **Line 12:** “sands”
- **Line 13:** “soar”
- **Line 14:** “surge”
- **Line 15:** “Circular”
- **Line 18:** “heaves himself”

CONSONANCE

Much like [alliteration](#), [consonance](#) appears throughout the poem and creates music and emphasis. For example, /l/ sounds connect the phrase “small emerald island.” These soft /l/ sounds create a sense of gentleness and peace, illustrating how the man feels while recalling his home.

By contrast, hard /g/ sounds appear in the middle of “groggily groggily,” reinforcing the /gr/ sounds at the beginning of these words and of “grey.” Then, a cluster of /r/ sounds appears in “soar,” “surge,” “North,” “Circular,” and “roar.” These guttural

sounds evoke the harsh setting of London, almost creating the sound of congested traffic and industrial noise on the page.

Similarly, /m/, /l/, and /p/ sounds appear in “muffling muffling,” “crumpled,” and “pillow.” This dense cluster of sounds has a disorienting effect, conveying the man’s disorientation as he struggles to wake up, and his peaceful dreams are “muffl[ed]” by the sounds of London.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “sound,” “blue,” “surf”
- **Line 4:** “head”
- **Line 5:** “steady,” “breaking,” “wombing”
- **Line 6:** “wild,” “seabirds”
- **Line 7:** “fishermen pushing,” “sea”
- **Line 8:** “sun surfacing”
- **Line 9:** “east”
- **Line 10:** “small emerald island”
- **Line 11:** “groggily groggily”
- **Line 12:** “sands”
- **Line 13:** “grey,” “soar”
- **Line 14:** “surge”
- **Line 15:** “North Circular roar”
- **Line 16:** “muffling muffling”
- **Line 17:** “crumpled pillow”
- **Line 18:** “heaves himself”



VOCABULARY

Breaking and wombing (Line 5) - The phrase “breaking and wombing” describes the sound of the ocean waves crashing on the shore and then moving back out to sea. “Wombing” is a made-up word that builds on the word “womb.” The fact that the man recalls the waves as “wombing” implies that he experienced his home island as a kind of womb, a place of security and safety.

Defiantly (Line 8) - Boldly or rebelliously.

Metallic (Line 13) - If something is metallic, this means it has qualities like metal. In the poem, this means that the sand and sky in England are metal-colored, or gray and unwelcoming. This line also might refer to the dirt and grime of the city.

Surge (Line 14) - A rushing forward movement. The speaker means that the man can hear traffic rushing by.

Dull (Line 15) - “Dull” can mean cloudy and overcast, as well as monotonous and boring.

North Circular roar (Line 15) - The North Circular Road, a major highway that loops around central London. The man hears the “roar” of traffic on this highway as he wakes up.

Muffling (Line 16) - To “muffle” something means to block out or deaden its sound.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Island Man" consists of 19 lines organized into five stanzas of varying lengths. The poem's stanzas are at their longest when the man is remembering his island home. This helps to convey the peace, restfulness, and expansiveness that he feels while remembering the beauty of the Caribbean.

As the man wakes up and "come[s] back" to his new home in London, however, the stanzas become increasingly shorter—perhaps evoking the way in which London saps the man of his joyous energy. The first stanza is five lines long, for example, but the last stanza consists of a single line that feels all the more striking and sad for its isolation within the poem itself:

Another London day

Other formal elements of the poem also contribute to its meaning. For instance, the first two stanzas feature a clear mix of long and short lines. This back-and-forth movement helps to convey the steady rhythm of the ocean waves in the man's memory. Take lines 3-5:

to the sound of blue surf
in his head
the steady breaking and wombing

Then, as the man struggles to wake up and return to his surroundings, the poem includes two large white spaces, before "groggily groggily" and "to surge of wheels." These vast gaps of white space evoke the difficulty the man has in waking up and coming to terms with his new country.

METER

"Island Man" is a [free verse](#) poem, meaning that it has no set [meter](#). Instead, the poem is written in language that is varied in its music and rhythm. This absence of meter helps to convey the sensation of thoughts moving fluidly through the man's mind as he wakes up.

Interestingly, the language of the poem is especially varied in its rhythms in the first half, as the man remembers his home in the Caribbean. This subtly mirrors the vibrancy and variety of the island the man left behind.

The poem's rhythms become more controlled, though, in its second half, as the man comes back to his London surroundings. For example, the [parallel structure](#) of "to sands," "to surge," and "to dull" creates a monotonous rhythm that conveys the dullness of the man's new home.

RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "Island Man" has no set [rhyme scheme](#).

Instead, the language of the poem is organic and varied, creating a sense on the page of all the different thoughts flowing through the man's mind as he wakes up.

Importantly, though, the poem *does* include several moments of [slant-rhyme](#) and [end-rhyme](#). For example, in stanza 2, "sea" and "defiantly" rhyme, while the word "east" in the next line echoes both these words (and creates a slant rhyme). All these musical long /ee/ sounds help to create the feeling of peace and expansiveness that the man associates with his island home.

Then, as the man "come[s] back" to the dullness of his London surroundings, the poem includes a few more rhymes. Specifically, "soar" rhymes with "roar," while "waves" creates a slant rhyme with "day." The rhymes here might evoke the "roar" of the city itself, and perhaps reflect the monotony of the man's London life. Additionally, the slant rhyme between "waves" and "day" emphasizes the *contrast* between the beauty of the man's dreams of waves and the "day" that he dreads facing in this harsh new place.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "Island Man" remains totally anonymous throughout the poem. This makes sense given that the poem isn't about the speaker; it's about the "island man" of its title. The speaker is simply an omniscient narrator who keeps the focus squarely on this "island man," delving into his dreams and sensations as he wakes up on a London morning.



SETTING

The poem essentially has two settings, one concrete and one imagined:

- Literally, the poem takes place on a morning in London as the "island man" of the title is waking up. More specifically, this man lives near the North Circular Road (a major highway that loops around the center of the city).
- At the same time, this man's dreams and memories pull him—and the reader—back to the Caribbean. More than half of the poem describes this setting, which, though not literally present, remains vivid in the man's mind.

The island man's home is a lush, green world filled with sunshine, blue waters, and the sounds of gentle waves, fishermen, and seabirds; London, meanwhile, is dreary and gray, marked by the rush of traffic.

The [juxtaposition](#) of these two settings, these two islands, makes the man's disorientation understandable. As the poem moves from its first half, which describes the man's island home,

to its second, which describes the harsh, industrial world of London, it enacts the inner struggle that the man experiences. The reader moves with the island man between these two worlds, experiencing alongside him the contrast between his remembered home and where he lives now.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Grace Nichols first published “Island Man” in 1984 in her second poetry collection, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*. The poems in this collection touch on themes of alienation, discrimination, and identity, often with humor and wit. Nichols has said that “Island Man” was based on her own experience as a recent immigrant living in London.

Nichols, who was born in Guyana but moved to England in 1977, was part of a generation of Caribbean poets whose work took on issues of race, isolation, and the immigrant experience in an era of intense racism and xenophobia in the UK. Her work draws on Caribbean and American Indian culture, folklore, and oral traditions. Poems like “[Hurricane Hits England](#)” similarly deal with the loneliness and search for belonging that many immigrants can experience.

Nichols is now recognized as a major British poet and her work is 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.

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.

The British government had in fact opened up migration from the Caribbean years earlier to fill a labor shortage created by World War II. West Indian immigrants of this generation, known as the Windrush generation, played a crucial role in rebuilding England after the war. The British government has more recently faced [criticism](#) for deporting members of the Windrush Generation and their descendants, including those born in the UK.

Within this context, “Island Man” acquires layers of additional

meaning. The poem implies that the man left his Caribbean home out of necessity, to make a living. At the same time, the poem suggests that England is a harsh, unwelcoming place for him and for many other immigrants.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Grace Nichols Discussing and Reciting “Island Man”](#) — Listen to the poet talk about how she came to write “Island Man” and how it connects to her own experience as an immigrant in the UK. Nichols goes on to recite the poem in the last minute of the video. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bACVeAclpU>)
- [Audio of Poems by Grace Nichols](#) — Read more about Grace Nichols’ work and listen to her read six of her poems at the Poetry Archive in the UK. (<https://poetryarchive.org/poet/grace-nichols/>)
- [The Windrush Generation](#) — Learn more about Caribbean immigration to the UK in this British Library page on the Windrush Generation, a generation of immigrants from the West Indies who migrated to the UK in the wake of World War II. This timeline and associated resources discuss how Caribbean immigrants played a key role in rebuilding England following the war. The poet, Grace Nichols, also migrated from the Caribbean to England, in 1977. (<https://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item107829.html>)
- [British Treatment of Caribbean Immigrants](#) — The poem depicts England as a harsh and unwelcoming place for the “island man”; learn more about the British Government’s treatment of Caribbean immigrants in this article from CNN. (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/22/uk/windrush-explainer-cnn-poll-scli-intl-gbr/index.html>)
- [Biography of Grace Nichols](#) — Learn more about Grace Nichols’s life and work in this biographical article from the British Council of Literature. This page also includes a critical essay on Nichols’s work. (<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/grace-nichols>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER GRACE NICHOLS POEMS

- [Hurricane Hits England](#)



HOW TO CITE

MLA

Little, Margaree. "Island Man." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 11 Jul 2021. Web. 29 Jul 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Little, Margaree. "Island Man." LitCharts LLC, July 11, 2021. Retrieved July 29, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/grace-nichols/island-man>.