

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Worlds and Lives
Like an Heiress – *Grace Nichols*

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LIKE AN HEIRESS

Grace Nichols

Brief Summary

Like an Heiress presents a speaker standing on a beach by the Atlantic Ocean, drawn to its beauty. While looking out at the sea, the speaker notices **pollution** washed up along the shore, which interrupts the sense of calm and pleasure. After a moment of **reflection**, the speaker leaves the beach and returns to an air-conditioned hotel, thinking about time passing and the state of the natural environment.



Synopsis

- The speaker is drawn towards the Atlantic Ocean, which feels precious and familiar, like an **inheritance** connected to memory and identity.
- She approaches the beach expecting beauty and calm linked to the natural world.
- Instead, she finds the shoreline **polluted** with human waste such as tyres, bottles, and cups.
- The beach feels eerily empty, with no people and not even birds present.
- The speaker stands in the heat, looking out at the distant sea, caught between admiration and unease.
- She leaves the beach and returns to her hotel, entering a cool, controlled indoor space.
- The poem ends with the speaker reflecting on time passing and the **uncertain future** of the planet.

Context

Heritage and connection to place

Grace Nichols was born in **Guyana** and spent her early childhood in a coastal village, which informs her strong **emotional connection** to the Atlantic Ocean. Nichols' life across Guyana and Britain has shaped her awareness of **migration, colonial history**, and ideas of ownership and inheritance. Describing the ocean as something 'inherited' subtly raises questions about who truly owns land, nature, and history, while keeping the poem rooted in personal **reflection** rather than **overt** political argument. In *Like an Heiress*, the sea is linked to memory, childhood, and heritage rather than serving as just a physical setting.



Migration and mixed cultural identity

Nichols moved to Britain in 1977 and has spent much of her adult life writing from a position shaped by more than one culture. Her work often reflects the experience of holding **layered identities** rather than feeling securely rooted in one place.

In *Like an Heiress*, the speaker's description of herself as a **"tourist"** highlights the tension of inhabiting a space shaped by movement and relocation, where cultural connection exists alongside **detachment**. This perspective reflects Nichols' broader experience of **migration**, where identity is formed through crossing places rather than belonging fully to one.

Modern disconnection from the natural world

Published in 2020, *Like an Heiress* reflects modern anxieties about **environmental damage** and human **detachment** from nature. The poem presents a polluted, deserted beach and a speaker who retreats to an air-conditioned hotel room, reflecting **contemporary lifestyles** shaped by tourism and environmental **neglect**. Nichols presents the natural world as both **precious** and damaged, and why the speaker's relationship with the landscape feels uneasy.

The title "Like an Heiress"

The title suggests inheritance and privilege, but the poem redefines this idea. Instead of wealth or property, the speaker's "inheritance" is her emotional and cultural connection to the Atlantic and her childhood memories, which gives the title a quiet, reflective meaning.

Like an Heiress

The word "like" is important because it shows uncertainty rather than certainty. The speaker is compared to an heiress rather than being one, which reflects her uneasy position as someone drawn back to a place that feels meaningful but no longer fully hers, especially when she later describes herself as a "tourist".

By using the idea of inheritance, the title also encourages questions about ownership and responsibility. The speaker stands before a polluted, damaged shoreline, suggesting that inheriting nature is not just about pride or belonging, but also about recognising loss, damage, and what has been passed onto future generations.



Perspective and Tone

Like an Heiress is written in the **first person**, which makes the poem feel personal and reflective, as if the speaker is quietly thinking while standing by the sea. This perspective allows the reader to follow her thoughts as she considers her connection to the Atlantic and what it means to return to a place linked to her childhood and **heritage**. The voice feels **questioning** rather than certain, suggesting she is unsure about her sense of belonging.

The tone **shifts** subtly across the poem. At first, there is a sense of attraction as the speaker feels **“drawn”** to the ocean, showing emotional pull and **inherited** connection. This is quickly **unsettled** by the sight of pollution and emptiness on the beach, which disrupts any romantic idea of return.

By the end, the tone becomes quietly uneasy and reflective, as the speaker retreats to the comfort of her hotel room and thinks about time and the planet’s future. The poem does not offer reassurance, but instead closes with a sense of **distance** between human comfort and the damaged natural world.



Like an Heiress

The poem opens with a simile comparing the speaker to an heiress, immediately framing the Atlantic as something precious and inherited rather than owned. This establishes a personal bond with the sea rooted in memory & heritage.

The mood shifts as the speaker notices the polluted beach. The emptiness of the setting creates isolation, while the image of a single wave made of rubbish replaces natural beauty with waste.

The speaker pauses to look outward again, standing beneath the powerful sun. Describing sunlight as a “treasury” keeps the language of wealth but makes it feel overwhelming rather than comforting. The distant “gleam” of the Atlantic suggests beauty remains, but it now feels unreachable rather than welcoming.

Ending with reflection on time and the planet’s future broadens the poem from a personal moment into a wider concern, leaving the poem unresolved and uneasy.

Like an heiress, drawn to the light of her
eye-catching jewels, Atlantic draws me
to the mirror of my oceanic small-days.

But the beach is deserted except for a lone

wave of rubbish against the seawall -

used car tyres, plastic bottles, styrofoam cups

rightly tossed back by an ocean's moodswings.

Undisturbed, not even by a sea bird,

I stand under the sun's burning treasury

gazing out at the far-out gleam of Atlantic

before heading back like a tourist

to the sanctuary of my hotel room

to dwell in the air-conditioned coolness

on the quickening years and fate of our planet.

Referring to childhood as “small-days” suggests innocence and intimacy, while the image of a “mirror” implies reflection, showing the speaker looking back at her past as well as at the ocean itself.

Listing discarded objects makes the pollution feel extensive and unavoidable.

Personifying the ocean as tossing the rubbish back suggests resistance, as if nature is rejecting human neglect rather than passively absorbing it.

The lack of birds and disturbance reinforces the unnatural stillness of the scene. Nature feels stripped of life, which deepens the speaker’s sense of disappointment and emotional distance from the place she once felt connected to.

The hotel room is described as a place of artificial comfort and control, contrasting with the uncontrollable natural world.

The speaker physically and emotionally withdraws from the beach. Comparing herself to a tourist highlights detachment and a lack of belonging.



Structure

Single continuous movement

- The poem is written as one **uninterrupted flow** rather than being divided into stanzas.
- This creates the sense of a single moment stretched out in time, as if the speaker is standing still while her thoughts unfold.
- Structurally, the lack of breaks **prevents** any emotional pause or resolution, so the poem feels held in suspension rather than neatly concluded.



Progression from memory to present

- Structurally, the poem moves from childhood memory and emotional pull towards present-day observation.
- It begins with inherited images of the Atlantic and the speaker's past, then **shifts** into the immediate reality of the beach as it is now.
- This progression highlights the gap between remembered meaning and present experience, shaping the poem as a gradual realisation rather than a sudden change.

Shift in setting

- The poem is structured around a clear change in setting, moving from the open beach and ocean to the enclosed space of the hotel room.
- This shift shapes the poem's ending, as the speaker turns away from the natural world rather than remaining with it.
- Finishing indoors creates a sense of **withdrawal** and containment, reinforcing the poem's unresolved mood and the speaker's discomfort with what she has observed.

Unresolved ending

- Instead of returning to the sea or childhood connection, the poem ends indoors and in reflection.
- Structurally, this denies the reader a sense of return or comfort, reinforcing uncertainty rather than **closure**.
- The poem therefore ends not with resolution, but with awareness and unease, shaped by the way the movement stops short of **reconciliation**.



Language and Imagery

Inheritance imagery

Nichols opens the poem with an **extended metaphor**, comparing the speaker to “**an heiress**”, which frames the Atlantic as something precious and inherited rather than owned through wealth or power.

The language of value continues in “**eye-catching jewels**” and “**the sun's burning treasury**”, using a **semantic field** of wealth and luxury to elevate the natural world. This





imagery suggests the ocean holds cultural and emotional riches linked to memory and identity. However, the comparison also carries **irony**, as the speaker cannot truly possess or protect this **“inheritance”**, hinting at **tension** between **emotional belonging** and real ownership.

Disrupted natural imagery

Nichols quickly **undercuts** the initial beauty of the scene by describing the beach as holding **“a lone / wave of rubbish”**, followed by a list of discarded objects such as **“used car tyres, plastic bottles, styrofoam cups”**. The **listing** technique creates an **accumulative** effect, making the pollution feel unavoidable and overwhelming. This sudden **shift** from richness to waste disrupts the **romantic expectation** of the beach and creates a sense of disappointment and unease.

Personification of the natural world

Personification gives the ocean emotional presence and **agency**. The Atlantic **“draws me”**, suggesting attraction and pull, while the sea’s **“moodswings”** imply **unpredictability** and response. In **contrast**, human presence feels thin and detached: the beach is **“deserted”** and **“undisturbed”**, emphasising absence rather than connection. This **contrast** makes the natural world feel active and expressive, while humanity appears disconnected and passive.



Indoor vs outdoor space

Nichols **contrasts** outdoor and indoor spaces to shape the speaker’s experience. The beach initially seems open and expansive, but this is **undermined** by **intrusive details** like **“a lone / wave of rubbish”**, where the **singular noun “lone”** narrows the space and drains it of **vitality**.

By contrast, the hotel room is described using more **controlled language**. Words such as **“sanctuary”** and **“air-conditioned coolness”** suggest protection and regulation, emphasising comfort that is manufactured rather than organic. The **adjective “air-conditioned”** highlights **artificial** control, **contrasting** with the uncontrollable forces of the ocean earlier in the poem. The section ends with **“the quickening years and fate of our planet”**, shifting from physical space to **abstract** reflection and leaving the reader aware of an uneasy **balance** between human comfort and the natural world.



Themes

Heritage and identity

The poem explores the idea of **heritage** and **inherited connection**. The sea is often used in literature to represent a person's roots and background, and in *Like an Heiress*, the Atlantic reflects the speaker's memories of childhood and where she comes from. By presenting the ocean as something she feels drawn back to, the poem suggests that **heritage** is carried **internally** rather than guaranteed by place or ownership. This connection feels emotional and personal, but it is also uncertain, as the speaker no longer feels fully at home in the landscape. The poem therefore shows how **heritage** can remain important even when a physical place has changed.

Disconnection and alienation

A strong theme in the poem is the **contrast** between expectation and reality, especially in relation to place. The speaker approaches the ocean expecting beauty and familiarity, but the beach is littered with rubbish and **devoid** of life, creating a sense of **disconnection**.



Environmental awareness and human impact

Like an Heiress engages with ideas about **environmental change** and human impact on nature. The presence of **pollution** on the beach – tyres, plastic bottles, and discarded cups – reflects broader global concerns about the effects of waste and **consumer culture** on natural landscapes.

Nichols wrote the poem at a time when concerns about **climate change** and **plastic pollution** are widely recognised. By showing rubbish on a once-meaningful beach, the poem reflects **modern anxieties** about how human behaviour damages the natural world and questions the idea that nature will remain untouched or protected on its own.

Modern comfort

The poem **contrasts** the natural world with modern comfort and convenience, highlighting how people retreat into **controlled environments** when the real world feels overwhelming. The speaker leaves the polluted beach and returns to the air-conditioned coolness of a hotel room. This theme connects to broader ideas about how modern life often prioritises immediate physical comfort over engagement with difficult realities which raises questions about responsibility and **avoidance**.



Memory, time, and loss

Another key theme is the passage of time and its relationship to loss. The poem begins with the speaker recalling “**oceanic small-days**”, suggesting that memory plays a role in how the present is experienced. The **contrast** between past recollections and the current state of the beach evokes a sense of loss – not only of environmental **purity** but also of a simpler, more **harmonious** relationship with the world. Ending with thoughts about the “**quickenings years and fate of our planet**” expands this theme beyond the personal, suggesting that loss and change are not **confined** to individual experience but are shared across time and place.

Comparisons

In a London Drawing Room – George Eliot

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems use a reflective speaker to critique their environment and show discomfort with the world around them. Nichols presents a polluted coastline through the image of a “wave of rubbish”, while Eliot describes London as oppressive and lifeless, using images such as “solid fog” to convey suffocation. Each poem highlights a broken relationship between humans and nature. In <i>Like an Heiress</i>, the ocean reacts to pollution through personification, being “rightly tossed back by an ocean’s moodswings”, while Eliot shows nature almost erased in the city, where “No bird can make a shadow as it flies”. Both speakers feel isolation within their surroundings. Nichols stands on a “deserted” beach, “undisturbed”, while Eliot presents London as closed and unwelcoming, describing it as “All closed”, suggesting emotional and physical confinement.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nichols focuses on a coastal, natural setting changed over time, contrasting childhood memory with present damage, while Eliot offers a sustained critique of urban industrial London as bleak and joyless. <i>Like an Heiress</i> reflects modern environmental concern, ending with anxiety about “the quickening years and fate of our planet”, whereas Eliot’s poem criticises social and moral decay caused by urbanisation, describing a city with the “lowest rate of colour, warmth & joy”. Nichols’ speaker retreats into modern comfort, becoming “like a tourist” in a hotel, while Eliot’s poem offers no escape, trapping the reader within a monotonous cityscape “Without a break to hang a guess upon”.



A Portable Paradise – Roger Robinson

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems explore how individuals respond emotionally to pressured or unsettling environments. Nichols' speaker feels unease on a polluted beach, while Robinson's speaker turns inward for comfort when life becomes overwhelming. Each poem uses imagined or symbolic spaces to cope with discomfort. Nichols contrasts the damaged outdoors with the "sanctuary" of an air-conditioned room, while Robinson creates an inner refuge through "Paradise" carried within. Both speakers experience isolation, shown through physical solitude in <i>Like an Heiress</i> and emotional pressure in <i>A Portable Paradise</i>, where the speaker is advised to find "an empty room".
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nichols' poem ends with unease and warning, focusing on environmental damage and uncertainty about the future, while Robinson's poem offers practical reassurance, presenting imagination as a reliable source of comfort. <i>Like an Heiress</i> emphasises loss and disappointment, ending with reflection on "the fate of our planet", whereas <i>A Portable Paradise</i> is hopeful, encouraging the speaker to "Shine the lamp on it like the fresh hope of morning". Nichols shows a speaker withdrawing from nature into artificial comfort, while Robinson suggests resilience comes from holding onto inner resources, not retreat.

Thirteen – Caleb Femi

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems present individuals disconnected from their surroundings, showing how environments can feel unsafe or disappointing. Nichols confronts environmental neglect, while Femi depicts a child's vulnerability in an urban setting. Each poet uses contrast between hope and reality. Nichols moves from attraction to the ocean's "eye-catching jewels" to pollution, while Femi contrasts childhood encouragement with fear, as "supernovas" become "dying stars". Both speakers end the poem reflecting on a troubling future, whether environmental collapse or personal danger.
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Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nichols' poem is observational, focusing on environmental responsibility, while Femi's poem is immediate and narrative-driven, presenting racial profiling and power imbalance through a child's experience.• <i>Like an Heiress</i> shows withdrawal and contemplation, ending in quiet concern, whereas <i>Thirteen</i> ends more sharply, using the metaphor of "black holes" to suggest threat and loss.• Nichols' speaker chooses to retreat into comfort, while Femi's speaker is trapped by authority, shown in being "cornered by an officer", with no control over the situation.
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