

# Plenty

“When I was young and there were five of us,  
all running riot to my mother’s quiet despair,  
our old enamel tub, age-stained and pocked  
upon its griffin claws, was never full...”

Isobel Dixon

*(Full poem unable to be reproduced due to copyright)*

## VOCABULARY

**Plenty** — A lot / more than you need.

**Grimace** — A painful smile.

**Sybarite** — An ancient Greek person who lived in Sybaris, a luxurious city in what is now. Southern Italy. Sybarites are pleasure seekers who live an extravagant lifestyle.

**Disgorged** — Poured out from, the word ‘gorge’ means ‘throat’, so the term ‘disgorged’ has a sense that a liquid is pouring out from the throat of something, in this case the ‘fat brass taps’.

**Co-conspirators** — People who plot together against something.

## STORY / SUMMARY

**Stanza 1:** We learn that there are five young children and one mother. The mother finds it difficult to look after so many kids.

**Stanza 2:** We learn that the family is poor, and the mum is struggling.

**Stanza 3:** The mum has to do a lot of maths and worry about money, and keep track of shopping lists to make sure the family has enough to eat.

**Stanza 4:** Details of things that the mother could afford with the money that she has—petrol, porridge, aspirin, bread, toilet paper—everyday items, bare essentials (no luxuries).

**Stanza 5:** The children thought the mother was very mean and disobeyed her because she had such strict rules, so they stole extra biscuits and undermined her.

**Stanza 6:** The children also stole extra water for their baths, and thought this was a luxury.

**Stanza 7:** The focus shifts here (VOLTA / TURNING POINT) into the present tense, we focus on the poet herself. This allows us to compare the poet's life now to her mother's life when the poet was young. The poet's life is very luxurious now—she leaves the heating on, she has long baths.

**Stanza 8:** The poet (in this case, the mother's daughter) misses her childhood, her sisters who are now "scattered", and her mother, the difficult time they shared together. She has a deeper appreciation for her mother's sacrifices and harsh rules now that she is mature.



## SPEAKER / VOICE

**Stanzas 1–6** is from the **point of view of the poet**, as a child, looking at her mother and not being sure why she's so mean.

**Stanzas 7–8** from the **daughter's point of view when she's grown up**—she sees her mum and childhood differently, she realises how lucky she is now.

**Personal point of view, memory / reflection on the past.**



## LANGUAGE FEATURES

- **Alliteration** — “running riot” — creates a strong image of the children being chaotic.
- **Visual imagery** — “dams leaked dry and windmills stalled” — dams and windmills are countryside images, perhaps the poet lived in the countryside or in a rural location when she was young. There is also a plosive alliteration of “dams” and “dry”, demonstrating difficulty and hardship.
- **Metaphor** — “it was a clasp to keep us all from chaos” — talking about the mother’s smile, the tightness of the smile creates a sense of being restrained and the poet speaks of it as a “clasp”, an object that locks other things into place. She realises that the mother’s efforts to keep strict rules in her household were a way of controlling what little money the family had, to make it last as long as possible.
- **Emotive language** — “Anger” — instances of emotive language show the reaction of the mother to the difficult time, suggests frustration, struggling, difficulty coping, and a sense of sadness or stress that she cannot fully communicate the seriousness of the situation to her children.
- **Tactile imagery / assonance** — “warmth / disgorged from fat brass taps” — (warmth shows the feeling of the water), enjambment—the tactile image is textural and it flows from one line to the next, the flow of the line is similar to the flow of the water into the bath. “Fat brass taps” uses assonance (half-rhyme repeated short ‘a’ sound) to reinforce the image, to create a sense of largeness. “Fat” is also a sign of luxury, and a type of personification. It suggests that the bath is a moment of luxury. The verb “disgorged” suggests that the taps are spitting out water from their throats, a kind of personification

## STRUCTURE / FORM

**Dashes**—creates a pause, a breathing space, in the flow of the poem. They stop the flow of images, make us pay attention and process what’s happening at that moment as the pace is disrupted. Sometimes, the dashes in the poem show shock or confusion of the poet as a child e.g. “at some fault—// of mine, I thought” — this pause created by the dash and gap in stanzas shows confusion as the speaker suddenly starts processing and questioning whether the mother’s strained smile really was because of her, or whether she misinterpreted it at the time.

**Volta** — there is a turning point in stanza 7, the tense shifts from past to present, the focus shifts from the poet’s memory of childhood to her life now. She makes a comparison between her easy life now and her difficult life as a child, but we realise she had a happy childhood.

**Free verse**—the poem is set into quatrains (four-line stanzas), which gives it some sort of regular structure, but within that the line length is irregular and there is no set rhyme scheme. This perhaps represents the way in which memories are both set and fluid in our minds or the struggle between the mother’s attempt to keep everything regular and the children trying to cause chaos.

## ATTITUDES

- **Being poor can be difficult.** Everyday activities that normal people take for granted require a lot of attention and effort if a person is living below a comfortable means, “where dams leaked dry and windmills stalled.” Without water you cannot clean the dishes, shower, etc, so we realise that the poet’s childhood was tough and that her family struggled to cope with basic necessities.
- The children formed an alliance against the mother, playfully resisting her strict rules—they “swiped biscuits” / “Stole another precious inch” of water for the bath. This demonstrates the tension between children and parents when children are still learning about the world.
- Because the poet was poor she had a limited supply of food and very limited access to luxurious or pleasurable experiences, this suggests that **the few things she did have were very special to her—we shouldn’t feel sorry for her because she did enjoy her childhood, but we should learn to appreciate and be thankful for what we have.**
- Being poor can sometimes have unexpected positive side effects, as it brings people close together, especially families and siblings.
- When we’re older, we can realise that we didn’t fully understand something important in our childhood.
- **The daughter misses the squabbles that she and her mother used to have when they had a long time ago,** suggesting that they were a form of entertainment and never too serious, perhaps they were an important bonding experience for her and also a way for her to create her own identity by being defiant against her mother’s strict rules.
- Later when the poet is mature she realises that the mother’s strictness wasn’t because she was mean, but instead because she was trying to protect the family and make sure they had enough money to live. **She changes her attitude towards her mother and begins to appreciate everything she did for her as a child.**

## THEMES

**Poverty**—Not having enough food to feed the family, or heating to have a proper bath. The mother suffers and struggles to provide enough for the children, but the children seem happy. They enjoy playing around with the mother, and testing boundaries.

**Luxury**—In later life, the poet has enough money to leave the heating on and take a long hot shower, these are luxuries compared to her childhood—this is kind of normal, not luxurious exactly, but when we see the poet's earlier life we realise it's a luxury for her.

**Parenting**—There is an absence of a father figure, so we assume that the poet's mother raised her five children by herself. She seems strict and as though she doesn't allow the children to have fun, but we realise later (as the poet also realises when she's older) that in fact she was trying to protect her children and to make sure they didn't suffer from being poor. She seems like a tired figure, but a protective and good mother, and in adulthood the poet is able to appreciate everything she did for her and her siblings.

**Pushing boundaries**—The children test the limits of their mother's patience, she hides her stress and anger with a tight smile / grimace. This is part of growing up, and in the poem, it's always presented playfully rather than showing serious tension.

**Difficulty**—Difficult times help you to appreciate good times, difficult times bring people together, sometimes you don't realise how difficult or serious a situation is until you're out of it and you can reflect on the experience.

**Childhood**—There's an innocence and naivety to the poet's memories as if she goes back to a state of childhood when she thinks about them. Despite struggling, she appears to have had a very enjoyable childhood with a lot of strong memories and close family bonds built.



An outdoor tap in Cape Town, South Africa, photo by Tania Melnychuk on Unsplash

## POSSIBLE ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. How does the poet explore ideas about parenting in 'Plenty'?
2. Explore how Dixon presents the theme of childhood in 'Plenty'.