

# Comparative Analysis: My Parents vs The Woman Speaks to the Man Who Has Employed Her Son

Matthew Williams • English Literature • March 18, 2026

## Introduction

Stephen Spender's *My Parents* and Lorna Goodison's *The Woman Speaks to the Man Who Has Employed Her Son* both examine the limitations of parental protection within hostile social environments. While Spender presents a speaker whose parents attempt to shield him from rough, working-class children, Goodison presents a mother who invests everything into her son only to lose him to systemic violence. In both poems, parental love is genuine yet ultimately ineffective against larger societal forces such as class division, crime, and instability. Through imagery, symbolism, and tone, both poets reveal that even strong parental effort cannot fully determine a child's outcome.

## Parental love and protection

In *My Parents*, parental protection is framed as restrictive rather than purely beneficial. The speaker recalls that his parents "kept" him from rough children, a word that suggests both safeguarding and confinement. Their attempt to separate him from perceived danger instead isolates him socially, leaving him vulnerable and unprepared. This isolation intensifies his experience of bullying, as seen in the **simile** "threw words like stones," which equates verbal abuse with physical violence. Rather than preventing harm, their protection indirectly contributes to it.

In contrast, Goodison's poem presents a mother whose protection is deeply sacrificial but insufficient against external forces. Her love is expressed through the **simile** "like the poor carry hope," where her son becomes her primary chance at survival and advancement. She raises him alone, assuming both parental roles, and imagines limitless futures for him. However, this hope collapses when he is drawn into violence, showing that even intense parental investment cannot override societal pressures.

## Social and emotional powerlessness

Both poems emphasize that parents are ultimately powerless against larger systems.

In *My Parents*, the speaker continues to suffer despite being shielded. His fear is captured in the **simile** "muscles like iron," portraying the boys as physically dominant and overwhelming. His parents cannot protect him from class-based hostility, highlighting the limits of their influence.

Similarly, Goodison's mother acknowledges her complete lack of control, stating she has "no power... at the level of earth." Her only remaining tools are spiritual, represented through the **metaphor** "knee city," symbolizing prayer. This shift from physical to spiritual resistance shows that societal violence has surpassed anything she can directly confront.

## Tone and perspective

The tone in both poems reflects regret and helplessness, though expressed differently.

Spender adopts a reflective and conflicted tone. The line "I longed to forgive them but they never smiled" reveals emotional complexity, showing both lingering hurt and a desire for reconciliation. The speaker looks back with a mixture of fear, bitterness, and reluctant understanding.

Goodison's tone shifts from hopeful to accusatory and finally to resigned. Her grief culminates in the **allusion** "Absalom," invoking the biblical story of a father mourning a lost son. This ending signals acceptance of inevitable loss, giving the poem a more final and tragic resolution than Spender's.

## Use of symbolism and imagery

Both poets rely heavily on imagery and symbolism to convey deeper meaning.

Spender presents the boys as animalistic and threatening through the **simile** "like dogs to bark at my world," while the **metaphor** "my world" represents the speaker's social class. This highlights the divide between him and the boys, framing the conflict as both personal and societal.

Goodison uses more explicit symbolic language to show systemic violence. The **metaphor** "bloody salary" represents the inevitable death tied to her son's involvement in crime, while references to weapons reinforce the destructive environment. These images connect personal tragedy to broader societal failure.

## Gender roles and responsibility

Both poems explore parental roles, but Goodison places greater emphasis on gender.

In *My Parents*, both parents are present but emotionally distant, with their role limited to protection rather than engagement. The poem focuses more on the child's experience than on parental identity.

In contrast, Goodison highlights the burden of single motherhood. The line describing how she raises him "once as mother / Then as father" emphasizes the imbalance of responsibility. Her struggle reflects broader societal issues, including paternal absence and the pressure placed on women to compensate for it.

## Conclusion

Although Spender and Goodison write from different contexts, both poems reveal the limitations of parental protection in flawed societies. In *My Parents*, protection leads to isolation and vulnerability, while in Goodison's poem, sacrifice and care are overwhelmed by systemic violence. Both poets ultimately show that forces such as class division, crime, and gender imbalance can override even the strongest parental intentions, leaving lasting emotional and social consequences.