Life Doesn't Frighten Me

SUMMARY

The poem's speaker, a little kid, makes a list of all the things in life that she's not scared of, such as shadows and odd noises.

She's not the least bit scared of angry dogs or ghosts.

She's not the least bit scared of Mother Goose or rampaging lions.

She's not the least bit scared of dragons crawling across the bedspread.

All she has to do is say "boo!" back to these scary things, or tease them, or refuse to cry, or just serenely smile at them, and they run away in terror.

Life, the kid reiterates, isn't even a little bit scary.

The kid goes on: overhearing a fight in the streets at night doesn't scare her.

Nor do prowling panthers or sinister strangers.

Even going to a new school where the boys pull her hair and the girls are snooty isn't scary.

Don't think she'll be frightened, the kid warns, if you try to startle her with frogs and snakes. The only time she's ever even a little frightened is in her nightmares.

But she feels safe because she carries a magical charm with her: with its power, she can travel to the depths of the ocean without needing to come up for air.

Life, the kid concludes, absolutely doesn't scare her—not one little bit.

THEMES

CHILDREN'S COURAGE OVER FEAR

In “Life Doesn’t Frighten Me,” a little girl puts on a brave face about all the terrifying things in the world. Nothing can rattle her, she claims—not “panthers,” “bad dogs,” or “shadows.” And yet, the very fact that she has such a long list of things that *might* seem frightening perhaps suggests that she finds the world a little scarier than she’s willing to admit. Regardless of whether she's being entirely honest with herself, however, this speaker feels she can handle all of the world's terrors simply by making fun of them, refusing to "cry," and smiling. The poem thus celebrates children’s courage and bravado and suggests that learning to “smile” in the face of fear can be a source of real power.

The poem’s speaker makes a long list of the things she’s not afraid of, mentioning perils from “shadows on the wall” to “lions on the loose.” While she might genuinely *not* be scared by any of these things, readers get the sense that she’s trying to name and be brave about fears she actually *does* have. Some of these things feel so specific that they must be her own bugbears: not everyone would list “mean old Mother Goose” as an enemy, for instance. Declaring that she’s not frightened, the speaker might unintentionally reveal just how frightened she often is.

And such fears are pretty reasonable: being a little kid in a big world is scary! The speaker’s list of fears doesn’t just cover imagined dangers like “dragons” and “panthers,” but real-life encounters with “tough guys in a fight” and “strangers in the dark.” Even a “new classroom,” full of hair-pulling boys and snooty girls, is a serious fear to face. Life might be *doubly* frightening for children, the poem suggests, because they have to grapple with both real and imaginary dangers, all mixed up together.

This overwhelming mixture of real and imaginary peril, the poem goes on, means that kids often have to reach deep inside themselves to find courage. When the speaker describes carrying a “magic charm” that allows her to walk on the “ocean floor” without taking a breath, for instance, the image suggests that she’s telling herself a story to give herself the nerve to face the world, conjuring up a comforting fantasy of invincibility—but also that she’s developing a deep-down faith in her own power and competence.

The speaker’s bravado thus seems both poignant and admirable. This little girl might often be frightened, but she’s also learning to stand up for herself and face her fears boldly. It takes guts, the poem suggests, to confront a scary world—but kids often rise to this challenge with panache.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-44

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

Shadows on the ...
... me at all

The speaker of "Life Doesn't Frighten Me" begins this poem with lots of bravado. She starts by naming a couple of classic bedtime terrors: "shadows on the wall" and "noises in the hall." But neither of these scary things, she says, frighten her the least little bit—and nor does "life" itself. This will be a poem about the way that children find the courage to face a genuinely scary world.

The poem's first four stanzas all use the same shape: over the course of three lines, the speaker lists two scary things, then returns to her refrain: "Life doesn't frighten me at all" (or a slight variation, like "They don't frighten me at all"). And all those stanzas also use similar punchy, up-front rhythms. Listen to the sounds of the second stanza:

> Bad dogs barking loud
> Big ghosts in a cloud
> Life doesn't frighten me at all

All these lines start with strong stresses, making the speaker sound forceful. And the parallel sentence structure of the first two lines of each of these stanzas makes it seem as if the speaker could go on listing scary things all day—and then scoffing at them. She sounds like one tough cookie.

But maybe she *needs* to make herself sound tough. In the first two stanzas, she's listed all kinds of terrifying things, from mysterious shadows and sounds to imagined "ghosts" in clouds to very real "bad dogs." The world, this poem already suggests, is a scary place for kids! Real and imaginary monsters lurk everywhere.

The speaker's refrain thus makes her sound as if she might be putting on a bold face—"whistling in the dark," as Maya Angelou herself puts it. The speaker might claim she never feels frightened, but she sure has a detailed list of everything that *could* seem scary!

LINES 7-12

> *Mean old Mother ...*
> *... me at all.*

The third and fourth stanzas follow the same patterns as the first two: in each, the speaker lists things that *could* be scary, only to knock them down with her trusty refrain: "They don't frighten me at all."

Readers have likely already gotten the sense that there might be something a little ironic about the speaker's claim that life doesn't frighten her "at all." After all, she can list plenty of things that a person *could* be scared of, suggesting that she's had more than a few run-ins with the world's frights.

In these lines, her fears start to sound even more personal. She claims not to be scared of "lions on the loose" or "dragons breathing flame" as they creep over her bedcovers—both images that sound like they came straight out of a kids' book. Perhaps her bedtime reading has been a little much for her lately.

And in an especially funny and poignant moment, she claims that she's not frightened of "mean old Mother Goose," either. This allusion to the kindly (if maybe a little witchy) old lady who appears on the covers of nursery rhyme collections feels awfully personal: not everyone would be scared of Mother Goose! But then, plenty of little kids develop odd fears of things that most people wouldn't find frightening. This moment makes it clear that the speaker is talking about things she really *is* scared of.

But she's also *confronting* all her fears, standing up to them with a lot of panache. Even the musical alliteration of "lions on the loose" makes it sound like the speaker is singing a song of her own courage, bucking herself up.

LINES 13-21

> *I go boo ...*
> *... me at all.*

Having introduced all the things in the world that "don't frighten [her] at all," the speaker hops into a new stanza and explains exactly what she does when she encounters any of these beasties. She's got a practiced technique, which she introduces in lively rhymed couplets:

> I go boo
> Make them shoo
> I make fun
> Way they run

In other words, she scares the scary things away before they can get to her! *She'll* be the scary one here, thank you very much. Notice her anaphora all the way through this stanza: starting alternating lines with the word "I" and a description of what she does, the speaker makes it clear that she's got all the power in this situation.

The particular ways in which the speaker stands up for herself makes it clear she's got a handle on what it takes to face your fears. Besides scaring her fears away by going "boo," she *teases* them, "mak[ing] fun" and "smil[ing]" contemptuously. What's more, she "won't cry"—which, it sounds like, is what her fears want her to do. The world's scary things, the speaker seems to feel, are a lot like bullies: they're just trying to get a reaction out of her, and they give up pretty quick if she shows she doesn't take them seriously.

This kid, these lines suggest, has a lot of swagger, and she knows how to put fear in its place. She might be afraid sometimes, but she knows that even fear itself is just a bully, easily tamed.

She closes this section with another repetition of her refrain: "Life doesn't frighten me at all." Set off in a stanza all by itself, this line starts to sound rather like a magic spell, a mantra the speaker can turn to for courage.

LINES 22-27

> *Tough guys in ...*
> *... me at all.*

The speaker has just described how she disposes of all her

fears, scaring them off as if they were cowardly bullies. Now, she returns to the same kind of three-line stanzas she began the poem with, listing even more things she's not scared of.

But here, the poem reminds readers that little kids don't just worry about "mean old Mother Goose" and "big ghosts in a cloud." They also have to face real-life dangers. Besides "panthers in the park" (a fear about as realistic as "lions on the loose"), the speaker here talks about "tough guys in a fight" and "strangers in the dark": things that might scare adults as much as they scare children.

Alongside the speaker's more childish fears, these lines suggest that part of what's hard about being a kid is that you have to confront genuinely threatening fears as well as imaginary ones—and that the difference between the two might not be as clear as it is to a grown-up.

Take a look at the way the speaker phrases this fear:

> Tough guys in a fight
> All alone at night
> Life doesn't frighten me at all.

Here, it's not clear if the "tough guys" are fighting "all alone," if the speaker is overhearing their brawl "all alone" in her bedroom—or both. Either way, it sounds like the speaker sometimes worries that no one is going to be there to help when things get bad. She needs courage not just to face her fears, but to understand that, inevitably, she'll have to face some of them alone.

That old refrain still comes back, though: "Life doesn't frighten me at all." A big part of the speaker's courage, it sounds like, is her strong sense of self-reliance. Nowhere in this poem does the speaker mention asking for help: she knows she can count on herself.

LINES 28-32

> *That new classroom ...*
> *... me at all.*

So far, the speaker's fears have been either imagined or a little separate from her. She might be scared of "bad dogs," "strangers," and "tough guys," but none of them seem to threaten her directly; she's just scared when she sees them. In this stanza, though, she talks about a more immediate and everyday danger: going to school.

The "new classroom" the speaker seems to have found herself in hasn't been a lot of fun, it sounds like. It's full not just of bullying boys who "pull all [her] hair," but of simpering "kissy little girls," teachers' pets whom the speaker regards with obvious scorn. Take a look at the way the speaker phrases this unusual five-line stanza:

> That new classroom where
> Boys pull all my hair
> (Kissy little girls
> With their hair in curls)
> They don't frighten me at all.

By setting off those "kissy little girls" in parentheses, the speaker suggests that, having discovered all the boys are bullies, she won't even bother turning to the girls for company: they're literally an aside here, barely worth mentioning. When she disdainfully mentions that these girls wear "their hair in curls," readers get the sense that she herself might not be too into dressing up and looking cute, playing the "sweet little girl." If that's true, maybe all those "kissy little girls" see her as the odd one out.

This stanza suggests that the speaker hasn't found many friends in this new classroom: only real-life bullies to go along with her imagined ones. Readers have already noticed that she seems very self-reliant. Perhaps she's learned some of that self-reliance from feeling like an outsider. Courage, the poem suggests, might sometimes be hard-earned.

LINES 33-36

> *Don't show me ...*
> *... in my dreams.*

Here, the speaker finally admits out loud that maybe she *is* scared sometimes, if only a little tiny bit.

But she's still insistent that she's not scared of much. "Don't show me frogs and snakes / And listen for my scream," she says—lines that suggest someone or other (perhaps one of those hair-pulling boys from the previous stanza) might have tried to startle her in exactly this way. But she scoffs at silly tricks like that.

The only time she's ever really afraid, she goes on, is "in [her] dreams." This line might remind readers of the way that "dragons" on the bedcovers and "tough guys in a fight" are all mixed up together in the speaker's list of fears: dreams and reality can live pretty close together for little kids.

But it also suggests that the speaker has learned some real wisdom about how fear works. This line hints that it's what happens inside a person, in their dreams and their imaginations, that really makes frightening things frightening. Nothing is *inherently* scary: it's all in how you look at it! (As President Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously put it, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.") But dreams are the one place where the speaker can't exactly choose how she faces the world.

The poem introduces a new kind of stanza here, with a new kind of rhyme scheme. So far, most of the poem has used punchy couplets, interspersed with that echoing refrain. But this stanza uses a new ABCB pattern of rhyme, like this:

> [...] snakes [A]

[...] scream [B]
[...] at all [C]
[...] my dreams [B]

This singsongy pattern makes this stanza feel a little slower and more reflective. Even as it nods to the refrain by ending one line with the same closing words ("at all"), it suggests that the speaker is thinking some more complicated thoughts here. The next stanza will use that same pattern again to describe how the speaker faces the kinds of dream-world fears that she really has no control over.

LINES 37-40

I've got a ...
... have to breathe.

Okay, the speaker has seemingly admitted, *sometimes I* am *a little scared—but only in my dreams.* Now, she explains how she can cope with her fear even in her dream world. She has, she tells readers, a "magic charm" that she carries "up her sleeve." With this charm to hand, she can travel to the very "ocean floor" without having to come up for a breath.

This hushed, mysterious stanza sounds rather like a dream itself—right down to the symbolism. That "magic charm" is an image of the speaker's self-reliant courage, her faith in her own power. And the "ocean floor" could be her inner world, the "depths" she travels to when she dreams.

For that matter, though, the "ocean floor" could just suggest how powerful and capable the speaker feels in general with her "magic charm" at her side. The story she's telling here suggests that she feels so confident in herself that she's invulnerable. She doesn't even need *air*, let alone protection against "bad dogs" and annoying classmates. This might just be a comforting fantasy—but comforting fantasies have real power!

The idea that the speaker keeps her magic charm "up her sleeve" might remind readers of the idiom "to have a trick up your sleeve," a secret strategy to deploy at just the right moment. Armed with her charm, she doesn't need to make a big deal of her own power; she can just walk the world, quietly confident that she'll be okay.

LINES 41-44

Life doesn't frighten ...
... me at all.

All through this poem, this speaker has seemed at once brash, brave, confident, and vulnerable. All those feelings come together in these last lines, where the speaker repeats her refrain a couple more times—and throws in an extra moment of repetition for good measure. Listen to her epizeuxis here:

Life doesn't frighten me at all
Not at all
Not at all.

On the one hand, this repetition makes the speaker sound especially firm and certain. On the other, maybe the lady protests too much! Readers know by now that the speaker certainly *is* scared sometimes, and her repetitions might sound more like she's trying to convince herself than like she's fooling anyone else.

But the whole point about fear, this poem suggests, is that courage isn't about never ever being scared. It's about how you *deal* with being scared. For this brave speaker, that means putting on a bold face: "smil[ing]" at her fears, "mak[ing] fun" of them, and going "boo" until they startle and run from *her*.

It also means having the nerve to say "Life doesn't frighten me at all" until it feels true. With the "magic charm" of an unshakeable self-confidence, the poem suggests, this speaker will stare down life's terrors with style.

SYMBOLS

THE MAGIC CHARM

The "magic charm" the speaker carries with her is a symbol of her own power and confidence.

When the speaker explains that she's not afraid because she has a magic charm that allows her to travel to the bottom of the ocean without ever needing to "breathe," the image suggests that she feels a part of her is invincible. With this "charm," the usual rules don't apply to her: she can endure even what seems unsurvivable.

In other words: she has confidence in herself! The world might be frightening sometimes, but she knows she's got a kind of power "up her sleeve" that allows her to handle whatever life throws her way.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 37-40:** "I've got a magic charm / That I keep up my sleeve, / I can walk the ocean floor / And never have to breathe."

POETIC DEVICES

REFRAIN

The speaker's refrain shows off her bravado and self-confidence—and, the poem hints, helps her to feel a little braver.

Over and over across the poem, the speaker repeats the same line: "Life doesn't frighten me at all." Those words become the poem's heart (as well as its title): this speaker, the insistent repetition shows, is one brave kid.

Sometimes, the speaker even uses a slightly different version of her refrain to emphasize just how brave she is. For instance, when she mentions the dangers of "panthers" and "strangers," she changes her phrasing up a little, saying, "No, they don't frighten me at all." Here, she seems to be saying: *Nope, no matter* what *you name, I'm not even a little scared of it!*

Of course, maybe repeating this refrain isn't just a way for the speaker to tell readers how brave she is, but also a way for her to *feel braver*. After all, she lists plenty of scary things before she insists that "They don't frighten me at all." Her refrain thus starts to sound a lot like a spell or a battle cry, a phrase that gives her the strength to confront everything that *does* frighten her.

In other words: the refrain perhaps helps the speaker to banish every fear she names.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Life doesn't frighten me at all"
- **Line 6:** "Life doesn't frighten me at all"
- **Line 9:** "They don't frighten me at all"
- **Line 12:** "That doesn't frighten me at all."
- **Line 21:** "Life doesn't frighten me at all."
- **Line 24:** "Life doesn't frighten me at all."
- **Line 27:** "No, they don't frighten me at all."
- **Line 32:** "They don't frighten me at all."
- **Line 41:** "Life doesn't frighten me at all"
- **Line 44:** "Life doesn't frighten me at all."

PARALLELISM

Parallelism helps the speaker to demonstrate just how brave she is.

The poem's first four stanzas are all shaped the same way: the speaker lists a couple of scary things, then declares that none of them "frighten [her] at all." Here's an example from the second stanza:

> Bad dogs barking loud
> Big ghosts in a cloud

By using similar phrasing each time, putting the scary thing she's describing right at the front of the line, the speaker makes it clear that she could keep on running through her list of scary things forever—but her response to them would always be the same. No matter what monsters the world throws at her, she'll never be even a little bit frightened.

The speaker does something similar using anaphora (which is a more specific form of parallelism) when she describes what she does to make these scary things frightened of *her*. Here's how that works in lines 13-16:

> I go boo
> Make them shoo
> I make fun
> Way they run

Repeating lines starting with "I," the speaker makes it clear she's got plenty of tricks in her bag to make the things that scare her turn tail and run. All those "I"s make her sound competent and powerful.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Shadows on the wall / Noises down the hall"
- **Lines 4-5:** "Bad dogs barking loud / Big ghosts in a cloud"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Mean old Mother Goose / Lions on the loose"
- **Line 10:** "Dragons breathing flame"
- **Line 13:** "I go boo"
- **Line 15:** "I make fun"
- **Line 17:** "I won't cry"
- **Line 19:** "I just smile"
- **Line 22:** "Tough guys in a fight"
- **Lines 25-26:** "Panthers in the park / Strangers in the dark"
- **Line 28:** "That new classroom where"
- **Line 30:** "Kissy little girls"

EPIZEUXIS

A moment of epizeuxis at the end of the poem plays a neat trick: depending on how one reads it, it can make the speaker sound confident and brave, or as if she's *trying really hard* to be confident and brave.

All through the poem, the speaker has repeated a refrain: "Life doesn't frighten me at all." Listen to how she uses epizeuxis to make that refrain sound even stronger in lines 42-43:

> Life doesn't frighten me at all
> Not at all
> Not at all.

Repeating the same exact words twice in a row, the speaker sounds firm and emphatic. But that strong emphasis could suggest two different things:

- On the one hand, the speaker could be repeating herself to let the reader know, *No, seriously, I'm not scared of even the scariest thing you could think of.*
- On the other hand, she could be trying pretty hard to convince *herself* that she's really not scared of anything—even though she sometimes *is* scared, deep down.

And maybe both of those things are true at once! Being brave, this moment suggests, might not mean never being scared at all. Instead, bravery might mean standing up to scary things *in*

spite of being scared.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 42-43:** "Not at all / Not at all."

END-STOPPED LINE

Almost all of the lines in this poem are end-stopped: in other words, most lines contain a complete thought or clause. All those solid, separate thoughts help the speaker to sound firm and bold.

For example, take a look at the first stanza:

> Shadows on the **wall**
> Noises down the **hall**
> Life doesn't frighten me at **all**

Each of these lines is one solid idea, set off by itself. That makes it feel as if the speaker is setting up two scary images in a row—only to knock them down like bowling pins with the declaration that they're not one bit scary to *her*.

That effect feels even stronger in the lines where the speaker describes how confidently she faces her fears:

> I go **boo**
> Make them **shoo**
> I make **fun**
> Way they **run**

Here, the end-stopped lines help to make the cause-and-effect pattern of these lines feel clear. The speaker goes back and forth between describing what *she* does to scare her fears away and describing how her fears run from her. All those firm end-stops make this process sound perfectly matter-of-fact, suggesting that the speaker has had plenty of practice out-scaring everything scary. These end-stopped lines suggest she knows *exactly* what to do and has total confidence in herself.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "wall"
- **Line 2:** "hall"
- **Line 3:** "all"
- **Line 4:** "loud"
- **Line 5:** "cloud"
- **Line 6:** "all"
- **Line 7:** "Goose"
- **Line 8:** "loose"
- **Line 9:** "all"
- **Line 12:** "all."
- **Line 13:** "boo"
- **Line 14:** "shoo"
- **Line 15:** "fun"
- **Line 16:** "run"
- **Line 17:** "cry"
- **Line 18:** "fly"
- **Line 19:** "smile"
- **Line 20:** "wild"
- **Line 21:** "all."
- **Line 22:** "fight"
- **Line 23:** "night"
- **Line 24:** "all."
- **Line 25:** "park"
- **Line 26:** "dark"
- **Line 27:** "all."
- **Line 29:** "hair"
- **Line 31:** "curls"
- **Line 32:** "all."
- **Line 34:** "scream"
- **Line 36:** "dreams."
- **Line 38:** "sleeve,"
- **Line 40:** "breathe."
- **Line 41:** "all"
- **Line 42:** "all"
- **Line 43:** "all."
- **Line 44:** "all."

IRONY

This whole poem is about not being frightened. But there might be a little ironic twist in its tail. By insisting that she's *not* frightened, the speaker might unintentionally reveal just how frightened she sometimes feels, deep down.

All through the poem, the speaker tells readers that "life doesn't frighten me at all." But she also has a pretty detailed list of everything in the world that *could* be scary. From "panthers in the park" to "noises down the hall" to "tough guys in a fight," there's plenty about "life" that the speaker might very well find frightening, the poem suggests.

The idea that "mean old Mother Goose" isn't scary feels like an especially ironic touch. Mother Goose—the old lady who appears on the covers of nursery rhyme books—isn't what you'd call a common fear. By bringing this grandmotherly figure up, the speaker might reveal a little more than she meant to about what she herself is frightened of. (And perhaps readers can relate: a lot of kids get inexplicably creeped out by things other people don't see as scary!)

Through sly little ironic moments like this one, the poem suggests that the speaker's bravery isn't really about never feeling frightened, but about *facing* her fears, putting on a good courageous show.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-44

COLLOQUIALISM

Colloquial language makes the speaker's voice sound natural and lively.

For instance, listen to the speaker's voice when she describes how she scares her enemies away:

> I go boo
> Make them shoo
> I make fun
> Way they run

Here, the poem uses authentic little-kid language to paint a picture of the speaker: she's clearly very young, maybe five or six years old. These lines also use a moment of dialect. When the speaker says that her enemies run "way" rather than running "away," she's using African American Vernacular English, or AAVE: in other words, her language suggests that she (like her author Maya Angelou) is Black. These lines help readers to get a clear mental image of the speaker.

Sometimes colloquial language helps readers to imagine how the speaker sees the world, too. For instance, when she describes the "kissy little girls" she meets in her "new classroom," readers can imagine that a lot of these kids are prissy suck-ups, with their hair in perfect ringlet "curls." The language here makes it clear that the speaker doesn't have much time for kids like that!

Colloquialisms thus give readers both a picture of the speaker and a picture of the world through her eyes.

Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "Mean old Mother Goose"
- **Lines 13-20:** "I go boo / Make them shoo / I make fun / Way they run / I won't cry / So they fly / I just smile / They go wild"
- **Line 22:** "Tough guys in a fight"
- **Lines 28-31:** "That new classroom where / Boys pull all my hair / (Kissy little girls / With their hair in curls)"

ALLUSION

When the speaker mentions "mean old Mother Goose," she's alluding to a figure from folklore. "Mother Goose," usually depicted as a (sometimes rather witchy) old lady, is traditionally said to be the author of all nursery rhymes.

In reality, nursery rhymes were written by countless anonymous people over hundreds and hundreds of years; there's no way to trace them all back to one author. The idea of "Mother Goose" is just a way to bring all these similar poems together. For that reason, a lot of collections of nursery rhymes have a picture of Mother Goose on their covers.

So there's something sweet about the idea that the speaker feels brave enough to face even "mean old Mother Goose." Mother Goose isn't meant to be an especially scary character! It seems as if the speaker might just have caught a glimpse of a book of nursery rhymes that gave her the willies.

The poem's allusion to Mother Goose thus reminds readers that, after all, this confident speaker is just a little kid. To this imaginative young girl, the dangers of "tough guys" brawling in the street and "mean old Mother Goose" grinning on a bookshelf feel just about the same.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "Mean old Mother Goose"

ALLITERATION

All across the poem, the speaker uses alliteration to give her song of her own bravery extra punch and music.

For instance, when she describes "bad dogs barking loud," those two strong /b/ sounds make those dogs sound pretty menacing, and even mimic the actual startling sounds of dogs barking. "Mean old Mother Goose," meanwhile, sounds even meaner and more sinister because of that muttered /m/ sound.

And later on, when the speaker describes "panthers in the park" and "lions on the loose," her alliteration draws attention to these fantastical images of jungle beasts prowling her neighborhood. They also just plain sound musical, giving the speaker's tale of her own courage a little extra flair and panache.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Bad," "barking"
- **Line 5:** "Big"
- **Line 7:** "Mean," "Mother"
- **Line 8:** "Lions," "loose"
- **Line 25:** "Panthers," "park"

VOCABULARY

Counterpane (Lines 10-11) - Bedspread, quilt.

Kissy little girls (Lines 30-31) - These "kissy little girls" might be kiss-ups, teacher's pets—or they might be sickly-sweet, so cute they disgust the speaker—or both!

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Life Doesn't Frighten Me" is written in jazzy free verse that evokes the speaker's confidence and bravado. The poem's 13 stanzas change and evolve to suit the speaker's mood. For example:

- A series of punchy tercets (three-line stanzas) introduces all the things the speaker claims she isn't one bit afraid of, from "panthers in the park" to "dragons breathing flame."
- A long octet (an eight-line stanza) describes all the ways the speaker stands up to her fears, whether by saying "boo" or "just smil[ing]" contemptuously at them.
- A pair of quatrains (four-line stanzas) take a look at the speaker's "dreams" and her inner world, including the "magic charm" that keeps her safe.
- And a couple of single-line stanzas simply declare, "Life doesn't frighten me at all."

This poem was originally published as a picture book; readers can imagine how the changing shapes of the stanzas might create little pops of excitement as the pages turn.

METER

"Life Doesn't Frighten Me" doesn't have a steady meter. Instead, it uses lots of different, playful rhythms that make the speaker's voice sound lively and bold.

While there's no regular meter across the entire poem, there are moments of repetitive rhythm. For instance, listen to the strong beats in the first two lines:

> Shadows on the wall
> Noises down the hall

Punchy stresses come right up front here, making the speaker sound tough and confident. And the speaker repeats this stress pattern in the three stanzas that follow (as in, "Dragons breathing flame"). This links all of the things that the speaker isn't scared of; they all sound the same, reflecting the idea that no one thing is scarier than another here.

Now listen to what happens when the speaker describes how she confronts all the scary things she describes in lines 13-16:

> I go boo
> Make them shoo
> I make fun
> Way they run

It's also possible to scan these lines as follows:

> I go boo
> Make them shoo
> I make fun
> Way they run

Either way, the boldest stresses clearly land at the end of each line, making the words that describe what the speaker is doing stand out. It's as if the last word in each line jumps out like a jack-in-the-box.

By playing around with where the strong stresses fall in each line, the poem helps readers to feel the speaker's courage and energy.

RHYME SCHEME

"Life Doesn't Frighten Me" uses a lively rhyme scheme that changes to reflect the speaker's feelings.

The poem starts with a series of four stanzas that follow this pattern:

> AAA BBA

...and so on.

In each of the stanzas that works this way, the first two rhymes describe scary things: "Bad dogs barking loud / Big ghosts in a cloud," for instance. But the closing rhyme always comes from the poem's refrain: "Life doesn't frighten me at all." Punchy couplets followed by that bold refrain evoke the speaker's bravado: *nothing* frightens her, she wants the reader to believe. (And notice that the first stanza uses three A rhymes in a row—"wall," "hall," and "all"—to start the poem with a bang!)

The speaker follows that passage up with a stanza in which she describes how she defeats all the scary things she's just listed. Here, she uses a series of rhymed couplets, like this:

> I go boo [A]
> Make them shoo [A]
> I make fun [B]
> Way they run [B]

Those couplets feel like one-two punches, ready to knock the monsters out.

Much of the rest of the poem uses similar mixtures of couplets and refrains. But toward the end of the poem, the speaker dips into a new rhyme scheme for a couple of stanzas, like this:

> [...] magic charm [A]
> [...] my sleeve [B]
> [...] ocean floor [C]
> [...] to breathe [B]

These more complex rhymes invite readers to slow down and reflect on some of the poem's quieter and more mysterious moments: moments in which the speaker admits that she *might*

be a little scared, sometimes, but knows she has the magic power to get through life anyway.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a bold little girl—a kid who's had to learn to be brave in a world that (secretly) "frighten[s]" her quite a bit.

Her long list of the things she's *definitely* not scared of sometimes feels sweetly childish: for instance, when she says she's not afraid of "mean old Mother Goose," readers get the sense that she might have gotten the heebie-jeebies from a picture of that folkloric figure on the cover of a book of nursery rhymes.

But sometimes, her fears feel all too serious. "Tough guys in a fight" and "strangers in the dark," for instance, feel like a lot for a little kid to handle. Through the speaker's innocent blending of mythical "dragons" and real-life "fight[s]," the poem makes the point that, to a child, the world can feel overwhelming, full of threats both imagined and real.

The speaker's bravado thus feels both poignant and inspiring: she *is* frightened, but she's facing up to life all the same.

SETTING

There's no clear setting in "Life Doesn't Frighten Me." All readers know is that the poem's speaker lives in a small childhood world: one only as big as the scary dark "hall" outside her bedroom at night, the "park," and the "classroom." But even a little kid's world, the poem points out, can feel full of oversized dangers. In her imagination, the speaker battles "dragons" and travels to the "ocean floor"—big, sweeping images that suggest she's dealing with deep fears. Readers might interpret the poem's setting as "life" itself—and life, the poem suggests, is often a frightening and dangerous place.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Maya Angelou (1928-2014) was one of the most beloved American writers of the 20th century. She first became famous for her memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in which she describes her troubled childhood with an honesty and openness that many of her early critics found shocking—and many of her early readers found moving and inspiring. Over the course of her long career, she would write a whole series of memoirs, as well as many books of (often autobiographical) poetry.

"Life Doesn't Frighten Me" was published as a children's picture book in 1993. Angelou collaborated on the book with the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose eerie illustrations get at the poem's tension between courage and fear. Angelou herself once said that the poem was for children who "whistle in the dark"—that is, for kids who put on a brave face even when they're scared.

As a Black American poet and memoirist, Angelou saw herself as a member of a literary tradition that included writers like Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar. She was also good friends with the essayist and novelist James Baldwin; the two were both major voices in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and '70s. In turn, Angelou has influenced countless people, from the cartoonist Keith Knight to the former U.S. President Barack Obama.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

By the time Angelou published this poem in 1993, she had thought a lot about the dangers of being a kid in the world. Her memoirs tell some scary stories from her childhood: her stepfather abused her, and even as a small girl she had to confront a lot of terrifying racism in the small, segregated Arkansas community where she grew up. Childhood, she knew, was no safe haven, and children were not ignorant of the real dangers they faced.

But Angelou also knew that books and poems had been a lifeline for her in dark times, inspiring her and giving her courage. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, for instance, she remembers a teacher, Mrs. Flowers, who taught her that words have huge power to do both good and evil, and coaxed her to speak again after she became mute in the wake of her stepfather's abuse.

This poem, first published as a picture book, might thus be read as a supportive message to young readers dealing with the same kinds of problems Angelou herself faced. The power of the mere words "life doesn't frighten me at all," the poem suggests, might help kids to strike a blow against fear.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem as a Picture Book — See images from the poem in its original form as a picture book illustrated by the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. (https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/gallery/24693/4/life-doesn-t-frighten-me)
- Maya Angelou's Website — Visit Angelou's website to learn more about her life and legacy. (https://www.mayaangelou.com/)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Angelou herself performing the poem. (https://youtu.be/89dLNzEhIz4)

- An Interview with Angelou — Watch a 1993 interview with Maya Angelou. (https://youtu.be/_jDKAXG8cb4)
- Angelou's Obituary — Read Angelou's obituary to learn more about her life and her influence. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/28/maya-angelou)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER MAYA ANGELOU POEMS

- Caged Bird
- Harlem Hopscotch
- On Aging
- On the Pulse of Morning
- Phenomenal Woman
- Still I Rise
- Woman Work

HOW TO CITE

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