

Phenomenal Woman



SUMMARY

The speaker refers to an elusive "secret" about herself that conventionally attractive women struggle to understand. She explains that she doesn't look like the models glorified by the fashion industry, and that when she starts to reveal her secret these other women don't believe her. The speaker claims that her beauty is manifested in her wide hips, her confident gait, and her smile. She's an extraordinary woman. When you think of an extraordinary woman, that's the speaker.

Whenever the speaker calmly walks into a room, every single man present desperately competes for her attention. These men are drawn to the speaker, buzzing around her like honey bees. This is because her passion for life manifests in her physical appearance—in her flashing eyes, her vibrant smile, the way her waist sways as she walks, and the happy lightness in her step. She again declares that she's an extraordinary woman. When you think of an extraordinary woman, that's the speaker.

Men have also asked themselves what it is about the speaker that makes her so attractive. But no matter how hard they try to pin down the speaker's mysterious appeal, they can't come close. Even when she tries to reveal her secret to these men, they just don't get it. The speaker says that her beauty exists in the way she carries herself—in her confident posture; her bright, sunny smile; the shape of her breasts; and her elegant style. She's an extraordinary woman. When you think of an extraordinary woman, that's the speaker.

This, the speaker says, is why she insists on moving throughout the world confidently and boldly. She doesn't have to overcompensate in any way or prove herself to anyone. In fact, when other women see the speaker, they should be inspired to be more confident themselves. The speaker's appeal exists in the way she struts in heels, in the way her hair falls, in the way she holds out her hands, in the way others want her to care for them. She's an extraordinary woman. When you think of an extraordinary woman, that's the speaker.

a fashion model's size," she still possesses a unique, mysterious allure. She calls this "her inner mystery"—something that no one can precisely define or identify, but that everyone can perceive on some level.

On the one hand, the speaker explicitly rejects narrow physical ideals of feminine beauty. For instance, she says her beauty lies in things like "the reach of my arms / The span of my hips." She's not a tiny, wispy fashion model, but that doesn't mean she's not attractive.

Even more importantly, the speaker repeatedly insists that her beauty lies in the way she carries herself—in her self-assured "stride," her bright smile, her grace, and her bold posture. All these things make her a "phenomenal woman"—that is, an extraordinary, spectacular woman. The speaker thus argues that true beauty stems from loving yourself, rather than trying to meet a certain standard and then feeling bad about yourself when you can't.

Indeed, the speaker declares that such self-acceptance is exactly what makes her so irresistible. Whenever she enters a room, she says men "swarm around" her like a "hive of honey bees," drawn to her passion for life and unconditional self-love. She describes the "fire in [her] eyes" and the "joy in [her] feet" as being part of her allure, further supporting the idea that her attractiveness comes from her refusal to feel let society fill her with any sort of shame about who she is or what she looks like.

Whereas society may expect women to be meek, demure, and apologetic about their supposed imperfections, the speaker refuses to belittle herself. As she says in the final stanza, "Now you understand / Just why my head's not bowed," concluding that beauty is born out of radical self-acceptance and the self-confidence that results from it.

What's more, she says that her example out to make her audience "proud." In other words, other women should find inspiration in the speaker's confidence. Though the poem never addresses race specifically, the fact that Angelou was a black woman writing when societal standards of beauty were often inextricable from whiteness adds another powerful angle to this message.

Ultimately, the poem says that instead of conforming to the standards set by society, women should reconnect with their own value and find validation from within. All women are capable of being "phenomenal," the poem implies, if they embrace who they are instead of trying to fit in with arbitrary social standards. In fact, the poem suggests that accepting and loving yourself is, in itself, an extraordinary act within a society that promotes insecurity and self-loathing in women. It is this step towards unconditional self-love that makes a woman truly phenomenal.



THEMES



BEAUTY AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE

"Phenomenal Woman" challenges restrictive notions of feminine beauty. The speaker rejects narrow societal beauty standards, and insists instead that real beauty comes from a place of self-confidence and self-acceptance.

The speaker opens the poem by referencing the "secret" to her appeal. She explains that though she is "not cute or built to suit

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-60

**LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS****LINES 1-4**

*Pretty women wonder ...
... I'm telling lies.*

The speaker opens with a reference to the "secret" of her own beauty, claiming that "pretty women" want to understand how the speaker can be so alluring without being considered conventionally attractive. The speaker explains that she may not meet social definitions of "cute" and that she doesn't fit the expected mold of what an attractive woman is supposed to look like.

She specifically calls out the fashion industry, making note of the fact that she doesn't have the tall, skinny build of a model. On a formal level, note how this line is the longest in the poem—a visual refutation of the idea that the speaker must shrink herself down to fit the fashion world's ideal of feminine beauty.

Notably, the speaker claims that when she explains her secret to these women, they believe she is "telling lies." This suggests that rigid definitions of beauty are so ingrained in women that they struggle to believe any alternative perspective, even when it's coming from another woman. By touching on women's visceral rejection of the truth, the speaker subtly reveals the profound psychological impact that cultural conditioning has on body image and self-perception.

These "pretty women" have internalized the attitudes of a society that glorifies the supermodel physique as the ideal to such an extent that they are blinded to the truth. In this sense, the speaker attempts to refute and deconstruct the harmful models of beauty that warp women's understanding of the world and themselves.

The first four lines of the poem feature intense alliteration and consonance of the /w/, /t/, /s/, /l/, and hard /k/ sounds:

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size
But when I start to tell them,
They think I'm telling lies.

There's also [assonance](#) here, such as can be seen in the [internal rhyme](#) between "cute" and "suit." This opening chunk features a clear AABA [rhyme scheme](#) as well, with "lies" in line 1 rhyming perfectly with "size" in line 2 and "lies" again in line 4. The first four lines of the poem are thus intensely musical, suggesting the beauty and confidence of the speaker's voice itself.

Though the poem overall is written in [free verse](#), these opening lines are very steady in their meter. The first two lines are clearly [trochaic](#) (meaning they follow a stressed-unstressed beat pattern), while lines 3 and 4 are [iambic](#) (unstressed-stressed):

Pretty | women | wonder | where my | secret | lies.
I'm not | cute or | built to | suit a | fashion | model's |
size
But when | I start | to tell | them,
They think | I'm tel- | ling lies.

(Note that, in line 2, "I'm not" could also be scanned differently; it's ambiguous). Overall, this adds a bouncy, steady rhythm to the poem's opening—one that will noticeably be shaken up in the second part of the stanza when the speaker begins talking about her unique appeal.

LINES 5-9

*I say, ...
... of my lips.*

Here the speaker begins to explain the substance of her "secret," which was alluded to in the preceding lines. The phrase "I say" is given its own line, lending gravity and authority to the speaker's subsequent proclamation.

The next four lines have a clear [parallel](#) structure that makes use of [anaphora](#) to create a smooth, lyrical flow as the speaker describes how her beauty is manifested in every fiber of her being:

The [noun related to measurement] of my [body
party]

The [asyndeton](#) between lines here also makes it feel as though this list could go on and on—that there are endless attributes the speaker could bring up that illustrate her beauty. The [end-stops](#), meanwhile, again reinforce the speaker's authority and confidence throughout, lending an air of assuredness to every line.

These lines are again filled with sonic devices as well, including alliteration, consonance, and rhyme. Note the many /s/, /p/, /t/, and /l/ sounds throughout:

The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips.

These shared sounds, plus the rhyme between "hips" and "lips," create a sensation of cohesiveness, of a speaker fully in control of her language.

It's also worth noting that, rather than focusing on specific physical attributes, the speaker emphasizes relatively

nonspecific features that are shared among all women. For example, she claims that her beauty lies "in the reach of my arms" without mentioning anything particular about the appearance of her arms. This lack of specificity in the speaker's self-description will continue throughout the poem, signaling the speaker's desire to make a universal statement about women's beauty through the lens of her own experiences.

While this self-description does not delve into specific physical characteristics, it still reflects the speaker's character and the elements that make her beautiful. The "reach" of her arms invokes the image of someone who is reaching out and strives to connect and bond with other people. She embraces the "span" of her hips, hinting at the fact that women naturally have wider hips and that it is nothing to be ashamed of.

This speaker makes it clear that she does not turn away from markers of her own womanhood. She celebrates the "stride" of her step and the "curl"—implying the smile—of her lips, [symbolizing](#) her confidence and self-assurance. The speaker is proud of who she is, and this pride permeates each aspect of this initial self-description as well as the self-descriptions that take place in subsequent stanzas.

LINES 10-13

*I'm a woman ...
... That's me.*

This set of lines establish the [refrain](#) that occurs at the end of each stanza in the poem. As the refrain, it is pivotal to understanding how the speaker views herself and her position in the world.

"Phenomenal" means remarkable, exceptional, extraordinary. As such, the speaker insists not just that she is as womanly as any other woman, but in fact that she is a truly special, spectacular woman.

The specific construction of the refrain is important, as it uses [chiasmus](#) and [polyptoton](#) to enrich its meaning.

First, the chiasmus. If you assign each meaningful chunk of the refrain a letter, you'll notice that it moves in an ABBA pattern:

I'm a woman A
Phenomenally. B
Phenomenal woman, B
That's me. A

In other words, lines 10 and 13 essentially say that same thing, as do lines 11 and 12. This adds a sense of inevitable, sound logic to the speaker's argument. Not only does she "phenomenally" exhibit the qualities that define a woman, but if you were to look up the definition of "phenomenal woman" in the dictionary, you'd see a picture of the speaker.

The use of polyptoton, in the repetition of "phenomenal" as both an adverb and adjective, is also striking. When the speaker

says, "I'm a woman / Phenomenally," she underscores how every aspect of her existence constitutes her womanhood and that her beauty cannot be reduced to superficial standards (such as body weight). It is this attitude of self-acceptance towards her body that leads to her identification as a "phenomenal woman," a status that she continually reinforces with the simple proclamation, "That's me."

The speaker's relationship with her body, and how that informs her identity, continues to be developed throughout the course of the poem. Thus the refrain serves as an undercurrent of confidence and pride that captures the speaker's core personality. As the poem progresses, it will become increasingly clear that this type of self-love lies at the heart of the speaker's elusive "secret."

LINES 14-20

*I walk into ...
... of honey bees.*

The speaker describes a scenario where she walks into a group full of men and they respond with one of two reactions: they enthusiastically stand up to greet her, or they fall to their knees in astonishment. This is clearly a humorous use of [hyperbole](#) meant to emphasize how attractive the speaker is to men.

In a sense, then, this stanza functions as a counterargument to the idea that rejecting superficial standards of beauty inevitably results in a woman being less attractive. The speaker turns this idea on its head by suggesting that, if anything, her carefree attitude makes her *more* attractive to men, so much so that they are [metaphorically](#) "swarming" around her like a "hive of honey bees."

The [imagery](#) in these lines is striking and vivid, allowing the reader to imagine the speaker being surrounded by admirers the instant she walks into the room. While this is undoubtedly an embellishment, it demonstrates the degree of confidence the speaker has in herself. If this is how she feels when she walks into a room full of men, that self-perception is arguably more important than anything else. She is, in her words, "as cool as you please" because she has nothing to be self-conscious about. She knows that men will be drawn to her, and that knowledge becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The assonance of these lines lends them a particularly musical, jazzy tone. Note the /oo/, /a/, and long /ee/ sounds throughout:

Just as cool as you please,
And to a man,
The fellows stand or
Fall down on their knees.
Then they swarm around me,
A hive of honey bees.

There's also again strong consonance and alliteration here, particularly of the /m/, /n/, /f/, /l/, and /th/ sounds:

And to a man,
The fellows stand or
Fall down on their knees.
Then they swarm around me,
A hive of honey bees.

The intricate sounds here further reflect the speaker's mastery over her lines, which in turn reflects her mastery over the room.

LINES 21-29

*I say, ...
... That's me.*

Once again, the speaker describes the personal qualities that make her so attractive and alluring. Again, "I say" is given its own line, reiterating the force of the speaker's voice: *she* declares what's true.

The description in this set of lines focuses on the speaker's passionate and vibrant personality. She describes the "fire" in her eyes and the "flash" of her teeth, two descriptions that imply eye-catching intensity. This connection is enhanced by the [alliterative](#) /f/ sound in these words.

Her personality is further characterized by great energy and exuberance, as she describes the "swing" in her waist and the "joy" in her feet. All of these descriptions emphasize movement and represent a woman who is full of life and constantly in motion.

While the speaker claims that her liveliness and love for life has the effect of attracting men, the larger point is that the speaker is happy and fulfilled in her own right. She does not seek validation or approval by conforming to society's standards. Instead, she lives life on her terms, and the happiness that results from this practice has the added benefit of making her more attractive to men.

The speaker returns to the [refrain](#) established in the first stanza, emphasizing how this personal attitude contributes to her life as a "phenomenal woman." In a society that conditions women to feel insecure about themselves and their bodies, the speaker's self-confidence is genuinely phenomenal. In this sense, self-love can be considered an act of resistance against a society that systematically instills shame and insecurity in women.

LINES 30-36

*Men themselves have ...
... still can't see.*

The speaker explains that it's not just "pretty women" who wonder about her "secret"; men are just as mystified by the nature of her allure. Interestingly, she claims that these men "can't touch / My inner mystery," further reinforcing the idea that her beauty is more than the sum of her physical parts. Just

like the women who think the speaker is "telling lies," the men struggle to grasp her secret despite her efforts to explain it to them. Both men and women are influenced by social norms that dictate what a beautiful woman should look like, and these norms can form the basis of men's expectations about women.

The men's confusion seems to lie in the fact that the speaker defies these expectations by being attractive without resembling a supermodel or actress. This continues to build on the concept of men and women being blinded to the truth behind real beauty while, paradoxically, being able to recognize the real beauty of the speaker when they see it. In a subtle manner, the speaker suggests that exposure to these ideals disconnects people from the truth about their own bodies and what makes people truly beautiful.

As the poem has progressed, the speaker has made it increasingly clear that her beauty is the culmination of her entire being. It is not limited to a specific trait or metric, but rather a complex interplay between all the aspects of her being that make her the phenomenal woman that she is.

The [rhyme scheme](#) further supports this idea of interconnection. The rhyming between "me," "mystery," and "see" and the rhyme between "much" and "touch" all serve to link the verses together into a harmonious whole. This sense of harmony matches the peace that the speaker feels within her own being, the peace that lies at the heart of her "inner mystery."

LINES 37-45

*I say, ...
... That's me.*

The speaker reiterates her pattern of self-description. Once again, the speaker expounds on the facets of her "inner mystery" by describing the qualities that make her uniquely beautiful. She describes the "arch" of her back and the "sun" of her smile, portraying herself as having a strong backbone while also being cheerful.

Embracing her curves and class, the speaker also celebrates the "ride" of her breasts and the "grace" of her style. This word choice invokes the image of someone who is elegant, poised, and simply a joy to be around.

The [assonance](#) of the long /i/ sound and [sibilance](#) of these lines lends them a calm, leisurely quality—suggesting the speaker knows she doesn't have to shout or loudly declare her worth; it simply exists:

The sun of my smile,
The ride of my breasts,
The grace of my style.

The speaker then returns to the [refrain](#), implying that the grace with which she moves through the world reinforces her status

as a "phenomenal woman."

The exposition in these lines helps to weave all of the elements of a "phenomenal woman" together. The speaker believes that she is a phenomenal woman not because of any particular attribute that distinguishes her from other women, but because she fully embraces and celebrates who she is as a person. Her beauty is born directly out of this unconditional sense of self-love and self-acceptance. The love and respect that the speaker has for herself informs her social relationships and, in turn, how other people perceive her.

The greater point in all of this is that these results are all the consequence of how the speaker feels about *herself*. Instead of looking outward for validation and approval, the speaker chooses to love herself unconditionally, and this ultimately inspires other people's admiration of her.

LINES 46-51

*Now you understand ...
... make you proud.*

The speaker's explanation of what it means to be a "phenomenal woman" comes full circle here. The speaker talks directly to the reader, saying, "Now you understand / Just why my head's not bowed."

This is in reference to the feelings of self-love and self-acceptance that she has been expanding on throughout the poem. She explains that this self-love breeds a level of confidence that eliminates insecurity and allows her to be authentically herself. Society might expect a woman like the speaker do be quiet and demure, to try to take up as little space as possible. But the speaker rejects that; instead, she holds her head up high.

At the same time, the speaker says that she does not have to "shout or jump about" in order to get noticed. She does not "have to talk real loud" in order to get her point across or to feel heard.

The speaker's self-confidence is so powerful that she expects other people to feel pride at the sight of her passing by! While this statement is another example of [hyperbole](#) within the poem, it effectively demonstrates the confidence that the speaker has in herself and how this confidence manifests in her social interactions. She isn't concerned about how people respond to her because she knows her worth and she knows people *should* feel pride at the sight of her, and that's all that matters. For the speaker, how she feels about herself is of the utmost importance, and everything else will follow.

This phrase can also be taken as the speaker talking directly to other women, and insisting that they should not feel jealous or intimidated by her but rather should learn from her example. They should be proud to see a woman walking with such confidence. Knowing that Angelou herself was a black woman writing a time when social beauty standards were

overwhelming tied to whiteness (as, indeed, they unfortunately still often are) adds yet another layer of defiance and power to this message.

LINES 52-60

*I say, ...
... That's me.*

The speaker concludes the poem with a final round of self-description combined with the [refrain](#). She emphasizes her lively personality as she references "the click" of her heels and the "bend" of her hair, highlighting the movement and energy that was described in prior stanzas.

She also mentions what she has to offer the world in the more general sense, citing the "need for my care." This is a statement that can extend to women more broadly, as women are more likely to be the primary caregivers in their families. The speaker hints at the essential role of women as mothers and caregivers in order to extend her message as an invitation to all women to recognize and embrace their worth as human beings. This line could also be read as the speaker suggesting how society wants her to care about what it thinks of her.

The speaker then returns to the poem's powerful [refrain](#). The speaker encourages other women to stop doubting their worth and start living life on their own terms, freed from the burden of unhealthy social attitudes. It is this mindset, above all else, that creates a phenomenal woman.



POETIC DEVICES

PARALLELISM

Not only is this poem brimming with examples of [parallelism](#), but Angelou uses parallelism to form the overall organizational structure of the poem. Every stanza is a mirror image of another: the first few lines provide a scenario that the speaker then consistently responds to. The response is structured the same way in every stanza, beginning with the line "I say" which is then followed by the speaker's self-description. Each stanza is also concluded by a [refrain](#) that remains unchangeable from beginning to end.

The overarching structure of this description remains the same throughout the poem as well, drawing heavily on devices like [anaphora](#) and [asyndeton](#) to establish a sense of consistency. When the speaker describes herself, the lines follow nearly the exact same pattern each time:

*I say,
It's in the [noun] of my [feature],
The [noun] of my [feature],*

And so forth. The parallelism on the one hand simply drives the poem's message home through [repetition](#). It also suggests that

the speaker could just keep going and going—easily swapping in various features into these lines. That's because there isn't one singular element of herself that makes her phenomenal; rather, they all do, all together. She is not reducible to her parts.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-13:** "I say, / It's in the reach of my arms, / The span of my hips, / The stride of my step, / The curl of my lips. / I'm a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That's me."
- **Lines 21-29:** "I say, / It's the fire in my eyes, / And the flash of my teeth, / The swing in my waist, / And the joy in my feet. / I'm a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That's me."
- **Lines 37-45:** "I say, / It's in the arch of my back, / The sun of my smile, / The ride of my breasts, / The grace of my style. / I'm a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That's me."
- **Lines 52-60:** "I say, / It's in the click of my heels, / The bend of my hair, / the palm of my hand, / The need for my care. / 'Cause I'm a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That's me."

ANAPHORA

[Anaphora](#) is tied to the poem's use of [parallelism](#), and pops up prominently in the middle section of each stanza when the speaker describes her various features. The speaker states that her "secret" is represented by various features, and each feature is introduced into the stanza through the same basic grammatical structure.

This is established in the opening stanza when the speaker says:

It's in **the** reach of my arms,
The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips.

The consistent use of anaphora throughout these lines and throughout every other self-description in the poem supports the poem's overall symmetry. The reader can see how every aspects of this woman's being contributes to her "inner mystery" in equally important ways, whether it is "the fire" in her eyes or "the sun" of her smile.

The presence of anaphora, both throughout each stanza and the entire poem, links the complex interplay of qualities (that make the speaker a phenomenal woman) into a greater whole. In this way, the reader can appreciate why the speaker's beauty (and by extension, all women's beauty) should be celebrated regardless of whether or not her body fits a specific ideal.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "It's in the"
- **Line 7:** "The"
- **Line 8:** "The"
- **Line 9:** "The"
- **Line 22:** "It's the"
- **Line 23:** "And the"
- **Line 24:** "The"
- **Line 25:** "And the"
- **Line 38:** "It's in the"
- **Line 39:** "The"
- **Line 40:** "The"
- **Line 41:** "The"
- **Line 53:** "It's in the"
- **Line 54:** "The"
- **Line 55:** "the"
- **Line 56:** "The"

REFRAIN

The same [refrain](#) occurs at the end of each stanza and is pivotal to understanding the speaker's perception of herself. This refrain, of course, is:

I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.
 Phenomenal woman,
 That's me.

The speaker's use of the word "phenomenal" has two functions. First, when she describes qualities that are visual and tangible, this connects to the definition of "phenomenal" as something related to sensory experience. Second, the speaker is also simply stating that she is "phenomenal" in that she is a remarkable or extraordinary person. This dual function pervades the poem as the speaker draws on sensory details to emphasize her identity as a remarkable woman.

On a thematic level, the refrain demonstrates how the speaker understands her own womanhood and beauty. She believes that her beauty cannot be reduced to any single metric or attribute, and that the source of real beauty is self-love and self-acceptance. This belief system is inextricably tied with her identity as a phenomenal woman.

Thus the refrain provides a constant affirmation of the speaker's confidence in herself and her position in the world. The refrain runs like a river through the poem, connecting all of the speaker's various experiences into a larger personality that is characterized by not only unyielding self-confidence, but the endless self-empowerment that results from it.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-13:** "I'm a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That's me."
- **Lines 26-29:** "I'm a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That's me."
- **Lines 42-45:** "I'm a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That's me."
- **Lines 57-60:** "Cause I'm a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That's me."

ASSONANCE

The speaker uses [assonance](#) in every stanza throughout the poem, especially in the middle sections when she describes her various features. Broadly speaking, this assonance contributes to the poem's sense of rhythm and its musicality. This is a very melodic, beautiful sounding poem, which makes sense given its content.

Assonance is of course part of the many rhyme sounds in the poem, and also creates [internal rhymes](#) within lines themselves. In the first stanza, for example, assonance of the long /i/ sound connects "lies" and "size," and also contributes to the rhyme between "cute" and "suit" in line 2.

Sometimes assonance reflects thematic ideas in the poem. For instance, the long /ee/ of "Phenomenally" in the poem's [refrain](#) chimes with "me," emphasizing the remarkable nature of the speaker herself. Often, though, the assonance is more about creating a sense of music in the poem. Note the jazzy feel of lines 14-20, created through shared vowel sounds:

I walk into a room
 Just as cool as you please,
 And to a man,
 The fellows stand or
 Fall down on their knees.
 Then they swarm around me,
 A hive of honey bees.

The sounds of the poem blend together and reverberate off each other without becoming too orderly or predictable. The speaker's lively personality is captured by a poem that is driven by rhythm but freed from the strict confines of a consistent rhyme scheme. The poem's abundant and generous use of assonance is one of the many ways in which it achieves this end while maintaining a lyrical and thematic flow.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "lies"
- **Line 2:** "cute," "suit," "size"
- **Line 4:** "lies"
- **Line 7:** "hips"
- **Line 9:** "lips"

- **Line 11:** "Phenomenally"
- **Line 13:** "me"
- **Line 14:** "room"
- **Line 15:** "cool," "you," "please"
- **Line 16:** "And," "to," "man"
- **Line 17:** "stand"
- **Line 18:** "knees"
- **Line 19:** "me"
- **Line 20:** "bees"
- **Line 22:** "fire," "eyes"
- **Line 23:** "teeth"
- **Line 25:** "feet"
- **Line 27:** "Phenomenally"
- **Line 29:** "me"
- **Line 30:** "Men," "themselves"
- **Line 31:** "see," "me"
- **Line 32:** "much"
- **Line 33:** "touch"
- **Line 34:** "mystery"
- **Line 36:** "see"
- **Line 38:** "my"
- **Line 39:** "my," "smile"
- **Line 40:** "ride," "my"
- **Line 41:** "my," "style"
- **Line 43:** "Phenomenally"
- **Line 45:** "me"
- **Line 47:** "bowed"
- **Line 48:** "shout," "about"
- **Line 49:** "loud"
- **Line 50:** "see," "me"
- **Line 51:** "proud"
- **Line 54:** "hair"
- **Line 56:** "care"
- **Line 58:** "Phenomenally"
- **Line 60:** "me"

METAPHOR

This is not an overly [metaphorical](#) poem, though there is a striking and important metaphor in the second stanza. Here the speaker describes the reaction of a group of men when she walks into the room. She claims that all the men will either "stand" to greet her or "fall down on their knees." She goes so far as to say that the men then "swarm around me" like a "hive of honey bees."

The speaker depicts a scene that is clearly an exaggeration intended for humorous effect, but more importantly, it highlights the speaker's supreme confidence in herself and her appearance. The metaphor of men surrounding her like a swarm of honey bees is powerful not because it is literally true, but because it is a direct reflection of how the speaker sees herself and the world around her. She is the queen bee, the one in charge. The [imagery](#) behind her internal narrative speaks

volumes about her level of confidence as she navigates the world and social relationships.

The speaker also sometimes speaks metaphorically regarding her various alluring attributes. When she talks about the "fire" in her eyes or the "sun" of her smile, she isn't speaking literally. Instead, these references to light and fire reflect her exuberance and joy. Her beauty is so bright and lovely that it bestows light and warmth on those lucky enough to be in its presence.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "Then they swarm around me, / A hive of honey bees."
- **Line 22:** "It's the fire in my eyes,"
- **Line 39:** "The sun of my smile,"

ASYNDETON

In "Phenomenal Woman," [asyndeton](#) is prominent in the speaker's descriptions of herself that appear in the middle of each stanza. In the beginning of each self-description, when the speaker is explaining the nature of her "secret," she starts by saying "It's in the" and then lists of various features until returning to the poem's [refrain](#).

Notably, asyndeton is applied in a consistent and similar way throughout the poem. In each instance, the use of asyndeton is punctuated by commas and omits the same prepositional phrases. The use of asyndeton thus coincides with the poem's application of [anaphora](#) and [parallelism](#), making it part of the poem's larger organizational framework.

Beyond this, asyndeton contributes to the poem's overall rhythm and connects the elements of the speaker's beauty. The removal of certain prepositions allows the speaker's various qualities to blend together, representing the harmonious whole that constitutes her womanly beauty. The lack of conjunctions also makes it seem as if these various lists could continue on indefinitely—that the speaker could just keep on adding to the list of things that make her attractive.

The asyndeton in the poem is also an example of [parataxis](#); these attributes are not ranked in any way, and the reader could switch around the order of these phrases without any meaningful impact on the poem's argument. As such, asyndeton and parataxis support the poem's idea that the speaker's beauty isn't limited to any singular physical trait or feature. Instead, her beauty comes from her confidence in who she is as a whole.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-9:** "It's in the reach of my arms, / The span of my hips, / The stride of my step, / The curl of my lips."
- **Lines 23-24:** "And the flash of my teeth, / The swing in

my waist,"

- **Lines 38-41:** "It's in the arch of my back, / The sun of my smile, / The ride of my breasts, / The grace of my style."
- **Lines 53-56:** "It's in the click of my heels, / The bend of my hair, / the palm of my hand, / The need for my care."

CHIASMUS

[Chiasmus](#) is an important part of the poem's [refrain](#). When breaking the refrain down into the ideas it conveys, it's easy to see that it follows an ABBA structure. The first and last lines of the refrain essentially repeat each other, as do the second and third lines of the refrain:

I'm a woman A
Phenomenally. B
Phenomenal woman, B
That's me. A

By essentially repeating itself, the refrain adds extra emphasis to speaker's assertion that she is "phenomenal." She saying that she reflects all the attributes of womanhood, and also that all those attributes are reflected in her. She at once enacts *and* creates what it means to be a remarkable woman.

This idea is further supported by the [polyptoton](#) present in the refrain, found in the adverb "phenomenally" and the adjective "phenomenal." This very slight tweak in verbiage matters. First the speaker is saying that she expresses womanliness in a remarkable, exceptional, wonderful way—that she does so "phenomenally."

Next she says that the very concept of a "phenomenal woman" is embodied by the speaker herself. It's not just that she is like a phenomenal woman; a phenomenal woman should be like her. This reiterates the poem's emphasis on the important of self-confidence and self-assuredness. The speaker isn't just mirroring what society says a "phenomenal woman" should be; that idea of a "phenomenal woman" is defined by the speaker herself.

Where Chiasmus appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-13:** "I'm a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That's me."
- **Lines 26-29:** "I'm a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That's me."
- **Lines 42-45:** "I'm a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That's me."
- **Lines 57-60:** "'Cause I'm a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That's me."

CONSONANCE

This poem is filled with [consonance](#) and [alliteration](#), which work

much like the poem's previously discussed use of [assonance](#). That is, sometimes these shared sounds serve to draw connections between various thematic ideas in the poem, and sometimes they simply add to the poem's intense lyricism and musicality. The use of all these shared sounds suggests the speaker's control and mastery over her language, reiterating her self-assuredness and self-confidence.

Take the very first line of the poem, with the clear [alliteration](#) of /w/ sounds in "women wonder where." This draws readers' attention to this phrase, emphasizing the fact that traditional standards of beauty don't include the speaker herself.

Later, the consonance—more specifically, the [sibilance](#)—of lines 39-41 reflect the speaker's calm, controlled demeanor as she again describes various attributes that make her so alluring:

The sun of my smile,
The ride of my breasts,
The grace of my style.

The /s/ sounds (plus lots of assonance) add a smoothness to these lines, making the speaker's language as graceful as the speaker herself.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "women wonder where," "secret"
- **Line 2:** "not cute," "built to suit," "size"
- **Lines 3-4:** "start to tell them, / They think"
- **Line 4:** "telling lies"
- **Line 6:** "reach," "my arms"
- **Line 7:** "span," "hips"
- **Line 8:** "stride," "step"
- **Line 9:** "lips"
- **Line 16:** "And," "man"
- **Line 17:** "fellows," "stand"
- **Line 18:** "Fall," "down on," "their," "knees"
- **Line 19:** "Then they swarm around me"
- **Line 20:** "hive," "honey"
- **Line 22:** "fire"
- **Line 23:** "flash"
- **Line 24:** "swing," "waist"
- **Line 25:** "feet"
- **Lines 30-31:** "wondered / What"
- **Line 32:** "much"
- **Line 33:** "touch"
- **Line 36:** "say," "still," "see"
- **Line 37:** "say"
- **Line 39:** "sun," "my smile"
- **Line 40:** "breasts"
- **Line 41:** "grace," "style"
- **Line 49:** "to talk," "real loud"
- **Line 50:** "see," "passing"
- **Line 51:** "proud"

- **Line 53:** "click," "heels"
- **Line 54:** "hair"
- **Line 55:** "hand"
- **Line 56:** "care"
- **Line 57:** "Cause"



VOCABULARY

Span (Line 7) - The full extent of something from end to end.

Stride (Line 8) - A long, decisive step.

Phenomenal (Line 11, Line 12, Line 27, Line 28, Line 43, Line 44, Line 58, Line 59) - Phenomenal refers to someone or something that is remarkable or extraordinary; it also refers to anything that is perceptible through the senses.

Swarm (Line 19) - Move somewhere in large numbers.

Hive (Line 20) - A dome-shaped structure in which bees live.

Mystery (Line 34) - Something that is difficult or impossible to explain.

Ride (Line 40) - "Ride" is used in a very specific way to refer to the shape of the speaker's bosom.

Grace (Line 41) - Simple elegance or refinement of movement.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

As a (mostly) [free verse](#) poem, "Phenomenal Woman" is not restricted to a particular form. The 60-line poem consists of four stanzas that are all 14-16 lines long and all follow a similar structural pattern. Each stanza ends with the same four lines that serve as a [refrain](#) throughout the poem.

All stanzas follow the same basic structure: the first few lines are original to the specific stanza at hand; the middle set of lines describe the speaker's body; and the final four lines are marked by the poem's refrain. The middle set of lines in each stanza is further characterized by the ongoing use of [anaphora](#) and [asyndeton](#), which creates a sense of consistency throughout the poem.

Thus, despite the fact that it doesn't follow any particular form, "Phenomenal Woman" still demonstrates an established structural pattern that consistently draws on the same poetic devices. This pattern helps build and reinforce the themes that develop throughout the course of the poem, providing extensive elaboration of the speaker's self-image and her rejection of the status quo.

METER

This poem does not have an established meter. It does have a

loose [rhyme scheme](#), which means it's not *technically pure free verse*, but it's still quite unpredictable. The meter fluctuates significantly throughout the poem, with line length varying greatly as well.

Some lines do have a clear meter, though, and the poem relies a lot on [trochees](#) (stressed-unstressed) and [iamb](#)s (unstressed-stressed). For example, lines 1-2 are filled with consistent trochees, while lines 3 and 4 are purely iambic:

Pretty | women | wonder | where my | secret | lies.
I'm not | cute or | built to | suit a | fashion | model's |
size
But when | I start | to tell | them,
They think | I'm tel- | ling lies.

("I'm not" in line 2 could arguably be scanned differently without changing the overall feel drastically.) Broadly speaking, this gives the poem a bouncy musicality that prevent it from feeling out of control. The speaker has her confident grip on all the lines here, even if she chooses to vary that grip at her pleasure—keeping the poem interesting and engaging on the level of sound throughout.

The lack of a strict meter also goes hand-in-hand with the free-spirited nature of the poem, which is centered around the rejection of social norms. Just as the speaker refutes social ideals of the perfect size, the poem also resists traditional notions of the "proper" meter through its liberal engagement with free verse.

Interestingly, the contrast between the long lines at the top of the poem and the relatively short lines throughout the rest gives the poem a curvy appearance, which can perhaps be interpreted as a tribute to body types that exist outside of the "thin ideal" peddled by the fashion industry ([alluded](#) to in line 2).

RHYME SCHEME

Rhyme occurs sporadically throughout the poem, mainly in the form of [end rhymes](#). Some of these end rhymes are consecutive (see: "lies" and "size" in lines 1 and 2) whereas others are separated by one or multiple lines (see: "hips" in line 7 and "lips" in line 9).

Although there is no strict pattern applied to the end rhymes, the rhyming is frequent and has a strong effect on the flow and overall rhythm of the poem. There are also some [internal rhymes](#)—"cute" and "suit" in line 2; "and"/"man"/"stand" in lines 17-18—which further adds to the poem's musicality.

This flexible rhyme scheme achieves a sense of lyricism and jazziness throughout the poem without committing to a specific structure or set of rules, echoing the nonconformist mindset of its speaker.



SPEAKER

The speaker in this poem makes herself known through the self-referential title, "Phenomenal Woman." Throughout the poem, the speaker presents herself as an exuberant and lively woman who has full confidence in her worth, regardless of what anyone else thinks.

Rather than being insecure about the standards that society imposes upon her, the speaker embraces herself as she is. The speaker feels beautiful despite not strictly conforming to common beauty standards. She does not care about fitting society's mold and she would rather embrace the qualities that make her extraordinary and set her apart. The speaker knows her value and her beauty; nothing and no one can take that away from her.



SETTING

This poem doesn't have a clear setting, which allows its message to resonate broadly with women in various contexts. The most readers know is that the poem is modern in its scope, given the reference to "fashion models."

The fashion industry has long promoted extreme thinness as the ultimate ideal of feminine beauty. "Phenomenal Woman" pushes back against the detrimental notion that only women of a certain body type can be beautiful, a message that still resonates decades after the poem was published.

The context of Angelou's writing enriches the poem's ideas as well. The fashion industry has historically not been just about promoting thinness, but also whiteness; models of color remain less represented in the industry to this day. Broad societal ideals of beauty in the western world have been tied to whiteness for centuries, with traits like straight hair and fair skin long upheld as the epitome of attractiveness. Such arbitrary ideals are rooted in racism and white supremacy.

Angelou was undoubtedly responding to this reality as well—asserting her worth and beauty specifically as a black woman in a society deeply prejudiced against people who looked like her.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Phenomenal Woman" was originally published in 1978 as a part of Maya Angelou's collection *And Still I Rise*. This was one of the most productive and creative times in Angelou's career. At this point, she was a well-established poet known for her reflections on racism, sexism, and oppression in the United States. "Phenomenal Woman" quickly became one of her most popular pieces with the publication of *And Still I Rise*, leading to

increased public recognition of her work.

Angelou was a prolific writer whose work frequently addressed anti-black racism and women's empowerment. She detailed her own life extensively over the course of seven autobiographies, including the famous *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Angelou's insistence on placing her own experiences front and center at a time when black women in particular remained intensely marginalized by society cemented her status as a steadfast and invaluable defender of black culture. Angelou also drew from black oral traditions and blues rhythms in much of her work, which has gone on to influence countless writers as well as many modern-day hip-hop artists, such as Kanye West and Tupac Shakur.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem is, in part, a reflection of ideals that emerged in the fashion industry during the 1960s and continued to solidify throughout the following decades. Broadly speaking, the feminine ideal had begun to shift away from curvy figures and towards thinner body types, which was demonstrated by the rise in popularity of slim supermodels like Twiggy. The expectations imposed on these models proliferated throughout culture, compelling ordinary women to strive for the same body type.

This was also the era of second-wave feminism, when women pushed for more than just basic enfranchisement. Feminists turned their focus to issues such as equality in the workplace and reproductive freedom, seeking to expand women's roles and responsibilities throughout society.

In "Phenomenal Woman," Angelou rejects the reduction of a woman's beauty or value to the size of her waist or the number on the scale. The speaker of "Phenomenal Woman" offers a powerful critique of this feminine ideal by suggesting that a woman's real beauty stems from loving herself and rejecting unrealistic standards that objectify and diminish all women.

In addition to critiquing the detrimental norms of the fashion industry, "Phenomenal Woman," if read autobiographically, is also an implicit rejection of anti-black racism. Angelou herself was a staunch activist, and the poem was written on the heels of the civil rights movement, just 10 years after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Black people had secured many basic legal protections, but societal prejudice didn't simply disappear.

This prejudice manifested in many societal depictions of beauty, which were overwhelmingly tied to whiteness. Thus while perhaps all women were subjected to unrealistic expectations propagated by the media and fashion industry,

black women were doubly so. The dual messages of black empowerment and women's liberation resonate throughout Angelou's work.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Maya Angelou and Women's History](#) — An overview of Maya Angelou's role in feminism as a writer and activist. (<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/maya-angelou>)
- ["Phenomenal Woman" Read Aloud](#) — Maya Angelou recites her poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeFfhH83_RE)
- [Maya Angelou in Her Own Words](#) — More on Angelou's fascinating life story, including many quotes from the poet. (<https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/39580/1/maya-angelou-in-her-own-words-still-i-rise-poet-writer>)
- [Biography of Maya Angelou](#) — An overview of Maya Angelou's life and work. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/maya-angelou>)
- [Women's Idealized Bodies](#) — An article covering the rise of the fashion industry and how it has promoted the "Thin Ideal." (<https://theconversation.com/womens-idealised-bodies-have-changed-dramatically-over-time-but-are-standards-becoming-more-unattainable-64936>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER MAYA ANGELOU POEMS

- [Caged Bird](#)
- [Still I Rise](#)



HOW TO CITE

MLA

Zevanove, Samantha. "Phenomenal Woman." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 6 Mar 2020. Web. 29 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Zevanove, Samantha. "Phenomenal Woman." LitCharts LLC, March 6, 2020. Retrieved April 29, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/maya-angelou/phenomenal-woman>.