Before Reading

Life Doesn’t Frighten Me
Poem by Maya Angelou

On Turning Ten
Poem by Billy Collins

How do we know we’re GROWN UP?

When we hear someone described as “grown up,” we know it refers to more than just the person’s age. Along with age come new responsibilities, greater independence, and, sometimes, greater challenges. The poems you’re about to read explore the excitement—and challenges—that growing up can present.

QUICKWRITE What are some ways you think you’ve grown up over the last few years? Consider any responsibilities you’ve taken on, such as caring for a pet or doing certain chores. Write these down in your journal. Then describe how you feel in general about growing up.
Meet the Authors

Maya Angelou
born 1928
Universal Voice
Though best known for her writing, Maya Angelou (ān’jə-lō’ō) has also worked as a dancer, a singer, an actress, a cook, and even a streetcar conductor. Although her writing is shaped by her experiences as an African American, the topics and issues Angelou deals with remain universal. Her ability to identify with a wide range of people has led to Angelou’s popularity. She notes, “In all my work, what I try to say is that as human beings we are more alike than we are unalike.”

Billy Collins
born 1941
Champion of Poetry
Known for his sense of humor and entertaining poetry readings, Billy Collins is loved by critics and readers alike. He has won numerous awards for his poetry and has served as United States Poet Laureate (2001–2003). Collins thinks that poetry should be everywhere, not just in the classroom: “I believe poetry belongs in unexpected places—in elevators and on buses and subways,” he once said.

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

TEXT ANALYSIS: SPEAKER

Just as a short story has a narrator, a poem has a speaker, or voice that “talks” to the reader. The speaker may be the poet or a fictional character. (Be aware that even when a poem uses the pronouns I or me, it does not always mean that the poet is the speaker.) Identifying the speaker, and understanding his or her situation, is an essential part of discovering the meaning of a poem.

As you read each poem that follows, look for clues in the title and in individual lines that help you determine who the speaker is and what his or her situation is like.

READING STRATEGY: READING POETRY

A poem can tell a tale or provide a message, just as a short story can. To gain a better understanding of the meaning of a poem, use these strategies:

- **Reread the poem.** Each time you read a poem, you may discover new images or ideas. Look for clues to a poem’s meaning in the sentence structure as well as in the words.
- **Read the poem aloud.** Reading a poem aloud will help you hear its song-like qualities and understand the importance of line breaks.
- **Take notes.** Record any words, phrases, or lines you find particularly interesting. Jot down comments or questions about the speaker or the poem’s meaning.

Read “Life Doesn’t Frighten Me” and “On Turning Ten” three times. Use a chart like this one to record images or ideas that help you understand the speaker and the poem’s meaning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Life Doesn’t Frighten Me”</th>
<th>“On Turning Ten”</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st Reading</td>
<td>The speaker seems pretty brave</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd Reading</td>
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Authors Online

Go to thinkcentral.com. KEYWORD: HML6-289
Life Doesn’t Frighten Me

Shadows on the wall
Noises down the hall
Life doesn’t frighten me at all
Bad dogs barking loud
Big ghosts in a cloud
Life doesn’t frighten me at all.

Mean old Mother Goose
Lions on the loose
They don’t frighten me at all
Dragons breathing flame
On my counterpane
That doesn’t frighten me at all.

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1. counterpane: a bedspread.
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
Life doesn’t frighten me at all.

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

Panthers in the park
Strangers in the dark
No, they don’t frighten me at all.

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

Don’t show me frogs and snakes
And listen for my scream,
If I’m afraid at all
It’s only in my dreams.

I’ve got a magic charm
That I keep up my sleeve,
I can walk the ocean floor
And never have to breathe.

Life doesn’t frighten me at all
Not at all
Not at all.
Life doesn’t frighten me at all.
The whole idea of it makes me feel like I’m coming down with something, something worse than any stomach ache or the headaches I get from reading in bad light—a kind of measles of the spirit, a mumps of the psyche,1 a disfiguring chicken pox2 of the soul.

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1. psyche (sīˈkā): the spirit or soul.
2. disfiguring chicken pox: Like measles and mumps, chicken pox was once a common childhood disease. It caused pockmarks to appear on the skin, sometimes leaving scars behind.
You tell me it is too early to be looking back,
but that is because you have forgotten
the perfect simplicity of being one
and the beautiful complexity introduced by two.  
But I can lie on my bed and remember every digit.
At four I was an Arabian wizard.
I could make myself invisible
by drinking a glass of milk a certain way.
At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.

But now I am mostly at the window
watching the late afternoon light.
Back then it never fell so solemnly
against the side of my tree house,
and my bicycle never leaned against the garage
as it does today,
all the dark blue speed drained out of it.

This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself,
as I walk through the universe in my sneakers.
It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends,
time to turn the first big number.

It seems only yesterday I used to believe
there was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I would shine.
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,
I skin my knees. I bleed.
Comprehension

1. **Recall** In “Life Doesn’t Frighten Me,” what are three things the speaker isn’t afraid of?

2. **Recall** In the first stanza, or group of lines, in “On Turning Ten,” what is turning ten being compared to?

3. **Summarize** How does the speaker of “On Turning Ten” feel about turning one year older?

Text Analysis

4. **Interpret Lines** The speaker in “On Turning Ten” says, “At four I was an Arabian wizard” and “At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.” What is the speaker referring to in these lines?

5. **Reading Poetry** Look at the structure of the first stanza (lines 1–7) in “On Turning Ten.” Explain how the sentence structure and line lengths help convey the meaning of these lines.

6. **Reading Poetry** Review the chart of your readings of the poems. Explain how your understanding of the poems and their speakers changed with each reading. Which words, or phrases had the greatest effect on you?

7. **Compare and Contrast Speakers**
   Think about the situation each speaker faces and the attitude each one expresses. In what ways are the speakers alike and different? Use a chart like the one shown to record your thoughts.

8. **Make Judgments** Do you think the speaker of “Life Doesn’t Frighten Me” is truly not afraid? Use examples from the poem to support your answer.

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<td><strong>Who is the speaker?</strong></td>
<td>I think the speaker is a girl.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What situation does he or she face?</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How does he or she feel about the situation?</strong></td>
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**Extension and Challenge**

9. **Speaking and Listening** Think about the poems’ speakers. How do you think their voices would sound? Perform a reading of one of the poems for your class. Use a tone of voice that allows the speaker’s attitude to come across in your reading.

**How do we know we’re GROWN UP?**

How would the speaker of each poem answer this question?