

Once Upon a Time

Like the beginning of a fairytale. Suggests that this has happened so long ago, it isn't real or part of our lives anymore. Gives a sense of nostalgia or passing down memories.

- The general lack of rhyme suggests disorder, confusion and contrasts with the normal expectation of a child's poem.
- Repetition of words like 'laugh', 'eyes' and 'heart' emphasise what the persona wants to get back. It could also make them lose their meaning through repetition (as repeating something can make it dull).

Time clause. Also creates a story-telling atmosphere. Here the parent/adult is in control.

Unknown persons; mysterious. Gives us the idea that 'they' are all the same, uniform. This is vaguely threatening.

Highly punctuated stanza; slow and relaxed emphasis on the pleasantries of the past. The persona makes his point in one big sentence.

Stanzas contain repeated positive and negative contrasts.

First person narration – tells us that the persona may be relating a personal experience.

The rhyme emphasises a repeated action. Gives the idea that the relationship with a pretentious society has ended

Superficial simile.

The repetition of points in the first and fourth stanzas help stress the poet's point. The persona contradicts himself: 'unlearn' 'relearn' and 'learn'. The endless list of pretences shows how society has corrupted him.

Breaking away; the persona reasserts his individuality and identity. The repetition of 'I want' shows his desperation to be different.

The persona requests help from the son – reversal of roles – the son is now respected, he is in power.

Once upon a time, son,
they used to laugh with their hearts
and laugh with their eyes;
but now they only laugh with their teeth,
while their ice-block cold eyes
search behind my shadow.

There was a time indeed
they used to shake hands with their hearts:
but that's gone, son.
Now they shake hands without hearts
while their left hands search
my empty pockets.

'Feel at home!' 'Come again':
they say, and when I come
again and feel
at home, once, twice,
there will be no thrice –
for then I find doors shut on me.

So I have learned many things, son.
I have learned to wear many faces
like dresses – homeface,
officeface, streetface, hostface
cocktailface, with all their conforming smiles
like a fixed portrait smile.

And I have learned too
to laugh only with my teeth
and shake hands without my heart.
I have also learned to say, 'Goodbye',
when I mean 'Good-riddance':
to say 'Glad to meet you'
without being glad; and to say 'It's been
nice talking to you', after being bored.

But believe me, son
I want to be what I used to be
when I was like you. I want
to unlearn all these muting things.
Most of all, I want to relearn
how to laugh, for my laugh in the mirror
shows only my teeth like a snake's bare
fangs!

So show me, son,
how to laugh; show me how
I used to laugh and smile
once upon a time when I was like you.

Gabriel Okara

Comment [W1]: Direct reference – we know it's an adult speaking to a child.

Comment [W2]: Associated with love, warmth and innocence.

Comment [W3]: Eyes – like windows to the soul, associated with honesty, trust. Contrasts with teeth – they are cold, sharp, emotionless, hard, vicious. The double /e/ consonants give it a harsh sound.

Comment [W4]: Ice – connotations of cold, harsh, emotionless. Emphasises the superficiality of the 'cold eyes'.

Comment [W5]: As if 'they' are looking for something, or hiding from something. Gives the impression that they are superficially nice, but furtively looking for a weakness to exploit.

Comment [W6]: A very clichéd action can appear positively and negatively. 'without hearts' = completely meaningless.

Comment [W7]: Empty – more in the emotional sense, than financial status.

Comment [W8]: Again – clichéd phrases seem emotionless and hollow.

Comment [W9]: Will' and 'feel' – very definite, clear words.

Comment [W10]: Onomatopoeic. Negative image of being excluded, left out and isolated.

Comment [W11]: Repetition of 'learned' gives the impression that it is not natural, the lea... [1]

Comment [W12]: Faces and dresses – like the masks of a pre-planned outfit. The list of fa... [2]

Comment [W13]: Simile used to emphasise the artificiality; it's painted on and is unchange... [3]

Comment [W14]: False – it has been learned in order to fit it with others.

Comment [W15]: Desperately pleads with his son.

Comment [W16]: Go back and repair all the things society has corrupted.

Comment [W17]: Intentional use of 'snake' as it is a very deceptive creature. Connota... [4]

Comment [W18]: Emphasises how the persona has changed since his early years as a child.

Comment [W19]: Reminds the child of his own individuality – it will be up to him to avoid... [5]

Persona: A parent/adult.
Story: Adult relating to child how society is corrupted and how it has affected him.
Organising Principles:

- Avoid losing honest qualities and becoming superficial.
- Don't conform and lose innocence.
- The negativity of pretence vs. reality: deception and shallow attitudes.
- Children: as a model of sincerity, purity, liveliness and genuine happiness.
- Society corrupts people by encouraging them to lie and dulling them down.

Page 1: [1] Comment [W11]	Winxp	27/05/2006 20:44:00
Repetition of 'learned' gives the impression that it is not natural, the learning has been imposed upon the persona.		
Page 1: [2] Comment [W12]	Winxp	27/05/2006 20:47:00
Faces and dresses – like the masks of a pre-planned outfit. The list of faces that follows shows how meaningless each is as one can change them so easily. Creates a build-up of pressure due to the long list. Impersonal.		
Page 1: [3] Comment [W13]	Winxp	27/05/2006 20:52:00
Simile used to emphasise the artificiality; it's painted on and is unchangeable; standardized.		
Page 1: [4] Comment [W17]	Winxp	27/05/2006 21:56:00
Intentional use of 'snake' as it is a very deceptive creature. Connotations of sinister, evil, poisonous - the effects of society - dehumanising of individuals. Bare fangs = like an undisguised weapon. 'Fangs' almost like humour to ease the tension. Also has vampire-like connotations.		
Page 1: [5] Comment [W19]	Winxp	27/05/2006 22:06:00
Reminds the child of his own individuality – it will be up to him to avoid conforming.		