

Name: _____ Class: _____

On Turning Ten

By Billy Collins
1995

Billy Collins (b. 1941) is an award-winning American poet who writes about everyday occurrences to express the deeper meaning of life. In this poem, the speaker reflects on his youth. As you read "On Turning Ten," identify the figurative language that the speaker uses to describe being young and growing up.

- [1] 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--
[5] a kind of measles of the spirit,
a mumps of the psyche,¹
a disfiguring² chicken pox of the soul.

- You tell me it is too early to be looking back,
but that is because you have forgotten
[10] 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
[15] 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 solemnly³
[20] 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,
[25] 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.



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1. **Psyche (noun):** the mind of a person or group
2. **Disfigure (verb):** to spoil or damage the appearance of something
3. **Solemn (adjective):** serious; not cheerful

It seems only yesterday I used to believe
there was nothing under my skin but light.

[30] If you cut me I could shine.

But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,
I skin my knees. I bleed.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best summarizes a theme of the poem?
 - A. Imagination is constrained by age.
 - B. Growing old is a universal fear, even though it feels unique to the individual.
 - C. Growing up means letting go of the carefree innocence of childhood.
 - D. Nature reflects the human cycle of life.

2. PART B: Which of the following phrases best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "The whole idea of it makes me feel / like I'm coming down with something." (Lines 1-2)
 - B. "But now I am mostly at the window / watching the late afternoon light." (Lines 17-18)
 - C. "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." (Lines 19-23)
 - D. "This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself, / ... It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends, / time to turn the first big number." (Lines 24-27)

3. Reread lines 5-7: "a kind of measles of the spirit, / a mumps of the psyche, / a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul." What does this description reveal about the speaker's attitude towards aging?
 - A. The speaker feels physically nauseated by age and older people.
 - B. The speaker compares his feelings about growing up to sickness, suggesting that he does not have a positive outlook on it.
 - C. The speaker likens aging to sickness, believing it to be a physically arduous process.
 - D. The speaker fears aging because he associates it with sickness and dying.

4. PART A: Which of the following best describes the tone of stanza 3?
 - A. Sullen
 - B. Disgruntled
 - C. Whimsical
 - D. Sarcastic

5. PART B: What diction, imagery, or figurative language develops this tone?

6. Consider the final stanza of the poem. How does the conclusion contribute to the theme of the poem?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. What does it mean to be 'grown up'? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
2. Do you think it is too early for the speaker to miss his youth? Why or why not?
3. In the context of this poem, should we value our youth? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.