



ANSWER KEY > On Turning Ten

by Billy Collins ● 1995

1.

PART A: Which of the following best summarizes a theme of the poem?

RL.KID.2

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?

RL.KID.1

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?

RL.CS.6

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?

RL.CS.4

A. Sullen

B. Disgruntled

C. Whimsical

D. Sarcastic
5.

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

RL.KID.1

Answers will vary; students should analyze the content of the third stanza and explain how the word choice, images, etc develop this tone. For example, the word “solemnly” suggests a level of seriousness, while the words “leaned” and “drained” imply a physical and emotional amount of resignation. The images of the “late afternoon light” and the falling sun connote an ending, just as the narrator is reluctantly accepting the end of their childhood.
6.

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

RL.CS.5

Answers will vary; students should consider the concluding lines of the poem and how it contributes to the theme of growing up. The narrator used to believe that there was “nothing under [their] skin but light,” but now (as a ten-year-old) they know they’ll bleed if they fall. This is akin to a loss of childhood and acknowledgement of aging/vulnerability. At the same time, the speaker is growing up, solidifying as a person, the blood making the speaker ‘more human.’