

Name: _____ Class: _____

On Turning Ten

By Billy Collins
From The Art Of Drowning • 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," consider Collins' message about being young and growing old.

- [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--
a kind of measles of the spirit,
a mumps of the psyche,
a disfiguring 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 solemnly
[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.

- 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. Based on stanza 1, how does the speaker feel about growing up? How do you know? [RL.6]

2. Explain the following lines: "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." [RL.4]

3. What is the tone of stanza three? What words, images, or literary devices reveal the tone? [RL.4]

4. In the final stanza, what is bleeding a metaphor for? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer. [RL.4]

5. What is the speaker's message about youth and growing up? [RL.2]

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'?
 2. Do you think it is too early for the speaker to miss his youth? Why or why not?
 3. After reading "On Turning Ten," do you think we should value our youth? Explain your answer.