

Name: _____ Date: _____

Analyzing Poetry

Below is "On Turning 10" by Billy Collins. Read the poem a few times. Then answer the questions on the next two pages. This activity is meant to be completed in pairs, in groups, or as a class.

On Turning 10 by Billy Collins

Go to
Scope Online
to hear this
poem read
aloud.

- 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,
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.

Directions: Work with your partner or group to answer the following questions. There are no right or wrong answers!

1 In the first stanza, the speaker says that the idea of turning 10 makes him feel like he is getting sick. But it's not a regular kind of sickness; it's "a kind of measles of the spirit,/a mumps of the psyche,/a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul." Of course, *literally* your spirit cannot get measles, your psyche cannot get mumps, your soul cannot get the chicken pox. So what do you think the speaker means?

2 Look at the first two lines of the second stanza. Who do you think the "you" is? What makes you think so?

3 What does the speaker mean by "You tell me it is too early to be looking back" in line 8?

4 To describe being one, the speaker uses the phrase "perfect simplicity." In line 11, what phrase does the speaker use to describe being two?

5 What do you notice about these two phrases?

6 Think about what the speaker says in lines 13-16. Clearly, he was never literally a wizard with the ability to turn invisible; he was never literally a soldier or a prince. So what does he mean?

7 In lines 17-18, the speaker says that now he is "... mostly at the window/watching the late afternoon light." Why might the poet have chosen to mention late afternoon light rather than the light at some other part of the day?

8 In lines 19-20, the speaker says that when he was younger, the late afternoon light "... never fell so solemnly/against the side of my tree house" as it does now. The sun doesn't change, though—so what has changed?

9 Consider the figurative language in lines 21-23. What do you think the speaker means when he says that the dark blue speed is drained out of his bicycle?

10 In lines 24-27, the speaker talks about saying goodbye to his imaginary friends. How does he feel about saying goodbye to them? How do you know?

11 What idea or ideas is the speaker expressing in the last stanza of the poem? Explain.

Big Ideas

12 How would the speaker complete the following sentences? Explain your answer.

Childhood means . . .

Adulthood means . . .

13 What does the speaker suggest about the role that imagination and creativity play in our lives when we are young compared with the role they play as we get older? Do you agree with him?