

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,<sup>1</sup>  
a disfiguring<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>3</sup>  
[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