On Turning Ten

SUMMARY

Just thinking about turning 10 makes the speaker feel like he's getting sick. The speaker clarifies that this feeling is more unpleasant than a relatively minor, passing ailment like a stomach ache or a headache. It's as though a contagious illness like measles, mumps, or chicken pox has infected his inner being, disfiguring his very soul.

The speaker realizes that readers might think he's too young to be feeling so nostalgic for the past. But, the speaker argues, they only feel this way because they don't remember their own early childhoods—what it was like to be just one or two years old. The speaker, by contrast, can still remember every single year he has lived so far. He recounts the various fantastical identities he has assumed throughout his childhood up until now: at the age of four he "was an Arabian wizard" with magical powers brought on by the way he drank milk; he was a soldier when he was seven years old and prince when he was nine.

Now, however, the speaker spends most of his time looking out of a window at the waning sunlight. Everything looks different to him now—the light falling gloomily on the tree house he once played in, while his bicycle rests next to the garage in a way it never did before, as if it's had all its speed sucked out of it.

The speaker concludes that sadness has officially entered his life, and that he must continue moving throughout the vast world in his sneakers without the imaginary friends and magical happiness of his youth, that he must accept his fate and finally turn 10.

He reflects that, not so long ago, he thought that he was composed of pure light, and thus that if he were injured he'd simply shine. Now, however, he knows that he is vulnerable to real pain and injury—that if he were to scrape his knees on the sidewalk, he'd draw blood.

THEMES

GROWING UP AND THE LOSS OF INNOCENCE

"On Turning Ten" examines the pain, discomfort, and loss of innocence that comes with growing up. The young speaker considers the prospect of turning 10 with discomfort, viewing this "the first big number" as marking an end to the period of youthful bliss he's enjoyed up until now. Much of the pain of entering adolescence, the poem suggests, is that it forces the speaker to abandon the fantastical, magical world of childhood—and to face the harshness of adult (or, at least, 10-year-old) reality.

The speaker compares the idea of turning 10 to "coming down with something," adding that this sick feeling is even "worse than any stomach ache" or "headaches." In other words, this is no momentary ailment, no temporary discomfort, but something much more unpleasant. In fact, the speaker locates this sickness as being in his "psyche," "spirit," and "soul."

The way the speaker views his surroundings reflects his newfound world-weariness: the late afternoon light looks solemn in a way it never has before, and his bike seems utterly exhausted. He thus concludes that turning 10 "is the beginning of sadness," a moment that marks a sharp break from the idyllic world of his early childhood.

Even worse, the speaker feels forced to abandon the various fantastical identities—"an Arabian wizard," "a soldier," "a prince"—that he used to inhabit when he was "seven" or even "nine." The speaker doesn't treat these childhood identities as *pretend*. Instead, he talks about them *literally*, as if he *really was* all these different figures. Magic isn't simply something kids *believe* in, this suggests; the magic of childhood is real to children in a way it can't be when kids grow up.

As a younger child, the speaker also believed himself to be invulnerable—that if he were injured, light would simply pour out of his body. Now, though, the speaker realizes that "if I fall upon the sidewalks of life, / I skin my knees. I bleed." Part of the speaker's sadness, then, stems from the realization that he isn't invulnerable or immortal—that he has a human body that's subject to pain, injury, and, ultimately, death. And this loss of innocence, of the comforting belief in magic and safety, the poem suggests, is the fate everyone faces when they leave their childhood behind.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

MEMORY AND NOSTALGIA

The speaker of "On Turning Ten" paints his childhood as a time of magic and happiness that's soon to be lost (or perhaps that's already been lost) upon the arrival of his adolescence. Of course, this speaker is about to turn 10—and thus remains well *within* the childhood that he's already looking back on with such longing. The reader understands that there are much worse things in life than turning 10, making the speaker's point of view seem amusingly melodramatic at first. Such intense nostalgia, the poem suggests, can limit people's perspectives, leading them to pre-emptively mourn the past without enjoying and appreciating the present.

Note, for example, how the speaker remembers the transition from age one to age two, from "simplicity" and "complexity," with equal wistfulness, but doesn't seem to realize that in turning 10 he's about to undergo another big transition—one he may one day look back on with equal fondness! In looking back on the past, then, the speaker seems to be missing out on the major life moment happening *right now*.

Note, too, how the speaker resigns himself to the fact that it is "time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends," while still treating them as if they are real—saying good-bye to them, rather than just stopping believing in them altogether. This shows that the speaker is in a kind of in-between space, looking back on a time he is *still living in*. Nostalgia, here, creates a sense of longing not only for the past but for what will soon *become* the past.

The speaker rebukes an unidentified "you"—presumably an older person, and perhaps even the reader—for telling him "it is too early to be looking back." The speaker argues that "you" only think this "because you have forgotten" the beauty of childhood, while the speaker insists they can "remember every digit," being closer to their earliest years. The speaker argues that he in fact feels the loss of childhood so acutely *because* he is still in childhood, and thus has less to compare life to.

Thus, while the poem's humor comes from the fact that this little boy is staking a claim to nostalgia at such a young age, it also sympathizes with his feelings. It ultimately suggests that this tendency to romanticize the past and even to feel nostalgic for the present doesn't have an age requirement.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 8-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

The whole idea ...
... in bad light--

The speaker opens the poem by telling readers how "it"—that is, turning 10—makes him feel.

The first line uses enjambment to play with readers' expectations, however, not actually revealing how this occasion makes the speaker feel until the next line. There's thus a moment of anticipation at the top of the poem, when one might think that what will follow will be some sort of *positive* feeling. But in the very next line, the speaker punctures any positivity with the revelation that, upon turning 10, he feels like he's "coming down with something."

This simile kicks off the speaker's melodramatic take on growing up. He treats getting one year older as if it were some kind of disease, one he cannot quite name. The anadiplosis of "something" (which appears at the end of line 2 and then repeats at the start of line 3) reinforces this sense that the speaker lacks the language to properly identify what sickness he's suffering from.

While he cannot say exactly what it is, the speaker can compare this feeling to other ailments he has experienced—stomach aches, or "the headaches I get from reading in bad light." A stomach ache in particular is a classic childhood ailment, which reminds readers that the person lamenting the loss of childhood right now is, indeed, still very much a child!

This a free verse poem, meaning it has no meter or rhyme scheme; it sounds conversational and casual. Despite their straightforward language, however, these lines are packed with consonance and assonance (as is the whole poem). Note, for example, the sharp "/k/" sounds of "makes" and "coming," as well as the round sounds of "coming," "something," "stomach" and "from."

There's also plenty of sibilance here, which might evoke a kind of childish lisp. Take lines 2-3:

> [...] something,
> something worse than any stomach ache

Even though the language of the poem is kept loose and conversational, it still has some subtle music.

LINES 5-7

a kind of ...
... of the soul.

The speaker compares the discomfort he feels upon turning 10 to three different ailments: measles, mumps, and chicken pox. All three are viral infections often contracted during childhood. This makes sense, as they would be some of the only illnesses the speaker would know about. And, of course, the "sickness" of turning 10 only affects children!

The speaker's discomfort is not physical, however, but spiritual, affecting the speaker's innermost self—his "spirit," "psyche," and "soul." Note how the alliteration between these three words (the "p" in "psyche" is silent) reflects the similarity of the words' meanings and hammers home the speaker's point.

This list of ailments is also an example of parallelism and asyndeton: the three phrases feature the same grammatical construction and lack any conjunctions between them.

> a kind of measles of the spirit,
> a mumps of the psyche,
> a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.

All these devices together add to the poem's music and to its humor: the building list feels intense and dramatic, and the

speaker is using some very sophisticated language. And yet, that seriousness gets undercut by the fact that the speaker is, again, talking about common childhood ailments. Even the sounds of these illnesses themselves—with their alliterative /m/ and consonantal /p/ sounds—comes across as clunky and childish: "measles," "mumps," "pox."

Note, too, that these three diseases all affect the skin—something the speaker will return to in the last stanza of the poem. Chicken pox is known for being "disfiguring," by causing an itchy blister-like rash that covers most of the skin on the body; measles can also cause a rash, while mumps affects the salivary glands, causing them to swell and making patients look as though their face and/or throat are ballooning. Though the speaker is not physically being marred in this way, he feels as though something equivalent is happening to his inner being.

LINES 8-12

You tell me ...
... remember every digit.

The speaker addresses an unidentified "you" directly, someone who has apparently told the speaker that he's too young to be experiencing such a sentimental longing for the past or such grief over the loss of youth. Such feelings would be more expected from a middle-aged person (the very kind inclined to write the "mid-life crisis poems" that Collins is parodying here).

This "you" could be an adult in the speaker's life (perhaps one or both of his parents), or it could be interpreted as the reader (who by now has almost certainly realized that the speaker is being melodramatic!). In any case, the speaker argues that "you" only feel this way because "you have forgotten" how wonderful it is to be a child under the age of 10.

To illustrate this point, the speaker points to "the perfect simplicity of being one." This might be a reference to the fact that one-year-olds have very basic needs, or just to the fact that "one" is literally the simplest number that exists. This changes with "the beautiful complexity introduced by two"—another moment of ironic humor, given that two is essentially the *second* simplest number that exists.

Most people can't remember being just one or two years old, which, in a way, proves the speaker's earlier point. It's hard to know whether to *believe* the speaker when he claims "I can lie on my bed" and recall every single year he has lived so far; regardless, it summons up a mournful (and, again, melodramatic) image of the speaker reclining, going back over the details of his lost youth in his memory. The word "digit" is another little joke for the reader: the speaker is young enough that he hasn't yet entered the complex world of double-digits. He can still count the years he's lived so far on his fingers.

LINES 13-16

At four I ...
... nine a prince.

The speaker recounts the various identities he's assumed throughout his childhood. Readers know these various identities are all in the speaker's imagination: clearly, the speaker could not possibly have been "an Arabian wizard" with magical powers, much less a soldier at the age of seven! But the speaker presents these identities quite literally, without fanfare. That he treats his fantasies like mere facts reinforces the idea, that, for him, the magic of his childhood still seems real. In other words, he's *still a child*.

It's also worth noting that all three of these identities seem to draw from archetypal characters in children's stories (particularly those traditionally told to boys), and all three suggest a certain amount of power or self esteem. This suggests that the speaker has historically held a pretty high opinion of himself—viewing himself, as kids typically do, as the center of the universe, the main character in a fantastical story.

Again, the contrast between the speaker's elegant language and the actual content of that language lends the poem its ironic, funny tone. The speaker waxes poetic about being a wizard, for instance, whose magic came from "drinking a glass of milk a certain way"—a ridiculous and rather hilarious image presented here with utmost seriousness.

LINES 17-20

But now I ...
... my tree house,

The wonder and joy of the previous stanza fall away as the speaker contrasts the fantastical identities of his earlier childhood with his life now, at the ripe old age of 10 (or nearly 10). The speaker now spends his days "mostly at the window," gazing at the light that falls "solemnly," or seriously, "against the side of my tree house."

The assonance of long /o/ sounds in "mostly" and "window" gives line 17 a slow, sorrowful feeling, while the alliteration and consonance in "late afternoon light" has a rhythmic, musical quality that almost seems to make the phrase shimmer like the light being described. The hushed sibilance of "so solemnly" evokes the intense seriousness and sadness with which the speaker seems to be looking at the world.

Light is a common symbol of knowledge and awareness, and the poem builds on those connotations here: it represents the speaker's growing adult awareness (the fact that it's specifically *afternoon* light—light that appears towards the end of the day—adds to this symbolism). The tree house, meanwhile, is a symbol of the speaker's childhood innocence. There's no indication that the speaker's tree house itself has changed; instead, the speaker's view of it shifts now that's he's a wizened 10-year-old. The world seems more serious in the light of maturity.

LINES 21-23

and my bicycle ...

... out of it.

The speaker's attention shifts to his bicycle, which, like the tree house mentioned above, is a symbol of childhood joy. The speaker says that the bicycle "never leaned against the garage / as it does today," creating a contrast, once again, between the present and the past.

Like the light in line 19, the speaker seems to personify the bicycle: the sentence is constructed so that the bicycle leaning against the garage seems like an action the bicycle *itself* is taking, rather than a passive state the bicycle is in. The speaker then creates a striking image in line 23, saying that the bike has had "all the dark blue speed drained out of it."

It's unusual for a color to be attributed to a somewhat abstract concept like speed, which is not something that one can see, exactly. This line could suggest that the bike itself is dark blue and that it creates a blur of this color when speeding past. In any case, describing the bike's former speed as dark blue gives it a sense of vitality; it makes the bike seem like a living entity that has had its life essence "drained" from it—much in the same way the essence and happiness of the speaker's childhood have been drained from him.

LINES 24-27

This is the ...
... first big number.

The speaker concludes to himself—again, somewhat melodramatically—that turning 10 marks "the beginning of sadness." More melodramatic still is the image of the speaker "walk[ing] through the universe in [his] sneakers." The smallness of a 10-year-old in sneakers contrasts with the vastness of the universe, suggesting that the speaker is slowly beginning to realize his relative insignificance in the grand scheme of things—that the self-centered view of the world that fueled his childhood happiness is, in fact, false.

The speaker concedes that "It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends, / time to turn the first big number," suggesting that he must sacrifice not only his own imaginary identities but also the friends he has imagined for himself.

Though the speaker acknowledges that these friends are "imaginary," he is still treating them in this sentence as if they are real—saying goodbye to them rather than just stopping believing in them altogether. Even when moving away from fantasy, the speaker still has to lean on a kind of metaphor to process this transition.

LINES 28-32

It seems only ...
... knees. I bleed.

Before turning 10, the speaker essentially thought he was invulnerable. "Only yesterday," he believed "there was nothing under my skin but light. / If you cut me I could shine." In other words, he didn't understand much about the realities of his body—including the fact that it's fragile and mortal. That this belief changed so dramatically in just one day ("only yesterday") adds to the poem's humor and sense of melodrama.

The "light" under the speaker's "skin" represents the happiness (or, more accurately, the innocent, blissful ignorance) the speaker enjoyed as a younger child and which has been destroyed with the arrival of his adolescence. This "light" seems almost holy, while the use of the word "shine" again reflects the speaker's former sense of self-importance: even when injured, there was once brilliance and beauty to him.

As in line 17, the speaker uses the phrase "But now" to bring the reader into a present that contrasts sharply with his innocent past. The phrase "sidewalks of life" is again ironically funny, contrasting the mundane, relative safety of a sidewalk with the vastness and seriousness of adult life.

But there's also some true pathos in the poem's final moments. To an adult, turning 10 seems like no big deal—but it does represent a transitional moment in the speaker's young life. Not only does the speaker now know that he's vulnerable to real physical pain and injury, but falling "upon the sidewalks of life" also represents being hurt emotionally.

For the most part, the poem has treated the speaker's sorrow as amusing and ironic, but there's a real sense of loss and pain here. The poem has gone beyond being a parody and touched on something universal: namely, human mortality, and the real pain people face in growing up.

SYMBOLS

LIGHT

Light in the poem symbolizes innocence and vitality, and it illustrates the speaker's shifting perspective upon growing up.

This symbolism is clearest in the third stanza, as the speaker watches the "late afternoon light" fall "so solemnly" against his tree house (itself a symbol of the speaker's childhood). The fact that this light is that of the "late afternoon" is significant: from the speaker's perspective, he's no longer in the early "morning" period of his life but entering the "late afternoon" of adolescence. The light of this more grown-up world is tinged with sorrow and loss, informed by the speaker's dawning awareness of his vulnerability and mortality.

Light continues to act as an important symbol in the last stanza, as the speaker describes how he "used to believe / there was nothing under my skin but light." This light represents, in part, the wonder and innocence of the speaker's childhood: he believed his body to be filled not with messy blood but something pure and shining.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-19:** "watching the late afternoon light. / Back then it never fell so solemnly"
- **Lines 28-30:** "I used to believe / there was nothing under my skin but light. / If you cut me I could shine."

CHILDHOOD TOYS

The speaker's unused playthings, specifically his tree house and bicycle, symbolize the fact that the speaker is leaving his childhood behind. Note how the speaker isn't playing with either item in the poem, but rather looking at them from within his house. This speaks to the distance the speaker feels from his childhood. The tree house has, in a sense, become a kind of monument, a memorial to a childhood that the speaker believes is now dead, a home that is no longer his.

The same might be said of the speaker's bicycle, which now leans "against the garage," unused. While the tree house is cast in the solemn light of maturity, the bike seems to have been robbed its very life force, "all the dark blue speed drained out of it." In this way, the bike also acts as a symbol for the speaker himself: he, too, seems to be drained of his speed, of the essence of his childhood.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "Back then it never fell so solemnly / against the side of my tree house,"
- **Lines 21-23:** "and my bicycle never leaned against the garage / as it does today, / all the dark blue speed drained out of it."

THE WINDOW

The speaker says in the third stanza that he's no longer outside riding his bike or playing pretend like he used to, but instead "mostly at the window," looking wistfully upon a childhood he feels he can no longer access. The window at which the speaker sits symbolizes his separation from his childhood innocence and the nostalgic lens through which he views his past.

The window acts as a kind of barrier between the speaker and the outside world. In this way, it represents the way that the speaker's nostalgia cuts him off from the present: he contemplates the loss of his childhood rather than going out and experiencing it while he still can.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "But now I am mostly at the window"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"On Turning Ten" uses lots of alliteration, which adds emphasis to certain words and generally fills the poem with rhythm and music. Take the opening stanza, where /s/ sounds connect "spirit," "psyche," and "soul"—and, in doing so, draw attention to the deep, internal distress the speaker feels upon getting older.

Another interesting example of alliteration appears at the beginning of the third stanza, with the tight repetition of /w/ and /l/ sounds:

> [...] mostly at the window
> watching the late afternoon light

These sounds are relatively soft, evoking a quiet, still atmosphere as the speaker languishes by the window. The sibilance of the following two lines adds to the effect:

> Back then it never fell so solemnly
> against the side of my tree house,

The lines themselves seem hushed and solemn thanks to those quiet /s/ sounds (which also appear within the words "against" and "house").

In making the poem's language more musical and striking, this alliteration also adds to the poem's playful irony. The speaker is talking quite eloquently and dramatically about his sorrow, yet that sorrow is about something very minor in the grand scheme of things: turning 10 years old.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "something"
- **Line 3:** "something," "stomach"
- **Line 5:** "measles," "spirit"
- **Line 6:** "mumps," "psyche"
- **Line 7:** "soul"
- **Line 8:** "be," "back"
- **Line 9:** "but," "because"
- **Line 10:** "being"
- **Line 11:** "beautiful"
- **Line 12:** "But," "bed"
- **Line 14:** "make myself"
- **Line 15:** "certain"
- **Line 16:** "seven," "soldier"
- **Lines 17-18:** "window / watching"
- **Line 18:** "late," "light"
- **Line 19:** "so solemnly"
- **Line 20:** "side"
- **Line 24:** "sadness," "say"
- **Line 26:** "time to," "to"

- **Line 27:** “time,” “ to ,” “turn”
- **Line 30:** “cut,” “could”
- **Line 31:** “sidewalks”
- **Line 32:** “skin”

ANAPHORA

Anaphora pops up a few times in "On Turning Ten." In the first stanza, for example, the speaker repeats the word "a" at the start of three consecutive lines when listing out the various ailments that turning 10 feels like:

> a kind of measles of the spirit,
> a mumps of the psyche,
> a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.

These lines also feature asyndeton (there are no conjunctions between these list items) and more general parallelism (each line follows the same grammatical structure). Together, these devices lend the lines a sense of rhythm and building momentum.

The speaker uses anaphora again in the second stanza with the repetition of the word "at" followed by a number (notice that the second line quoted below also features more asyndeton as well):

> At four I was an Arabian wizard.
> [...]
> At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.

The speaker is recounting the various identities he's assumed throughout his younger years, and the repetition of "at" again creates a sense of momentum—of the speaker going through a definitive list. Readers can almost see the years passing through the speaker's mind.

The last example of anaphora comes in the fourth stanza, in lines 26-27:

> It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends,
> time to turn the first big number.

Unlike the earlier example of anaphora, where the speaker was focused on the past, the repetition of "time to" grounds readers in the present. The anaphora adds a sense of inevitability to these lines, which makes sense: no one can escape "time," or avoid turning 10.

The repetition also imbues these lines with a sense of weary responsibility: now that he is turning "the first big number," the speaker feels obligated to leave childish things behind. The repetition of "time to" gives one the feeling of a ticking clock, time plodding along steadily, coming to rob the speaker of his childhood.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “a”
- **Line 6:** “a”
- **Line 7:** “a”
- **Line 13:** “At”
- **Line 16:** “At,” “at”
- **Line 26:** “It is time to”
- **Line 27:** “time to”

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration and consonance, adds music and rhythm to "On Turning Ten." Sometimes all these devices work together, as in lines 2 and 3:

> like I'm coming down with something,
> something worse than any stomach ache

The repetitive sounds here add subtle emphasis and momentum to the poem's introduction.

Often, assonance can also work to evoke words' meaning through sound. For example, in line 7, the many short, clipped /i/ sounds in "disfiguring chicken" add extra unpleasantness to the image, the sound of the words themselves pinched and nasal. Similarly the long, smooth assonance of "beautiful [...] introduced by two" makes the phrase pleasing to the ear.

Perhaps the most striking moment of assonance comes in the poem's final two lines. Here, long /i/ and /ee/ sounds draw out these lines and fill them with melancholy rhythm:

> [...] the sidewalks of life,
> I skin my knees. I bleed.

The shared /ee/ sounds in particular call readers' attention to the fragility of the speaker's body—essentially, to his mortality.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “coming ”
- **Lines 2-3:** “something, / something”
- **Line 3:** “stomach”
- **Line 7:** “disfiguring chicken”
- **Line 11:** “beautiful,” “introduced,” “two”
- **Line 12:** “I,” “lie,” “my,” “bed,” “remember every”
- **Line 14:** “invisible”
- **Line 15:** “drinking,” “milk”
- **Line 20:** “side,” “my”
- **Line 24:** “This is,” “beginning”
- **Line 25:** “through,” “universe”
- **Line 26:** “time,” “bye,” “my”
- **Line 27:** “turn,” “first”
- **Line 28:** “believe”

- **Line 29:** "nothing under," "but"
- **Line 30:** "cut"
- **Line 31:** "fall upon," "sidewalks," "life"
- **Line 32:** "I," "my," "knees," "I," "bleed"

CONSONANCE

Consonance appears all throughout the poem, and it works a lot like assonance and alliteration. Shared sounds intensify the speaker's language at certain moments, create a certain mood, and simply add music to this free verse poem.

Note the mixture of sharp /p/ and /k/ sounds and hissing /s/ sounds at the end of the first stanza, for example, which makes it seem as though the speaker is spitting out this list of ailments in disgust:

> [...] measles of the spirit,
> a mumps of the psyche,
> a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.

Consonance here thus evokes the speaker's discomfort with and distaste for turning 10.

Much of the consonance in the poem is more specifically sibilance, as in lines 19-20:

> Back then it never fell so solemnly
> against the side of my tree house,

These hushed sounds convey a sense of "solemn," or serious, silence and stillness. The same thing happens in line 24:

> This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself,

Of course, this sibilance is so over the top that it might have the opposite effect of what the speaker's going for: it makes the line seem deeply melodramatic rather than full of "sadness."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "makes"
- **Line 2:** "like I'm coming," "something"
- **Line 3:** "something worse," "stomach ache"
- **Line 4:** "headaches"
- **Line 5:** "measles," "spirit"
- **Line 6:** "mumps," "psyche"
- **Line 7:** "disfiguring chicken pox," "soul"
- **Line 8:** "be," "back"
- **Line 9:** "but," "because"
- **Line 10:** "perfect simplicity," "being"
- **Line 11:** "beautiful," "complexity," "introduced," "two"
- **Line 14:** "could make myself invisible"
- **Line 15:** "drinking," "glass," "milk," "certain"
- **Line 16:** "seven," "soldier," "nine," "prince"
- **Line 17:** "window"
- **Line 18:** "watching," "late afternoon light"
- **Line 19:** "fell so solemnly"
- **Line 20:** "against," "side," "house"
- **Line 21:** "bicycle," "against"
- **Line 22:** "does today"
- **Line 23:** "dark," "speed drained"
- **Line 24:** "This," "sadness," "say," "myself"
- **Line 25:** "universe," "sneakers"
- **Line 26:** "time to"
- **Line 27:** "time to turn," "first"
- **Line 30:** "cut," "could"
- **Line 31:** "sidewalks"
- **Line 32:** "skin," "knees"

SIMILE

"On Turning Ten" starts off with a simile: the speaker compares the feeling of turning 10 to "coming down with something." In other words, even the "idea" of entering double digits makes the speaker feel sick.

He can't quite identify what kind of sickness it feels like he's suffering from at first, just calling it "something." This speaks to how confusing and disorienting growing up can be. Like many people entering adolescence, the speaker is overwhelmed by feelings that he can't quite name.

The speaker elaborates:

> something worse than any stomach ache
> or the headaches I get from reading in bad light—

This isn't just any old illness, it seems, but "something" new—and "something worse" than the illness the speaker has experienced thus far in his young life. The comparisons that the speaker makes to clarify how he's feeling also remind readers that he's still a kid: stomach aches in particular are discomforts often associated with childhood (think about how common "tummy aches" are in little kids).

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "The whole idea of it makes me feel / like I'm coming down with something,"

ENJAMBMENT

Most of the lines in "On Turning Ten" are end-stopped, lending the poem a measured, steady feel that adds to the speaker's resigned, melancholy attitude towards growing up. There are, however, a few scattered instances of enjambment throughout. This keeps the language feeling natural and conversational, rather than overly stiff or rehearsed.

In pretty much all of these cases, though, the enjambed line still ends on a natural pause, a moment where the phrase or clause has been completed. This gives each line a sense of being able to stand on its own and work as its own statement before the enjambment leads readers into more information. For example, line 14, "I could make myself invisible" could work as a full sentence, if one chose to put a period at the end of it. Instead, the line breaks, pushing readers into line 15:

> I could make myself invisible
> by drinking [...]

This second line adds a funny twist to the first: it's not just that the speaker believed he could make himself invisible (which, of course, readers know he could not)—there was a particular *technique* to this magical power, borne of the speaker's childish imagination. In this way, enjambment creates moments of excitement and surprise that reflect the fact that the speaker is still a kid.

In other moments, enjambment creates suspense or anticipation, enticing readers onto the next line to find out more. Take line 28:

> It seems only yesterday I used to believe

Believe... what? The next line reveals the answer:

> there was nothing under my skin but light.

By staggering the information in the way, the poem keeps the reader engaged, while still moving the poem along at a steady, measured pace.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "ache / or"
- **Lines 9-10:** "forgotten / the"
- **Lines 10-11:** "one / and"
- **Lines 14-15:** "invisible / by"
- **Lines 17-18:** "window / watching"
- **Lines 19-20:** "solemnly / against"
- **Lines 21-22:** "garage / as"
- **Lines 28-29:** "believe / there"

IRONY

"On Turning Ten" was originally written as a parody of the many poems written by older poets about turning a certain age. These poems are often steeped in sadness and regret about the loss of youth.

The irony of "On Turning Ten" stems from the fact that a child adopts the same melancholy, jaded tone, speaking as though he's on the brink of adulthood, in fact, he's not even a teenager yet. The reader can sense that the speaker is far too young to be experiencing such a profound existential crisis about getting older, and the juxtaposition between the speaker's age and the poem's mopey sentiment is what makes it so funny. Though the speaker treats this coming of age as if it were the end of the world, as "the beginning of sadness" itself, the reader understands that there are many worse things in life than turning 10.

The speaker knows that the reader might feel this way, declaring in line 8:

> You tell me it is too early to be looking back,

The speaker then challenges the poem's (ostensibly adult) readers' assumptions, claiming that they have forgotten "the perfect simplicity of being one / and the beautiful complexity introduced by two."

This introduces more subtle irony still: the speaker doesn't seem to realize that in turning 10 he's about to undergo another such transition from "simplicity" to "complexity"—one he may one day look back on just as fondly.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-11:** "You tell me it is too early to be looking back, / but that is because you have forgotten / the perfect simplicity of being one / and the beautiful complexity introduced by two."
- **Lines 13-16:** "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."
- **Lines 24-25:** "This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself, / as I walk through the universe in my sneakers."

METAPHOR

The speaker uses a series of metaphors at the beginning of the poem to describe what turning 10 feels like:

> a kind of measles of the spirit,
> a mumps of the psyche,
> a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.

Your soul can't literally contract any of these illnesses. Instead, the speaker is trying to convey, through metaphor, the way that age itself seems to infect the spirit—"disfiguring" your inner being in the way chicken pox might scar your skin.

The fact that all three of the diseases mentioned here are typically contracted in childhood makes them perfectly suited to represent the crisis the speaker is going through so early in life. The juxtaposition between nonserious childhood illnesses and melancholy sentiments about the nature of the "psyche," "spirit," and "soul" also adds to the poem's irony and humor.

When the speaker describes "the dark blue speed" being "drained out of" his bicycle, this is another metaphor. It's unusual to describe speed as a color, something that people can't strictly see, as being dark blue. This line suggests that the bike itself is dark blue, and that when it's being ridden it looks like a blur of dark blue rushing past. The color blue is also linked symbolically with sadness, reinforcing the speaker's melancholy mood. In any case, the metaphor suggests that the speaker himself feels drained of his own vitality and "speed."

A final metaphor comes at the end of the poem, when the speaker laments skinning his knees "upon the "sidewalks of life." Life doesn't literally have "sidewalks," of course; the metaphor represents the many *emotional* scrapes and mistakes the speaker will experience upon growing up. And yet, the metaphor is once again ironically funny, reminding readers that this speaker is still a child—someone whose serious reference point for injury is scraping his knees.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-7:** "a kind of measles of the spirit, / a mumps of the psyche, / a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul."
- **Lines 21-23:** "and my bicycle never leaned against the garage / as it does today, / all the dark blue speed drained out of it."
- **Lines 31-32:** "But now when I fall upon / , / I skin my knees. I bleed."
- **Line 31:** "the sidewalks of life"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker uses some subtle personification in the poem's third stanza by talking about the "late afternoon light" in a way that makes it seem alive.

The speaker describes the light as falling "so solemnly," which is more specifically an example of pathetic fallacy: the speaker is projecting his own thoughts and emotions onto the natural world. Light, of course, has no feelings, and cannot literally be "solemn"—but because the speaker is feeling down, he imagines the light is feeling the same way.

The way the speaker talks about his bicycle creates another moment of personification. It sounds like the bicycle has a sense of agency, that it's leaning "against the garage" of its own accord. This subtle personification then makes the idea that its "speed" has been "drained out of it" seem like the bicycle has been drained of its very life force—much in the same way the speaker's childhood bliss has been drained from him.

Treating inanimate things as though they're alive reflects the imaginative view of the world that the speaker has held up until now, and which he now is in danger of losing with the arrival of adolescence. In other words, the use of personification makes sense here to evoke as a means of evoking the way that children often look at the world.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-19:** " the late afternoon light. / Back then it never fell so solemnly"
- **Lines 21-23:** "my bicycle never leaned against the garage / as it does today, / all the dark blue speed drained out of it."

REPETITION

The poem uses general repetition (that's separate from its use of anaphora) a few times. Up top, for instance, the speaker uses anadiplosis, repeating the word "something" at the end of one clause and then the start of the next:

> [...] with something,
> something worse [...]

This draws attention to the word "something" itself, reinforcing the fact that the speaker doesn't have the language to properly identify what he's feeling beyond knowing that it doesn't feel good!

Later, the speaker uses diacope in lines 19-21 when saying that the light "never fell so solemnly / against the side of my tree house," while his bike "never leaned against the garage / as it does today." This brief moment of repetition makes the speaker's mournful point ring out more clearly: the world has simply "never" looked this way to him before.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "something, / something "
- **Lines 19-20:** "never fell so solemnly / against"
- **Line 21:** "never leaned against"

VOCABULARY

Measles (Line 5) - An infectious disease accompanied by a blotchy rash.

Psyche (Line 6) - The human mind. The speaker seems to mean some essential part of his being that has been metaphorically infected as a result of him turning 10.

Mumps (Line 6) - A viral infection that causes one's salivary glands to swell.

Chicken pox (Line 7) - A contagious viral infection common in childhood that causes an itchy rash all over the body.

Solemnly (Line 19) - In a serious manner, usually tinged with some kind of sadness.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem has 32 lines broken up into five stanzas, which range from four to nine lines apiece. The last two stanzas (starting with "This is the beginning of sadness") are noticeably shorter than the first three. This helps to give the last nine lines of the poem (which are more somber and serious than everything that's come before) more space to resonate with the reader.

Beyond that, "On Turning Ten" has no fixed poetic form or structure, and is written, like most of Collins's poetry, in free verse. This makes the poem feel intimate and conversational throughout.

METER

"On Turning Ten" is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't stick to a set meter. This adds to the casual, conversational style of the poem. Readers get the sense that the speaker is talking to them directly. There's nothing overly formal or complicated here: just a simple, natural rhythm that fits right with the fact that the poem's speaker is still a child.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "On Turning Ten" doesn't have a regular rhyme scheme. As with the lack of meter, this keeps the poem feeling conversational. Without rhyme, the poem sounds like normal speech, as if the speaker is talking directly to the reader.

SPEAKER

The speaker is a child who has either just turned or is about to turn 10 years old. The poem never explicitly states that the speaker is a boy, though this is implied by the fact that the speaker imagines being a "wizard," "a soldier," and "a prince."

That said, readers certainly don't have to interpret the speaker this way in order to understand and identify with the poem. What really matters here is how young the speaker is: he's still a child even while lamenting the loss of his childhood. That's what gives the poem its irony and humor. At the same time, there's some genuine sadness here: because the speaker is so young, it's understandable that every year feels weightier to him. He may just be turning 10, but even a single year represents a big chunk of his young life!

Adults reading the poem can see how limited the speaker's perspective is. That is, grown-up readers understand that the speaker is being more than a little melodramatic (even if his pain is very real). Perhaps seeing how naive this young child sounds, readers might reconsider their *own* thoughts about aging as well—and conclude that they're not quite as washed up as they tend to think, either!

SETTING

"On Turning Ten" takes place late in the afternoon on a day sometime around the speaker's tenth birthday (likely on the day itself). This entry into double-digits marks a momentous occasion in the speaker's young life.

Location-wise, readers can think of the poem as being set in the speaker's childhood home: the speaker contemplates growing up while gazing out a window at his tree house (presumably in his backyard) and at his bicycle as it leans next to the garage.

These details—the tree house, the bicycle, and even the "sidewalks of life"—all remind readers that the speaker is still very young. They're details linked to childhood, and they suggest that, to the speaker, his house and neighborhood are the entirety of the "universe" through which he walks. Despite feeling so world-weary, he hasn't actually seen much of the world yet.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"On Turning Ten" was first published in Billy Collins's 1995 collection *The Art of Drowning*. The poem exemplifies Collins's use of humor and clear, accessible language in his poetry.

The title "On Turning Ten" also places this poem within a long tradition of poetry written "on" (that is, about) a momentous occasion—particularly one's birthday (see Lord Byron's "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year"). Collins actually wrote "On Turning Ten" in order to poke fun at what he calls the "midlife crisis poem [...] poems that are written on a poet's birthday, particularly when that birthday ends in zero" and which tend to be rather "depressing."

The poem is thus both a parody, in that it mimics the form of these "birthday poems," and a satire of the self-indulgent poets who write them. But Collins also said that the poem "nicely [...] got away from me," surpassing his original jokey intentions. Indeed, the poem has genuine sadness and pathos as its end, as its young speaker becomes aware of the inevitable pain that growing up will bring.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"On Turning Ten" deliberately makes little reference to any historical circumstances surrounding it. That said, the main features of the speaker's childhood—the bicycle, the glass of milk, the tree house, the sneakers, and the various imaginary friends—evoke a fairly typical suburban childhood in the U.S. in the second half of the 20th century.

Collins himself was born in 1941, meaning that the illnesses referenced in the first stanza—measles, mumps, and chicken pox—were more common during his own childhood than they

are today. This is mainly thanks to vaccination: the chicken pox vaccine came into use in the U.S. in 1995, the same year this poem was first published; measles was declared eliminated from the U.S. in 2000; and mumps has also drastically decreased in recent years. There are still occasional outbreaks, but these diseases are a much less common feature of the lives of young people today.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- An Interview with Collins — Read this 2007 interview with Billy Collins, originally published in Guernica Magazine, where he discusses his poetic style and influences. (https://poets.org/text/brisk-walk-billy-collins-conversation)
- Billy Collins's Biography — A detailed biography of Collins's life and career as a poet. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/billy-collins)
- A Reading of "On Turning Ten" — Hear Billy Collins read and talk about"On Turning Ten" at the 2009 National Writing Project Annual Meeting. (https://youtu.be/vrdGQo6lSSw?t=2148)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER BILLY COLLINS POEMS

- Afternoon with Irish Cows
- Introduction to Poetry
- The History Teacher

HOW TO CITE

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