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College Reading and Writing

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On Turning Ten

Aging, getting older, maturing, leaving childhood, growing chest hair—at least for guys—these are all just ways to say growing up. As children, most of us can't wait until we're older. At least I know I always looked up to my older brother and wanted to be like him. But that wasn't because he was actually cool; it was because he had more privileges than I did. My brother is six years older than me, so there was a good reason that he got to do activities that I didn't get to do. There were several checkpoints in my life that I looked forward to: playing high school sports, getting a driver's license, having money, etc.

These were all things that I wanted as a child, but I couldn't have them until I was older. I'm sure everyone had different reasons they wanted to be older, but the point is that we all couldn't wait to grow up. *On Turning Ten*, by Billy Collins

(PoemHunter.com, see appendix), is based on growing up and getting older, but it focuses on just the opposite of what I described above. This poem portrays the reality of getting older, stressing that it is not as exciting as it seems, and emphasizing how depressing it may be to leave childhood behind.

The poem's tone is very dreary, almost dreadful. This is evident right away in the first stanza of the poem. "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” (1-7). In these lines, Collins makes growing up seem like a painful, deadly disease with his description, mental imagery, and using a simile to compare getting older with these different sicknesses. I found it interesting that Collins chose to relate these diseases to the spirit, the psyche, and the soul. I think he was trying to say that we not only age physically, but mentally too. He might also be making a point that we can become mentally sick as well as physically sick.

I also believe Collins might be saying that growing up is taking away the “perfection” of childhood when he says, “a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul” (7). I think he used diction quite carefully in this specific spot. “Disfiguring” is a strong word and demonstrates that Collins thinks growing up “disfigures,” or ruins a child along with his/her innocence. I think Collins is portraying himself as the ten-year-old boy in the poem.

In the next stanza, Collins starts with, “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 complexion introduced by two” (8-11). Collins is looking back to earlier years of his life as if he was much older, reflecting on his childhood. But he is actually only ten years old, and really shouldn’t be looking back because he is still in his childhood. I think the hidden meaning here is that ten-year-olds should be having fun and should not be worrying/thinking back to their younger years. In lines 10 and 11, Collins shifts away from his dreary tone, almost as if daydreaming about his childhood, which is what the words in the poem display as well. He starts to dream, mentioning the “perfect simplicity of being one and the beautiful complexity introduced by two.” I think he is again

stressing the perfection and innocence of childhood in these two lines, with a hint of satire in the 11th line when he says, “the beautiful complexity introduced by two.” It is ironic that he says being two is complex when we know that it is not in comparison to what lies ahead. But turning two for a one-year-old actually would be complex in some ways.

The development of these childlike dreams progresses even further with his words and images in the next five 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” (12-16). When Collins says he remembers every digit, he means he can remember something from every year since he was four years old, but then he only mentions ages four, seven, and nine. This might be because in actuality, he can only remember a minimal amount from these years of his life. I think Collins chose his words carefully again here when he first used “an Arabian wizard,” then a “soldier,” and finally a “prince.” I believe the sequence of these characters he “played” are such that each one requires more maturity and responsibility than the previous did. This is probably to follow along with the maturation and new responsibilities a child faces as they grow up.

The third stanza falls back into the depressed and dreary tone that Collins began the poem with. “But now I am mostly at the window watching the late afternoon light. 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” (17-23). Here, he is at the window, looking outside feeling sad that he is “too old” to be out there playing and having fun. He says the “afternoon light”(the sunlight) “never fell

so solemnly” as if the light is now shining sadly on the side of the tree house, where as before it must have been shining happily. This is because Collins is sulking in his own sadness and thinks everything around him seems sad as well. When he talks about his bicycle, he means that now he never rides his bike anymore and it just sits against the garage. Most kids’ bikes probably don’t make it to the side of the garage. When I was younger, mine always ended up lying on the ground in the front yard.

“All the dark blue speed drained out of it” (23), tells me that his bike is getting old, just like he is getting old. Maybe the bike doesn’t really have the “speed drained out of it,” but he has the “speed” (energy) drained out of him.

The last two stanzas of the poem portray feelings of grave sadness as well. Collins even states that, “This is the beginning of sadness,” in the first line of this stanza (24). He also says, “As I walk through the universe in my sneakers” (25). I think Collins is trying to say that he is all alone in the universe, but means he’s not actually alone, he just feels that way.

“It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends, time to turn the first big number” (26-27). These two lines are fairly self-explanatory. He’s too old for imaginary friends because he’s ten now, and imaginary friends aren’t “cool” if you are ten.

In the last stanza, Collins makes it sound like he used to be invincible and nothing could harm him, but that is no longer the case because he’s older. “It seems only yesterday I used to believe there was nothing under my skin but light. If you cut me I could shine. But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life, I skin my knees. I bleed” (28-32). These lines refer to the fact that kids think they are unstoppable and they rule

the world. When he would fall down before, he probably did bleed, but maybe mom or dad made it better right away, so it felt like he just “shined” or was invincible.

When he says, “I fall upon the sidewalks of life, I skin my knees. I bleed,” I think he means that now he has other things to worry about rather than just playing all the time. He’s getting closer to a point in his life when he will have to deal with some things on his own, and he might “fall” (fail) sometimes. His bleeding may be real, but could also just be feeling pain in general. Responsibilities are taking precedence in his life, instead of the freedom and innocence of childhood years.

This poem is definitely sad when you first read it, but after several times through, it is actually funny. It’s sad in the sense that we have to grow up and can’t be kids forever, no matter how much we want to be. Parents become sad when their children grow up because they know they’ll have to let them live their own lives sooner or later. But I found this funny because this kid is only ten years old. He has plenty of growing up to do and should still be having fun.

I thought this poem was ironic because Collins makes turning ten seem like such a tragedy, which it is not. I would love to be ten again and not have all the worries of college and my future plans. I think this poem also makes you realize the differences between childhood and adulthood. All these changes for a ten-year-old seem miniscule to us, but it’s all a matter of perspective. Maybe for a ten-year-old, it is actually terrible and this is the way life really is.

Works Cited

Collins, Billy. "On Turning Ten." PoemHunter.com. 2 Apr. 2007.

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/on-turning-ten/>

On Turning Ten (Billy Collins)

1 The whole idea of it makes me feel
2 like I'm coming down with something,
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4 or the headaches I get from reading in bad light—
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