

Excerpt from *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke

Childhood

It would be good to give much thought, before
you try to find words for something so lost,
for those long childhood afternoons you knew
that vanished so completely -and why?

We're still reminded-: sometimes by a rain, 5
but we can no longer say what it means;
life was never again so filled with meeting,
with reunion and with passing on

as back then, when nothing happened to us
except what happens to things and creatures: 10
we lived their world as something human,
and became filled to the brim with figures.

And became as lonely as a shepherd
and as overburdened by vast distances,
and summoned and stirred as from far away, 15
and slowly, like a long new thread,
introduced into that picture-sequence
where now having to go on bewilders us.

Rainer Maria Rilke 1902 (age 27)

Answer the following questions about the poem above on a separate sheet of paper:

1. In “Childhood,” what words and phrases does the speaker use to describe childhood? What do these words and phrases suggest about this time of life?
2. Do you think the speaker had a positive childhood experience or a negative one? How do you know?
3. What does the speaker mean when he says that “...back then, when nothing happened to us/except what happens to things and creatures:/we lived their world as something human..”?
4. What words show that the speaker’s movement into adulthood is not a positive experience?
5. What is the overall tone of this poem?
6. Predict what advice the speaker would give to someone younger than himself about growing up.