

The history teacher

by billy collins



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Most people try to shield children from the evils of the world; however, some may try a little too hard. The teacher in Billy Collins's poem "The History Teacher" is an example of this. By teaching the children a fairy-tale version of history rather than the reality of it, the children fail to learn about the consequences of their actions. The desire of the teacher to protect his students has caused him to soften the harshness and reality of the past.

Not wanting to corrupt their innocence, "he told them the Ice Age was really just / the Chilly Age, a period of a million years / when everyone had to wear sweaters" (lines 2-4). Rather than telling them the truth about the War of Roses, he told them that it "took place in a garden" (line 11). Once they leave the classroom, the children go to "the playground to torment the weak / and the smart / mussing up their hair and breaking their glasses" (lines 15-17).

While this is happening, their history teacher is "walking home / past flower beds and white picket fences" (lines 18 & 19) and wondering if the children will believe his next lesson. The misconceptions of the history teacher may seem innocent enough, but the children will never be able to understand the mistakes of the past if they are never told the truth. Had the children been taught properly about the past and the consequences of violence, perhaps they would not have been so eager to behave so harshly towards those who seemed physically inferior to them.

Sadly, the teacher seems oblivious to the fact that the students are behaving in such a manner. Even though the teacher's need to protect the children's innocence was well intended, he seemed to be doing more harm than good.

In Billy Collins's "The History Teacher", we are reminded that even though it is important to maintain the innocence of children, it is more important that they learn the truth of the past, even if it is more violent and harsh than we would like it to be. By learning about the past, children will have a better understanding of how their actions can effect others.