

"ballad of birmingham" explication



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Dudley Randall's "Ballad of Birmingham" is a look into the effects of racism on a personal level. The poem is set in Alabama during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The tone of the title alludes to the city of Birmingham as a whole. The poem gives the reader, instead, a personal look into a tragic incident in the lives of a mother and her daughter. The denotation of the poem seems to simply tell of the sadness of a mother losing her child. The poem's theme is one of guilt, irony, and the grief of losing a child.

The mother feels responsible for the death of her child. The dramatic irony of the mother's view of church as being a "safe haven" for her child is presented to the reader through the mother's insistence that the young girl go to church to sing in the children's choir instead of letting her go to the Freedom March in Birmingham. While the poem does not seem to contain many poetic devices, it seems to be full of imagery. The poem is divided into eight stanzas with each stanza containing four lines (quatrain). Each stanza has an identical rhyme scheme (abcb).

The poem is written mostly in iambic tetrameter, though some of the feet actually transition from an iamb to a trochee and back. For example, the second line of the third stanza is a trochee when the daughter says, "Other children will go with me," obviously referring to the Freedom March. The poem is written in the third person. The first stanza is spoken by an innocent young girl that assumes a role of maturity with exuberance and youthfulness. The girl wants to participate in a Freedom March in downtown Birmingham rather than play with her friends.

The second stanza is spoken by the mother as she rejects the idea of her sweet little girl attending a Freedom March. She tells her daughter she may not go and tells of the ferocious dogs, clubs, hoses, guns, and jail that could possibly await her. The mother paints an accurate picture of the dangers of the Civil Rights Movement. The third stanza is spoken by the young daughter. She insists that she will not be alone and that other children will be there. She wants to march to "make [their] country free. She seems to understand the concept of the different standards people were held to because of their skin color and very nobly wanted to help change that. The fourth stanza is spoken by the mother and is the last stanza containing dialogue. The mother puts her foot down and tells her daughter she is not going to march but to sing in the children's choir at the church instead. The repetition of the first line of the mother's response shows that she is concerned about her daughter's interest in the Freedom March. On first inspection, the mother seems overbearing and cautious of her daughter.

The daughter's request to march with her friends could be considered a move toward independence, though she is made out to be very young. The mother is nowhere near ready to let her child be out from under her wing. After all, she is but a child. In order to occupy her child, the mother dresses her daughter up to go sing in the children's choir at church in the fifth stanza. She brushes her hair, bathes her, and puts on her gloves and shoes. Randall appeals to the senses in this stanza; he uses a metaphor here to inform the reader a visual that the family is African American.

She has "night-dark" hair and small brown hands. She is dressed in white and smells of sweet rose petals. The mother takes the girls mind off of the

Freedom March and fixes it on the children's choir. The tone is one of content. The sixth stanza is a turning point in the poem. The irony of church being a " sacred place" gives the mother a false sense of security. This sense of security brings a smile to the mother's face, and it would be the mother's last smile. The seventh stanza has a tone of fear and anxiety.

When the mother hears the explosion, she seems to automatically know something is wrong. She becomes frantic and tears fill her eyes as she ran through Birmingham shouting her little girl's name. Randall's metaphor of the mother's " wet and wild" eyes brings to mind a woman frantically searching for her child that she loves so dearly. The explosion is almost audible, one empathizes with the mother. One can visualize her running through the crowded streets of Birmingham. The eighth and final stanza is one of misery and woe.

The mother digs through all rubble from the explosion only to find her daughter's shoe. She knows her daughter could still be alive if she had let her go to the Freedom March; she feels directly responsible for her daughter's death. It is hard enough to lose a child at all, but to feel at fault for his or her death must be sickening. It is easy to think of all the people that died as another number to remember, but it is heart-breaking when you think of the individuals that went through this kind of pain because of racism.