

Ballad of birmingham analysis essay sample

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



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In the poem, “ Ballad of Birmingham”, Dudley Randall depicts the real historical events of the 1963 bombing of Martin Luther King Jr.’s church by white hate criminals in Birmingham, Alabama. Although this is the background and basis to the poem, I believe there is a deeper meaning that just that. Beneath the talk of innocence by the child and the protective nature of the mother, there lies an ironic situation. This poem is not only about the tragic events of a hate crime during this time, but by use of word choice, symbolism and imagery, shows a conflict between a child who understands the severity of racism in this time and a mother who is trying to protect her child from all of the problems.

The first clue that the tone of the poem is fateful and will end in tragedy is the title itself. Ballads are known to tell tragic, comic, or heroic stories by focusing on one central idea or event (Poetry Foundation). Since the subtitle, (On the Bombing of a Church in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963) is given as well, we know the setting of the poem. This also gives another clue that there will be a death or harmful event at some point during the poem. Along with the title and subtitle, the first stanza suggests an ending to the story:

“ Mother dear, may I go downtown
Instead of out to play,
And march the streets of Birmingham
In a Freedom March today?”

This child is aware of the current racial discriminations going on the world and wants to march in order to help. Given the knowledge of the child, it is foreshadowing that she will end up at the church at some point.

Examining the dialect inside the poem gives many examples of the conflict between this mother and child. After the initial question by the child in the first stanza, the mother replies with:

“ No, baby, no, you may not go,
For the dogs are fierce and wild.”

The “ dogs” in this line is a metaphor to describe the white hate criminals. She knows the danger that her daughter would be in by going out and walking in the march. But the daughter doesn’t understand completely the severity of the hate because of her remark:

“ And march the streets of Birmingham
To make our country free.”

The back and forth talking between the mother and child throughout the poem shows the different ways of thinking of the two of them. The daughter, although being called “ baby” by her mother, feels as though she isn’t too young to be going out and trying to help “ make her country free.” The mother, on the other hand, still sees her daughter as an innocent and oblivious to the current racial problems in Birmingham.

The first indication of irony in this poem comes in lines 14-16:

“ For I fear those guns will fire.
But you may go to church instead
And sing in the children’s choir.”

The mother believes that by sending her daughter to church, the daughter will be safe from the racial hatred. Given the subtitle at the beginning of the poem, it is known that the tragic event of this story takes place in a church.

Therefore, by trying to protect her daughter, she is actually sending her into a place of danger. The irony of this poem goes hand in hand with the multiple themes. One theme is that parents are not always going to be able to protect their children. Another theme, tragedy can happen at any time, no matter how careful one is trying to avoid it, is depicted in the previous lines, 14-16.

The use of imagery by Randall is important in showing the real innocence and purity of the young girl. By describing her as “ bathed rose petal sweet” it shows that she is pure and yet untouched by the racial hatred. The term rose, in literature, often means a sign on innocence and youth (Marien).

Lines 19-20:

“ And drawn white gloves on her small brown hands,
And white shoes on her feet.”

again suggests the innocence of the daughter. By using the color white repeatedly, it shows the importance of how unscathed the daughter is by the crimes during this time of the Civil Rights movement.

The climax of the poem takes place in lines 25-26, “ For when she heard the explosion, her eyes grew wet and wild.” Throughout the whole story, the mother has been doing everything she can to keep her daughter safe. She sends her to church rather than letting her daughter walk the streets of Birmingham with other children. But even though she has tried to protect her daughter, tragedy still strikes. The most ironic part of this poem comes in the end:

“ She clawed through bits of glass and brick,
Then lifted out a shoe.

“ O here’s the shoe my baby wore,
But, baby, where are you?”

The image of a mother digging through glass and brick to find her daughter, only to find a single shoe, summarizes the entire theme of the poem.

While “ Ballad of Birmingham” can be read as the real life events of a mother and daughter in the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama during the Civil Rights movement, by examining the imagery, symbolism and word choices used by Randall, it can also tell a tragic, yet ironic story. I believe that “ Ballad of Birmingham” shows the conflict between a protective mother and her innocent, yet knowledgeable, daughter.

Works Cited

Marien, Catherine. “ Language of Roses and Rose Symbolism.” Lilly’s Rose Garden. Lilly’s Rose Garden. Web. Poetry Foundation. “ Ballad.” Poetry Foundation, 2014. Poetry Foundation. Web. Randall, Dudley. “ Ballad of Birmingham.” Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama and Writing. Ed. X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia. 12th Edition. New York: Pearson, 2013.