

The "ballad of birmingham": a historical analysis



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The poem, “ Ballad of Birmingham” by Dudley Randall, is a piece of work that is incredibly important in history and for American literature because it depicts the disgusting reality that racism has created. Randall was born on January 14th of 1914; a native of Washington, D. C. who later transplanted to Detroit and worked as a librarian up until his retirement in 1974. “ His military service during the World War II is reflected in such poems as “ Coral Atoll”, and “ Pacific Epitaphs”. (Madgett, 2019) Randall also translated Russian poetry and through his translations, gained influences for his writing which is why his writing covers many different ideas and topics.

While his writing material is very broad, when he “...established the Broadside Press in 1965, which became an important publisher of African-American poets and political writers”. (The Poetry Fund) He gave the opportunity for many African-American political writers and poets, to voice their opinions and their perspectives on the world in which they found themselves in. They were able to expose the truth of what people all over experienced during a time in which racism, prejudice and social injustice were the cause of so much crime and death.

In the 1960's, Birmingham, Alabama, was known for being very aggressively racist towards the African-American community. It was during this time that Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed for leading a protest advocating for civil rights and against segregation. He made the people aware of the social injustice that was going on and exposed law enforcement by describing how they participated in police brutality against peaceful protesters. This helped fuel the civil rights movement and it gained more support. The 61st Street Baptist Church, in which the fatal bombing took place, was the location at <https://assignbuster.com/the-ballad-of-birmingham-a-historical-analysis/>

which civil rights movement leaders gathered and used as a starting point for their protests and marches. It was also the home to a predominantly African-American congregation. Prior to the bombing on the 15th of September of 1963, the church had been receiving bomb threats constantly by members of the KKK with the intention to interrupt their services and their meetings. During this time period, there was still a lot of racial segregation and the police was not of much help due to the fact that members of the force were also racist and abused their power through police brutality. The Governor, George Wallace, was not a supporter of desegregation, therefore, without the support of the state, this horrible behavior continued to happen without consequence.

In the poem, Randall describes a mother who is having a conversation with her daughter about her attending the march which took place on the day of the church bombing. The mother tells her daughter that she is not allowed to go because it is dangerous and instructs her to go to church instead, where she can be safe.

“ No, baby, no, you may not go,

For I fear those guns will fire.

But you may go to church instead

And sing in the children’s choir” (Randall, Dudley, 1963)

The mother’s attempt to protect her child from harm, resulted in her death because she could not have known that someone would have the horrible intention of bombing a sacred place such as the church. Randall conveys the

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pain and suffering that the mother goes through as she realizes that she sent her daughter to her death. He also shows the audience how it doesn't matter how respected a specific place is, people who are willing to cause harm, will not care what that place means to others' because their goal is to dissuade them to fight for what they deserve. Randall doesn't have to say too much in the poem and he doesn't have to disclose to the audience that the child is dead. The reader is led to that conclusion by what the mother finds in the ruins of the church. We are led to realize that her worst fears have come through and no matter how hard she tried to protect her daughter, death found her anyway.

The day of the bombing, the church was full of its members as well as children who were attending Sunday school. The explosion caused the church to cave in and kill four girls who had been in the bathroom in the church's basement. The death of those four girls is what inspired the poem from Dudley Randall, "Ballad of Birmingham". In a place that so many people hold faith in and feel safe, the most horrible crime was committed. Mothers lost their children and families lost people they loved because of the color of their skin. The poem conveys how it is nearly impossible to escape violence because it is everywhere, even in the most beloved places. "Randall's broadside reminds the audience of what is at stake in the struggle for civil rights...", (Sullivan, 1997), he points out to people how it doesn't matter where you are, what you believe in or why you're trying to change something; people who fight back against those ideas will do the most horrible things to obtain what they want and to make sure to stop what you are trying to accomplish. It doesn't matter if you go to a "safe" place to

conduct a protest or to talk about the changes you want to make in the world, nowhere is really safe. A church cannot protect you, your parents cannot protect you, and you yourself cannot avoid what others bad intentions will lead to. The bombing of that Birmingham church is proof of how strong hate can be and what it is capable of creating.

The events that inspired this poem convey how dangerous hateful divisiveness can be and how, unfortunately, when a place is as racially divided, like Birmingham, violence is sure to take place in every corner and how respect for anything is basically out the window. The actions taken by the KKK, who sought to stifle the civil rights movement and promote segregation to continue to divide the people of the United States, only gave more reason for people to fight against it. The events of that fatal day, caused people to riot because nothing was being done by the police or the government, to bring justice to those who deserved it. " Though Birmingham's white supremacists (and even certain individuals) were immediately suspected in the bombing, repeated calls for the perpetrators to be brought to justice went unanswered for more than a decade". (History. com) The blatant refusal of the government and local officials to resolve the situation gave people the reason and the fire to continue to protest and continue to fight for justice and to prove that those little girls' lives were not lost in vain. It was due to this event that the path was made to create the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as well as the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

History shows us how violence is inescapable and how racism and hate, through the pain, will pull people to fight together for the greater good. It also depicts how unfair and broken our justice system is and continues to be.

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The fact that the people responsible for the bombing were known by others and were not brought in for questioning, shows how strong the racism was during that time and how it dominated every aspect of the justice system, or lack thereof. While it is true that a lot has changed in the last couple of decades, we continue to see violence through racism. But what is also evident is that we can also see how these unspeakable actions are causing people to wake up and fight for others, especially for those who fall victims to these hate crimes. The "Ballad of Birmingham" will always be a piece of literary art that perfectly describes how unpredictable and how unsafe the world is. Unfortunately, to this day, it is still applicable to our world and it depicts the fear that parents go through every single day when they send their kids off to school or to the movies with their friends. It is also a very adequate example of the fear that every mother has of losing her child, but that we as caregivers, cannot control what others do nor what their intentions can cause. The world is an ugly place and there is nothing we can do except continue to fight against the violence until we can't anymore because it will always exist.

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