

Ballad of Birmingham

Poetry by DUDLEY RANDALL



Comparing Literature

Traditions Across Time: The Civil Rights Movement

Earlier in this part of Unit 4 you read poems that protested slavery. The following selection, Dudley Randall's "Ballad of Birmingham," is also a protest poem. Inspired by an actual historical event—the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham—this poem protests the violence inflicted on participants in the civil rights movement.

Points of Comparison As you read, think again how poetry can be an instrument of political change. Try to see connections between Randall's poem and the antislavery poems by Harper and Lowell.

Build Background

City of "Bombingham"

Birmingham is Alabama's largest city. In the spring of 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., led a huge demonstration to protest racial discrimination in Birmingham, which was then considered one of the most segregated cities of the South. Police dogs and fire hoses were used against the peaceful protesters, including children. Later that year, four young African-American girls were killed when the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed. A white supremacist, Robert Chambliss, was finally convicted of the murders in 1977.

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS BALLADS A **ballad** is a narrative poem that was originally meant to be sung. Traditional folk ballads are forms of oral literature, composed anonymously and passed down through performance. Early ballads often commemorated tragedies—ill-fated love affairs, wars, shipwrecks, and murders. Literary ballads imitate the style of folk ballads but are composed by one individual and written down as they are created. "Ballad of Birmingham" is a literary ballad. Notice how it resembles a song, and consider how it might make a tragic event live on in memory.

ACTIVE READING READING NARRATIVE POETRY A **narrative poem** is one that tells a story. Like a work of fiction it has characters, setting, and plot. However, a narrative poem, particularly a ballad, tells a story in a much more condensed form, without many of the details that aid a reader. You will have to make inferences as you read. The following strategies will help you get the most from the "Ballad of Birmingham."

- Read the poem aloud to appreciate its patterns of rhythm and rhyme.
- Infer who is speaking. Often ballads are structured as a conversation between two people.
- Watch for abrupt shifts in time. In ballads there are often no transitions to indicate that time has passed.
- Bring your background knowledge to the poem. The poet assumes his readers already know what happened in Birmingham.

READER'S NOTEBOOK If, after reading, you have questions about the events or references in the poem, write them down in your notebook.

Ballad of Birmingham

DUDLEY RANDALL

“Mother dear, may I go downtown
instead of out to play,
and march the streets of Birmingham
in a freedom march today?”

5 “No, baby, no, you may not go,
for the dogs are fierce and wild,
and clubs and hoses, guns and jails
ain’t good for a little child.”

10 “But, mother, I won’t be alone.
Other children will go with me,
and march the streets of Birmingham
to make our country free.”

15 “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.”

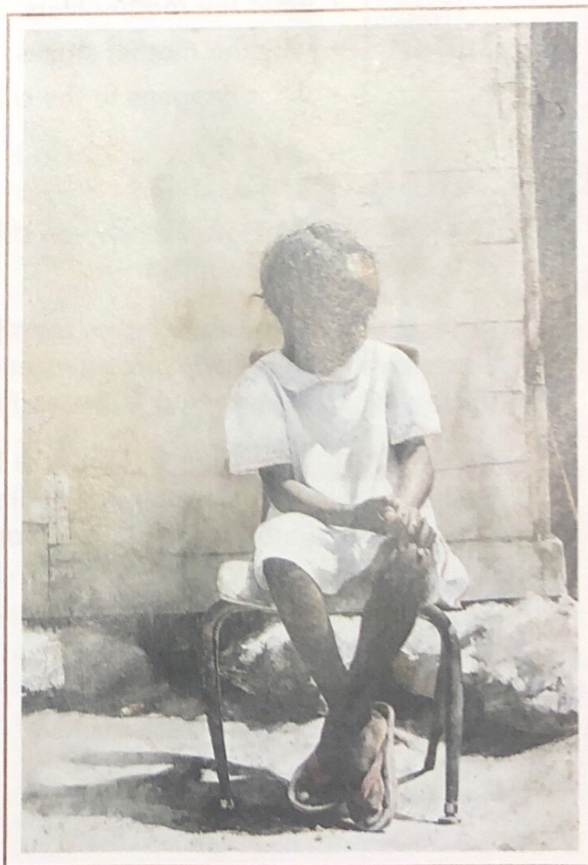
20 She has combed and brushed her nightdark hair,
and bathed rose petal sweet,
and drawn white gloves on her small brown hands,
and white shoes on her feet.

The mother smiled to know her child
was in the sacred place,
but that smile was the last smile
to come upon her face.

25 For when she heard the explosion,
her eyes grew wet and wild.
She raced through the streets of Birmingham
calling for her child.

30 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?”



Flip Flops and Lace (1991), Stephen Scott Young.
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John H. Surovek Gallery, Palm Beach, Florida.

Connect to the Literature

1. What Do You Think?

What was the first emotion you felt after reading the poem?

Comprehension Check

- Who is speaking in the poem?
- What do the speakers disagree about?
- What has happened at the end of the poem?

Think Critically

2. **ACTIVE READING** **READING NARRATIVE POETRY** What details did you have to infer because they were not directly explained in the poem?

3. What questions do you still have about the events in the poem?

4. What **ironies** do you see in the poem?

THINK ABOUT

- what the child would rather do than play
- what the mother fears
- why the mother smiles
- what happens to the child

Extend Interpretations

5. **The Writer's Style** How well do you think the traditional **style** of the poem fits its subject?

6. **Connect to Life** Why should the tragedy in Birmingham still be remembered today? Name a recent tragedy that you think will be remembered 40 years from now.

7. **Points of Comparison** Compare Randall's **purpose** and **audience** with the purpose and audience for "Stanzas on Freedom" (page 575) and "Free Labor" (page 576).

Literary Analysis

BALLADS As you recall, a **ballad** is a narrative poem that was originally meant to be sung. "Barbara Allan" and "John Henry" are traditional folk ballads. A literary ballad you may have studied is Longfellow's "The Wreck of the Hesperus," about a young woman killed in a shipwreck. A ballad typically has the following characteristics:

- It focuses on a single incident, beginning in the middle of a crisis and proceeding directly to the resolution, with only the sketchiest background information, character development, or descriptive detail.
- It consists of four-line stanzas, or **quatrains**, with **end rhyme** in the second and fourth lines.
- Each stanza has a regular **meter**, usually with four stressed syllables in the first and third lines and three stressed syllables in the second and fourth lines.
- Action is developed through **dialogue**.
- There is often **repetition** of words, phrases, and lines to emphasize ideas and to create suspense.

Paired Activity With a partner, go through the "Ballad of Birmingham" and note which of these ballad characteristics it shows. Be prepared to give examples. Then collaborate in writing your own ballad stanza, on any subject you choose. Share your stanza with the class.

Writing Options

1. Original Ballad Using what you have learned about the ballad form, write your own ballad to commemorate a true event. You might finish the ballad you began for the Literary Analysis activity.

2. Points of Comparison

Evaluate “Ballad of Birmingham” against either “Stanzas on Freedom” or “Free Labor.” In a critical essay, tell which you believe is a more effective protest poem, and why.

Writing Handbook

See page 1281: Compare and Contrast

Activities & Explorations

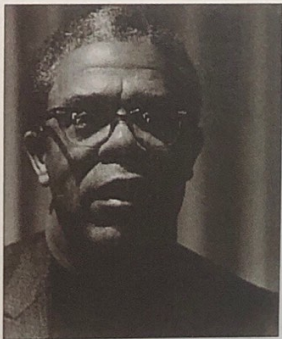
1. Learned by Heart Memorize “Ballad of Birmingham” and perform it for an audience who has never heard it. Monitor yourself as you prepare. What makes the poem easy to memorize? What lines do you want to emphasize for dramatic effect? ~ **SPEAKING AND LISTENING**

2. Sorrowful Song Set “Ballad of Birmingham” to music, either composing your own melody or adapting an existing one. Perform your song for the class. ~ **MUSIC**

3. Ballads of Today What contemporary rock, rap, or pop songs qualify as ballads? Bring in a recording of one such song, and in a lecture-demonstration, explain what elements make it a ballad. ~ **MUSIC**

Inquiry and Research

Find out more about the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church and the events in Birmingham that led up to and followed it. Spike Lee’s 1997 documentary “Four Little Girls” is an excellent source of information. You might also consult Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (page 1136).



Dudley Randall

1914-

Other Works

A Litany of Friends
After the Killing
Broadside Memories: Poets I Have Known

Poet of All Trades Dudley Randall, the first poet laureate of Detroit, Michigan, wrote his earliest poem when he was four years old. His first published poems appeared in the *Detroit Free Press* when he was only 13. Randall, who received his education at Wayne University (now Wayne State University), the University of Michigan, and the University of Ghana, worked for many years at different jobs before becoming a book publisher and an editor. He was employed as a foundry worker for 5 years, a mail carrier for 13 years, and a librarian for 24 years.

Four Little Girls “Ballad of Birmingham” was Randall’s response to the 1963 church bombing that killed four young girls in that city. This poem eventually led to the birth of Broadside Press,

which Randall founded and operated until 1977. As he explains, “Folk singer Jerry Moore of New York had it [“Ballad of Birmingham”] set to music, and I wanted to protect the rights to the poem by getting it copyrighted.” After Randall learned that leaflets could be copyrighted, he printed his poem on a single sheet of paper called a broadside. “Ballad of Birmingham” was the first title published by Broadside Press.

Publishing for the People As a publisher, Randall provided an important forum for numerous African-American poets. Under Randall’s direction, Broadside published nearly sixty books by such distinguished writers as Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), and Etheridge Knight.

Author Activity

If you can, obtain some books published by Broadside Press. What do the concerns and styles of the authors tell you about the period in which Randall was publishing?