

How Imagery Subverts the Concept of Safety in *Ballad of Birmingham*

“Ballad of Birmingham” is a poem that revolves around a little girl who would like to go downtown to take part in a freedom protest. Her mother, however, says that she cannot go because of the dangerous conditions outside. Her mother instead tells her to go to church, despite the little girl's constant explanations that she would not be alone. Defeated and showing respect for her mother, the little girl gets dressed and goes to church. Her mother is content that she will be fine at the church. Soon, her mother hears an explosion that sends her racing downtown in search of her daughter. Unfortunately, she finds her daughter's dress and shoes in the piles of rubble. She is left wondering where her daughter is.

The author employs imagery in most parts of the poem to trigger the emotions of the readers concerning the innocence of the little girl and the gravity of the explosion. The imagery serves to create a memory in the readers' minds, leaving them to form images after reading the whole poem.

The first use of imagery occurs in the second stanza, second and third lines. The little girl's mother describes the nature of the streets, which are, in her opinion, dangerous for a little girl's life: “...dogs are fierce and wild.” The little girl's mother is worried that the girl could lose her life to guns or get arrested as a result of the march for freedom: “...and clubs and hoses, guns and jails.” The imagery used in the third line depicts how the government, through the police, dealt with protesters. The line shows that the police would use clubs, hoses, and guns to thwart the protests. The police could also arrest the protesters and take them to jail. The readers thus

form an image of how the police dealt with the protesters, which eventually appeals to their emotions.

Another instance of imagery is in the fifth stanza, particularly for emotive purposes. The poet writes that the little girl "...bathed rose petal sweet" to display the girl as young and innocent. Although the previous stanzas portray the little girl as mature, the quotation reminds the reader that the girl is little, innocent, and vulnerable in the march for freedom. The quotation moreover portrays the little girl as delicate and defenseless against the danger and evil that lie outside. The little girl also has "...drawn white gloves on her small brown hands," which displays more innocence. The little girl's defenselessness and vulnerability add emotion to the poem.

Finally, another instance of imagery is found in the sixth stanza. We are told that the little girl's mother's eyes "...grew wet and wild, as she raced through the streets of Birmingham" after hearing the explosion. Instantly, the reader understands the tension that befalls the mother because of her conclusion about her daughter's death. The reader forms an image of the mother, with her eyes wet and wild. The line appeals to the readers' emotions in addition to giving them the memory of the traumatic events that followed the explosion. The poet moreover describes how the mother searched for her daughter in the rubble frantically: "...through bits of glass and brick." In a moment, the reader forms an image of the effects of the explosion, thus concluding that the girl has lost her life.

The poet effectively employs imagery to appeal to the memory and emotions of the readers. The poet has deliberately chosen and used descriptive words to present imagery that instantly enables the reader to form pictures with relative ease.

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