Ballad of Birmingham

SUMMARY

The poem begins as a young girl addresses her mother and asks if she can go into town rather than spend her free time playing, since she wants to protest in the streets of Birmingham, Alabama, as part of a march for racial equality.

In response, the mother says her daughter can't go because police dogs—which she implies will attack the protestors—are vicious and out of control. The Birmingham police also often use billy clubs and fire hoses against Black people, the mother says, and fire guns at and arrest protestors too. None of these things, the mother says, are suitable for young children like the daughter.

Undeterred by her mother's words, the daughter points out that she wouldn't be on her own at the march, since other children will be attending. She then emphasizes the importance of this kind of activism by saying that marching through the streets of Birmingham will help Black people achieve true freedom and racial equality in the United States.

Still, though, her mother refuses to let her go, saying that she's afraid the police will shoot her. She then suggests that her daughter go to church instead of the Freedom March, saying that the girl can spend her time singing in the children's choir.

The daughter then prepares for church, combing her dark hair, bathing until she smells as sweet as a rose, and putting on small white gloves and white shoes, which stand out against her brown skin.

The mother is happy knowing that her daughter has gone to church, which she views as a holy and safe place. However, this is the last smile to ever cross the mother's face.

This is because the mother suddenly hears an explosion, which instantly changes her facial expression from one of bliss to one of intense sorrow and fear. Desperate to know what has happened, the mother rushes through the city, yelling her daughter's name.

When she gets to the church, she discovers that it has been bombed, so she starts digging through the rubble. Eventually, she finds a shoe and exclaims that it is one of her daughter's. Stricken with grief, she calls out to the girl in desperation, asking where she has gone.

THEMES

RACISM AND VIOLENCE

"Ballad of Birmingham" spotlights the ever-present threat of racism and violence that Black people face in the United States. Set in the particularly racist environment of Birmingham, Alabama, in the early 1960s, the poem centers around a mother's fear that her daughter will be hurt or killed by white supremacists if she attends a march for racial equality. Because of this, the mother convinces her daughter to attend the seemingly safe environment of church instead. When the church is bombed by racists, though, the mother is forced to confront the harsh reality that *nowhere* is completely safe for Black people living in a racist society.

The poem features a young Black girl who wants to become politically involved by participating in demonstrations for racial equality known as Freedom Marches. With this in mind, it's worth acknowledging the historical backdrop of "Ballad of Birmingham," since Birmingham was an important city in the Civil Rights movement. Indeed, the prominent Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. turned his attention to the city because of its many discriminatory and segregationist policies. In response to the city's widespread racism, Dr. King and a number of other Black activists organized marches and protests, and part of this effort included encouraging children to become involved in the movement.

This, then, is the underlying context of the conversation between the daughter and her mother in the poem. To convince her mother to let her march, the daughter points out that she won't be alone. "Other children will go with me," she says, going on to imply that this sort of activism is necessary to help Black people in the United States achieve true freedom and equality.

However, this does little to sway her mother, who is too concerned about the young girl's safety to let her join the marches. The mother fears that white people will shoot her daughter if she joins a protest, believing that this kind of activism will inevitably put the girl in harm's way. Accordingly, she tells her daughter to go to church, thinking that this is a safe alternative.

Tragically, though, the mother is mistaken in thinking that there are *any* fully safe places for Black people within a racist society. What eases her worry is the idea that church is a "sacred place," a phrase that frames church as a haven that will protect her daughter from the racist violence she might otherwise encounter. However, the church itself becomes the target of this exact kind of violence when racists blow it up, killing the daughter and revealing the harrowing fact that even places that seem safe within the Black community are subject to the dangers of racism, especially when racist violence runs rampant throughout the broader community (as it did in Birmingham in the 1960s). In turn, the poem implies that Black people living in racist environments are in danger no matter *what* they do,

which is why it's important to stand up against racism like the daughter planned to do in the first place.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

PARENTING AND PROTECTION

The poem is driven by the mother's attempt to protect her daughter. When the daughter asks if she can take part in the Freedom March happening in Birmingham that day, the mother says no, but it's not because she doesn't believe in protesting or the goal of racial equality. Rather, it's because she wants to keep her child safe. In keeping with this, the poem presents the daughter as very young and emphasizes her youthful innocence, making it all the more heartbreaking when she dies in a violent, racist act. And though it would be easy to argue that the poem is a testament to the fact that it's impossible for parents to fully protect their children, it is probably more accurate to view it as a simple look at the pain and sorrow of losing a child—especially to something as troubling and hateful as racism.

In the conversation between the mother and daughter, readers might notice that the mother wants to preserve the girl's youth even as the girl tries to branch out into the adult world. This is made evident by the way the daughter asks if she can go to a Freedom March, specifically saying that she'd like to do this instead of going "out to play." In this moment, a contrast emerges between the very adult act of protesting and the more childish act of playing, suggesting that the daughter is eager to engage in adult activities.

Her mother, on the other hand, doesn't want her to grow up so fast. This is made apparent by the fact that she responds to the daughter's question by saying, "No, baby, no, you may not go." When the mother refers to her daughter as "baby," it becomes clear that she wants to preserve the girl's innocence—a dynamic that becomes all the more obvious when she suggests that the dangers associated with protesting aren't suited for a "little child." Simply put, the mother isn't ready to let go of her daughter, whom she wants to protect above all else.

Yet the mother's attempt to keep her daughter out of harm's way is unsuccessful, since the girl dies in an act of racist violence. This terrible outcome might imply that fully protecting children from danger is an impossible task, especially when it comes to the threat of racism. This is certainly one of the poem's messages, but what's even more notable is the raw emotion on display in the aftermath of the girl's death, as the mother grieves the loss of her daughter. Indeed, the poem suggests that the mother never smiles again in her entire life—a fact that underscores just how much her daughter meant to her and how harrowing it is for her to consider the fact that she was, in the end, unable to protect her. In this regard, the poem illustrates the sheer grief of losing a child to senseless acts of racist violence.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-8
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 21-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

"Mother dear, may ...
... Freedom March today?"

The poem begins with an inscription that alerts readers to important contextual information—namely, that "Ballad of Birmingham" is based on the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. This event was an important and devastating moment in the Civil Rights Movement, when white supremacists bombed a predominantly Black church called the 16th Street Baptist Church, ultimately killing four young Black girls in the process.

With this in mind, the first stanza makes it clear that the poem features a conversation between one of these young girls and her mother, as the girl asks if she can go "downtown" to join a demonstration for racial equality (referred to here as a Freedom March) instead of going out to "play." Right away, a notable juxtaposition arises between the childish act of playing and the more mature act of protesting. Indeed, the daughter seems eager to leave behind childish games so that she can march in the streets and fight for racial equality like an adult.

The early 1960s were tumultuous but incredibly important in southern cities like Birmingham, as Civil Rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called for nonviolent action to stand up to the racism that was so pervasive at that time (and is unfortunately very much alive in contemporary society, too). Part of Dr. King's efforts in Birmingham included recruiting politically active young people from nearby schools, calling upon Black children to join marches to protest the city's segregationist policies and racist police commissioner.

This, then, is most likely why the daughter in "Ballad of Birmingham" is so eager to become involved in the activism taking place in her city. In order to convince her mother, she calls her "Mother dear," as if doing this will endear her to her mother. Accordingly, readers will perhaps sense that the daughter expects her mother to say she can't go to the marches, so she addresses her affectionately in the hopes of convincing her. It's also the case that calling her mother "dear" makes the daughter sound somewhat sophisticated, once more suggesting that she wants to distance herself from childish

behaviors in order to more fully enter the adult world. In this sense, it's possible that her mature tone is an attempt to convince her mother that she's mature enough to participate in an important protest.

In keeping with this, the young girl uses certain poetic devices to further enhance the sound of her speech, making her sound even more sophisticated and mature. For instance, she uses alliteration throughout the first stanza, repeating the /m/ sound in words like "Mother," "may," and "march." In fact, she also uses consonance to double down on this /m/ sound, meaning that the sound is quite prominent:

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

In addition to this alliteration and consonance, the girl also uses assonance to repeat the long /ee/ sound in words like "dear," "streets," and "Freedom." This, in turn, adds a certain musicality that makes her sound even more adult, which is the exact effect she hopes her mother will register, since this might convince her mother to let her go to the march.

On a technical level, it's also worth noting that these first four lines establish the poem's overall rhythm, since they are written in common meter, a meter in which the lines alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. A line of iambic tetrameter includes four iambs, which are metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (four da-DUMs). A line of iambic trimeter, on the other hand, includes only *three* iambs (three da-DUMs). Lastly, these lines also establish the poem's ABCB rhyme scheme, which is a common scheme used in ballads like this one.

LINES 5-8

"No, baby, no, ...
... a little child."

In the second stanza, the mother responds to her daughter by saying that she's not allowed to attend the Freedom March in downtown Birmingham. The specific way that the mother says no to her daughter is worth noting, since she makes use of diacope to repeat the word "no" twice within one line:

> "No, baby, no, you may not go,

The repetition of the word "no" is important because it underscores just how unwilling the mother is to let her daughter venture into the adult world of activism. Furthermore, the fact that the mother calls the daughter "baby" is significant because it infantilizes the daughter, who wants to be seen as mature. Consequently, the juxtaposition between the daughter's desire to engage with the adult world and the mother's desire to keep her safe by treating her like a child becomes especially noticeable.

As the stanza progresses, the mother clarifies why she doesn't want her young daughter to attend the Freedom March. Listing all the ways in which the environment of a protest in Birmingham is dangerous, she references vicious police dogs that the police force sics on activists. She also mentions the billy clubs that police officers use to beat protestors and the fire hoses they spray at crowds of demonstrators—all things that really happened on a regular basis during the Civil Rights Movement in the South.

Lastly, the mother expresses her fear that attending the march might make her daughter the target of police guns or might land her in jail. And all of these things, she adds, "aren't good for a little child." Once again, then, she reiterates her concern for her child and her child's innocence. She doesn't believe that children belong in a perilous environment like the one she envisions the Freedom March to be.

The mother's words are quite assonant, as the long /o/ sound weaves its way through line 5: "No, baby, no, you may not go." This creates an internal rhyme between "no" and "go" that gives her speech a sing-song quality, as if she has repeated this sentiment so many times that it has started to sound like a nursery rhyme or some other well-worn phrase.

There is also a fair amount of consonance in these lines. For instance, the blunt /d/ sound, the sibilant /s/, and the /z/ sound all pattern their way through the rest of the stanza:

> For the dogs are fierce and wild,
> And clubs and hoses, guns and jails
> Aren't good for a little child."

The combination of these consonant sounds creates a tough but smooth sound that reflects the mother's overall tone. Indeed, the mother's worry is conveyed by the hard, edgy /d/ sound, but her soothing, parental attitude comes through with the softer /s/ and /z/ sounds. In turn, readers sense a certain tension between her love for her daughter and her strict refusal to let the girl do what she wants.

LINES 9-12

"But, mother, I ...
... our country free."

The poem's third stanza features the daughter's response to her mother, who has just refused to let her go to the Freedom March in downtown Birmingham. To make her case, the daughter emphasizes that she won't be alone, pointing out that other children will also be at the march. In this moment, then, the poem alludes to the fact that Dr. King organized many schoolchildren, encouraging them to join the fight for racial equality in Birmingham, the South, and the country at large.

In a way, the daughter uses this allusion to Dr. King's encouragement as a rhetorical device, subtly implying that her mother will be actively contributing to the Civil Rights Movement simply by letting her daughter attend the march. Going on, the daughter reminds her mother of the reason she and other children want to march through "the streets of Birmingham": to advocate for true freedom for Black people in the United States. By saying this, the daughter tries to underscore the importance of the Freedom Marches, ultimately making it harder for her mother to forbid her from going.

As convincing as the daughter's points are, though, her tone sounds somewhat pleading. This, at least, is the case in line 9, which includes two caesuras:

> But, || mother, || I won't be alone.

These caesuras give the line a somewhat halting rhythm, breaking up the first two metrical feet. Indeed, this line is in iambic tetrameter, meaning that it contains four iambs, which are feet containing an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). Normally, this creates an easy, somewhat bouncy rhythm. Here, however, the caesuras appear in the middle of the first two iambs, separating the unstressed syllable from the stressed syllable in both cases. The first foot, for example, looks like this:

> But, || moth-

And the second foot looks like this:

> -er, || I

These caesuras are quite strongly felt because they each appear in the middle of a foot, and this ultimately gives the line a choppy quality. In turn, the daughter's otherwise persuasive arguments about why she should be allowed to protest take on a somewhat childish tone.

At the same time, though, the daughter's way of speaking in lines 10 through 12 becomes more confident and sophisticated. Indeed, she brings back the line "And march the streets of Birmingham," which originally appeared in the first stanza but now becomes a kind of refrain in the poem. In turn, the daughter emphasizes the importance of marching while also demonstrating her ability to stay focused on her desire to change the country.

What's more, she repeats the assonant long /ee/ sound throughout the stanza, and this gives her words an assured tone that juxtaposes the halting rhythm of line 9. In fact, when she uses the /ee/ sound in the stanza's final line by saying "To make our country free," she creates an echo that not only enhances the stanza's ABCB rhyme scheme, but also rivals the musicality that the mother set forth in the line "No, baby, no, you may not go." In this way, it becomes clear that—despite her youth—the daughter is a confident negotiator who believes in the value of protest and doesn't want to back down simply because her mother worries about her.

LINES 13-16

> *"No, baby, no, ...*
> *... the children's choir."*

By repeating the line "No, baby, no, you may not go," the mother counters the daughter's refrain by establishing one of her own. Once again, then, a juxtaposition arises between their points of view, as the daughter's refrain focuses on the importance of marching through the streets while the mother's refrain focuses on treating her daughter like a "baby." This is on the one hand a term of endearment, evidencing the mother's love for her child. At the same time, by calling her "baby" and forbidding her from going to the Freedom March, the mother insists on trying to maintain her daughter's innocence.

The meter of line 13 is also worth considering, since the first caesura forces emphasis onto the word "no," turning the first foot into a trochee (stressed-unstressed) instead of an iamb (unstressed-stressed). As such, the line reads like this:

> No, || baby, || no, || you may not go

Most notably, the first caesura puts a very prominent stress on the word "no," adding to the mother's strict refusal to let her daughter attend the march.

After emphasizing her daughter's youth and refusing to let her protest, the mother adds a concrete reason why she doesn't want the young girl to march downtown: she's afraid that white supremacists will shoot her. Unfortunately, this is a very valid fear, since many Black people marching for racial equality were indeed hurt and killed during the Civil Rights Movement (in fact, when Dr. King first came to Birmingham to organize against segregation, he told a number of his followers that he suspected they wouldn't all survive their fight for freedom and equality).

To more thoroughly convey her emotions, the mother uses alliteration in line 14, repeating the /f/ sound three times:

> For I fear those guns will fire.

This rapid repetition of the /f/ sound creates a sense of urgency, one that makes the mother sound passionate and frightened. This, in turn, makes it easier for readers to empathize with the mother's fear, ultimately underlining the fact that all she wants to do is protect her daughter, whom she sees as especially vulnerable to the horrors of racist violence.

Because of this desire to protect her daughter, the mother says that she can go to church instead of the Freedom March,

suggesting that she go sing in the children's choir. Consequently, this creates even more juxtaposition within the poem, as the mother contrasts the dangerous image of guns firing at marchers with the safe, calm environment of a children's choir singing in church.

LINES 17-20

She has combed ...
... on her feet.

The poem shifts away from the mother and daughter's conversation, as an unidentified speaker narrates the rest of the poem. This speaker describes the daughter and her process of getting ready for church, making it clear that she has followed her mother's instructions to attend church instead of the Freedom March.

It's worth paying attention to the speaker's careful descriptions of the daughter, whose preparations for church seem so conscientious and pure-hearted that it's hard not to see her as admirably young and innocent. In other words, the speaker describes the girl in a way that encourages readers to see her in the same way that her mother sees her: as perfect, precious, and delicate.

Indeed, the white gloves and shoes that the young girl wears seem somehow angelic, as if she were a small cherub. This only emphasizes the image of her as innocent and vulnerable, framing her as a perfect child who smells like the sweetness of rose petals. What's more, it's worth noting that most protestors would not wear white gloves and white shoes to a march—a fact that creates yet another instance of juxtaposition in the poem, since the girl is now dressed in a way that completely contrasts the way she would most likely have dressed if she were to have gone to the march like she wanted.

The speaker also describes the daughter's hair as "night-dark," using this metaphorical description to suggest that it is as dark as the night itself. Furthermore, the speaker goes out of the way to describe the daughter's hands as "small" and "brown." This use of the word "small" is important in that it emphasizes her youth and innocence, never letting readers forget that she is still just a child—and thus making her desire to fight for freedom all the more powerful and poignant. Noting the fact that her hands are "brown," meanwhile, is actually the first time that the poem has specifically called attention to the girl's race (though as much could be inferred from the introduction to the poem).

These lines also continue the poem's use of common meter, which consists of alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. Again, a line of iambic tetrameter is made up of four iambs, which include an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). Iambic trimeter, on the other hand, includes only three iambs. However, the poem doesn't always strictly adhere to this iambic rhythm, since some lines occasionally swap in other metrical feet in place of an iamb. For example, consider line 17:

> She has combed | and brushed | her night- | dark hair

Instead of beginning with an iamb, this line starts out with an anapest, which is a foot made up of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable (da-da-DUM). The speaker also uses an anapest in line 19, plus two spondees (DUM-DUM):

> And drawn | white gloves | on her small | brown hands

The third foot of this line is an anapest ("on her small"). This enables the speaker to place extra emphasis the word "small" by delaying the stress with an extra syllable. In turn, readers are once more invited to view the daughter as especially young, thereby aligning them with the mother's point of view and her desire to keep the girl safe.

LINES 21-24

The mother smiled ...
... upon her face.

In line 21, the speaker spotlights the mother's happiness by illustrating how pleased she is to know that her daughter went to church instead of the Freedom March. This happiness and reassurance is reflected by the internal rhyme that appears between the word "smiled" and the word "child," ultimately giving the stanza's first line a musical sound that is quite satisfying. In turn, readers can more thoroughly feel the mother's relief at the idea that her daughter is completely safe in church, which she sees as a "sacred place."

The phrase "sacred place" is also worth noting because it portrays the church as a safe haven, the kind of place where nothing bad could ever happen. In the same way that the daughter herself is precious in the mother's eyes, then, the church is cast as a "sacred," cherished place.

Because of the inscription at the beginning of the poem, though, readers know that the church isn't as safe and untouchable as the mother thinks. Again, the entire poem is based on the bombing of a Birmingham church in 1963. This, in turn, makes sense of the assertion in lines 23 and 24 that this moment is the last time the mother smiles in her entire life. Indeed, the first half of this stanza focuses on the mother's contentment surrounding the fact that her daughter is safe, but the second half acknowledges that this isn't actually the case because, in reality, white supremacists have targeted the church, thereby putting the young girl in grave danger.

Although the rest of the poem follows an ABCB rhyme scheme, this stanza gestures toward an ABAB rhyme scheme, since the words "child" and "smile" are slant rhymes. In this way, the stanza feels oddly unified with itself even though lines 21 and 22 are at odds with lines 23 and 24, since the first half of the

stanza features the mother's happiness that her daughter is safe and the second half hints at the fact that her daughter isn't safe at all.

Despite this sense of unity created by the slight alteration to the rhyme scheme, though, a glaring juxtaposition emerges between the mother's expectations and reality, making it hard to ignore the painful fact that she is wrong to think there's *anywhere* her daughter will be completely safe, especially in the context of a racist society.

LINES 25-28

For when she ...
... for her child.

Line 25 clarifies why the mother's smile in the previous stanza is the last one to ever cross her face, as the speaker notes that the mother hears an explosion. Taken alongside the poem's inscription about the 1963 bombing of a Birmingham church, it becomes clear that the church where the mother sent her daughter has just been bombed.

This presents readers with a tragic kind of irony, since the mother's attempt to protect her daughter from racist violence ultimately ends up putting the daughter in danger. Needless to say, this is not the mother's fault; it would be impossible for her to have anticipated that white supremacists would bomb the church, a place that is typically considered safe from the horrors of the outside world. And yet, there's no escaping the notion that the daughter might have been safer if she had attended the Freedom March, which her mother originally thought would put her in harm's way. On the whole, this dynamic illustrates the disturbing fact that *nowhere* is fully safe for Black people living in racist societies.

Although this is an important dynamic, the poem also focuses on something a bit more immediate: the mother's fear that her daughter has been killed. Indeed, the speaker describes the mother's eyes by saying that they become "wet and wild," using alliteration by repeating the /w/ sound to intensify this moment of terror. The speaker also uses consonance in line 27, repeating the /r/ sound:

> She raced through the streets of Birmingham

Like the alliterative /w/ sound in line 26, this consonance increases the sense of urgency and anticipation by intensifying the sound of the language, thereby vividly conveying the mother's fear.

In addition, it's noticeable that the speaker end-stops lines 26 and 28, since this segments the stanza into two halves and emphasizes the rhyme scheme, since the words "wild" and "child" are followed by prominent pauses. All in all, this accentuates the rhymes in a way that gives the stanza a rapid sound of progression, as the lines successively move from one rhyme to the next in a manner that mimics the mother's hurried journey to see whether or not her daughter has been harmed in the bombing.

LINES 29-32

She clawed through ...
... where are you?"

When the mother reaches the church, she discovers that it has indeed been bombed. Stricken with grief and horror, she searches the rubble for her daughter, desperately trying to find her. Her frantic terror is emphasized in line 29 by the speaker's use of cacophony, as the /k/ and /t/ sounds pair with the repeated /s/ sound to create a harsh, sharp effect:

> She clawed through bits of glass and brick

In addition to these abrasive sounds, the speaker also alliterates the /b/ sound in "bits" and "brick," adding a blunt quality that only increases the rather unpleasant sound of the line. As a result, readers are able to more thoroughly pick up on the mother's terror and grief.

And after digging through the remains of the church, the mother finally finds her daughter's shoe. It's worth remembering that this shoe was first mentioned in the sixth stanza, when it was presented as an adornment that makes the daughter seem innocent and cherub-like. In a way, this shoe represented the protection the girl's mother thought she was giving her daughter by forcing her to go to church instead of the Freedom March.

Now, though, it is little more than a sign that her daughter has been killed, since it is the only trace of her that her mother can find. This, in turn, illustrates that nothing the mother could have done would have fully protected the girl from the threat of racist violence, which is disturbingly ever-present in the context of Birmingham in the 1960s.

The poem's final two lines ("O, here's ... are you?") feature the assonant /ee/ sound in words like "here's" and "baby." This sound is interwoven with the consonant /b/ sound, which also appears in the word "baby" (a word that occurs once in each line). Lastly, the final two lines also include the alliterative /w/ sound in words like "wore" and "where." Taken together, all of these sounds build a very rich sonic that aligns with the overwhelming emotions the mother experiences in the aftermath of her daughter's death, ultimately encouraging readers to fully step into the mother's sorrow to feel what it would be like to lose a child to racist violence after trying so hard to protect her from this exact fate.

SYMBOLS

THE WHITE GLOVES AND SHOES

The white gloves and shoes that the daughter wears to church are important symbols of her childhood innocence and, in many ways, of her mother's desire to protect her. They represent a certain kind of angelic purity, which the mother hopes she can preserve by sending her daughter to sing in the children's choir at church instead of letting her attend the Freedom March in downtown Birmingham.

These items of clothing are clean and pristine, further reflecting the little girl's own purity and essential goodness—qualities that, importantly, do not protect her from racist violence. Indeed, the fact that the mother finds one of the shoes in the rubble of the bombed out church illustrates the horrific reality that racists would never treat the little girl with dignity and respect, no matter how innocent or presentable she seemed. This, in turn, implies support for the protests, which sought to challenge and change a racist society.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "And drawn white gloves on her small brown hands, / And white shoes on her feet."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

There are moments alliteration throughout the poem. Take the /m/ sounds in the first line, which immediately give the poem a musical quality and make the daughter's words sound catchy and sweet:

> "Mother dear, may I go downtown

However, her mother remains unconvinced and even uses the daughter's tactic against her by setting forth her own alliterative line, repeating the /n/ sound in a way that sounds nearly as musical as the daughter's opening line:

> No, baby, no, you may not go

Like the daughter, the mother uses alliteration to enhance the sound and cadence of her words. To that end, the mother's alliterative musicality gives readers the sense that she has said this phrase time and again. In turn, alliteration alerts readers to the dynamic at play between the daughter and her mother, both of whom want to convince the other as they argue about whether the daughter should be allowed to attend the Freedom March.

Other moments of alliteration appear throughout the poem as well, such as when the unidentified speaker uses the phrase "wet and wild" to describe the mother's eyes in line 26: "Her eyes grew wet and wild." Similarly, the speaker repeats the /b/ sound in line 29 in reference to the mother's search for her daughter in the rubble of the church bombing: "She clawed through bits of glass and brick." In both cases, the speaker uses alliteration to intensify the auditory aspect of the line, thereby adding a sense of urgency to the poem's most emotionally charged moments.

In keeping with this, the speaker repeats the /b/ and /w/ sounds in the last two lines:

> "O, here's the shoe my baby wore,
> But, baby, where are you?"

Above all, this kind of alliteration heightens the desperation in the mother's voice. As a result, readers are able to more thoroughly feel her pain, regret, and horror.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Mother," "dear," "may"
- **Line 3:** "march"
- **Line 4:** "March"
- **Line 5:** "No," "no," "not"
- **Line 6:** "For," "fierce"
- **Line 10:** "will," "with"
- **Line 11:** "march"
- **Line 12:** "make"
- **Line 13:** "No," "no," "not"
- **Line 14:** "For," "fear," "fire"
- **Line 15:** "church"
- **Line 16:** "children's"
- **Line 21:** "smiled"
- **Line 22:** "sacred"
- **Line 23:** "smile," "smile"
- **Line 26:** "wet," "wild"
- **Line 29:** "bits," "brick"
- **Line 31:** "baby," "wore"
- **Line 32:** "But," "baby," "where"

ASSONANCE

The assonance in "Ballad of Birmingham" is notable because it accentuates the poem's overall sound while also enhancing or building upon its rhyme scheme. Indeed, each stanza includes some form of assonance, as the speaker extends certain sounds over the course of several lines.

For instance, the sixth stanza ("The mother ... her face") features the long /i/ sound as well as the long /a/ sound, both of which appear several times:

> The mother smiled to know her child

Was in the sacred place,
But that smile was the last smile
To come upon her face.

These assonant repetitions make the entire stanza sound musical and unified with itself. What's more, the repeated long /i/ sound adds to the poem's rhyme scheme by creating an internal rhyme in the line "The mother smiled to know her child." Because the poem follows an ABCB rhyme scheme, the first line of each stanza doesn't generally feature a rhyme. And yet, the assonance in this moment enables the speaker to infuse an otherwise unrhymed line with an internal rhyme. In fact, the long /i/ sound of the word "child" at the end of the first line also creates a slant rhyme with the word "smile" at the end of the third line, meaning that the stanza almost takes on an ABAB rhyme scheme instead of an ABCB rhyme scheme.

In addition, the refrain that the mother repeats in stanzas two ("No, baby ... little child") and four ("No, baby ... children's choir") includes three long /o/ sounds and two long /a/ sounds:

No, baby, no, you may not go

Once again, this use of assonance creates several internal rhymes, as the word "no" repeats twice and rhymes with "go." As discussed in the line-by-line analysis of this guide, this enhances the musicality of the refrain, ultimately making it sound like it's something the mother has said to her daughter over and over again.

Furthermore, the final stanza ("She clawed ... are you?") features some of the most prominent assonance in the entire poem, as the /oo/, short /i/, and long /ee/ sounds are interwoven throughout all four lines:

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?"

By using assonance, the speaker weaves the /oo/ sound throughout the stanza in words like "through," "shoe," and you." Meanwhile, the other assonant syllables (the short /i/ and /ee/) also add to the overall soundscape. In this regard, assonance makes the final stanza sound especially tight-knit and poetic, accentuating the language in a way that communicates the intensity of this devastating moment.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "may," "downtown"
- **Line 2:** "out," "play"
- **Line 3:** "streets"
- **Line 4:** "Freedom," "today"
- **Line 5:** "No," "baby," "no," "may," "go"
- **Line 6:** "wild"
- **Line 7:** "clubs," "guns"
- **Line 8:** "child"
- **Line 9:** "alone"
- **Line 10:** "go," "me"
- **Line 11:** "streets"
- **Line 12:** "country," "free"
- **Line 13:** "No," "baby," "no," "may," "go"
- **Line 14:** "fire"
- **Line 16:** "choir"
- **Line 18:** "sweet"
- **Line 20:** "feet"
- **Line 21:** "smiled," "child"
- **Line 22:** "sacred," "place"
- **Line 23:** "smile," "smile"
- **Line 24:** "face"
- **Line 26:** "wild"
- **Line 28:** "child"
- **Line 29:** "through," "bits," "brick"
- **Line 30:** "lifted," "shoe"
- **Line 31:** "here's," "shoe," "baby"
- **Line 32:** "baby," "you"

CAESURA

The caesuras in "Ballad of Birmingham" are closely tied to the patterns of speech that appear in the dialogue between the mother and her daughter. In fact, there are no caesuras in the stanzas in which the unidentified speaker is the one delivering the words. Rather, the caesuras appear as pauses in the things that the mother and daughter say to one another as they argue about whether the daughter should be allowed to go to the Freedom March.

This is evident right away, as the daughter pauses briefly after addressing her mother:

Mother dear, || may I go downtown

In this moment, the caesura separates the daughter's address to her mother from the question she's about to ask. It also emphasizes the word "dear," calling attention to the fact that the daughter has gone out of her way to use this respectful term to refer to her own mother. This, in turn, reveals the extent to which she hopes to endear herself to her mother and prove that she's mature, two things that might help her convince her mother that she's responsible enough to attend the protest.

Interestingly enough, the mother's response also strategically employs caesuras. In this case, the mother inserts small pauses between her words to add subtle emphasis on the word "no":

"No, || baby, || no, || you may not go

Without the first caesura in this line, the first occurrence of the word "no" would not receive a stress. Instead, the line would adhere to the poem's iambic pattern, since the majority of the poem uses iambs, which are metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). Without the first two caesuras in this line, for example, the mother's response would scan like this: "No baby no." However, the presence of the caesuras force the stresses onto both occurrences of the word "no," so that it sounds like the mother is strongly refusing the daughter's request by saying "No, baby, no." In this way, the caesuras illustrate just how uncomfortable the mother is with the idea of letting her daughter attend what she believes will be a dangerous protest.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dear, may"
- **Line 5:** "No, baby," ", no," ", you"
- **Line 7:** "hoses, guns"
- **Line 9:** "But, mother," ", I"
- **Line 13:** "No, baby," ", no," ", you"
- **Line 31:** "O, here's"
- **Line 32:** "But, baby," ", where"

CACOPHONY

In the final stanza ("She has ... on her feet"), the speaker uses cacophony to reflect the mother's horror and grief as she searches for her daughter in the rubble of the bombed out church. As the mother frantically tries to find her daughter, the speaker uses words that are full of sharp consonant sounds. In particular, the speaker repeats the /k/ and /t/ sounds:

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

The /k/ and /t/ sounds are very noticeable here, since they can be so harsh and abrasive. To add to this intense effect, the speaker uses other strong consonants like the /w/ and /r/ sounds. And though the sibilant /s/ isn't necessarily considered cacophonous, in this context the hissing that appears in words like "bits" and "glass" pairs with the grating noise of the /k/ and the /t/ to create an even more unsettling overall effect. Indeed, the /k/, /t/, and /s/ sounds come together in a way that sounds overwhelming, perhaps imitating the sound of glass crunching underfoot or flames crackling all around. In this sense, then, cacophony not only helps the speaker better convey the mother's shock and sorrow, but also what it would be like to witness the awful aftermath of this racist attack on the church.

Where Cacophony appears in the poem:

- **Line 29:** "She clawed through bits of glass and brick,"
- **Line 30:** "Then lifted out a shoe."

CONSONANCE

Consonance is very common through ought the poem. This is evident as early as the first line, when the daughter repeats the /m/, /d/, /r/ and /n/ sounds in quick succession:

"Mother dear, may I go downtown

Combined with the daughter's use of alliteration, this consonance gives the opening line a satisfyingly musical sound.

Consonance also subtly alerts readers to the heightened stakes that develop later in the poem, when the speaker describes what it's like for the mother to hear the explosion of the nearby church. In this section of the poem, the speaker repeats the consonant /w/ sound alongside the /r/, /d/, and /l/ sounds:

For when she heard the explosion,
Her eyes grew wet and wild.

This is a pivotal moment in the poem, since the mother has just heard the explosion but doesn't yet know whether or not the blast killed her daughter. The consonance, then, accentuates the stress and tension already at play in these lines, ultimately slowing readers down by forcing them to struggle over unwieldy syllables like the /r/ and /w/ sounds, which, when paired with one another, disrupt the poem's flow. In turn, consonance escalates the sense of anticipation that already exists, giving readers the same feeling of impatience and fear that the mother undoubtedly feels as she runs to see if her daughter has been killed.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Mother," "dear," "may," "downtown"
- **Line 2:** "Instead," "out"
- **Line 3:** "march," "streets," "Birmingham"
- **Line 4:** "Freedom," "March," "today"
- **Line 5:** "No," "baby," "no," "may," "not"
- **Line 6:** "For," "dogs," "are," "fierce," "wild"
- **Line 7:** "clubs," "hoses," "guns," "jails"
- **Line 8:** "good," "little," "child"
- **Line 9:** "But," "mother," "won't," "be," "alone"
- **Line 10:** "Other," "children," "will," "with," "me"
- **Line 11:** "march," "streets," "Birmingham"
- **Line 12:** "To," "make," "our," "country," "free"
- **Line 13:** "No," "baby," "no," "may," "not," "go"
- **Line 14:** "For," "fear," "those," "guns," "fire"
- **Line 15:** "church," "instead"
- **Line 16:** "sing," "children's"

- **Line 17:** “combed,” “brushed,” “her,” “dark,” “hair”
- **Line 18:** “sweet”
- **Line 19:** “drawn,” “white,” “gloves,” “brown,” “hands”
- **Line 20:** “white,” “shoes”
- **Line 21:** “mother,” “smiled,” “her,” “child”
- **Line 22:** “sacred,” “place”
- **Line 23:** “But,” “that,” “smile,” “the,” “last,” “smile”
- **Line 24:** “face”
- **Line 25:** “For,” “when,” “heard,” “explosion”
- **Line 26:** “Her,” “grew,” “wet,” “wild”
- **Line 27:** “raced,” “through,” “streets”
- **Line 28:** “Calling,” “for,” “her,” “child”
- **Line 29:** “She,” “clawed,” “through,” “bits,” “glass,” “brick”
- **Line 30:** “Then,” “lifted,” “shoe”
- **Line 31:** “here’s,” “shoe,” “baby,” “wore”
- **Line 32:** “But,” “baby,” “where,” “are”

ENJAMBMENT

Most of the lines in "Ballad of Birmingham" are end-stopped, but there are several notable moments of enjambment. One of the most prominent instances of enjambment appears in the second stanza ("'No, baby ... little child'") when the mother lists the things that might take place at the Freedom March—things she believes aren't suited for young children:

> For the dogs are fierce and wild,
> And clubs and hoses, guns and jails
> Aren't good for a little child.

The third line of this stanza runs seamlessly into the fourth line, creating enjambment. The phrase "Aren't good for a little child" doesn't make sense without what comes before it—namely, the list of everything the mother thinks isn't good "for a little child," including "clubs and hoses, guns and jails." In this case, then, it's very clear that the third line of the stanza is closely tied to the fourth line.

On the whole, though, there are not that many moments of enjambment throughout the poem. For this reason, it is especially apparent in the sixth stanza ("The mother smiled ... upon her face") when the speaker uses enjambment twice within just four lines:

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

The fact that the first and third lines are enjambed is important because it speeds up the overall rhythm of the poem, as these lines run into each other. Instead of pausing at the end of nearly each line, the speaker establishes a steady flow that rushes toward the poem's climax. After all, readers know from the poem's inscription that there will be a bombing at the church, so this stanza is especially fraught with tension, a dynamic that is only intensified by the slightly quicker pace created by the speaker's use of enjambment. In this regard, enjambment affects not only the rhythmic flow, but also the way the lines work their way toward the violent act upon which the poem is based.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “downtown / Instead”
- **Lines 3-4:** “Birmingham / In”
- **Lines 7-8:** “jails / Aren’t”
- **Lines 11-12:** “Birmingham / To”
- **Lines 21-22:** “child / Was”
- **Lines 23-24:** “smile / To”
- **Lines 27-28:** “Birmingham / Calling”

JUXTAPOSITION

One of the poem's defining qualities is that it juxtaposes the daughter's worldview with her mother's tendency to treat her like an innocent, inexperienced child. This dynamic comes into play in the second stanza ("'No, baby ... children's choir") when the mother responds to the daughter's request that she be allowed to go to downtown Birmingham to participate in a Freedom March. Whereas the daughter takes on a sophisticated, mature tone by calling her mother "dear" and emphasizing the importance of marching for freedom, the mother responds by calling her "baby" and suggesting that protests are dangerous for "little child[ren]."

This contrast between the daughter's yearning to engage with the adult world of protest and the mother's desire to protect her continues throughout their conversation. Indeed, the daughter makes her case by suggesting that she won't be alone at the march and pointing out that this kind of activism is necessary in order to make the country truly free. By saying this, she shows her mother how much she cares about working toward racial equality. In turn, readers sense her maturity.

Her mother, on the other hand, remains unconvinced. Instead of acknowledging her daughter's desire to contribute to the Civil Rights Movement, she focuses on the fact that the girl is still a child, using this as a reason to forbid her from attending the Freedom March. Instead, she sends the girl to church to sing in a "children's choir," ultimately spotlighting the girl's youth. To that end, the mother is happy and at ease after she sends her daughter to church, believing that the girl is out of harm's way. She even thinks of the church as a "sacred place," framing it as a safe haven that will protect her daughter from the kind of racist violence she might encounter while protesting.

However, the poem juxtaposes the mother's assumption that

the church is a safe place with the devastating reality that *nowhere* is completely safe for Black people living in racist societies. This becomes painfully evident when the church is blown up. In this moment, the church goes from a "sacred place" to a pile of "bits of glass and brick," a juxtaposition that only intensifies the feeling of tragedy that emerges at the end of the poem with the daughter's harrowing and untimely death.

Other juxtapositions are at work in the poem as well. For example, the horrific violence of the protests stands out starkly against the little girl's dutiful preparations for church. Her meticulous bathing and dressing is a dramatically different scene from that in the streets, where protestors are beat with clubs, attacked by dogs, and shot at.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16
- Lines 17-20
- Lines 21-22
- Line 29

REPETITION

The most noticeable form of repetition in "Ballad of Birmingham" is the poem's use of two different refrains. The first refrain appears in line 3, when the daughter says, "And march the streets of Birmingham," a line that repeats in line 11. In both cases, the daughter uses the line as a way of showing her mother that she doesn't want to go downtown just to spend time there, but to march for racial justice. By turning this line into a refrain, then, she manages to emphasize her determination to get involved in the fight for racial equality.

Similarly, the mother establishes her own refrain by repeating the line "No, baby, no, you may not go." She says this every time she responds to the daughter's request to join the Freedom March, delivering the line before saying anything else. The fact that she repeats this line—which is so musical—makes it seem as if she is used to saying it, perhaps because she often tells her daughter she can't do something she wants to do. In this regard, the repetition of this phrase makes it sound like a time-tested way of keeping her daughter safe, since this is the mother's overall goal.

In addition, the mother's repetition of the line "No, baby, no, you may not go" also uses diacope, repeating the word "no" twice within the relatively short phrase. This highlights just how unwilling the mother is to let her daughter go to the march. Indeed, she is so against the idea of the girl doing this that she feels the need to say "no" two times per refusal instead of just once.

Diacope appears elsewhere in the poem as well, and is most evocative in the fifth and sixth stanzas. Note the repetition of "white" in lines 19-20:

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

Repeating the word draws attention to the purity and innocence of the little girl's attire, which readers know will soon be destroyed in the bombing. Diacope appears again with "smiled"/"smile" in lines 21 and 22. The repetition here serves to undercut the mother's brief moment of joyous relief, insisting that it will be short-lived.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "And march the streets of Birmingham"
- **Line 5:** ""No, baby, no, you may not go,"
- **Line 7:** "And," "and," "guns," "and"
- **Line 11:** "And march the streets of Birmingham"
- **Line 13:** ""No, baby, no, you may not go,"
- **Line 14:** "guns"
- **Line 18:** "And"
- **Line 19:** "And," "white"
- **Line 20:** "And," "white"
- **Line 21:** "smiled"
- **Line 23:** "smile"
- **Line 30:** "shoe"
- **Line 31:** "shoe," "baby"
- **Line 32:** "baby"

ALLUSION

The main allusion in "Ballad of Birmingham" is hard to miss, since the poem includes an inscription at the beginning stating that it is about the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. Consequently, when readers encounter line 25, "For when she heard the explosion," they know that this mention of an "explosion" is a reference to the historical event that the inscription cites at the beginning of the poem.

As discussed elsewhere in this guide, the historical event to which this mention of an "explosion" alludes is the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church. More broadly, though, the poem also alludes to several important dynamics at play during the Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, when the mother talks about "fierce" dogs and "clubs and hoses, guns and jails," she alludes to the fact that the Birmingham police were particularly hostile and violent toward Black people during the 1960s. The police sicced vicious dogs on Black people involved in peaceful protests. They also used large fire hoses to spray Black protestors with powerful, painful streams of water.

Furthermore, Black people and protestors have historically been shot at by police and put in jail. In keeping with this, the mother's list of fears is made up of things that actually happened during the Civil Rights Movement. In this regard, the mother's fears allude to the many trials and tribulations of Black people during the Civil Rights Movement.

It's also worth mentioning that the daughter's promise that other children will be at the freedom march is an allusion to the fact that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other organizers in the Civil Rights Movement actively encouraged school children to join protests in Birmingham, Alabama, where in 1963 Dr. King turned his attention to fight segregation and oppose the racist police department. With this in mind, it's clear that the daughter's insistence that she will be surrounded by other children is an allusion to the influence that Dr. King's community organizing had on Birmingham.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "And march the streets of Birmingham / In a Freedom March today?""
- **Lines 6-8:** "For the dogs are fierce and wild, / And clubs and hoses, guns and jails / Aren't good for a little child.""
- **Lines 10-12:** "Other children will go with me, / And march the streets of Birmingham / To make our country free.""
- **Line 14:** "For I fear those guns will fire."
- **Lines 25-26:** "For when she heard the explosion, / Her eyes grew wet and wild."

ANAPHORA

The unidentified speaker uses polysyndeton in the fifth stanza ("She has combed ... on her feet") to call attention to the care and attention that the daughter gives to the process of getting ready for church. This use of polysyndeton is rather specific, since the device also functions as an anaphora in this context. Indeed, the speaker begins three clauses in a row with the word "and," ultimately using polysyndeton to achieve the same effect as anaphora:

> **And** bathed rose petal sweet,
> **And** drawn white gloves on her small brown hands,
> **And** white shoes on her feet.

This repetition adds to the list-like quality of the speaker's words, making it sound like the daughter has gone through a number of different preparations in order to get ready for church.

This, in turn, spotlights the girl's painstaking effort to look presentable and respectable—a notion that reflects that the church is a safe, holy space (or at least, that it should be one). This further aligns with the girl's overall desire to be seen as a mature adult instead of a child. In this sense, the speaker's use of polysyndeton and anaphora accentuates the daughter's attempt to be seen as an adult; if she can't engage in the adult world of the Freedom March, it seems, she will at the very least behave like an adult by fastidiously preparing herself for church.

This list also underscores an important point of the poem: the little girl is brutally murdered despite these preparations. Racists would never accept the little girl no matter how meticulously she presented herself. The anaphora here, then, draws attention to the cruelty and irrationality of racism itself.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 18:** "And"
- **Line 19:** "And"
- **Line 20:** "And"

IRONY

The poem is ironic because the little girl is killed in a place meant to keep her safe; the church proves to be more dangerous than the protest, despite the latter being filled with "fierce" dogs, "clubs and hoses, guns and jails." Understandably, the mother forbids her daughter to attend the Freedom March in downtown Birmingham precisely because she thinks the girl might be put in harm's way if she goes to the march.

Consequently, she sends her daughter to church instead, clearly believing that this is a safer alternative. In fact, just thinking about the idea of her daughter in the "sacred place" of the church is enough to make her smile, clearly putting her at ease.

This creates dramatic irony, since readers know from the poem's inscription that the church is about to be bombed. As a result, tension creeps into the poem, as readers understand that the mother is woefully mistaken in her belief that her daughter is safe in the church—or, for that matter, *anywhere*, since Black people living in racist societies are upsettingly always at risk of encountering racist violence.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-8
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 21-32

VOCABULARY

Freedom March (Line 4) - A peaceful protest in which demonstrators walk through a city or some other area in order to demand freedom from an oppressive policy or unjust governing body.

Clubs (Line 7) - Weapons that police officers carry and use to hit people. Typically called "billy clubs."

Hoses (Line 7) - Fire hoses.

Rose petal sweet (Line 18) - The speaker uses this phrase to suggest that the daughter is so clean that she smells as sweet as a rose.

Drawn (Line 19) - Put on.

Sacred (Line 22) - Holy or spiritually significant.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem has 32 lines broken up into eight stanzas. As the title makes clear, "Ballad of Birmingham" is a ballad. This means that its stanzas are quatrains (they have four lines), use common meter, and follow a rhyme scheme in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme with one another.

Historically, the ballad form emerged as a kind of poetic folktale set to music, which is why many ballads can be set to various melodies of popular hymns. Using the ballad form here allows the poem to feel familiar and accessible, with a steady rhythm and pace that indeed feels a bit like a song.

METER

"Ballad of Birmingham" is written in common meter, which is a meter often used in ballads that alternates back and forth between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. This means that the first and third lines of a given stanza are in iambic tetrameter, whereas the second and fourth lines are in iambic trimeter.

To say that a line is in iambic tetrameter means that it is made up of four iambs, which are metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). A line of iambic trimeter, on the other hand, is made up of just *three* iambs (three da-DUMs). For instance, lines 11 and 12 are perfect examples of common meter:

> And march | the streets | of Birm- | ingham
> To make | our coun- | try free

In this example, the first line has four separate iambs, but the second line only has three. This, in turn, is why these two lines perfectly exemplify common meter.

However, the poem does not always stick to common meter so faithfully. In fact, almost every line of trimeter actually contains an extra syllable, as is the case in line 4:

> In a Free- | dom March | today?

This line contains seven syllables instead of the standard six, meaning that one of the feet has an extra syllable and is therefore not an iamb. Indeed, the first foot of the line is an anapest, or a foot consisting of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable: "In a Free-."

These moments of variation add interest and emphasis in certain moments, while allowing the poem overall to have a steady, familiar rhythm.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows the typical rhyme scheme of a ballad, meaning that the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme with one another. As such, the poem's first two stanzas look like this:

> ABCB DEFE

The poem follows this rhyme scheme very closely, only making use of perfect rhymes and never resorting to the use of slant rhymes (or at least not within the rhyme scheme itself, that is). To add to this, there are a number of internal rhymes throughout the poem. For instance, the mother's refrain makes use of the assonant /o/ sound to create three internal rhymes within a single line:

> No, baby, no, you may not go

This, in turn, gives the line a particularly song-like quality, one that suggests that this is something the mother has said many times before—so many times that it now sounds vaguely musical.

What's more, there are moments in which subtler rhymes intensify the entire rhyme scheme. This is the case in the sixth stanza ("The mother smiled ... upon her face"), when the unidentified speaker uses a slant rhyme between the words "child" and "smile," thereby gesturing toward an ABAB rhyme scheme instead of the standard ABCB scheme that the rest of the poem follows.

All of these uses of rhyme ultimately increase the poem's musicality and, in turn, intensify the language. As a result, the poem sounds not only unified, but also more emotionally resonant, effectively allowing readers to more thoroughly empathize with the mother's grief.

SPEAKER

There are three separate speakers in "Ballad of Birmingham." At first, the poem features a conversation between a young girl and her mother. The daughter is the poem's first speaker, as she asks her mother if she can attend a Freedom March in downtown Birmingham. Based on the fact that the poem is based on a real event, readers can assume that this young girl and her mother are both Black.

The mother then becomes the poem's second speaker when she responds by saying that the march is too dangerous for children. This conversation takes place over the course of the first four stanzas ("'Mother dear ... children's choir'"), with the stanzas alternating between the daughter's words and the mother's.

This allows the poem to explore both of their

perspectives—and perhaps even two ideas about how to counter racism; the daughter wishes to go out and march in protest, whereas the mother, believing this to be unsafe, turns towards prayer and the far less volatile activity of going to church. There are subtly two tactics here: active protest vs. aiming to appear as a respectable, non-boat-rocking citizen and assuming that this will protect you. The fact that going to church is what gets the little girl killed, however, implies that no amount of seemingly "good" behavior—no amount of dressing in pristine white clothes and going to church—will end racist hatred and violence, because racism is hateful towards the little girl's very existence in the first place.

After the mother convinces the daughter to go to the nearby church instead of attending the march downtown, an unidentified speaker takes over. This speaker acts as a narrator of sorts, describing the daughter's preparations for church, the mother's relief that her daughter will be safe from the dangers she associates with the act of protesting, and, finally, the mother's reaction when she hears the explosion of the church as it is bombed. The speaker then narrates the mother's frantic rush toward the church and her subsequent search through the debris for her daughter. Then, in the final two lines of the poem, the mother's voice returns as she cries out, "O, here's the shoe my baby wore, / But, baby, where are you?"

SETTING

The poem takes place in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. This is made clear by the following inscription, which appears at the beginning of the poem: "*(On the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963)*." As discussed elsewhere in this guide, the poem is a response to the 1963 attack on the 16th Street Baptist Church by four white supremacists who bombed the church, killing four young Black girls and injuring 22 other people. With this in mind, "Ballad of Birmingham" is set against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement in the South.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Written just one year after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (which officially outlawed racial segregation and discrimination based on skin color), "Ballad of Birmingham" belongs to a genre of poetry written about racism and injustice during the Civil Rights Movement. Because it is about a significant historical event that took place during this movement (the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church), it makes sense to consider the poem alongside other poems about major moments in the struggle for racial equality, such as Etheridge Knight's "For Malcolm, A Year After" or June Jordan's "In Memoriam: Martin Luther King, Jr."

It also makes sense to think about the poem alongside the work of other Black authors and thinkers dealing with the topic of race relations in the 1960s. For instance, James Baldwin published his book-length essay, *The Fire Next Time*, in 1963, which was a particularly tumultuous and artistically generative year in the Civil Rights Movement. To that end, it's worth noting that Dr. King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in August of 1963. And though Randall's poem was written in 1965, the actual bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church occurred just one month after Dr. King's iconic speech.

It was in the mist of this kind of unrest, art, and activism that Randall eventually produced "Ballad of Birmingham," which is now seen as an iconic poem that commemorates a terrible tragedy—a tragedy that ultimately spotlighted the horrors of racism and accelerated the national conversation surrounding racism, discrimination, and segregation.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1965, Dudley Randall started a publishing imprint called Broadside Press and published "Ballad of Birmingham" as a broadside. He originally did this because he wanted to establish an official copyright for his poem before allowing it to be set to music (a project he was already considering). The press went on to publish a number of well-respected Black poets and writers like Audre Lorde, Etheridge Knight, and Margaret Walker. As a result, it emerged as one of the foremost Black owned and operated presses of the Civil Rights Movement.

On another note, "Ballad of Birmingham" is about a specific historical event: the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. The vast majority of the church's congregants were Black, which is why four Ku Klux Klan members targeted the church and blew it up using sticks of dynamite. The blast killed four young Black girls, prompting Randall to reimagine the final conversation between one of these girls and her mother.

Furthermore, it's worth considering that the poem takes place in Birmingham in 1963, since this was an important time and place in the broader context of the Civil Rights movement. Indeed, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led a movement known as the Birmingham Campaign in 1963 alongside other members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Together, these leaders sought to draw attention to the racist policies that ran rampant throughout the city—racist policies that were only exacerbated by the city's racist police commissioner, Bull Connor.

In order to shed light on the situation in Birmingham, Dr. King and his fellow organizers encouraged schoolchildren to attend marches and protests, thereby increasing the number of protestors while also sending a stark message to the public—namely, that even innocent children were capable of recognizing the city's racism and injustice. During this period in 1963, Bull Connor eventually ordered police officers to sic

vicious dogs against the demonstrators and also urged them to spray the protestors with strong fire hoses. This, it seems, is why the daughter's mother is so worried in "Ballad of Birmingham" that her daughter will be harmed at the march.

In the end, pictures of police assaulting innocent children in this manner incited outrage around the nation, thereby alerting the rest of the country to the terrible racism plaguing the city and, more generally, the South.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "Ballad of Birmingham" Set to Music — Check out musician Jerry Moore's version of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVHhzku2yuE)
- Randall Reads His Work — Listen to Dudley Randall recite a number of his poems—including"Ballad of Birmingham," which begins at the 6:50 mark—in this recording from the Library of Congress. (https://www.loc.gov/item/91740723/)
- The New York Times Celebrates Dudley Randall — Read about Dudley Randall's work and his founding of Broadside Press, which was an important publishing press in the Black Arts Movement. (https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/13/obituaries/dudley-randall-overlooked.html)
- The Poet's Life — Learn more about Dudley Randall's life and work in this brief overview. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/dudley-randall)
- Broadside Lotus Press — Take a look at what Broadside Press—now called Broadside Lotus Press_is doing these days!T he press is the oldest Black-owned press still in existence. (http://www.broadsidelotuspress.org/)

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