“The Ballad of Birmingham”

**Ballad:** a song/poem with a regular rhyme, a strong rhythm, and a refrain. Most ballads have a strong emotional or sentimental quality.

Before Reading

What do you think the subject of this poem will be, based on what you know about ballad as a genre?

Background

<http://www.history.com/topics/birmingham-church-bombing>

<http://youtu.be/q-MuWDsv5pg>

* A number of kids were at Sunday school at the **Sixteenth Street Baptist Church**. The church had a significant Black population. Four young girls were killed: Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley. The other 22 Black members were injured, but not killed.
* **Freedom March:** when citizens come together to protest governments’ laws which discriminate against some citizens. During the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, the Black people often participated in Freedom Marches.
* **Jim Crow Laws:** state and national laws which imposed segregation on Black people. They were overtly racist.

Here’s a YouTube video of the song.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kk7ghmoQ6s&feature=share&list=PLA16B14A38E36EE80>

During Reading

1. What are some of the most vivid images in this poem?
2. Circle the verbs in stanzas five to eight. How does the author’s choice of verbs

enhance the drama?

1. What is the irony in this poem? (When there’s a disparity between what you think will happen and what actually happens.)

After Reading

1. What is the rhyme scheme?
2. Repetition—how does the poet’s use of repetition intensify the drama of the poem?
3. The mood of this poem could be one of poignancy (a state of deeply felt distress or sorrow; heart-wrenching). In particular, how does the poet pull at your heart strings?

Writing Notebook Response:

Write a letter to the mayor of Birmingham. In your letter explain your thoughts of what happened and what should be done to prevent this happening in the future.

Ballad of Birmingham By Dudley Randall

(On the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963)

“Mother dear, may I go downtown

Instead of out to play,

And march the streets of Birmingham

In a Freedom March today?”

“No, baby, no, you may not go,

For the dogs are fierce and wild,

And clubs and hoses, guns and jails

Aren’t good for a little child.”

“But, mother, I won’t be alone.

Other children will go with me,

And march the streets of Birmingham

To make our country free.”

“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.”

She has combed and brushed her night-dark 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.

For when she heard the explosion,

Her eyes grew wet and wild.

She raced through the streets of Birmingham

Calling for her child.

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?”