

The Burning Babe by Robert Southwell

As I in hoary winter's night
Stood shivering in the snow,
Surprised I was with sudden heat,
Which made my heart to glow;

And lifting up a fearful eye,
To view what fire was near,
A pretty Babe all burning bright
Did in the air appear;

Who, scorched with excessive heat,
Such floods of tears did shed,
As though His floods should quench his flames,
With which His tears were fed;

“Alas” quoth He, “but newly born,
In fiery heats I fry,
Yet none approach to warm their hearts,
Or feel my fire, but I;

“My faultless breast the furnace is,
The fuel, wounding thorns:
Love is the fire, and sighs the smoke,
The ashes, shame and scorn;

“The fuel Justice layeth on,
And Mercy blows the coals,
The metal in this furnace wrought
Are men's defiled souls

“For which, as now on fire I am
To work them to their good,
So will I melt into a bath,
To wash them in My blood.”

With this he vanish'd out of sight,
And swiftly shrunk away,
And straight I called unto mind,
That it was Christmas day.

A Unit Study

by Maureen Wittmann

Introduction

I first created this unit for my history co-op when we were studying the Renaissance. I used it with children from upper grade school to high school age. At first, I was afraid that it would be too deep a subject for the younger children, but they rose to my high expectations. At first they were appalled by the intense imagery of the poem, but as they grew in understanding they found the beauty that laid within. A study of Robert Southwell and his poetry also brought them a better understanding of the Renaissance Era and Elizabethan England. I encourage you to use this unit alongside either your history or literature studies, and to be bold enough to use with children of all ages.

Structure and Terminology

Before exploring the complexity of this poem's theme, let us first take a look at the simplicity of its form, as it may be the simple structure that makes the deep theology understandable to the reader. It is just sixteen lines, each seven metrical feet long, in regular iambic verse.

"Meter" measures the number of feet in a line. A "foot" divides a line of poetry into two or three syllables, with each group having a stressed syllable. "Iambic" is a rhythm beginning with one unstressed and ending with one stressed syllable. This poem is iambic tetrameter (four feet) alternating with iambic trimeter (three feet):

As **I**/in **hoa**/ ry **win**/ ter's **night**
Stood **shive**/ ring **in**/ the **snow**,
Sur **prised**/ I **was**/ with **sud**/ den **heat**
Which **made**/ my **heart**/ to **glow**;

The rhyme scheme of this poem is *abcb*. Simply put, the second and fourth lines rhyme, while the first and third do not:

As I in hoary winter's **night**
Stood shivering in the **snow**,
Surprised I was with sudden **heat**
Which made my heart to **glow**;

"Alliteration" is the repetition of a beginning sound, usually a consonant. We see this in the fifth stanza with the repetition of /f/ and then /s/.

My **f**aultless breast the **f**urnace is,
The **f**uel, wounding thorns;
Love is the **f**ire, and sighs the **s**moke,
The ashes, shame and scorns.

The author, Robert Southwell (pronounced "SUTH-ell"), is known as a metaphysical poet. His poetry looks at the body, mind, and soul not as three separate parts, but as integrated components. Rather than dealing with the personal feelings found in love poems, Southwell is dealing with much deeper concerns. In *The Burning Babe* he is dealing with God, sin, love, and suffering.

One tool used by the metaphysical poets is analogies called “conceits.” This is the comparison of two apparently unrelated things, for example: Southwell draws a parallel between fire and love.

“Personification” is a figure of speech where human characteristics are attributed to something non-human, for example *Justice* lays on fuel and *Mercy* blows the coals. Justice and Mercy are not living beings, but are spoken of in this poem as if they are capable of human characteristics.

“Metaphors” are comparisons between two things without spelling out the likeness by using “like” or “as.” Metaphors are abundant in this poem. Christ’s breast to a furnace, wounding thorns to fuel, men’s defiled souls to the metal of the furnace, and so on.

The Poet

It is not enough to learn the structure of the poem. To better understand *The Burning Babe*, it is necessary to look to the historical events that surrounded the author.

Robert Southwell, a Jesuit priest, was born in Norfolk England in 1561 and at thirty-four years of age he was dragged through the streets of London to the gallows where he was hanged, drawn, and quartered.

He is an example of the religious conflicts of his day. The hostility between Catholic and Protestant degenerated to persecution, torture, and executions, sadly on both sides. In England during Southwell’s lifetime, it was illegal to be a Catholic priest. In fact, the mere act of professing one’s Catholic faith was considered treasonous.

Though Southwell knew that it certainly meant martyrdom, he spent six years in zealous missionary work throughout London, sometimes using disguises and moving from house to house to avoid authorities. Finally, in 1592 he was arrested and subjected to atrocious cruelties for nearly three years. He was examined thirteen times under torture and confined to a dungeon, swarming with vermin. It was under these conditions that his poems were mostly written.

His are not poems of love; they are religious in nature. His poems reflect God’s hand in everything around us. It is through Southwell’s poetry that we view his soul, even more so than we do through the stories of his martyrdom.

Southwell sought to provide inspiration through his poetry. Writing from prison, he was able to compose poems that spoke directly to his fellow Catholics. The persecution endured by Catholics was terrible indeed, but it was also a time of honor and spiritual growth. Southwell was an example of one who would not compromise his faith simply to save his life. It is believed that *The Burning Babe* was written to provide the persecuted with strength to endure.

Finding Understanding

The Burning Babe, perhaps Southwell’s most famous poem, is one of four nativity poems. The unit is characterized by Southwell’s wonder at the Incarnation and the paradox of an apparently helpless infant born to save all of humankind. Though it is simple in form, the imagery that the poem evokes is far from simple. This is certainly not your everyday Christmas poem.

At first glance, the title gives one a terrifying image: the image of an innocent engulfed in flame, rather than the usual sweet baby asleep in the manger. The narrator is standing in the snow, finding warmth in the Christ Child who is burning with intense love. A love so deep that it cannot be drowned by His sorrowful tears – tears that are brought on by those who refuse His love. The fire is fueled by wounding thorns, foreshadowing this baby’s future on the cross. In the

furnace are men's defiled souls, where they are refined by intense heat and washed in the baby's blood. Christ loved us so much that He freed us from our sins by His blood.

After all this, the baby is gone and the narrator is left to ponder Christmas day. Perhaps he is reminded that without Christmas we do not have the crucifixion and without the crucifixion we do not have the resurrection and without the resurrection we do not have redemption.

Exercises

1. Read the poem aloud and listen for the rhyme and rhythm. Ask yourself how the structure of the poem leads one to understanding.
2. Learn more about the terminology of poetry. [*The Harp and Laurel Wreath: Poetry and Dictation for the Classical Curriculum*](#) by Laura Berquist is a good resource to consider.
3. Find biographical information on the author (try a search on the Internet) and study the religious upheaval of Elizabethan England. It is impossible to separate Southwell from the events of his day. Ask how his poems would have differed had he lived in another era.
4. Read other poems written by Robert Southwell. A trip to the library should yield a compilation of his works. The other three nativity poems written by Southwell are [*New Heaven New Warre*](#), [*A Childe My Choyce*](#), and [*New Prince New Pompe*](#). How do these poems complete *The Burning Babe*?
5. William Shakespeare's poem *Venus and Adonis*, was published in 1593; it was the most popular poem of that time. Southwell's poem *Saint Peter's Complaint*, published soon after his death in 1595, is written in the meter of *Venus and Adonis*. Also interesting is that the preliminary address contains the line, "Still finest wits are stilling Venus' rose." This would be considered by Southwell's readers to be a reference to Shakespeare's poem. Evidence shows that it is likely that Shakespeare had also read Southwell's work. Can you find similarities between the two men's poetry?
6. As a Jesuit priest, Southwell was well educated in Bible study. Reflect on the following Bible verses (RSV) and ask yourself how they may have influenced Southwell in writing this poem:

Exodus 3:2 And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush [was] not consumed.

Daniel 3:17 If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king.

Matthew 27:29 And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put [it] upon his head, and a reed in his right hand: and they bowed the knee before him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews!

Romans 5:8-9 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.

Revelation 1:5 and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.

7. End the unit by enjoying a biography or piece of historical fiction from the Elizabethan Era. See the sidebar for suggestions.

Reading List

[*Saint Edmund Champion*](#) by Evelyn Waugh (Ignatius Press) – High school to adult.

Edmund Campion by Harold Gardiner, SJ, Vision Series (Ignatius Press) – Middle to high school.

Come Rack, Come Rope by Msgr. Benson (Neumann Press) – High school to adult.

Sun Slower Sun Faster by Meriol Trevor (Bethlehem Books) – Middle school to high school.

Bibliography

This unit study could not have been written without the following books and website:

Robert Southwell: A Unit Study on English History, Poetry and the Catholic Faith by Philip Healy and Lesley Payne. Available from Emmanuel Books (800) 871-5598 or

<http://www.emmanuelbooks.com>.

The Harp and Laurel Wreath: Poetry and Dictation for the Classical Curriculum

(Ignatius Press) by Laura Berquist. Available from your favorite bookstore.

<http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/southwell.htm>