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The Ball Poem by John Berryman

A ball can mean a lot to a child because children find enjoyment out of the simplest things. Thinking back on my childhood, there are many memories that flood my mind when I simply think of one object, a ball. I remember when I was little I loved playing four square on the playground at school with my friends or at home on my driveway. We always competed at recess to get the last blue or red bouncy ball so we could play four square or kickball. In *The Ball Poem* by John Berryman (see appendix), a little boy loses his ball that means so much to him and it is a symbol of his childhood, like a ball was for many of us when we were kids.

When I first read the poem, I thought the message was fairly clear. The poem is about a little boy who lost his ball when it bounced down the street and went into the harbor. He is stricken with grief and senses responsibility because he cannot get the same ball back. He is learning how to deal with the loss of his ball. When the poem says, “Soon part of me will explore the deep and dark / Floor of the harbour” (21-22), it seems as if this means the little boy wants to jump in and search the floor of the harbor to get his ball back. The little boy has to move on and realize his ball is gone.

However, once I did some research on Berryman, I discovered this poem might have a much deeper and darker meaning. I found that Berryman’s father shot himself outside of the little boy’s bedroom window when Berryman was only eleven. Berryman

suffered with depression and alcohol abuse for much of his life because he was greatly affected by his father's suicide (Eveland). This information about Berryman's personal life brings a whole new meaning to this poem. There is immense symbolism: the ball *is* his father. The boy in the poem is Berryman as a child. The loss is the worst kind of loss: death. The poem says, "No use to say 'O there are other balls':/ An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy / As he stands rigid, trembling, staring down / All his young days into the harbour where / His ball went" (5-9). There are not other balls because a person is irreplaceable. Berryman cannot bring his father back to life- he is dead. The grief process that the boy in the poem goes through is not simply because he lost his ball; it is because his father is gone. He thinks back on all of the memories he had with his father. The poem reinforces again that another ball is worthless because his father cannot be "bought back" and there is no one exactly like him.

Berryman feels a sense of responsibility because he had to grow up fast. His father died when he was only eleven years old. "He is learning, well behind his desperate eyes, / The epistemology of loss, how to stand up / Knowing what every man must one day know / And most know many days, how to stand up" (15-18). These lines illustrate how the little boy has to grow up quicker than he should have for his age because of this tragic situation. Death becomes very personal to him but he has to be stand up and be strong. "Light returns to the street / A whistle blows, the ball is out of sight" (19-20). These lines show how things come back to normal and he realizes his father is gone forever.

The end of the poem gets eerie and sort of depressing once I realized the true meaning. The poem says, "Soon part of me will explore the deep and dark / Floor of the

harbour” (21-22). I found from my research that Berryman could not get past all of his emotional struggles and he committed suicide by jumping off the Washington Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis at age 57 in 1972 (Eveland). Once I found out the way in which Berryman died and read these two lines of this poem, it seems like a suicide note. It is scary that readers may have been able to see signs of his suicide and even how he would do it before he died. The last line really sends the message home- “I am not a little boy” (25). Berryman is not a little boy because he had to grow up so fast and he went through so many things in his life, like depression and alcohol abuse. Perhaps this line also can be taken literally by meaning he is an adult, because Berryman wrote this poem in his adulthood about something that happened when he was very young.

The diction Berryman uses in this poem can also be a clue into the deeper meaning. I noticed in most of the poem he uses “the boy”, but at the end of the poem he uses “me” and “I” instead. This makes most of the beginning of the poem seem like it may be about some random little boy, but Berryman really makes it personal at the end because it makes you think it must really be about him. I think he chose not to use “me” and “I” until the end because it makes it more of a shock and more powerful when everything kind of comes together at the end and there is a big revelation. The diction of the poem made me initially believe it was just about a ball, but once I found out about Berryman’s personal life, I can see how there are multiple meanings.

The mood of this poem is very depressing and dark. It is about loss and the emotions that come with it. The boy has to be strong and move on when he loses his ball (his father). The mood adds to the meaning of the poem because I suspect Berryman was feeling very depressed when he wrote this poem. It lets you into his mind and allows you

to understand his thought process better. The mood emphasizes how Berryman might have been hiding other feelings under the surface of how he was acting- just like he hid another meaning under the surface of this poem. As I got to the end of this poem, I also suspected this poem seems too depressing to just be talking about losing a ball.

This poem does not have any rhyme- it is a free verse. I believe Berryman wrote the poem like this because he does not really care about following the strict rules, he is just telling it how it is. He has so many other things on his mind that are much more serious and the last thing he is going to worry about is a rhyme scheme. Another aspect of the poem is the alliteration or consonance. It is a fairly minor use, but I noticed that Berryman uses the letter “b” often with the words “boy” and “ball”. The “b” sound is percussive like a gunshot and sounds harsh. Berryman may have used this sound because it reminded him of when his father shot himself. This adds to the meaning of the poem because it shows how depressed Berryman must have been when he was writing this poem. He could still hear the shots in his head.

Symbolism is a major aspect of craft in this poem. As I mentioned earlier, the ball is a symbol for Berryman’s father. This means the little boy in the poem is Berryman and the loss was death. The poem says, “Balls will be lost always, little boy, / And no one buys a ball back. Money is external” (13-14), and this means there will always be death in the world. You can’t buy back someone who has died. People are worth so much more than money and material possessions. Money cannot atone for death because our loved ones are gone. When the poem says, “The ball is out of sight” (20), I think this is the moment when someone is buried. The harbor symbolizes a place where one cannot return from. It is deep and dark, just like when someone’s eyes are closed in death. When the

little boy's ball goes into the harbor, it is lost forever. When Berryman explores the bottom of the harbor, he has jumped into the Mississippi River and committed suicide, never to return to life.

There is a powerful meaning and life lesson in *The Ball Poem* by John Berryman. The loss depicted in this poem can apply to physical possessions and death. It can teach a little kid that once you lose your ball and it goes into the big body of water, you will never get it back, so be responsible. More importantly, the poem says that death is hard to go through. We cannot replace those people who are so close and dear to us. Throughout the death process, we experience extreme stages of grief. We have to sometimes face things we may not be prepared for at different stages in our lives, but we have to try to be strong. Unfortunately, in Berryman's case, sometimes people go through so many difficult situations in their lives and they feel they cannot deal with life any longer. This poem really opened my eyes to the deep and dark feelings those dealing with depression and contemplating suicide might have. I wish more could be done to try to prevent suicide. One human life cannot be replaced because we are all unique individuals and each of us is so valuable.

Works Cited

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<<http://www.mndaily.com/news/campus/2013/10/23/remembering-john->

berryman>.

Appendix

The Ball Poem, John Berryman

1 What is the boy now, who has lost his ball,
2 What, what is he to do? I saw it go
3 Merrily bouncing, down the street, and then
4 Merrily over- there it is in the water!
5 No use to say 'O there are other balls':
6 An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy
7 As he stands rigid, trembling, staring down
8 All his young days into the harbour where
9 His ball went. I would not intrude on him,
10 A dime, another ball, is worthless. Now
11 He senses first responsibility
12 In a world of possessions. People will take balls,
13 Balls will be lost always, little boy,
14 And no one buys a ball back. Money is external.
15 He is learning, well behind his desperate eyes,
16 The epistemology of loss, how to stand up
17 Knowing what every man must one day know
18 And most know many days, how to stand up
19 And gradually light returns to the street
20 A whistle blows, the ball is out of sight,
21 Soon part of me will explore the deep and dark
22 Floor of the harbour...I am everywhere,
23 I suffer and move, my mind and my heart move
24 With all that move me, under the water
25 Or whistling, I am not a little boy.