

Pyokyeong Son

IB English Literature SL

Ms. Suzanne Seddon

May 20th, 2018

A Literary Commentary on Regina Barreca, "Nighttime Fires"

The attitude of a parent during a familial crisis can have lasting impressions on a child, which are often inaccurately filtered by their unsuspecting eyes, but through which the parent's despair can be further emphasized. In her poem, "Nighttime Fires," Regina Barrera explores the bitter attitude of a father who lost his job, through an ironically innocent recollection by his child.

The details of the family's uncomfortable, but unforgettable outing is described with a sentimental tone in a recollective manner, contrary to the bitterness of their father. The title, "Nighttime Fires," contains a magical, fantastical connotation that one might associate with a pleasant childhood memory, contrary to the tragedy of the actual event—a fire in a neighbor's house. The opening line, "When I was five in Louisville," (1) establish the storytelling tone of the poem, as if the persona was recollecting a nostalgic event, while enjambment is continually used in narrating this episode, unwinding the events like a story. The description of other children, "Piled seven of us, / all pajamas and running noses," (2-3) provokes a child-like, playful mood, while the pleasant alliteration of the "i," "When I was five [...] nighttime fires [...] Piled," (1-2) further enhance this enchanting atmosphere. While the purpose of the event is hinted at in the following lines, "into the Olds / drove fast toward the smoke," (4-5) it is not clearly established until later on, allowing for the reader's immersion into this innocent mood.

Such an innocent atmosphere is juxtaposed and contrasted with the embedded descriptions of the father who lost his job. His bitter personality is revealed through a plain description of his habits: "awake past midnight, he read old newspapers / with no news, tried crosswords until he split the pencil, between his teeth, mad," (6-8) as the persona does not fully understand the father's depression. It is clear, though, that the father is irritated and

unstable, looking for distractions to alleviate his mood—one of which, is going to see the “nighttime fires.” This narration of the aggravated personality of the father that immediately follows the initial, innocent atmosphere emphasizes the disconnect between the emotions of the persona and the father, creating an uncomfortable, dissonant atmosphere that continues throughout the poem.

The intertwined feeling of innocence and irritation continues in the latter part of the first stanza, as the persona narrates the events of the night. The description of their mother who “pushed and shoved us all,” (10) and the description of his “old man” (12) as he “[swearing] in a good mood” (13) driving through rich neighborhoods whose houses were lit on fire highlight the father’s irritation. Child-like metaphors of the firetrucks that “snaked like dragons,” (14) and their siren’s “wolf whine,” (9) are naïve, yet unsettling analogies that contrast the innocence of the persona with the bitterness of the father. The incorporation of the olfactory image of “burnt wood” (11) and “a smell of flames high into the pines,” (12) as well as the alliterations of the “s” sound, “swearing [...] as he followed fire engines that snaked [...] and split the silent streets,” (13-15) elevate the uneasiness of this whole experience. Yet the persona suggests that “It was festival, carnival,” (15) somehow interpreting this as an exciting event, rather than a depressing memory. This contrast emphasizes the apparent bitterness of the father, compared to the naïvety of the persona, the reasons of which are revealed in the following stanza.

The detailed narration of the father’s attitude while the family watches the burning house, reveal his sour and vulnerable emotion, finding delight in the despair of others. The persona describes that the “[father’s] face lit up in the heat given off by destruction / like something was being made or was being set right,” (19-20) showing that his enjoyment stems from envy, especially of the rich, as he “smiled a smile” if “there were a Cadillac or any car.” (16-17) The father sees justice in the fire that destroys the houses of the rich, understandably angry at his unfair situation, with his “secret, brittle heart,” (18) vulnerable, and private. The visual image of the description of the father’s face that “lit up in the heat,” (19) simultaneously displays the father’s lunatic pleasure, and heightens the unsettling atmosphere, by describing the destructiveness of the fire.

The following actions of the persona and their parent reveal the malfunctioning relationship between the family members, describing the father's child-like madness, and the mother's worrisome attitude. The persona merely gazes at "where the sparks / ate up the sky," (21-22) visually communicating the darkness and loneliness, while the father "would take my hand and point to falling cinders," or "excited, show us / the swollen collapse of a staircase," (23-25) only interested in watching the burning house, like a child at a festival—this seeming switch of the role of the parent and the child emphasizes the father's disturbed emotions, while the enjambment and the frequent comma breaks convey his fast-paced excitement: "or, excited, show us the swollen collapse of a staircase." (24-25) The persona remarks that their father "never held us," (22) and that their mother "watched my father, not the house," (26) worried, apparent as "She was happy only when we were ready to go." (26-27) These descriptions allude to the disconnected interpersonal relationship in the family—the father, finding joy only in watching the despair of others; the mother, worried about her husband; and the children, seeing this whole event as a merely festive outing.

While the title, as well as much of the narration, portray the visit to the "nighttime fires" in a romanticized recollection through an innocent perspective, such a portrayal only contrasts with and intensifies the father's irritability and the familial disconnect. The ending line describes his father during the return home, whose eyes were "like hallways filled with smoke" (31)—failing in his duty to the family, emotionally persisting on short instances of Schadenfreude of watching houses of the rich burn, only to later fall back to his gloomy, bitter attitude.

Word Count: 1012