

We Didn't Start the Fire
by Billy Joel

Presentation by Jacob Hall

Novel Approach

- Speaker: Billy Joel and his generation
- Setting: The world from 1949 to the mid-1980s
- Protagonist(s) – Billy Joel and his generation
- Antagonist – The previous generation
- Events – Korean war, H-bomb, British invasion, Woodstock, Watergate, etc.

Billy Joel can't
take the
struggles of
society
anymore.

His generation wonders
if the struggle will
continue after they have
died.

trouble in the
Suez, U-2
incident, Bay of
Pigs, Kennedy
assassination,
etc.

Billy Joel is
born. It is in
Truman's
presidency and
shortly before
the Korean War

Realistic Approach

- I feel that I too experience a social “fire” that I have caused but that has been caused by the generations before me. Mr. Joel claims that “[h]e didn’t light [the fire] but he was trying to fight it.” Events such as global warming, gas prices, and air pollution I find to be the fault of my preceding generation

Thematic Approach

- Truth: In life, we often face the repercussions of actions performed by our ancestors.
- Lesson: If we continue this process and make mistakes that will affect not us but our children, then as Joel says, “After we’re gone, [the fire will] burn on, and on, and on...”

Allusion Approach

- *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger is mentioned in line 6: “Brando, *The King and I*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*.” The purpose is to show what time period Joel is speaking of, this being the 1950s, when Brando was a famous actor and the literary works were written.

Musical Approach

- The poem contained a lot of iambic patterns which produces the image of an open flame.

English teacher Approach

- The only literary device used is the allegory of “the fire” which symbolizes the hate in society that destroys us.

Art History Approach

- The main image throughout the song is fire, which symbolizes the negative repercussions of our ancestors actions, such as the nuclear bomb dropping, (repercussions being the Arms Race and the Cold War) that are slowly destroying society. This is demonstrated in the chorus:
- We didn't start the **fire**, it was always **burning**, since the worlds been turning, We didn't start the **fire**, we didn't **light** it we were trying to **fight** it..."

Structural Approach

- This song shifts from one stanza to another between decades. For example, the third stanza is 1951 and the fourth is 1953. Proof of this is the fact that *Catcher in the Rye* was published in 1951 and that is also the date when the H-bomb was invented, both of which are listed in the third stanza. Eisenhower was inducted in 1953 and England had a new Queen in 1953, both of which are listed in the fourth stanza. This shift from decade to decade remains constant until the final verse.

Significant Event Approach

- The verses of the song are lists of significant events (in chronological order) beginning in line one with 1949 (Joel's birth year) and 1981 (when the song came out.)