Robert Southwell’s famous poem “The Burning Babe” uses imagery to reinforce an epiphany experience. In a well-organized essay, analyze the techniques that Southwell uses to bring this scene alive. Be sure to focus on the imagery, symbolism, and irony that the poet uses to explain his Christmas Day experience.

STUDENT EXAMPLE #1 – THE BURNING BABE

In the poem The Burning Babe, Southwell uses the picture of a burning child to show how the child Jesus, born on Christmas Day, would one day die to save the world from their sins. The child is Jesus, and he is the pure and holy furnace in which the raw, sinful metal of men’s souls is tempered into the purity of the redeemed. Although Jesus was blameless, God used human justice to condemn him to mockery, a crown of thorns, and death. This crown of thorns is the fuel for the furnace, and the flames are Jesus love for us, born of undeserved mercy & grace. The tears of the babe were tears of love, mercy, and grace —-not pain and sadness alone. Therefore, they didn't put out the fire, but instead fed the flames. Jesus’ pain and mockery heaped on him are but smoke and ashes, mere by-products of the process of redemption. The Babe that appeared to the speaker on Christmas day was Jesus, loving and merciful, determined to save the lost and condemned sinners of earth.

While many aspects of the child and the fire are given symbolic meanings, the central comparison, the idea of raw and undesirable ore or impure metal being fired and tempered by something purer and stronger than itself shows up in many places in poetry, prose, and biblical allusion. The fire is central to the comparison, a hot and essentially destructive creature that, through its very heat and consuming nature, purifies the baser metal and makes it far better than it was. The metal has gone through it’s “trial by fire” and has been tempered into a finer and purer thing, that now having gone through the fire, has something of the fire in it. Although fire and metal have many different roles in literature, in this case fire is the pure, flaming, cleansing entity & the metal the object to be purified. Also of note is the idea of Jesus’ blood as a final bath, perhaps to cool, set, and clean the new, pure metal, just as a blacksmith uses a trough of water.

STUDENT EXAMPLE #2 – THE BURNING BABE

The poem, The Burning Babe, dealt with the birth and life of Jesus. The poem starts off on a hoary winter’s night and ends with Christmas Day. Christian’s celebrate the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day which is in winter. These points seem to make Southwell say this is Christ’s birth. The lines “It was with sudden heat which made my heart to glow” is speaking of the fact that Jesus fills the believers’ heart with the joy and warmth that the Savior has come to save their souls by sending his son on the cross. The author in writing the line “who, scorched with excessive heat, such floods of tears did shed” speaks of Christ’s death on the cross and how he descending into the flames of hell to declare victory over death. The tears were tears shed by all who mourned Jesus’ death. He scorched those tears when he resurrected from the dead. The words, “my faultless breast” speaks of how Jesus was perfect. “Wounding thorns” speaks of the thorns that Jesus had in his head when he died. The men’s defiled souls would be those souls who went to hell because they did not believe in Jesus. “To wash them in blood” speaks of how Jesus blood was shed and he had to die to away sins.
TEACHER EXAMPLE – THE BURNING BABE

*The Burning Babe* is Robert Southwell’s vision of a Christmas Day epiphany. It was a white, cold, winter’s night (evidenced by the use of the word hoary). Suddenly – just as the Bible records happened to the shepherds on the first Christmas night – a surprising and perhaps fearful visitation takes place. In contrast to the cold and snow, it is a warming event as seen in the title *The Burning Babe*. The poet points to this insight in line 4 as his vision makes his heart glow. It is a burning babe he sees – the Babe of Bethlehem.

The Babe warms the believer’s heart, but Southwell gives an ironic explanation of how and why this occurs. The “newly born” exclaims that it “fries” in fiery flames. The Christian understands that this is a foreshadowing of what the Babe of Bethlehem will undergo, enduring the fiery pains of hell for the world he has come to save. As the poem continues, the poet uses fiery imagery to describe the redemption process. The fire is love. The furnace is his loving heart or “faultless breast.” It is burning or consuming sins . . . the ashes are “shames” and “scorn.”

Southwell continues with his extended comparison or conceit in personifying mercy “blowing” on these burning coals and Justice serving as the fuel. The process is somewhat horrific and stark in comparison to the cool winter night, but the poet reassures his reader that the ultimate purpose here is good. Men’s defiled souls are being “wrought” clean and pure, washed in the blood of this “burning Babe.”

As the unnamed traveler ponders this wondrous vision, there is a feigned attitude of confusion. He is perplexed at this paradoxical vision until he realizes that this is Christmas Day. A climax of realization – an epiphany is cited. The traveler has witnessed God’s vision of the Christmas and Easter miracle united on this special night.

STRATEGIES TO ATTACK

WRITING A LITERARY ANALYSIS ESSAY

1. Sound authoritative and masterful. If you don’t know the “correct” answer offer intelligent choices.

2. Always write in third person – use the author’s name early in your essay and at points throughout the essay.

3. Carefully examine the question for what points/techniques need to be included in your answer.

4. Read through your poem or selection carefully and mark key ideas, symbols, allusions, and images that should be included in your response.

5. After your first read-through, go back and read again to make sure you get the “big ideas” and didn’t misread anything. Start thinking about how best to organize your essay.

6. Start your essay by getting down the basics – tone, setting, speaker. Move on to more detailed analysis as you continue writing. (This gives you a basic organization format)
7. Be sure to quote lines or phrases from the text to support your point. Give examples of the techniques you see the author using: diction, allusion, symbolism, irony.

8. Try hard to demonstrate that you have a deeper understanding of literature than just this piece. If the author uses allusions, briefly point out the source for the allusion. If appropriate cite other similar works or techniques you are aware that the “masters” of literature have used.

9. Write clearly – handwriting does count to a certain degree – and spell accurately. Be sure not to misspell items that you quote or cite as evidence.

10. Write at normal size – tiny writing looks short; large writing looks like you are trying to pad your essay. Better larger than smaller.