

Poem Still Burning

A Note for "The Teeth Mother Naked at Last" by Robert Bly

Though first heard as a powerful antiwar poem, "The Teeth Mother Naked at Last" by Robert Bly protested much of American culture from the vantage point of objecting to our nation's efforts in Vietnam. However, like most great poems, "The Teeth Mother Naked at Last" is about more than it first seems to concern. When Bly published this poem in 1973, the United States of America was fiercely involved in many conflicts. In addition to the war and antiwar movement, our country was deeply divided with many of the sexual, racial, religious, and economic "wars" that still exist today.

One way to interpret our involvement with Vietnam is to see the story of how young Americans woke up and rose to great moral heights to stop the military decisions of its elder leaders. This is a legacy of protest learned from our country's birth and remembered in time to avoid further death and destruction in the 1970s. At the time, Americans were realizing that they were not only misdirected by wrong-headed military leaders, but that many of their leaders simply didn't understand our people's need to find more racial and religious harmony, to gain more sexual respect, and to establish more economic fairness.

"The Teeth Mother Naked at Last" was not only one of the best antiwar poems of its time, but was also one of the most effective expressions of dissent and criticism of American culture since Allen Ginsberg published

"Howl" in 1956. As we re-read "The Teeth Mother Naked at Last," we might ask ourselves if Bly's protest still needs to be heard? Are our children still burning? Are our leaders still making decisions that make too many suffer? Does poetry still uncover hidden meaning decades after its words are written? □