

Poetry discussion

Literature



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John Q. Doe English 344 8 May 2000 Three Poems: One Theme Though poems composed across a great expanse of time would seem to address vastly different concerns, the amount of similarity in poems separated by hundreds of years can be great. Much of this similarity is a result of the subject of poetry, human experience. Even though humans change throughout the ages, the essence of their experiences remains the same. So, a reader can find a theme composed a hundred years ago present in a work composed a decade ago. Such is the case with Ben Jonson's "On My First Son," Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," and Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz." All of these poems investigate tragic relationships between father and child. In Jonson's "On My First Son," the relationship between the father and son is tragic due to death but also beautiful in the love of the father for the son. Jonson composes the poem as a memorial to his son. He opens with a "Farewell" and explains that his son was "Seven years . . . lent" (Jonson 526/ 1 and 3). The overall tone of the poem is bittersweet. Jonson laments the loss of his son, but he celebrates his son's escape from the hardness of life, the "world's and flesh's rage" (526/ 7). He wishes that he too could escape the pain of life. But, as was typical of Jonson's time period, he uses his poetry as a metaphor. In this case, Jonson compares his son to poetry. His son is "Jonson's best piece of poetry" (526/ 10). That Jonson compares his son to his work is telling of the love he had for his son. Jonson was renowned for his poetry, but he felt his son was his best work.

Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" presents a relationship between father and child that is tragically poisonous. In the poem, the speaker is desperate to obtain release from the control of her father. War imagery dominates the struggle between the father and child. He is a "German," and she is a "Jew" (Plath <https://assignbuster.com/poetry-discussion/>

543/ 29 and 32). For the speaker, the father is not a source of love but is a source of oppression that has kept her long from her independence. Like Jonson's poem, this one also contains death, but it is metaphor. In the final lines, the speaker gains her freedom by metaphorically staking her father's "fat black heart" (543/ 76). The father is not a kind or sympathetic character, and though the overall tone and relationship is tragic in its lack of love and bonding, the speaker does gain her freedom.

Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" presents a tragic relationship that combines the love of Jonson's poem with the hate of Plath's poem. In "My Papa's Waltz," the father is an alcoholic with "whiskey on [his] breath" (Roethke 327/ 1). While he and the speaker dance, he "beat[s] time" on the speaker's head while the mother stands by unable to "unfrown" (327/ 13 and 8). All the imagery leads the reader to the conclusion that the father is an alcoholic that likely abuses his family. The speaker is afraid of the father. He "[hangs] on like death" during the dance (327/ 3). But, despite the fear of his father, the speaker does have a relationship where he loves, or at least depends, on the father. At the end of the poem, the speaker is carried off to bed "still clinging to [his father's] shirt" (327/ 16). So, while the speaker is afraid of his father like the speaker of "Daddy," he also loves his father in some way. These three poems all explore father-child relationships that are tragic in the difficulty of the relationships. Jonson's poem is classically tragic in that his son has died. The depth of hate that the speaker of "Daddy" has for her father is tragic as is the father's role as oppressor. Lastly, the speaker of "My Papa's Waltz" has a tragic relationship because of his father's alcoholism and possible abuse.

Work Cited

Kennedy, X. J., and Dana Gioia, ed. *Backpack Literature*. 3rd. New York: Pearson Longman, 2010. Print.