

Roethke's use of tone



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Childhood experiences seem to be the ones that are recollected most vividly throughout a person's life. Almost everyone can remember some aspect of his or her childhood experiences, pleasant and unpleasant alike. Theodore Roethke's poem "My Papa's Waltz" suggests even further that this concept could be true. The dance described in this poem illustrates an interaction between father and child that contains more than the expected joyous, loving attitude between the two characters. Roethke's tone in this work exhibits the blended, yet powerful emotions that he, as a grown man, feels when looking back on this childhood experience. The author somewhat implicates feelings of resentment fused with a loving reliance with his father.

For example, the first two lines of the poem read: "The whiskey on your breath/ Could make a small boy dizzy;" (Roethke 668). This excerpt appears to set a dark sort of mood for the entire rest of the poem. By the first two lines, the reader may already see how this man feels about his father's drunkenness. It seems as if Roethke has preceded his poem with this factor in order to demonstrate the resentment that he feels toward his father.

However, the last two lines of the poem suggest feelings other than resentment: "Then waltzed me off to bed/ Still clinging to your shirt" (Roethke 668). By mentioning the fact that his father put him to bed, Roethke seems to show affectionate feelings

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involved in this dance. He shows his caring feelings in the last line by using the words "still clinging". "Certainly, this small boy's family life has its frightening side, but the last line suggests the boy is still clinging to his

father with persistent if also complicated love" (Kennedy and Gioia 668).

Although their dance appears to be "comic", Roethke seems to possess "an odd and ambivalent closeness" to his apparently intoxicated father (Balakian 62).

Still even more evidence of these mixed feelings is illustrated in the third stanza. "This love dance, a kind of blood rite between father and son, shows suppressed terror combined with awe-inspired dependency" (Balakian 62). "The hand that held my wrist/was battered on one knuckle;/ At every step you missed/ My right ear scraped a buckle"(Roethke 668). The speaker's father's hand being "battered on one knuckle" is indicative of a man who works hard with his hands. This stanza suggests that Papa probably earned a modest living and might have drunk on a regular basis to escape from reality. This stanza also provides the reader with the feeling of how aggressive this dance may be. Roethke is apparently referring to his father's belt buckle in the last line of the third stanza. During an aggressive act such as this, a small child would experience pain from such a man's belt buckle "scraping" across his ear in this fashion, yet the child refrains from any type of resistance. Perhaps this is caused by the child's fear that his father will become angry, so the child simply endures the pain and tries to enjoy the moment, for he may also feel love and attention that he may not receive regularly from his father.

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John J. McKenna offers us further suggestions about the feelings suggested in this poem. In McKenna's article, two of the holograph manuscripts to "My Papa's Waltz" are discussed. McKenna implies that the changes made

between these manuscripts are further evidence that this poem shows mixed emotions through the tone that Roethke utilizes. These holograph manuscripts are labeled " MS-A" and " MS-B" at the University of Washington where they are contained in the archives.

The first of these changes discussed in McKenna's article is the gender of the child in the poem. He discusses how Roethke seemed to argue with himself about what the sex of the child should be, but finally chooses male for a few different reasons. " It seems plausible that he did recognize the rough-house nature of this working-class father's waltz. Certainly American society of 1941, the year of the poem's composition, would see this rough play as more appropriate for a boy than for a girl. By substituting 'boy' for 'girl', then, Roethke could keep the dual tone of this dance: a little rough and scary and a little dear and loving" (McKenna 34-35). The changes shown here are yet another indication of this grown man's emotions toward his childhood experience between him and his father.

McKenna also discusses a significant change made in the third stanza of the poem. This change involves the fourth line which reads " My right ear scraped a buckle" (Roethke 668). McKenna discusses how Roethke seemed to reciprocate between the two versions, substituting " forehead" for " right ear" and vice versa (35). " In the revised and final version, then, the speaker's head is turned to the side, more in the attitude of a child's embrace. Thus, the effect is positive on the tone because the dance becomes an

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informal, impromptu romp" (McKenna 35). This factor makes it clear to the

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reader that, although this waltz is rough and violent, there are still some loving feelings between the child and his father.

Even more revisions were applied to the fourth stanza of "My Papa's Waltz".

"In 'MS-A', the first two lines originally read: 'The hand wrapped round my head/ Was harsh from weeds and dirt'. Significantly, these two lines describing the father's hand actually touching the son/ daughter were greatly revised" (McKenna 35). These lines were changed to say something almost totally different: "You beat time on my head/ With a palm caked hard by dirt,/ Then waltzed me off to bed/ Still clinging to your shirt" (Roethke 668). McKenna notes how Roethke replaced 'kept' with 'beat' and in doing so, "making the situation more ominous, more negative" (35). The second line is also almost totally different than it appears in the two original manuscripts. The word 'palm' appears in the final version instead of 'hand'. McKenna mentions this revision in saying that "the father's palm is indeed hard, albeit from honest work; he is a hard man as well as a hard worker. He even plays hard" (35-36). McKenna comments further by stating that the revisions in the first two lines of the fourth stanza "personalize the dance between the speaker and his father. At the same time, they add an undeniably negative tone with the words 'beat' and 'palm caked hard'. In addition, the three stressed syllables in 'palm caked hard' emphasize the insistent, invasive power of the father over the child" (36). It is evident through these changes that Roethke really wanted to say something in this poem. All of the different changes made in the poem are quite demonstrative of how

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powerful his feelings for his father must have been. "Roethke tried, through

careful revisions to balance negative and positive tones in 'My Papa's Waltz'" (McKenna 36).

Although the dance between him and his father was rough and aggressive, the very fact that Roethke chose to write about the waltz indicates that it is a special moment he remembers sharing with his father. The poet has a remarkable ability to describe the moment and not his feelings. This is what makes " My Papa's Waltz" so interesting and leaves so much to interpretation.

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Words

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