

Theodore roethke research paper

[Literature](#), [Biography](#)



In 1908, Theodore Huebner Roethke was born in Saginaw, Michigan. There he was raised by his mother and father, who owned a greenhouse with their uncle. As a child, he spent much time in the greenhouse observing the nature, which greatly influenced his future works. Roethke attended Arthur Hill High School and later graduated magna cum laude from the University of Michigan in 1929. Afterward he took a few graduate classes at Michigan and Harvard, but was unhappy and left (Kalaidjian).

After leaving graduate school Roethke began teaching at Lafayette College and started writing and after ten years he published his first book, *Open House*. Then going to teach at Michigan State College and Pennsylvania State University he released some works and from there he started to make a name for himself. While teaching it was discovered that he had a mental illness, he had to be hospitalized and stopped teaching. Roethke had reoccurring depression, but instead of bringing him down he used it to his advantage of being able to explore writing in a different mindset (Kalaidjian).

After many collections of books and poems his reputation was admired by many. Some of his most successful works are *The Walking*, *The Lost Son*, *Praise to the End!*, and *Elegy for Jane*. Some sets of poems that were also huge accomplishments were *The Greenhouse Poems*, *Words for the Wind*, and *The Far Field*. Over the years he was awarded many honorable prizes and grants such as the Pulitzer Prize, Levinson Prize, National Institute of Arts and Letters Grant, and Guggenheim Fellowship.

Roethke made great advances in literature and composition but made sure to give credit to the influence of many great and notable writers. Including Emily Dickinson, John Donne, and William Blake, and admiring the works of <https://assignbuster.com/theodore-roethke-research-paper/>

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, and William Yeats (Kalaidjian). Throughout Theodore Roethke's life he was very successful. From going to school, teaching, writing, and overcoming depression. He began traveling to different states and countries with his wife, giving presentations and writing columns.

Unfortunately while visiting a close friend in Washington, Roethke suffered a heart attack leading to his death at age fifty-five. As I mentioned earlier as a child Theodore Roethke spent a lot of his time in the greenhouse his father and uncle owned. He observed nature and its true beauty in unique ways. The years he spent in that greenhouse truly helped him become successful in his writing career. A good number of his most famous works, as well as his less notable works reference nature in some way. I will discuss some of these poems showing the references to nature and repeated themes.

Roethke tends to relate life and death to nature using imagery and detailed descriptions to captivate the readers. *Elegy for Jane* which is one of Roethke's most famous poems was published in *The Waking: Poems 1933-1953* (DiYanni). An elegy is defined as a poem written in memory of a deceased acquaintance (Dictionary. com). Throughout the whole poem there is a mournful and dreary mood being conveyed. Roethke describes the girl in the poem and mentions elements of nature, but neither are described or portrayed as beautiful.

The first line Roethke wrote " I remember the neckcurls, limp and damp as tendrils" is not a very beautiful sounding description, and he mentions a wren and skittery pigeon neither of which are birds of beauty. In the poem the girl dies and the narrator, her teacher, is at her funeral feeling a little

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misplaced. Roethke shows that the narrator seems to have feelings for the girl but in a respectful admiring way as you can see when he says “ Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love: I, with no rights in this matter, neither father nor lover”. Another famous poem of Roethke is The Waking.

This is another gloomy poem he wrote, describing waking up from either death or a nightmare. The repetition of the line “ I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow” makes it seem like the narrator dreads death or nightmare every single day, but if it happens it was meant to be. Roethke once again references nature talking about the ground he walks on, a tree, and the air. Susan Pinkus critiques The Waking saying that Roethke used literary techniques such as paradoxes which made the poem confusing, until the poem progressed and the meanings became clear.

Susan describing the poem said “ It is as vibrant and fragile and mysterious as the circle of our lives--birth and decay, life and death--that inspired this poem”. The Night Journey by Roethke is describing a journey which represents the path of life. Mentioning hardships life has using nature to portray them; “ rocks of earth”, “ bleak wasted place”, “ thunder through ravines”, and “ wheels shake the roadbed stone”. The narrator talks about these rough times lead up to staying up all night just to be in touch with his soul and spiritual life.

In this time is when one reaches serenity and a peace of mind, able “ to see the land I love”. Frederick Philip Lenz said that “ Roethke’s essential need was to confess his own humanity, both the agonies and joys that existed...” Journey into the Interior is somewhat similar to The Night Journey in that the poem also describes the path of life to eventual death. This poem uses vivid

descriptions of nature, “ The arroyo cracking the road, the wind-bitten buttes, the canyons, creeks swollen in midsummer... (Roethke)” emphasizing the difficulties each person faces.

When facing the uphill battle of life eventually it will come to an inevitable ending, death. Theodore Roethke wrote the poem *The Geranium*, it talks about a man who has a plant but does not take very good care of it “ At the time: she'd lived so long on gin, bobbie pins, half-smoked cigars, dead beer, her shriveled petals falling”. One day the maid throws the plant away and shortly after she is dismissed because she threw out the man’s only friend.

The plant is of great importance in this poem used as a metaphor for the man’s abuse of his own health and negligence of his well being or can be taken literally as about a plant being improperly treated and friend to the man. In class we read *In a Dark Time* which can be compared to all the poems I mentioned above because of its references to nature. This poem is talking about life and death similarly to *The Waking*, *The Night Journey*, and *Journey into the Interior* explaining that in the end death will come.

In *In a Dark Time* Roethke is talking about one trouble, mental illness, while in the other poems the nature is just symbolizing any and all obstacles of life that a person could face. In all the poems Roethke uses great detail so that the reader can really picture and relate to the life cycle he describes. In class we also read *My Papa’s Waltz* which brings up alcohol abuse just as Roethke did in *The Geranium*. *Elegy for Jane* describes a relationship that could be interpreted the wrong way, similarly is the odd relationship between father and son in *My Papa’s Waltz*.

My Papa's Waltz is referring to his childhood and his abusive relationship with his father " The hand that held my wrist was battered on one knuckle; at every step you missed my right ear scraped a buckle (Roethke)". This could be the reason for the majority of Roethke's poems having dark, gloomy, and somewhat mysterious tone and verbum. From the works discussed in this paper it is clear that Theodore Roethke found nature as the main inspiration and symbol for his literature.

Nature did not only represent beauty and life, but also darkness and death. There are many representations of the cycle of life using descriptive references to nature showing the ups and downs many people face throughout their lifetimes. The uniqueness and high quality of writing Roethke was able to achieve in the delivery of his messages and themes will render throughout literary history for years to come. Theodore Roethke truly was a remarkable writer of his time, leaving notable works for generations of people to read and appreciate.