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The Opposing Emotions Found in Roethke's " My Papa's Waltz"

Roethke's " My Papa's Waltz" is a very brief poem, but one filled with powerful verses and a plethora of emotions. It is a poem that talks about a bedtime dance performed by a father-son duo. The poem has given birth to multiple interpretations over the years, regarding the speaker's emotion towards his father. While some argue that the poem is about a father physically controlling or even abusing his son, some see it as an expression of love by a clumsy and rough, yet, affectionate father. However, familial relations are a complex subject, and not all relations can be defined by a single emotion/characteristic. The poem, in essence, depicts a mixture of brutality and warmth in the part of the father and a combination of fear and affection in the part of the son.

The poem is said to be a reminiscent of Roethke's difficult childhood and thus, a look into his life would throw more light on the context of the poem, and help us to decipher its many themes. Theodore Roethke was born in Saginaw, Michigan and spent most of his childhood in a greenhouse owned by his father. He had a difficult relationship with his father, who was an authoritarian by exterior and kept his ' vulnerable core' hidden from his son and expressed only through his plants in the greenhouse. As a result, Roethke felt abandoned and bitter, and was not able to understand his father.

The speaker of this poem is a young boy whose father has rough, work-hardened hands. So, the speaker in many ways resembles a young Roethke,

who both admired and feared his father. Like Otto, Roethke's father, the father in the poem too expressed his love in a brutal way. He chose to dance with his son, but the dance is fast paced and so violent that the "pans slid from the kitchen shelf." The speaker is an innocent little boy, who both wanted to and, at the same time, was scared of bonding with his father. The poem is written in iambic trimeter. This meter gives the poem a sense of rhythm that resembles a waltz and also of colloquial English speech. The iambs restrain the trimeter, and there is a pause-and-a-start feel to the poem, which is very waltz-like. The punctuation at the end of every second and fourth line makes the structure of the poem neatly arranged into four stanzas, with each having two free standing lines.

A reader can find that these poetic elements do not concur with each other when the poem is read aloud. This play accentuates how the symbol of dance, which is an event that involves two people harmoniously moving with each other, in this poem, is used to represent the disharmony of a family. The poem contains a rollicking rhythm with verses such as dizzy, waltzing and romped, and some heavy verses such as battered, cracked hard, and death. This mixture of playful and grim verses creates the mood for the poem, which describes a night in the young boy's life, during which he danced with his drunken father.

Beneath the external lightness of the tone of the poem, as witnessed through the verses such as "make a small boy dizzy," there is an ambivalence and terror in the narrator's voice. The boy, though enjoys the dance with the papa and looks forward to the intimacy they share, has some trepidations and fear. He notes that his father is drunk and his speed is

difficult for a small boy to keep up. He also adds that he hung on to his father 'like death.' The simile 'death' here denotes how the boy clung on to his father as though his life depended on it, but was it because of affection or fear remains ambiguous. Such grim words are hardly used to denote a celebratory or joyful thing such as a dance.

Imagery is another poetic element used by Roethke to highlight the confused emotions of the speaker. He says the frown on the mother's face was difficult to erase. While mothers do not like the mess caused by sliding pans and young boys out of bed at the night, the reason behind the mood of the speaker's mother may be something serious. We can also see tactile imagery being used by the poet, when the boy says things like he clung to his father's shirt and that his father beat time on his head.

The situation mentioned in the poem is a bedtime dance and should have been filled with joyful and pleasant images. Instead, we have a scene where the mother is frowning, boy is struggling to keep pace and when he misses a beat his 'right ear scraped a buckle.' The father's battered knuckle and dirt filled palm shows that he has come home from a hard day's work, and the smell of whiskey in his breath indicates that he is drunk. He is trying to put his son to sleep, but in a manner that both exhilarates and scares the young boy.

The poem through its diction succeeds in conveying the entire event through the point of view of a young boy. There is an innocence, affection, confusion, fear and joy in the words of the speaker thus, providing an authentic tone to the entire poem. The boy feels dizzy while dancing, notices the frown of the mother, understands his father's drunken mood, and feels the pain of

missing a step and hard grip of his father, but through all this clings to his father like death. Beneath the simple verses of this laconic poem, a multitude of emotions are conveyed that too from the perception of a child. The waltz dance is used as a symbol to convey the bonding of the father and son, which is tumultuous and exhilarating. Waltzing was dizzy, rough, demanding, sometimes painful, yet, the son wanted to do it. Not just the body of the poem, but the title too adds to the theme conveyed. It is not titled 'our dance' or 'a bed time dance'. It is titled 'my papa's waltz,' indicating that it was not a joint activity but it was more of his father's dance. He led the way and forced his son to follow, just like the poet's real life father dominated him. When the son couldn't keep up with the father, invariably, he felt the pain, be it in dance or life.

Roethke's poem contains opposing emotions that balance each other. The emotion of joy (conveyed through diction, symbol of waltz, rhyme and rhythm) is balanced by the emotion of fear (conveyed through imagery, tone, and grim verses). The waltz dance and the fun rhythm are ironically opposite to the brutality of the father who hurts the son in the process of bonding, either without knowing or caring.

However, a close scrutiny of the poem reveals that both the extreme emotions conveyed (joy and fear) are given equal importance. The poem cannot be classified as a depiction of a joyful dance/bonding, nor can be classified into a description of fatherly abuse. The son wants to bond with his father but is scared of the pain sometimes accompanies with it. Though the poem conveys the stench of whiskey, rough hands, and beating time on

head, the boy loves his father and that is why he goes to bed ' Still clinging to your(his father's) shirt.'

Works Cited

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