

Example of theodore roethke literature review

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



" My Papa's Waltz" - Literary Analysis

In Theodore Roethke's " My Papa's Waltz," the complex relationship between a father and son is communicated expertly through evocative imagery, steady rhythm and clear emotion. The specific nature of the boy's relationship with his father is a complex dichotomy between love and victimization, as the father is shown to be clearly alcoholic and abusive, both to his son and to his mother. Through the help of the aforementioned imagery and escalation of each stanza, Roethke makes clear the overall message of the poem, subtly alluding to the father's alcoholism, which is taken at face value by the son.

The poem's first two lines provide a microcosm for the work's message: " The whiskey on your breath / Could make a small boy dizzy" (lines 1-2).

Here, Roethke demonstrates that a) the father is an alcoholic, and b) the boy is affected, whether knowingly or unknowingly, by the actions resulting from his father's drunken state. Roethke continues by cementing the poem's perspective being that of the son's, and reiterating the difficulty of walking around with his drunken, stumbling father: " But I hung on like death: / Such waltzing was not easy" (lines 3-4). Here, the language takes a dark yet comic turn, as the son's clinging to his father is related to danger and death while the father's drunken shambling is compared to a dance.

In the second stanza, we see the son recognize the father's alcoholism affecting his marriage with his mother. Their " romping" continues " until the pans / Slid from the kitchen shelf;" the boy likening his father's clumsy breaking of cookware to play (lines 5-6). This further demonstrates the boy's ignorance of the seriousness of this problem, as his description of his father's

state as "waltzing" and "romping" implies he is unaware of how problematic his behavior is. The boy notices that his "mother's countenance / Could not unfrown itself," being distantly aware of his mother's disapproval, but perhaps not quite connecting the dots - this is likely a normal, regular occurrence.

The third stanza reveals slightly darker undertones to his father's alcoholism, revealing a history of physical abuse likened directly to his actions while under the influence of alcohol. The boy relates that "the hand that held my wrist / Was battered on one knuckle," revealing that the son and father are not holding hands, as implied earlier in the poem, but the son is being dragged along by the father (lines 9-10). The battering on one knuckle implies the father has been punching something (or someone), making his father's hand something quite sinister between the two actions related here. Even the father's shambling harms the boy, the physical injuries making the emotional trauma manifest, when his "right ear scrape[s] a buckle" at "every step [the father] missed" (lines 11-12). While there was always an undercurrent of menace in the prior stanzas, it is here that Roethke relates the not only passive, but active danger the father represents to the family: not only is he clumsy and unpleasant when drunk, he is physically harmful. In the fourth and final stanza, the implicit abuse is made explicit and current, as the father "beat time on my head / With a palm caked hard by dirt" (lines 13-14). This makes it clear that the father is actively beating his son, likely influenced by the drunken state he is in. Roethke gives further character to the father, perhaps implying his own difficult employment and working-class nature, by describing the dirt caked on the father's palm. The final two lines

of the poem, much like the first, toe the line between the danger of the father's behavior and the love and connection that still remains between them: the father " waltzed me off to bed / Still clinging to your shirt" (lines 15-16). Here, the " waltzing" is given a much friendlier context, and the son " clinging" to his shirt implies a persistent connection and adoration between them, despite the physical abuse.

In conclusion, " My Papa's Waltz" is an intriguing and haunting look inside a broken home that is traumatized by alcoholism and physical abuse. The father is shown to be monstrous, at least when he is drunk; he stumbles around like a fool, disappoints his wife, beats his son, and breaks things in his home. By rounding out such a violent poem with two stanzas relating both a) the father's drinking problem and b) the son's persisting love in spite of that, Roethke illustrates the nature of abusive relationships, particularly between father and son. The father, by having no one stand up to him, is given implicit permission to beat his son and trash his home (to the disappointment and disapproval of his wife), likely encouraged by the lower-class working man lifestyle he lives. By likening the father's behavior to a dance, Roethke also cements the son's lack of understanding of what is going on, normalizing the behavior in his mind and (tragically) paving the road for the son to do the same in the future.

Works Cited

Roethke, Theodore. " My Papa's Waltz." Poetryfoundation. org. 1961. Web. .