

Stylistic devices in my papa's waltz

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



“ My Papa’s Waltz” : A Poetry Analysis

Author Theodore Roethke, in an intimate and sincere poem in reference to his relationship with his father attempts to share his story with his audience. In this case, Roethke adopts a vague, somber tone to relay his blurred opinions about his father. By employing the use of intoxicating tone, varying diction and metaphors, Roethke alludes to his violent relationship with his father.

In “ My Papa’s Waltz”, Roethke’s tone is obscure; he speaks utilizing a type of style similar to that of a lullaby, every other line ends in a rhyme. “ The whiskey on your breath... But I hung on like death...” (Lines 1 & 3, Roethke.) “ The hand that held my wrist... At every step you missed...” (Lines 9 & 11, Roethke.) This presents the audience with a sense of berceuse, masking the fact that the father was a drunk (line 1), and would occasionally abuse his child (lines 9-10). Nevertheless, the infatuation with his father is evident in his tone, thus clouding the underlying disheartening tone of the boy with admiration. Beginning in the next stanza, lines 5-8 elaborate on the third part of the family, the mother. Her “ countenance could not unfrown itself” (lines 7-8, Roethke.), insinuating the mother’s facial expressions being saddened. The third-party view of the mother is clear; she knows the situation they are all in. However, she does nothing about it, she simply “ lets the pans slide to the kitchen floor.” (lines 5-6, Roethke.) The tone continues to be depressing, even the mother is upset with their predicament. It doesn’t end there; “ The hand that held my wrist / Was battered on one knuckle / At every step you missed / My right ear scraped a buckle.” These

lines, (9-12) further suggests the violence in a whimsical tone. They are still waltzing throughout the child abuse; the battered knuckle and belt buckle are symbols for violence, yet rhyme, giving it a less violent tone. " You beat time on my head / With a palm caked hard by dirt..." (lines 13-14) give the same idea as lines 9-12; however, " Then waltzed me off to bed / Still clinging to your shirt." reminding the reader just how much the boy adores his father that he physically clings his shirt. The abusive tone is heavily romanticized, ending the poem by leaving the reader to imagine the ending.

Furthermore, Roethke utilizes the use of connotative diction; " waltzing" is a word apart from what it being described explicitly- abuse. This could also be seen as using metaphors- the entire piece is filled with them. The very embodiment of the metaphor is seen in the fourth stanza; " You beat time on my head / With a palm caked hard by dirt, / Then waltzed me off to bed / Still clinging to your shirt." After hitting the child, the father " waltzes" with him, meaning the two partake in the same routine each time they " waltz." In addition, referring back to lines 1-2, the father's drunkenness alludes to violence, the whiskey on his breath dizzying the child is a denotative diction, directly referring to alcohol. Most alcoholics tend to abuse the depressing substance, as well as their families, and that is what Roethke's underlying message is; the child is inadvertently aware of his father's alcoholism. Not only does this form of diction enhance the effect of the story on the reader, but also lines 9-10 also do so; " The hand that held my wrist / Was battered on one knuckle..." This is also connotative diction because it insinuates the father's violence by holding his son's wrist instead of his hands, a position often used to hold someone down, as well as indirectly shine a light on his "

battered knuckle” probably from hitting something, or even worse, someone. Progressing forward to relay his story, Roethke writes; “ But I hung on like death: / Such waltzing was not easy.” (lines 3-4, Roethke.) The boy enforces a simile, further developing the diction due to the son physically hanging on to his father, implying that inevitably, violence leads to death, and the small child has already accepted his fate with pride because the end results would have been by his beloved father’s hard hands.

In summary, “ My Papa’s Waltz” attempts to subtly share a violent story, and depict it better than it was from a loving young boy’s point of view. The boy did not want the waltz to end- it was his genuine connection to his father. Abuse victims are almost always unaware of the situations due to love, yet Roethke relays the story in a way that many can perceive the underlying message. The emotional appeals are evident along with the tone and diction, presenting a story of violence hazed with blinding love.