

A critical essay on theodore roethke's "my papa's waltz" analysis

[Society](#), [Child Abuse](#)



How can a poem written more than fifty years ago manage to find a more contemporary reading, and inspire a healthy yet critical discussion between ' classicists' and ' modernist' readers or audiences?

Such is the charm exhibited by the poem *My Papa's Waltz* written by Theodore Roethke. Even before jumping straight to the discussion of the meat and matter, or the content of the poem itself, there is already so much to say about the poem if we are to judge its literary merit in terms of form.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE, LANGUAGE AND RHYME

The poem is very easily understood and is presented in a clear chronological order, from the time the father comes home, up to the conclusion of the ' waltz' with the speaker in the poem *off to bed* (Roethke). Because of a clear chronology of events, the poem is light, delightful, and yet, remains thought-provoking.

The language used is also very light and appropriate, as it is seen that the speaker in the poem is a child and the addressee is the papa, or the father of the speaker (Roethke). Such easy vocabulary is appropriate for the speaker in the poem, thus creating a high level of believability in the reader and lending credibility to the speaker in the poem.

We see clearly and immediately the distinction between the speaker and the addressee, and we can also create in our minds the right profile for both speaker and addressee in the poem. The rhyme scheme is A-B-A-B-C-D-C-D-E-F-E-F-G-H-G-H.

There is a wonderful mix of masculine rhymes; like head-bed in lines 13 and 15 (Roethke), and dirt-shirt in lines 14 and 16 (Roethke); and feminine rhymes like dizzy-easy in lines 1 and 3 (Roethke), and knuckle-buckle in lines 10 and 12 (Roethke) in the poem. The few 'sloppy' rhymes found in the poem are also interesting since they can be, again, attributed to the fact that the speaker is a person of tender age.

IMAGERY AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

The narrative structure of the poem is further bolstered by a clear and vivid rendering of images. The very first two lines - "The whiskey on your breath/Could make a small boy dizzy" (Roethke); - clearly and certainly presents a clear mental picture, where, not only the mind's eye, but as well as other senses are able to participate: to be specific, in these lines, the sense of smell.

Even the 'mind's ears' are able to participate in the sensory experience of the poem as evidenced by lines 5 and 6 - "We romped until the pans/Slid from the kitchen shelf" (Roethke); where one could easily hear the racket that these pans sliding off kitchen shelves may have caused.

This poem is simply a delight to the senses! The use of figurative language is superior as well. With lines 7 and 8 - "My mother's countenance/Could not unfrown itself" (Roethke), and the final lines - "Then waltzed me off to bed/Still clinging to your shirt" (Roethke) - are excellent and very inventive use of figurative language, not to mention it being far from cliché.

The poem is a brilliant gem of literature that exhibits mastery, not only of poetic form, but as well as content. Speaking of content, this is exactly what

has been subject of heated debates and lively discussion regarding the theme or the reading of the poem.

DUALITY OF READING

The poem presents a multilayered theme, capable of multiple readings. This conflict of reading and interpretation of the poem's thematic or symbolic meaning stems from a difference in reader response to the poem.

Most 'classicists' view the poem as an innocent and nostalgic retelling of a 'bonding time' between a doting father and a beloved son/child. On the other end of the spectrum are the 'modernists' interpretation of the poem as one which speaks of child abuse by physical punishment of a drunk father.

The classicists argue that a reading of a poem should also take into consideration the era or period at the time of the poem's writing. They argue that the poem should not only be read and appreciated or criticized by using intrinsic information within the poem, but also extrinsic factors, such as the reference to line 1's whiskey breath (Roethke), and lines 7 and 8's mother's countenance (Roethke).

The modernists are in the view that this is not an enjoyable scenario for a child when such a dance is considered 'not easy' (Roethke) in line 4, as well as a 'hung to death' (Roethke) in line

3. Furthermore, violence is suggested by the hand holding on to the person's wrist in line 9, which is described as batter in one knuckle in line 10. There is also a strong suggestion of violence by the scrapping of the right ear in a buckle at every misstep (Roethke) in lines 11 and 12. Delivering the final nail to the coffin of the argument are the final lines 15 and 16's waltzing

off to bed still clinging to the abusive father's shirt (Roethke), which shows reluctance and forcible tucking in of the speaker to the bed.

I identify with the modernists in the reading and interpretation of this poem. I see violence and abuse in the poem, but to debate on such matters would be to entirely miss the point. The point here is that, this work is a marvelous piece of literature because it has the timeless quality of a classic, as well as a multi-faceted and multi-layered interpretation.

After all, a good poem should impart a significant human experience, and it should draw from the reader, empathy, and a participation of the senses. Whether this is a nostalgic recall of good times between father and child or a violent episode of child abuse, the fact remains that the poem succeeds both in form and substance or content, and transcends time, is of essence. Its allowing for multiple readings is only a testament to the sterling qualities of this timeless classic.