

Example of essay on theme of parental love in poems by theodore roethke and weldo...

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



Like every other human relationship, the love between parents and children is not simply black and white, but rather it conveys different shades of grey which make it confusing and difficult to grasp, but simultaneously, one of the most potent human relationships in existence. In their poems, Theodore Roethke, Weldon Kees and Natasha Trethewey show the side of parental love that might appear to be lacking in love at first sight, because the poet does not merely state his love for his child, or his parent, bluntly. On the contrary, the situations that these poets convey are ones that show that love does not exist only during good times, but during bad times as well, and by no means do these bad times make this love any less powerful. The poetic voices of the following poems love their children and parents, but at the same time, want to show them that life does not consist only of good things, but of bad ones as well, and that these bad times should be exactly when this love surfaces.

Theodore Roethke's poem " My Papa's Waltz" is one that can be interpreted in two ways. The first would be the painstakingly obvious one: a drunken father comes home to his family, and holding his boy by the wrist, forces him into a bizarre dancing ritual, which actually physically hurts the boy, as he mentions that when his father misses a step, his ear gets scraped by the father's buckle. In addition to this, the boy mentions clinging to his father like death, and that this waltzing can, by no standards, be considered an easy thing to do. To a reader who is satisfied with the superficial interpretation, this indicates enough of a bad relationship of a drunken father, who mistreats his son, which might be extracted from the following

lines: "hung on like death" and "beat time on my head" (Kennedy and Gioia 674).

However, a second, deeper, more profound analysis reveals something quite different from this initial, negative outlook on this father-son relationship. It might be argued that, having gotten home a bit drunk, the father is in a very happy and joyful mood, and has the desire to play with his son whom he has not seen all day. The hands of the father are "with a palm caked hard by dirt," a fact which connotes the idea that the father is a laborer, working hard from morning until dawn to provide for his family, and as such men do, he enjoys a glass or two of hard liquor after a hard day's work (Kennedy and Gioia 674). On coming home, it is natural that the boy smells alcohol on his breath, but at the same time, the boy is all too happy to see his father back from work and is reluctant to let go once their odd, but loving dance is brought to an end.

In addition, it is true that the mother has a frown on her face, but this can easily be attributed to the fact that pans were sliding from the kitchen shelf, which of course, will be her duty to clean up and put everything back to its place after their little waltz. The end comes soon, but the boy is unwilling to let go of his father, "still clinging to [his] shirt," exactly because even though the father may be drunk and frequently out of the house, he is still his father nonetheless, and as such, the boy loves him (Kennedy and Gioia 674). What surfaces here is not an idyllic image of family life; it is far from it. Everyone appears to be in a wickedly enchanted mood: the mother frowns, the father unintentionally hurts the boy, though not too much, and the boy

mentions death and hitting, but is still reluctant to let go of this magical waltz. This is the beauty of Roethke's poem; not the simplicity of love, but rather the grotesque comedy of life, where even such love as that of a parent and child has its frightening moments, but in the end, we cling to those we love, no matter what.

On the other hand, Weldon Kees offers the same idea, but from a different perspective. His is a father's eye overlooking the fate of his beloved daughter, and instead of conjuring up images that most fathers do, graduation, marriage and grandchildren, he envisions something much darker that might befall his daughter. His daughter is still young, inexperienced, in possession of "the innocence of morning flesh," where morning stands as a symbol of commencing of a life and the awakening of a soul (Kennedy and Gioia 679). Most fathers imagine only the best that will happen to their children, but not Kees. He sees only misery, "hintings of death," that his daughter is too young to take notice of, a life of pain and wretchedness, of hating herself and others around her, and finally, a life of being married to someone who will cheat on her and give her a sexually transmitted disease: "bride of a syphilitic or a fool" (Kennedy and Gioia 679). Finally, the end of the poem is equally disturbing as his future vision of his daughter's life. He simply acknowledges the fact that he has no daughter, and for these reasons that he mentioned, he does not desire one. One would think it a strange thing for a loving father to say.

Nevertheless, again a deeper insight into the poem does not reveal that the speaker does not feel parental love for his daughter, but rather that he is

painfully aware of all suffering that might befall his much-loved daughter, and like everyone loving father, the last thing he would ever want is to see his child in pain. Thus, it is simply easier to imagine one has no daughter than to see her go through hell in life. Even though it appears that he renounces her, because the amount of pain and suffering life can instill on her is simply too much for one father to protect her from, the poem does appear to have positive connotations. This is a reasonable father, who will always tell his daughter exactly how things are. He will not lie, he will not tell her things are better, when they are not. And, it is exactly this kind of love and support that will make his daughter a worthy person, able to take on life head on.

Finally, Natasha Trethewey offers the story of a child who chooses to tell a white lie, as the poem is aptly named, and with this action, appears to renounce her family, her heritage and her roots, something her mother endeavors to wash out of her with soap, symbolically making her stop telling white lies, though the daughter still hopes that this washing will make her white from the inside. In times of segregation and extreme sensitivity to racial issues, the speaker is all too willing to tell a white lie to pass for a white child, instead of her true skin color; still, "mama found out" (Kennedy and Gioia 680). Naturally, the mother endeavors to instill racial pride in her daughter, symbolically washing her mouth with soap, as this appeared proper punishment for lies, white or the usual kind. The mother wants only the best for her child, though she knows that in those times, being a person of color meant being segregated and not having equal opportunity as white

people had. Some might even accuse the mother of not being fair and that she should have let everyone think her daughter was truly of light skin color. But, it is obvious that the mother wants to raise a proper person, righteous and hard working, and not a liar who will lie her way through life. This teaches the daughter a valuable lesson, though by the end of the poem, she still erroneously believes that the soap suds will make her white from the inside.

In the end, all three poems offer a deeper introspective look into the nature of what it means to be a parent. It is not only the good times where it is easy to show love, but rather it is about those frightening times, insecure times, painful times, when a child needs to know that even though it might have done something wrong, the parent is still there, offering unconditional love and support.

Works Cited:

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