

Comparison of "my father's song" and "my papa's waltz" essay sample

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Family relationships are not always the loving embraces seen on the Disney Channel. Some can become more malicious, such as those seen on Fox. The poems “ My Father’s Song,” by Simon J. Ortiz, and “ My Papa’s Waltz,” by Theodore Roethke, are two similar poems written about a father and child relationship. The two poems are spoken from the child’s point of view during a memorable event. As well as their similarities, these two poems have their differences. Although both poems concern the relationship between a father and his son, they differ on tone, imagery, and figurative language.

In “ My Father’s Song,” the main tone is nostalgia. “ My Papa’s Waltz” is a stark contrast, in that there is a harsh tone. In “ My Father’s Song,” the nostalgic tone comes through in some of the word choices. In the first stanza, the speaker remembers his father’s voice. He describes his experience:

“ I miss my father tonight.

His voice, the slight catch,

the depth from his thin chest,

the tremble of emotion

in something he has just said

to his son, his song:” (Ortiz 2-7)

The speaker can remember even the tiniest detail about his father, down to "the slight catch, / the depth from his thin chest" (3-4). The child cared very deeply about his father, even more tonight, and is thinking about him. The tone of the second poem is established by the diction used by the author. Upon first glance, the tone of the poem is amusing. The scene that the reader's mind forms is rather comical, with the child holding on for dear life as his chuckling father spins him around. However, the lines "At every step you missed / My right ear scraped a buckle" (Roethke 11-12) suggest that the boy is being injured by this careless dance. Furthermore, when the author states, "You beat time on my head" (13) it leads the reader to believe that the father is abusive of the boy. The speaker says "We romped until the pans / Slid from the kitchen shelf" (5-6). The word romped evokes a playful tone, and is not usually used to describe a negative event. However, the fact that the pans fell off the shelf shows that the father was doing more than playing boisterously.

Both authors use a large amount of imagery to convey their experiences. In "My Father's Song," the speaker uses the imagery of the "tiny pink animals" (Ortiz 18) to denote one of the major themes. Mice are generally considered small and fragile, which extends the theme of gentleness. The child expresses his feeling of safety with his father. In "My Papa's Waltz," Roethke uses dramatic, seemingly violent language to describe a rowdy encounter between a son and his father. The diction used reveals that the waltz is not a playful dance, but rather a son roughly swung around by his father. The first stanza opens with the image of the father's whisky breath that the speaker

recalls was powerful enough to " make a small boy dizzy" (Roethke 2). Immediately, the poem makes the reader feel uneasy about what is to come of this drunken father and his son. In addition, when the author states him " hung on like death" because " such waltzing was not easy" illustrate that this evening dance is nearly overpowering for the young boy (3-4). This is not a joyful encounter but one of apprehension. We also can see that the mother is disapproving of this rough play by the expression on her face that " Could not unfrown itself" (8). She is perceptibly upset and yet does not stop it, presumably out of fear.

Figurative language helps promote the different themes in each poem. In " My Father's Song," nature imagery in the last two stanzas includes repetition of the phrase " soft damp sand [...] soft moist sand [...] sand moist clod" (Ortiz 11-23), the repetition of the line shows that the speaker again noticed the slightest detail about this trip with his father. This phrase stood out of the poem because it was repeated several times and because it contained a greater sense of power to it than the rest of the poem because of its repetition. " My Papa's Waltz" differs from this, in that there is no repetition in words or phrases, yet it still manages to present a strong and clear message. Theodore Roethke compares the actions described by the poem to a waltz. However, the comparison is ridiculous and satirical. The narrative of this poem describes an abusive father " waltzing" (Roethke 4) with his reluctant child. However, this dance is nothing resembling a waltz. The waltz of the father in the poem is coarse and forceful. The drunkenness of his Papa, the mother's ignorance, and the way the child describes his abuse are

very clear interpretations of mistreatment in Theodore Roethke's poem " My Papa's Waltz."

Although " My Father's Song," by Simon J. Ortiz, and " My Papa's Waltz," by Theodore Roethke both concern the relationship between a father and his son, they differ on tone, imagery, and figurative language. " My Father's Song" has a reflective tone, while " My Papa's Waltz" uses diction to convey a harsh, violent tone. " Song" suggests a gentle, positive image, whereas " Waltz" suggests a violent, negative image. In addition, " Song" uses figurative language to show the child's devotion to his father, while " Waltz" conveys the rough nature of the father. These two poems demonstrate that while most fathers are truly passionate and beneficial to their children, there are some that are not as virtuous.