

My father in the navy:
a childhood memory
by judith ortiz cofer
and my papa`s wal...



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The two poems deal with a child's love for a father encapsulated in the persona's most vivid memory of his or her father. Pivotal in both poems is the physical presence of the father in the persona's life as a child. The presence of the father in Roethke's poem is encompassing. Even the reader could almost smell his breath laced with whisky; feel him tap the beat of the waltz on one's head; hear the crashing of the pans on the floor; feel his callous hands upon one's skin; feel oneself go dizzy with his grand movements as he goes round and round, dancing to his own drunken rhythm.

On the other hand, the absence of the father in Cofer's poem is palpable in every corner of the persona's reminiscences and imagination. The reader sees the father only through the persona's recollection and emotions: the father's crisp white uniform, her sadness when he leaves and her anticipation of his impending return home. In both poems, the personas look forward to their father's arrival. In Roethke's poem, the waltz takes the place of a lullaby; a ritual between father and son representing their closeness and affection.

For the other, it is a perpetual vigil to be graced by the father's presence every once in a while; a blessing fervently awaited by a child with a profound longing for her father in her life. . The title of the Roethke's poem, My Papa's Waltz, aptly sets the mood and creates the primary image of the poem. The term 'papa' is an affectionate term in calling one's father and the waltz is a dance in close proximity with one's partner, characterized by revolving and gliding, with one partner leading the other in this mesmerizing steps of revelry.

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It is light and happy and leaves the dancers quite dizzy. Even the form of the poem is consistent with the systematic rhythm of a dance such that when one reads the poem, s/he moves with the persona and the father as they sweep the floor and steadily climb the heightened emotions and slowly cool off to a bow as the father puts his son to bed. Roethke paints us a picture of a father and a son enjoying some quality time at day's end, with the mother at the background showing slight annoyance over their choice of activity.

The father returns home from work after a few shots of whisky. He is a laborer as his hand is 'battered on one knuckle' and his 'palm caked with dirt.' As he twirls his son, the boy 'hangs on like death' because 'such waltzing was not easy.' The use of simile by the author highlights the magnitude of the father's movement and the boy's age and stature. He is still quite young and finds it quite hard to keep up dancing with a grown up. This conveys that the small boy finds it challenging and thus anticipates waltzing with his father.

The ritual might probably be the highlight of most of his days. The crashing pots and pans underlines the fact that the pair dances to their own brand of waltz. Perhaps because of the father's occupation, their movements, as he leads the boy, are not quite as fluid and delicate as an ideal waltz should be. The last two stanzas show us of the father's role in the child's life. The love and affection between the two is obvious. The firm hand and influence of the father over the child and his upbringing is not, however, lost.

Line nine states that the father holds the child's wrist. This conveys the image of strength and leadership, even dominance for had it been mere

gentle guidance, the father would have held his son's hand, instead of his wrist, as the former is more proper in waltz. This though is bolstered by Line thirteen, ' You beat time on my head. ' I am not proposing beating with a stick but a none-too-gentle reminder of the father's expectation of precision in movements. This could translate to the father's strong influence on how and what the son turns out in life.

The poem ends showcasing once again his deep love for the father as he is ' waltzed...off to bed still clinging to his (your) shirt. ' In Cofer's poem, the readers have not been indulged in having a glimpse of the father's character. It is a privilege not enjoyed even by the persona. Perhaps it is because of the father's prolonged absence in his child's life. I would suppose that an officer on duty parts with his family for long periods of time. Even the title, My Father in the Navy, conveys formality and authority. The persona cannot even describe her father like a real person.

Her father has no face, no hands, no feet, no skin. She cannot describe her father's laughter. Do his eyes shine when he is surprised? Does he have wrinkles around his mouth when he smiles? Does he whip her when he is angry? Does he kiss her goodnight? The poem is, instead, punctuated by religious images in references to the father: his immaculate white cloth, a round cap on his head like a halo, he was an apparition, flesh and blood when he rose from below the waterline, an angel. This is what he is to his daughter: distant and untouchable.

It is a sharp contrast to the father in Roethke's poem. There the father is present. The child can smell him. He can touch him. He can hear him. Cofer's

poem in a glance is a child's prayer. The child cannot hold on to certainty of his father's homecoming. Instead she is ruled by faith. She clings on to her faith that her father will heed the 'siren's song' and come back to his family. So she waits, 'Mother, brother, and I kept vigil on the nights and dawn of his arrival.' And what a blessed day it is when her father arrives.

The persona, though she may love her father or what she remembers of him, she does not know him. And this is even more heart wrenching than the image of girl fighting off sleep and waiting for that moment when she finally sees a 'flash of white' at the 'corner beyond the neon sign of a quasar.' Often children do not have clear pictures of their childhood memories. They remember as they have felt during important events in their lives; their minds capture not complete pictures of a memory but snapshots of vivid emotions.

For the child in Roethke's poem he remembers the pungent smell of whisky; the feeling of lightheadedness from dancing; the feel of his father's hand on his wrist; the callousness of the caked dirt on his head; and his death grip on his father's shirt when he is lowered to bed. For the child in Cofer's poem, she remembers white as the color which could invoke either tremendous sadness as it disappears in the distance or overwhelming happiness as a glimpse of white is caught at a corner. Perhaps she remembers white knuckles when her hands are tightly clasped in prayer for her father to come home soon.

In both poems, love for one's father takes on a different form and conjures a variety of emotions. The poems are not conclusions of filial love and

devotion. Beyond that, it makes us wonder if there exists a rationale for this kind of love. Do we love our fathers because he is present and dependable or is it simply because he is our father? Is there any rhyme or reason to loving one's father? Or is it, like the child in Cofer's poem, simply guided by something more abstract like faith and devotion?