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Childhood in Theodore Roethke's “My Papa's Waltz”

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Dedication

To our first teacher prophet Muhammad (peace and prayer upon him).

To Ahl Albayt peace and prayer on them.

To Al Imam Al Hussien peace and prayer on him.

To our parents , who have taught us that the best kind of knowledge is learnt for its own sake; they are our mirror of example and wisdom.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our appreciation to our supervisor Prof.Qasim Salman for providing the needed advice and encouragement.

Abstract

This paper is concerned with the theme of childhood memories in Theodore Roethke's poems "My Papa's Waltz," the poet reflected on a childhood memory that he and his father shared. This poem reflects the relationship between the speaker and his father. "My Papa's Waltz" is a perfect expressing of the nuances of emotion that the speaker feels towards his father.

This paper is divided into two chapters. Chapter one sheds light on Theodore Roethke's life and career and childhood in Roethke's Greenhouse poems. Chapter two is an analysis of childhood in Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz."

Finally, the conclusion sums up the findings of this paper.

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CHAPTER ONE :INTRODUCTION

1.1 Theodore Roethke's Life and Career

Roethke was born in Saginaw, Michigan and grew up on the west side of the Saginaw River. His father, Otto, was a German immigrant, a market-gardener who owned a large local 25 acre greenhouse, along with his brother. Much of Theodore's childhood was spent in this greenhouse, as reflected by the use of natural images in his poetry. In early 1923 when Roethke was 14 years old, his uncle committed suicide and his father died of cancer. ¹

Roethke noted that these events impacted him deeply and influenced his work. Roethke attended the University of Michigan, earning B.A. and M.A. degrees. He briefly attended law school before entering Harvard University, where he studied under the poet Robert Hillyer. Abandoning graduate study because of the Great Depression, he taught English at several universities, including Michigan

State University, Lafayette College, Pennsylvania State University, and Bennington College.²

In 1940, he was expelled from his position at Lafayette and he returned to Michigan. Prior to his return, he had an affair with established poet and critic Louise Bogan, one of his strongest early supporters. While teaching at Michigan State University in East Lansing, he began to suffer from manic depression, which fueled his poetic impetus. His last teaching position was at the University of Washington, leading to an association with the poets of the American Northwest.³

Some of his best known students included James Wright, Carolyn Kizer, Jack Gilbert, Richard Hugo, and David Wagoner. The highly introspective nature of Roethke's work greatly influenced the poet Sylvia Plath. So influential was Roethke's poetry on Plath's mature poetry that when she submitted *Poem for a Birthday* to Poetry magazine, it was turned down because it displayed "too imposing a debt to Roethke'." In 1961, *The Return* was featured on George Abbe's album Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry on Folkways Records. The following year, Roethke released his own album on the label entitled, *Words for the Wind: Poems of Theodore Roethke*.⁴

Roethke taught at Michigan State College, (present-day Michigan State University) and at colleges in Pennsylvania and Vermont, before joining the faculty of the University of Washington at Seattle in 1947. Roethke died in Washington in 1963. His remains are interred in Saginaw's Oakwood Cemetery. The Friends of Theodore Roethke Foundation maintains his birthplace at 1805 Gratiot in Saginaw as a museum. Roethke is often cited as among the 20th Century's greatest teachers of poetry. His passionate and often theatrical classroom

style inspired some of finest American poets of the late 20th century. His work continues to inspire and embolden poets. Among those who continue to draw inspiration from his work is Mark Jarman, a key figure in both New Narrative and New Formalism movements and major influence on contemporary American Poetry.⁵

To this writer, there appears to be a definite pattern of implied pantheism in Roethke's early poems, a pattern more obviously developed in the middle poems, and even more fully expressed or implied in the later poems, including those published after his death. To go on to contribute to the quality of Roethke's pantheism. Naturally, the content of each poem is the primary concern because the writer believes that a consideration of that content shows a definite pattern of pantheism which developed in Roethke's poetry through the years.⁶

The early poems representing Roethke's creative production between 1941 and 1957 are drawn together in *Words for the Wind*, published in 1958. Placed in a time sequence, these poems offer an opportunity to observe at close range the development of the man and the poet in the direction of what is not so much an overt, explicit pantheism as an implicit pantheism.⁷

Richard States that:

Grown out of the tradition that begins with William Wordsworth and follows with Samuel Coleridge and R.W. Emerson, Theodore Roethke's *Greenhouse Poems* present a particular

perception of reality that transcends solipsistic modes of representation in an attempt to break the different levels of discourse that compose it. This recreation of the textual self though is characterized by a strong feeling of anxiety that does not point towards a rebirth of the self but towards its own disintegration Landscape in Literature.⁸

Roethke is among the most celebrated American poets of the twentieth century. His poetry employs dynamic, descriptive imagery to convey the process of self-realization and discovery. The concrete language of Roethke's poetry serves to present his personal themes as archetypal experiences, resulting in a highly original, symbolic body of work charged with semantic associations that must be intuitively comprehended by the reader .⁹

As Roethke used the world of nature as his primary source of inspiration and imagery, one can easily use an organic metaphor to describe the nature and growth of his poetry.¹⁰

Allan admits that:

Roethke believed, like the Romantics, that ultimate meaning grew from the encounter of the sensitive individual with nature in an attempt to determine personally the relationship between humankind and all existence. Theodore Roethke can be best understood as a poet in the tradition of nineteenth century English and American Romanticism. His early poetry of the 1940's and 1950's has some significant similarities to that of the English Romantic poets, especially William Wordsworth and John Keats, while his later

poetry, especially “North American Sequence,” owes a large debt to Walt Whitman. In general, one can see a number of essential Romantic characteristics in his poetry.¹¹

Although he often objectifies his feelings in concrete images, he also His poems are human poems in the full weight of that adjective: poems of a creature animal enough to enter half into unthinking nature and unanimal enough to be uneasy there, taking thought at what the animal half discerns and feels.¹²

There is great joy in Roethke's poems, great sorrow, and great fear as well; one feels that unspeakable dread is never very far from any line, any perception. But everything he says has the authority of the earned vision, paid for with part of an extraordinary human life. Roethke is one of the few great poets who have been able to make effective statements: ones you believe, and believe in, at first sight, like a look into the one right pair of eyes in the world.¹³

The career of Theodore Roethke remains one of the most remarkable achievements of a period whose creative vigor will surely astonish succeeding ages. Coming near the end of a great revolution in the arts and sciences, his career is like a history in miniature of that artistic revolt. His work not only managed to recapitulate this culture's war against form and matter.¹⁴

1.2 Childhood in Theodore Roethke's Greenhouse

Self Indulgence in Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" was first published in 1948 in *The Lost Son and Other Poems*. The poem is reflective of an era when many men were still physical laborers. Roethke saw manual labor firsthand as he grew up in the Saginaw Valley of Michigan where his father and uncle owned and actively managed a complex of greenhouses .¹⁵

Ostensibly, it is a straightforward ballad: four quatrains of rotating rhyme reviewing an occurrence from adolescence. Be that as it may, this effortlessness misrepresents Roethke's intricate joining of different feelings and mind-sets. An affectionate memory of a comic move of a father and his child, it is likewise an evaluate of the father's coarseness and tipsiness .¹⁶

"My Papa's Waltz" is a poem of self indulgence on the part of the father, and is reminiscent of Roethke's difficult childhood. It is an introspective look at the father through the voice of the young son. Some readers of poetry are opposed to the idea of analyzing a poem, believing that to do so destroys the poem when the analysis itself is held up on its own value against the poem . However, analysis is also beneficial. It produces a richness that *enhances* the understanding of the poem.

Analysis helps the reader to understand various components of a poem, and also the background of the poet, thereby providing *context* within which to enjoy a poem to its fullest. Just such analysis helps the reader to enjoy and better understand “My Papa’s Waltz” by Theodore Roethke.¹⁷

Roethke admitted having difficulty in capturing the mind set of a child in any poem he wrote from a child’s point of view. He had to choose words that would be appropriate for a child to use, and those words had to be presented in a manner that would be consistent with the manner of a child, yet still a reflective version of himself if it was autobiographical in nature. Roethke worked hard to capture the movement of the mind of a child when constructing his or her respective observations .¹⁸

The vehicle that Roethke employed to further extend his consciousness was meditation. By meditating on the Self within Nature and within his own being he was able to have progressively deeper experiences with God. He found that unlike sexual experiences which afforded him only a brief glimpse of the "oneness," the revelations that came from meditation endured, and constantly lifted him into higher planes of consciousness .¹⁹

In a figurative sense, the waltz was the dad’s lifestyle. It was a metaphor for his life, and the characterization of the father in the poem is done so through his self-centered manner and his self-indulgent actions. The ebb and flow of the pulsation of the meter of the waltz is a microcosmic representation of the pulsation of his lifestyle. It indicates the repetitiveness of his drinking and hard living.²⁰

In Roethke's last vision of his personality he can please, both in the physical

and profound parts of his being. He never again felt that his body and soul were alternate extremes as he had in his initial life; he now saw that his body and soul were correlative, that in their embodiment they were "one" with each other.²¹

Notes

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Theodore_Roethke&oldid=68476786.

² Ibid.

³ Gloria Merritt, *Theodore Roethke Pantheist* (Drake University: Humanities Press, 1974), p.4.

⁴ Ibid. p.16

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ William J. Martz, *The Achievement of Theodore Roethke* (Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1966), p.14.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, p.16

¹⁰ M. L. Rosenthal, *The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 240.

¹¹ Allan Seager, *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), (p.21.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, p.22.

¹⁴Dorothy Myren, ed. *"Roethke, Theodore (1908-63)." In A Library of Literary Criticism* (New York: Frederick Ungar Co., 1960),p.67.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Jarold Ramsey, "Roethke in the Greenhouse." *Western Humanities Review*, 26 (1972),p. 35.

¹⁷Robert Milton Underwood, *Self Indulgence in Theodore Roethke's MyPapasWaltz*,2008.

www.homesaustin.com/Documents/Roethke_MyPapasWaltz.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Allan Seager,p.41

²⁰Ibid,p.43.

²¹Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO

Childhood in Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz,"

In Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz," the persona reveals an incidence of child abuse that happened earlier in his life. He divulges the occurrence of abuse through the use of certain words and noting the actions that go on during the "waltz." Through the use of graphic diction, Roethke informs the reader that "My Papa's Waltz" depicts an episode of child abuse .¹

Theodore Roethke's poem "My Papa's Waltz" illustrates a nightly ritual between a working-class father and his young son. In the first stanza a young boy holds tightly to his father. The second stanza describes a playful roughhousing between father and son.²

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance

Could not unfrown itself.³

The fourth stanza shows again the boy's unwillingness to let go of his father. Roethke's AB rhyming scheme and waltz-like meter set a light and joyful cadence.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

The persona Roethke creates discloses the incidence of child abuse to the reader by using particular words in his poem. The persona says "I hung on like death: / such waltzing was not easy" to show he is being beaten badly but is still alive. He also uses the phrase "battered on one knuckle" to describe his father's knuckles. The persona chooses the word "battered" in the phrase to describe his father's knuckles because it creates a realistic visual image of the beating. When a person is battering another person, his knuckles often become bruised. When the speaker's father misses steps, his son's "right ear [scrapes] a buckle," which shows that the father is projecting his frustration with himself onto his son; the father therefore punishes his son for his own incompetence.⁴

Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" tells the reader of a small boy's memory of his father. It explains how his father is intoxicated and the scene that goes along with it, using the word waltz to describe it. In the first two lines, it recounts the smell of his father's breath and the extent to which it reeked.⁵

As the third and fourth lines are read, a picture of a small boy hanging onto his father is instilled in the reader's mind:

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy.

But I hung on like death
Such waltzing was not easy (3-4).

The fifth and sixth lines describe, sarcastically, a playful incident where pans fall off the kitchen shelf:

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf.

Finally the boy's mother comes into play during the seventh and eight lines. Her facial expression "Could not unfrown itself" . This tells us that the mother was displeased but its rather discerning that she made no attempt at intervening. One would normally think of a mother's love as unconditional and willing to do anything for her son. It really shows the degree of fear the father must have embedded into the mother with his actions .⁶

The eleventh through fourteenth lines describe actual, bodily harm done to the young boy by way of his father's acts:

At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle
You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt (11-14).

Walter B. Kalaidjian states that :

"My Papa's Waltz" deals with critical and serious issues that lie within the human mind. The issues being compared can be viewed as abusive, emotional or confusion. The reader can possibly be drawn by the poet to experience their own memories, emotions, and experiences in similar situations. These childhood memories can easily be revisited as adults and their life experiences can be viewed differently as they enter into adulthood. Both pleasant and unpleasant memories stay with a person throughout his or her lifetime. The poet expresses similar

situations in his own journey through his eyes as a child. “My Papa’s Waltz”, demonstrates the possible inappropriate behavior of a father towards his son. The father shows a lack of concern for his child when it states .⁷

The poem expresses critical and serious issues that surround the heartfelt childhood memories of the readers. The surrounding circumstances and situations are different in each household. The readers are personally drawn to feel expressions of abuse, emotional issues and confusion as the poets draw them into a journey through their own personal life experiences from childhood to adulthood. These experiences are carried throughout a person’s life. Readers are somewhat forced to immediately draw themselves closer to the characters and can relate to them on a personal level.⁸

With the line, “Then waltzed me off to bed,” one learns that the father continued his movements, even as he recognized the late time of evening for the boy. The father may have been observant enough to know that it was bedtime for the boy, but he wasn’t observant enough to know that the fear factor was still present enough for the boy to remark, “Still clinging to your shirt.” The entire poem is like a little four-act play, with each stanza helping to unravel the essence of the scenario. The story unfolds by giving the reader the indication that the father had gone straight from work to a bar, and had come home from hours of boozing, but not too late in the evening to find the boy already asleep. The father picked, or grabbed, the son to dance with him.⁹

The son may have been the closest to him when the father entered the home, or selecting the child may have been because his wife would have made a much less-willing participant. The dad didn’t care that he was dirty and stinky, he just

wanted to have a little fun, albeit self-centered fun. His wife was disapproving, especially since they were moving actively and rowdily enough to loosen pans from the shelf. But the dad didn't care. He merely drifted off into his self-focused daydream dance-world beating time on his son's head.¹⁰

As such, "My Papa's Waltz" reflects elements of the unpleasant in life. But it is *real*, an honest reflection of life, and a reflection that Roethke made strikingly clear. In the last two stanza's, Roethke describes the vivid details of the beating. He describes how one hand clinches the boy's wrist. Clinch seems to be a rather strong word and it indicates a use of forceful grabbing. If this were a happy dance, the author would not use such a strong description. Lines 11-12 shows how the father tries to hit the son but due to his intoxication he misses and grazes the son's ear with the belt buckle. The fourth and final stanza sums up the feelings of the boy towards the father. The words seem to be directly spoken to the dad. This is not the first time this type of action has taken place.¹¹

Theodore Roethke's father died when the poet was only fourteen, and that loss appeared to impact much of Roethke's later life as well as his writing, the mention of death seems even more elegiac. In fact, when one finds similar lines in the first and last stanzas "I hung on like death" and "still clinging to your shirt", one may believe the father's death is foreshadowed and that the son is unwilling to let the father go despite possible pain, even decades later when Roethke writes the poem.¹²

According to W. D. Snodgrass :

This poem is about a man who exercises control over his son

while he has lost full control over himself. Roethke said that a poet must be a good reporter. He has certainly done an excellent job of vividly reporting the actions of a self-indulgent man from the youthful perspective of a child. While the tone is that of apparent acceptance of the father by the boy, without undue judgment, the theme is that of a young boy seeing his father in a certain way. The word “Papa” is an endearment, and suggests that the boy wanted his approval and affections .¹³

“My Papa’s Waltz” is a closed-form poem in that there is regularity and consistency in such elements as rhyme, line length and pattern of meter. The rhythm of the reading of the stanzaic poem can actually be read with the same cadence as a moderately-paced waltz .¹⁴

Roethke admitted having difficulty in capturing the mind set of a child in any poem he wrote from a child’s point of view. He had to choose words that would be appropriate for a child to use, and those words had to be presented in a manner that would be consistent with the manner of a child, yet still a reflective version of himself if it was autobiographical in nature. Roethke worked hard to capture the movement of the mind of a child when constructing his or her respective observations .¹⁵

In Theodore Roethke’s “My Papa’s waltz” the reader finds a horrid experience, the beating of a child by his father, which is told in a way of a romantic and beautiful dance the waltz. The feeling one get from reading this poem is that the narrator, at least at the time in which the poem is written, does not look at this experience as something bad. He tries to beautify the experience by making it a waltz. He also, by means of images and rhythm, shows the conflict between the

readers, or the way any other ‘normal’ man will look at this experience, and how he sees it, or wants it to be seen although he does not show his father as completely innocent. It can also be looked upon as a ‘reality’ so intense and strong that one feels incapable of any other ‘reality’, fearing it can and will be worse.¹⁶

Theodore Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz” reveals the speaker’s reflections of his childhood memories with his father. Throughout the poem, Roethke describes a moment in time when he dances the waltz with his father in the kitchen, making his younger self the speaker of the poem. His skillful use of situation, tone, and setting, prosody, diction, and figurative language helps to dramatize the imperfect scene and further demonstrates his flawed relationship with his father. In “My Papa’s Waltz”, Theodore Roethke commemorates his divided memories of childhood and his broken relationship with his father by describing the waltz in an unconventional way.¹⁷

Notes

¹ Carolyn Kizer, Foreward. *On Poetry and Craft*. By Theodore Roethke. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2001. 5.

² Ibid.

³ Theodore Roethke, "My Papa's Waltz." *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (New York: Anchor Books, 1975),p. 43.

⁴ Robert Milton Underwood, *Self Indulgence in Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz"* (New York: Random House,2008),p.4

⁵ Ibid,p.7.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Walter B. Kalaidjian, *Understanding Theodore Roethke* (Columbia University of South Carolina Press, 1987),p. 518.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid,p.519

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² W. D. Snodgrass, "That Anguish of Concreteness?Theodore Roethke's Career," *Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965) ,p.81

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jarold Ramsey, "Roethke in the Greenhouse." *Western Humanities Review*, 26 (1972),p. 38.

¹⁵ Ibid,p.39.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion

Poetry is made to express the feelings, thoughts, and emotions of the poet. The reader can interpret the poem however they see fit. Critics are undecided about the theme of Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz." Some people believe that the poem is one of a happy exchange between a father and son. The more convincing interpretation is that it has a hidden message of parental abuse. Careful analysis of the keywords and each individual stanza back up this theory of child abuse by a violent and drunken father.

Roethke's poem uses tone to show that child ultimately love his father regardless of the abuse he commits. The young boy in My Papa's Waltz is clearly very fond of his father even though his Papa abuses him. It is through the tone the young boy uses that Roethke shows how much he loves his father.

Theodore Roethke, describes and gives the readers an insight of what child abuse is like. The poem presents a relationship between a drunken father and his son. Therefore, the setting, sensory details, and word choice of the poem allows the reader to understand the violence the little boy goes through after his father returns from work. The setting of the poem is very important to understand key elements that the poet is trying to express.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Theodore_Roethke&oldid=68476786.