

Self Indulgence in Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz"

Robert Milton Underwood, Jr.

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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 (1908-1963) 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. "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 (Ciardi 663). 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.

Roethke admitted having difficulty in capturing the mind set of a child in any poem he wrote from a child's point of view (Kizer 23). 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.

It was not titled, "I Danced with My Papa," nor was it titled "Our Waltz." Either would have implied an agreeable partnership in the activity. It would have indicated a united activity

performed willingly. But it was not. It was the father who *did* the dance. It was *his* dance, not the son's. It is interesting to note that the title itself went through numerous revisions, some of which included "Dance with Papa," "Dance with Father," "My Papa's Dance," "The Dance" and "Papa's Dance." Roethke was looking for the most accurate way to express the tone of the poem. Incorporating waltz in the title "My Papa's Waltz" (Fig. 1) more accurately reflected the meter and rhythm. A waltz has a regular meter, a consistent cadence. As a dance, it is an up-and-down movement in three-quarter time, and that pulse is reflective of the pulse of life as the boy saw it in his father.

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.

Told from the point of view of the child, the lines are not overly complex. But there is nothing wrong with a poem being somewhat simple in structure. A poem with short or few stanzas leaves "a lot of white space" on the page, Roethke wrote, but that forces "those lines to stand up by themselves" (Kizer 6). Each line of "My Papa's Waltz" is therefore distinct. Roethke believed that every line of a poem should *be* a poem (Kizer 5). He meant that each line must

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.

The hand that held my wrist
 Was battered on one knuckle;
 At every step you missed
 My right ear scraped a buckle.

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

Fig. 1: Theodore Roethke, "My Papa's Waltz"

stand on its own with meaning and intent¹. Each line can also be a little story. The first line, “The whiskey on your breath,” is poignant. Anyone who has been near a heavy drinker can smell the booze on their breath, and can sometimes smell the effects of liquor oozing from their pores when they sweat. In this case, it was so strong that it “Could make a small boy dizzy.” That odor is not a smell that children are exposed to in normal childhood activities, except when in close proximity to a heavy drinker.

Roethke wrote that the poet “puts his thoughts in motion. (His) design in short poems (was) ... to create the situations and the mood as quickly as possible...There must be symbolical force, weight, or a gravity of tone” (Roethke 172-173). The first two lines of the poem quickly set the tone and help us to form a vivid mental picture. Even the olfactory imagery of a boy recoiling from smelling the odorous breath of a heavy drinker is very active imagery.

When the child metaphorically expressed, “But I hung on like death,” there was a sense of fear or high tension in him. It is unclear if the child’s feet were on the ground or on top of the father’s feet, but in either case, “Such waltzing was not easy.” It was difficult being physically mismatched for dancing. The child’s legs would have been considerably shorter. It was not easy dancing with a boozing man, and one that was also much larger.

“We romped until the pans” is an evocative phrase. If the remainder of the poem was covered up at this point to prevent further viewing, imagery (both visual and auditory) would surely form in the mind of the reader of pots and pans being rattled or jostled. The next line completes the prompt indicating that they “Slid from the kitchen shelf.” For pans to slide from shelves means that they were either dancing so roughly that they were hitting the walls and counters or else it means that they lived in a frame house with a weak pier-and-beam foundation.

¹ Recognizing each line as an independent thought is consistent with Perrine’s directive, “the line is a rhythmical unit, and its end should be observed whether there is punctuation or not” (Arp 22).

It is easy to picture a wooden house in a rural area with the dad and son in the kitchen. It seems more likely that pans would “fall” from a kitchen shelf rather than “slide” from one. But the concept of “sliding” is more consistent with the dance movements of a waltz.

A dance should be performed with at least a minimal level of grace in it, and it should bring two people comfortably closer together. But this waltz is different. Roethke juxtaposes images of tension with images of fun (“romped”) throughout the poem, back and forth, mimicking the form of a waltz itself.

The line, “My mother’s countenance,” indicates much more than just a facial frown or scorn. Her posture, her facial expression, the tilt of her head, the look of silent disgust—those would all be components of her countenance. The word countenance suggests that her entire body expressed its communication of displeasure. Her body language was like a disapproving frown that “Could not unfrown itself” because she had seen it before, and was sad to see it happening again, and it may have been especially inconvenient if she was still in the kitchen working. There must have been a history of this type of inconsiderate occurrence happening, and this repetition is consistent with the metaphor of the rhythm of the waltz, his dance of life. Perhaps she knew better than to argue with him. Her silence indicated that she had tried before to talk to him, but frustratingly learned that he became belligerent if she tried to interfere.

“The hand that held my wrist” signifies dominance, perhaps even forcefulness. The wrist that “Was battered on one knuckle” might have been injured in a work-related accident. However, the mention of the knuckle rather than of any other part of the hand suggests that the injury might have occurred in a brawl. It wasn’t nicked, as from a slight accident from work; rather, it was “battered.” Most men favor their dominant fist in fights, and an experienced brawler will learn to strike with just the knuckles of the forefinger and middle finger, which are

structurally in alignment with the radius and ulna bones of the forearm, in order to avoid breaking the hand.

“At every step you missed” must surely indicate the dad was quite intoxicated. A waltz is not a difficult dance, yet it requires coordination to complete the simple movements with ease. To miss a step is not common except for the uncoordinated and the inebriated. “My right ear scraped a buckle” indicates the height of the boy, who was probably less than ten years old. For the ear to hit the buckle meant that the dad was holding on too tight and used the little boy’s diminutive frame to catch himself when he missed a step or stumbled. The sloppy movements also help explain the loosening of the pans from the kitchen shelf.

With “You beat time on my head,” we can confirm the approximate height of the child, but we also understand that the dad was drifting off into the daydream of his own self-focused inner world, not paying attention to the irritation it may have caused the child. “Patted time” and “tapped time” were not used. The more forceful “beat time” is obviously a much stronger subjective reflection of the boy’s experience. The only instruments that get “beat” are drums. We also wonder how a hand could be free to beat time on a head. A waltz requires the two hands of both partners for stability. Perhaps a free hand also explains why the dad held the wrist of the boy, and also why he missed a step so often—the bodyweight of the boy was displaced as the dad lost focus of holding him properly when beating time on his head.

We learn from “With a palm caked hard by dirt” not only that the dad was a laborer, with calloused hands, but also that he probably hadn’t washed his hands before dancing with the boy. Had his hands been caked with grease, the implication may have been that the father was a mechanic or other laborer in the industrial northeast. The 25-acre compound of greenhouses that Roethke’s father and uncle owned would have surely meant that they got dirty every working

day. Perhaps it was from this dirty work in the greenhouse that Roethke understood how caked hard-worked hands could become from the soils of the region.

With the line, “Then waltzed me off to bed,” we learn 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 us 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. 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.

When Roethke grew up, he was as comfortable with manual laborers as he was with academics and intellectuals. “What our country needs, he said, is more barnyard poets—there isn’t time for good taste, and besides, poetry requires a certain vulgarity, even brutality, to communicate the ‘aliveness of life’” (*Eight American Poets* 3). Each poem should be its own little field of energy with form and essence. “My Papa’s Waltz” provides its own gritty essence of an honest reality seen through the eyes of a child.

“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 waltz². Roethke’s own reading of the poem (Poetry Speaks 37) is presented in a moderate meter of about 130 beats per minute. Ironically, he read it in a voice that was neither excited nor fearful, nor was it overly dramatic in any way. Rather, it was presented in a very matter-of-fact manner. It was as if he read it in an adult voice, having been disassociated and hardened emotionally after so long a time. It was interesting to note that in the reading he emphasized the word *you* in “At every step *you* missed.” As partners in the dance, both father and son effectively missed the step, but it was clearly because of the father’s error. Every mistake the father made affected both him and the boy. The implication of Roethke’s stress of the word *you* in his reading is that it wasn’t only the father’s mistakes during the dance that affected the boy, but also his other mistakes in life.

Roethke edited a lot and made numerous revisions, always striving for the most accurate representation of a mood or theme. He also wanted all elements of poems to be interesting. One drill that Roethke used to do with his students was to take just the first word of each line of a poem to see if those words were interesting enough to form a poem on their own (Kizer 6). Too many articles or too many connecting words could be boring, he thought, and it is of value to note that the first word of a line sets the tone for that line. Using that particular drill of Roethke’s with “My Papa’s Waltz” provides the following curious little four-line poem that can also be read with the cadence of a waltz:

The Could But Such
 We Slid My Could
 The Was At My
 You With Then Still

² The speed of a waltz typically ranges from around 100 beats per minute to around 170 beats per minute.

The meter and rhyme help define the mood of “My Papa’s Waltz”. A waltz is typically written in three-quarter time, and Roethke plays on this meter with the number of syllables per line. Perfect timekeeping would have six syllables per line, but four of Roethke’s sixteen lines have seven syllables. Each stanza’s four-line syllabic pattern is thus 6-7-6-7 / 6-6-6-6 / 6-7-6-6 / and 6-7-6-6. Therefore, being slightly off meter, the time is consistent with the unsmooth movements of a drunken dancer.

Not only is the meter slightly off with regards to number of syllables per line, but the rhyming is also imperfect. The first and third lines rhyme, as do the second and fourth lines, but not perfectly in each stanza. In general Roethke didn’t necessarily think that a poem should always rhyme perfectly, thinking that doing so was unreal and too contrived. Also, since this poem is told from the voice of a child, the imperfect rhyming of “dizzy” and “easy,” as well as of “pans” and “countenance,” is consistent with the unrefined vocabulary of a child.

The father and his actions in the poem represent the affects of alcoholism on a family. While he may be a functional alcoholic, able to perform his work-related labors during the day, he unwinds with booze when he can. He is self-focused, and most alcoholics focus on themselves and the hole in their soul that the numbing effect of alcohol supposedly fills. If “My Papa’s Waltz” could be summed up in three words, they would be *inconsiderate self indulgence*. That description is reflective of what a drunk will do—indulge their desires without consideration for the others around them.

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” (Kizer 75). 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.

When referring to small poems, Roethke wrote that “a thing may be small but it need not be a cameo; it may be a cinder in the shoe or the mind’s eye or a pain in the neck” (Roethke 175). He believed that a short poem didn’t need to be pleurably cute or novel. He knew from personal experience that life could be tough, and that tough moments and disagreeable memories were also worthy of reflecting life in short poetry. 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.

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