A Father-Son Bond

Analysis of Theodore Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz”

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The poem “My Papa’s Waltz”, published in 1942 by Theodore Roethke describes a dance between a drunk father and son. Although the young boy seems to be enjoying his time, the entire waltz is a journey through his relationship with his father. The idolization of his abusive father can be seen as complicated, but can also be argued to be the love a child feels for their parent.

The poem is described as a waltz, which is a close dance between two people. The way the poem is read similarly to the beat of a song, just like as if a waltz was being danced to it. This tone is playful and upbeat to read, but it is contradicted by the scene described. The father and the son are the two “partners” in this waltz, but it is anything but that. The son is holding onto a destructive father that is drunk, yet the young boy does not seem to mind. The boy is described to have “hung on like death: / Such waltzing was not easy,” (2-4), which implies how hard it was to love his father. This may seem like a bad situation for such a young child to try and hold onto, but it is understandable at the same time. All the boy wants is his father, no matter the cost. Being so young and vulnerable, he is not quite able to see the true circumstances for what they are, but just that his dad had been drinking. With the boy hanging on, it represents the desire to be oblivious to his father’s alcoholism and still try to hang on to any part of him that he can. The word “death” in line 2 also sets a bleaker tone for the poem, suggesting how dangerous the father really could be around his son, as well as contradicting the mood of the poem.

The relationship is not as easy as a waltz, with evidence shown when Roethke describes a scene as “We romped until the pans / Slid from the kitchen shelf” (5-6), implying anything but the peacefulness of a waltz. The romping suggests a playful, yet aggressive scene that is destructive. The pair is making a mess of the kitchen, with the mother just standing by watching with disapproval. This shows that the father’s behavior is known by others besides his son, but the mother does not seem to share this idolization of the father like the boy does. Just like the boy’s relationship with his father, it is a romping in a waltz itself. The boy tries to hold onto the love he has with his father despite the abuse he might encounter. Instances such as “At every step you missed / My right ear scraped a buckle” (11-12) suggest abusive behavior from the father. The father is either too drunk to notice what he does to his son, or he does these things because he is drunk. Either way, his behavior affects his son physically, yet the boy still tries to hang on emotionally.

The father’s abuse continues towards the end of the poem, becoming more evident. Roethke wrote “You beat time on my head” (13), which can give multiple meanings. The word “beat” implies the beat of the music they are dancing to, as well as physically beating him. The boy was then “waltzed… of to bed / Still clinging to [his] shirt” (15-16). When reading this in the point of view from a child that loves his father, the reader sees a loving dad who is taking care of his son. However, when reading it from the point of view that the father is abusive to his son, you interpret the lines as he is finished beating his son and is done dealing with him. Either way, the boy sees it as an intimate time with her father, still calling it a “waltz”, when it was anything but that.

When reading this poem, it can be assumed that Theodore Roethke wrote it as a memory from his own childhood. An article titled “Overview: ‘My Papa’s Waltz’” written by Marie Rose Napierkowski and Mary Ruby describe the complicated relationship between the father and the son in the poem, revealing that Roethke’s father was very demanding of him. Even with these high standards, young Roethke still idolized his father, even with all of the abuse. The child viewed their dance as a playful time with his father, barely recognizing the unruliness of the situation. The argument the author of this source makes is how the relationship between the father and son could have been as easy going as a waltz, but it wasn’t. Instead, it was rambunctious and careless. The source does an accurate job of showing the symbolic meaning of the relationship, revealing the deeper experience for the dance they have with each other. The authors described it as the dance as “a metaphor for the overall relationship between father and son: intimate and vitally important for the boy, but also dizzying and anxiety provoking,” (Napierkowski, Ruby 1998). It shows how the son is clinging onto this father not only during the waltz, but to his father’s life, proving the boy recognizes the danger the father is in.

The boy’s relationship with his father can be viewed as strange, and almost sick, as to why he still wants the love from an alcoholic. A study described in the article “Forgiveness of Adult Children Toward Their Alcoholic Parents” by Diana Breshears describes a study used to find if adults who grew up with alcoholic parents would offer them any kind of forgiveness. The purpose of it was to study how a relationship in this kind of household may have had consequences, as well as the desire to forgive. The author makes the point of how much more negative the environment is versus nonalcoholic households, but the results of her study showed that most of the kids affected by alcoholic parents still wanted to find forgiveness for them. These children who wanted to forgive their parents either thought it was best for everyone’s interest just to forgive their parents, or that they viewed alcoholism as a disease. Those who chose not to forgive simply could not bear to revisit those emotions. The author did a good job of identifying the kinds of forgiveness there are, then placed the results in the appropriate categories to help determine what the people in the study felt. It helped give insight on the emotions children in these kinds of families have and how that can affect them in their adulthood. This relates to the poem because as Roethke writes the poem as an adult, he views his childhood differently than when he was a boy. Breshears made the comment that “For many, placing blame outside of the alcoholic enables them to look upon the alcoholic parents without experiencing constant hatred and anger,” (Breshears 2015). The way he viewed himself still clinging onto an unhealthy relationship could be a result of Roethke trying to show forgiveness in a way, even with his memory. Roethke writing the poem as an adult finally allows him to see the situation for what it was, especially the danger that was involve. However, Breshears’ conclusion on why people may tend to forgive their alcoholic parents may be evidence as to why Roethke wrote a poem that can still be viewed as just a boy who loves his father.

Both sources analyze how a child is affected by an alcoholic parent, but with different perspectives. The first source analyzed the poet himself by giving background on his childhood with his father and then analyzed each stanza of the poem and how it related to his relationship with his father. The second source analyzed adults who had to live with alcoholic parents as children and how that affected them as adults, more specifically with the feeling of forgiveness towards their parents. Even though both sources had different material to study, both of them revolved around the idea of how complicated a relationship between a child and their alcoholic parent can be. The idea of wanting to hold onto something destructive, as Roethke wrote about in his poem, is proven to be something that both children and adults can identify with. Roethke was not as aware of it when he was a child, and when he was able to recognize it as an adult, he was still able to identify with it. It can even be concluded that as an adult, Roethke still idolizes his father, especially when remembering those intimate moments with his father. Although there was chaos surrounding them, it was the connection with his father that seems to stick in his mind. The poem hinted at the consequences Roethke suffered from his father’s alcoholism, but it mainly presented a father-son bond to the reader.

Works Cited

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