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A Father-Son Bond

Theodore Roethke, a popular poet from the 1940’s, focused many of his poems on the memories and vividness of his childhood. Published in 1942, Roethke’s poem “My Papa’s Waltz” describes a dance between a boy and his drunk father. Although the young boy seems to be enjoying his time, the entire waltz is a journey through his relationship with his father. One reading is the abusive nature the son experiences around his alcoholic father, but an alternative reading of the poem is the carefree and fun experience between a father and son can be recognized. Both readings contribute to the complex relationship the son shares with his father.

The poem is described as a waltz, which is a close dance between two people. The way the poem is read is similar to the beat of a song, just as if a waltz were being danced to the reading. This tone is playful and upbeat, 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 a loving dance. 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” (Roethke 2-4), which implies how hard it was to love his father. When looking at a young child in this situation, it is initially perceived as bad because of the environment around someone so young. However, when looked at from the perspective of the boy, it is easier to understand why he continued to hang on to his father. With this poem being a memory from childhood, the alcohol is remembered to be a part of his father. This shows that the boy is aware of his father being drunk, but being so young and vulnerable, he is not quite able to see the true circumstances for what they are. All he initially sees is that his dad had been drinking. This difficulty 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 points to an underlying darkness and tension within the aspect of the 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. She is described as having a “countenance / [that] Could not unfrown itself” (7-8). This can be viewed in two different ways. The mother is either amused by the horse play and is trying to hide it, or she is so frightened by her husband’s behavior that she is too scared to show any emotion about it. Either way, it shows that the father’s behavior is known by others besides his son. However, the mother may not share the idolization of the father like the boy does.

Just like there is aggression in the waltzing, there are further signs of aggression between the father and son. 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. Whether he is aware of it or not, his behavior affects his son physically. These lines either suggest the boy was injured every time the father missed a step of the dance, which was most likely unintentional, yet his son still had to endure indirect abuse due to his father’s alcoholic behaviors. Even with all of this chaos, the boy still chooses to hang onto his father. This highlights the obsession the boy has with him, especially when he is paying the price for his father’s carelessness.

The father’s abuse continues towards the end of the poem, becoming more evident. The boy speaker in the poem says, “You beat time on my head” (13), which suggests multiple meanings. The word “beat” implies the beat of the music they are dancing to, as well as physical abuse. The boy was then “waltzed… off to bed / Still clinging to [his father’s] shirt” (15-16). These lines can be interpreted in two very different ways. On the surface, it seems like the father and son just finished having a fun dance together, and now he is carefully being taken to bed by a caring father. The boy is still clinging to his shirt for comfort, not wanting to let go of the experience with his father. However, when reading it from the point of view that the father is abusive to his son, the lines can be interpreted as he beat his son and is done dealing with him. The boy clings to his father’s shirt out of fear, afraid to make a single movement, scared his father will react again. 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, some scholars have suggested 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 describes 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 danger of the situation. Napierkowski and Ruby also emphasize 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 with the dance the father and son have with each other. The authors describe 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). During the waltz, the son is clinging to not only his father’s shirt, but to his father’s life, suggesting 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. In the article, “Forgiveness of Adult Children Toward Their Alcoholic Parents”, Diana Breshears describes a study used to find if adults who grew up with alcoholic parents would offer them any kind of forgiveness. Breshears identified different kinds of forgiveness, such as reframing, well-being, and recovery. She then placed the results in the appropriate categories to help determine what the people in the study felt. The author highlights the negative the environment in alcoholic households, but suggests that most of the kids affected by alcoholic parents still wanted to find forgiveness for them. Now adults, these people either believed forgiving their parents was best for everyone’s interest, or saw alcoholism as a disease that was responsible for their parent’s behavior. Those who chose not to forgive their parents simply could not bear to revisit those emotions. This study helped give insight on the forgiveness that 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 suggests that “For many, placing blame outside of the alcoholic enables them to look upon the alcoholic parents without experiencing constant hatred and anger” (Breshears). The way he viewed himself still clinging onto an unhealthy relationship could be a result of Roethke trying to show forgiveness, 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 involved. However, Breshears’ conclusion on why people may tend to forgive their alcoholic parents may be evidence as to why Roethke’s poem can be viewed as a boy who loves his father, not a boy who suffered at the hands of his father’s alcoholic abuse. Roethke’s poem could have been a way to indirectly forgive his father, allowing Roethke to let go any memories of abuse. This way, he is allowed to see the good in the memories with his father, like the time they would waltz together, and not focus on his father’s alcoholism.

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 to reveal a tension between the happy memory of a “romp” and the dangerous implications of abuse and alcohol. The second source analyzed adults who had to live with alcoholic parents as children. It gave insight on how these people struggle 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 the boy does in the poem, is something that both scholars of poetry and studies of alcoholic parents illuminate. Given that Breshears tells us about children of alcoholics, it makes sense when Napierkowski and Ruby conclude that, as an adult, Roethke still idolizes his father, especially when remembering those intimate moments. Although there was chaos surrounding them, it was the connection with his father that seemed to have stuck in his mind.

Works Cited

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