Student Name

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Course Number

Date

My Papa’s Waltz

**Introduction**

The poem “My Papa’s Waltz,” written by Theodore Roethke, is a description of a moment in the life of a family. The moment which Theodore Roethke has talked about in his poem spins around the relationship between a father and his son. Some people are of the view that the poem is an account of child abuse and the strained relationship between the father and son has torn the family asunder. A few of the critiques suggest that there is a depiction of affection and love between father and son. The imagery and dialect used by Theodore Roethke and symbolism and tone of the poem imprints of destitution and love between father and his son (Stiffler). The readers, more often than not, misunderstand the relationship between father and son. The poem actually tells the readers how love is developed between the father and son as they grew older.

The poet “Theodore Roethke” uses a questionable tone and mood to reinvent a scene concerning the relationship between father and son. Why do some people perceive that the relationship between father and son in the poem is not positive, and why do others think opposite to them? The answer is quite simple and profound. Interpreting the feelings narrated by Theodore Roethke in the poem actually depends upon the reader. It depends upon the mood and experiences of the reader that colors the relationship between the father and son as positive or negative. The writer used both, the positive imagery as well as the negative imagery (Stiffler). The picture of negative imagery is exposed to the readers throughout the poem, as some of the phrases and words clearly paint a negative picture. The poem actually has a carefree and frisky sort of atmosphere. The poem consists of some darkness and uncertainty coupled with light and frolicking themes owing to the ambiguity accumulated in the poem by Theodore Roethke.

**Discussion**

The technique used by Theodore Roethke throughout the poem is metaphorical. The technique is clearly visible in certain words and lines of the poems. For instance, the poet has used the phrase “hung on like death” elucidates that the waltz could be terrifying but not hard, while another phase such as “such waltzing was not easy” explicates that the waltz was neither easy nor calming. There are also metaphors which narrate the father’s mistakes, and again phrases like “you beat time on my head” also narrates the story of the father’s struggle to convince his son to waltz. There is another poetic technique found in the poem and that is the smile (Petersen). This technique is depicted by the phrase “hung on like death” which elucidates the insecurity of son as he considers his father as unavoidable as death and hold onto him. Theodore Roethke used a simple ABAB scheme in which every other line within a stanza rhymes. The poem has only three stressed syllables making it a trimester in lieu of a pentameter. This simply means that it has three beats e.g. the **whisk**ey **on** your **breath**. Bold words represent the stressed syllables.

The themes presented in the poem are power, masculinity and men, family and admiration. Family represents the core theme of the poem and represents the subject matter of the poem. It is because the relationship painted by the poet in the poem is between father and son. The views of the people are divided concerning this very theme of the poem. Some are of the view that family abuse and alcohol tore the family asunder while others think that the family is happy (Fong). However, on a realistic and critical note the poem represents both, the distress and the pleasure experienced by the family.

The admiration theme is also visible in the poem. Nevertheless, having a strained relation with his father, the son in the poem admires his father in spite of getting his ear scraped for being woozy. Another theme in the poem is the men and masculinity. Words, such as battered knuckles exemplify all the hard work done by the father every day. The last theme in the poem, which in my view is as important as the other three, is power. The power of parents is described in the poem as parents dictate small children about their diet, and playing and sleeping schedule. The power of the father is also painted in a poem as the father leads his son in waltzing.

The first two lines of the poem gives an introduction of the core characters of the poem i.e. the father and the son. In line-1 of the poem the “The whiskey on your breath” the son addresses his father and represents the theme of family in the poem. In line-2 of the poem “could make a small boy dizzy” the son mentions himself with the words “the small boy”. These two lines of the poem actually elucidate the domination of the father as described by the words “whiskey on your breath”. The whiskey describes the masculinity as well, owing to its traditional perception of being a manly drink. On the contrary the poet has described the dizziness of the son metaphorically (Fong). However, this dizziness is not owed to whiskey or alcohol but the masculinity of the father. The theme of power is also revealed in these two lines, as the father has power over his son, and it is also painted in these two lines that the father is being influenced by whiskey and the poet paints whiskey as the most controlling actor in these lines.

Line-3 of the poem exposes the most powerful thing elucidated in the poem by Theodore Roethke: Death. In spite of the fact that the father has the power and has strength of masculinity, he can by no means evade death. The poet Roethke experienced his father’s demise when he was fifteen, and this was by probably the most haunting experience of his life (Fong). Another thing which line-3 elucidates is admiration. Even though the son gets his ear scrapped by his father and the smell of whiskey makes him dizzy, he struggles to cling onto his father. Line-4 of the first stanza of poem “such waltzing is not easy” further expounds the relationship between the father and his son. The line reveals that waltzing is scary as well as hard and fun. A son dancing with a man who is hard working and dominating is actually quite a hard thing to cope with. It is more or less a kind of an aggressive countenance of a father’s affection.

Line-5 and line-6 represents two things in the poem. One is the family and the other one is men and masculinity. Line-5 and 6 “We romped until the pan, slid from the kitchen shelf” actually paints a family environment in a very subtle manner as both the father and the son romp i.e. dance in a clumsy manner and disturb the kitchen accessories. This line actually explicates the relation between father and the son living in the family. Another thing which these two lines exemplify is the men and masculinity as both are male members who are involved in the dance and the dance is actually not a waltzing but a romping. No female has given representation in this dance and a little boy takes on the role of the female and the father who has got domination takes on the role of male partner in the waltz. So, a trace of power is also seen in these lines. If the father had not considered himself dominating, he could also have taken the role of the female partner in the waltz. However, it is the boy, who is weak and small, takes the role of the female partner in the waltz.

Line 7 and 8 of the poem also represent a couple of themes elucidated in the poem. Line-7 “My mother’s countenance” introduces the only female character of the poem to the readers and talks of her expressions of frowning on the romping she experiences in the kitchen between her husband and her son. Line-8 “could not unfrown itself” reveals a few possibilities of her expression over the dance she witnesses in the kitchen. She might be amused by seeing her husband and son dancing. There is also a possibility that she might be scared or upset. It is because she feels herself helpless in front of her husband and can’t utter a word to stop them from making a mess of the kitchen. The disapproval of the mother exemplifies a divergence to the masculinity of her son and her husband. It is upon the readers what they perceive of the mother’s expression, either she enjoys the dance or remains subservient to her husband and do not utter a word in a dissent.

Line 9 and 10 “The hand that held my wrist” and “Was battered on one knuckle” respectively, provide the sense of admiration in the poem. These lines describe that son pay close attention to his father and admire his hard work which he is entitled to do to make both ends meet. These two lines of the third stanza also glorify the masculinity. The poet Theodore Roethke actually refers to his father as a hard-working man. By going down the aisle of history we can witness that poet’s father owned a timber preserve and a greenhouse where he used to work to win bread for his family (Stiffler). The theme of family is also painted in the picture and depicts the picture of traditional family system of our society where father is responsible to work hard not for himself but whole family. Line-10 of the poem actually demonstrates father’s machismo and rough hands that work very hard in the dirt to support his family.

Line 11 and 12 “At every step you missed” and “My right ear scraped a buckle” respectively, spell power and masculinity in the poem. These lines represent the power parents enjoy in order to improve their kids’ lives. These lines also represent that sometime kids pay off the parents’ mistakes and parents’ mistakes can harm the kids. Missteps of father followed by a scrap on son’s ear is actually a metaphor which paints how parents’ mistake harm the children, even if the parents commit a mistake by accident (Petersen). Further the family theme is also painted by these lines as these lines explains metaphorically that the dance is fun for the boy. We can interpret the play in two ways; either it is too much fun for the boy and does not utter a single word about getting his ear tattered, or he feels scared that his father might get upset. These lines are actually a metaphor for natural environment within a family i.e. the mistakes of one member of family are paid off by the other member of the family also.

The last stanza of the poem represents all the four themes of the poem. There is a sense of admiration in the first two lines of the poem. Line-13 and 14 “You beat on my head” and “With a palm caked hard by dirt” respectively, depict admiration. The first line of the stanza i.e. line-13 shows the learning ability of children from their parents. In this line the thing which particularly discussed which children is time and its importance. Line-14 again depicts masculinity and presents a picture of father’s rough hands to the readers. Although, hints about rough hands wouldn’t have so important to narrate them twice in the poem. However, it seems that rough hands and the hard work of father are extremely noticeable in the poet’s memory (Stiffler).

Line-15 and 16 “Then waltzed me off to bed” and “Still clinging to your shirt”, both line show power, family atmosphere and sense of admiration. Admiration in a sense that the kid does not want to sleep early and enjoys having fun with his father. These lines show the love of son for his father despite of the whiskey smell and cling onto his father’s shirt while his father take him to his bed. These two lines represents the family atmosphere also and describe the parenthood and parents’ affection for their children. The domination of father over his son is also shown in these lines as father makes the schedule for his son. However, the dance before the bed time of son shows that father makes use of his power in very affectionate manner.

**Conclusion**

The entire poem presents the countenance of affection of son. It has to be kept in mind that the poem was written in the times when punishing children was measured ordinary and typical. The poem is quite confusing and readers might get confused about the relationship between the father and his son. The poem actually makes their readers to inquire whether the relationship between the father and son is abusive and strained or loving and affectionate.

Works Cited

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