

A Comparative Analysis Of My Papa's Waltz And Those Winter Sundays

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Introduction

Theodore Roethke's "My [Papa's Waltz](#)" and Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" are poems about father-son relationships based on the memories of childhood. On the surface poems are simple but under the surface the things are not simple, the things are not quiet, as if something raging on under the surface, challenging the normal conception of family and family-relationships. The present essay intends to evaluate the father-son relationship conceived by the poets from their childhood memories, the evaluation is based on the comparative analysis of both forms and subject matter of the poems.

Discussion

First, we will analyze both poems individually and in the next section of the paper, a comparative analysis will be drawn between both poems regarding themes and issues raised by the poets. Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" is one of his most famous poems. The poem's first stanza states:

"The whiskey on your breath

Could make a small boy dizzy;

But I hung on like death:

Such waltzing was not easy." (Theodore, S.1)

As mentioned earlier, on the surface, it seems a happy image of a little boy dancing with his father, but if we look at the word choice, we'll find a chaotic situation, unstable and insecure. The poet is addressing his father, who is drunk, and the boy can smell the booze from his breath. The father is so drunk that he "could make a boy dizzy," but the boy has no choice but to dance, although it is not easy, as the speaker suggests in the last line of the first stanza. The speaker goes on to describe the setting of the action, and we happen to know that they are romping in the kitchen. Furthermore, the angry mother is present in the kitchen, and she is not happy with this dancing as the pans are sliding from the kitchen shelves; the speaker says "My mother's countenance / could not unfrown itself" (Theodore, S.2).

Here we get a sense of disorder and chaos presented in the form of a drunkard father. There is a mix of joy and danger in this dance that alludes to the controversial and ambiguous relationship between father and son. In the following two stanzas the violent images emphasized by the use of words like “battered”, “beat”, “hard by dirt” and “scraped”. In the ABAB rhyming scheme, every line consists of three stressed syllables that resemble the actual waltz as it has three beats. The most important thing to note is the attempted harmony of the poem, the poem has 4 stanzas, each stanza consists of four lines that follows arrhythmic pattern similar to the waltz. Nevertheless, the subject matter of the poem is odd in its form as it depicts the underlying fear and the mess created by the dance. Furthermore, it also alludes to the ambiguous nature of the relationship between the father and the son. The disharmony between the tone and the serious subject matter is intentional as the poem has a playful form that follows specific rules to build, yet it depicts the fear and insecurity felt by the speaker in his childhood (Fong, 1990).

Similar to Theodore Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz,” Robert Hayden’s “Those Winter Sundays” also deals with the memories of childhood and rethinking the complex relationship between father and son. The poem consists of three stanzas: the first stanza contains five lines, the second stanza contains four lines, and the final stanza also contains five lines. Unlike “My Papa’s Waltz”. “Those Winter Sundays” does not follow a rhyming scheme. The first stanza of the poem states:

*“Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.”* (Robert, S.1)

The speaker has an addressing tone as if he is sharing his most secret thoughts with someone close to him. It starts with a confession of the sacrifices made by his father when he was a child. The speaker states that even on “Sundays,” his father used to wake up early in the morning, and then the speaker goes on to describe his father’s labor by alluding to his “cracked hands” that “ached” from the weekday labor, despite of the hard work nobody ever thanked him says the speaker. Not even the speaker ever thanked him. In the following stanza, there is a shift in tone; it is still sad, but it also depicts anger and aggression through the use of words such as “splintering,” “breaking,” “fear,” and “chronic anger.”

The language portrays the harshness and coldness of the atmosphere as well as of his father and their complex relationship, as we have already seen in the previous poem. Furthermore, this stanza informs us about the speaker’s fear of the “chronic anger” of their house, here we get sense that something is not quite right. In the last stanza, there is a sense of regret and more sadness. The speaker alludes to his indifference to his father, who polishes his shoes and warms his room

(Gallagher, 1993). The final two lines reflect the skeptical nature of the speaker's mind and his doubt about the complexity of his relationship with his father as the lines state:

"What did I know, what did I know

Of love's austere and lonely offices?" (Robert, S.3)

"Love's Austere and Lonely Office" depicts the incredibly complex nature of parental love. These lines are true depictions of the nature of the love between parents and their children.

As we have analyzed both poems individually, now it's time to draw a comparison between the two poems. First, both poems are about the complex nature of parental love, specifically of a father-son relationship. As we have observed, both poems are about the recollection of childhood memories composed in an adult age into poems. Unlike "My Papa's Waltz," "Those Winter Sundays" does not follow a rhyming pattern as we have observed in the preceding passages.

In "My Papa's Waltz" the speaker is hesitant to clearly describe his feeling towards his father, the use of violent words observed in the above passages alludes to the danger and fear that the speaker faced when his father used to engage him in the waltz. Similarly, in "Those Winter Sundays," the speaker refers to the same kind of fear and sadness about his relationship with his father and the hesitant and doubtful nature of love between him and his father is expressed beautifully in the last two lines of the poem. The lines describe an altogether different sense of the word "love", its harsh and it's lonely.

The same sensibility runs in "My Papa's Waltz," the poem is very well composed and written in a playful manner, yet under the surface, things are messy and chaotic; the fear of sadness and fear is depicted by the careful choice of the words as one critic says it reflects "Roethke's vacillation towards his father registering playful but poignant tones in stanzas of iambic trimeter" (Kalaidjian, 1987). On the contrary, the style of "Those Winter Sundays" reflects a feeling of regret and remorse as the speaker did not thank his father for the sacrifice they made. Nonetheless, both poems depict the complex nature of their love with their fathers in an almost confessional way mixed with nostalgia and pain, joy and fear, regret and uncertainty.

Conclusion

"My Papa's Waltz" and "Those Winter Sundays" challenge the traditional conception of love between father and son. Furthermore, the poems also give an insightful view of love. In the case of "My Papa's Waltz," the love is mixed with cruelty and chaos in the form of a drunkard patriarch. Similarly, in "Those Winter Sundays," the love is mixed with harshness, loneliness and remorse.

Works Cited

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