“My Papa’s Waltz” Poem

Posted on September 3, 2018

Form and Ambiguity in My Papa’s Waltz

My Papa’s Waltz is not a complicated poem concerning diction or form; it can stimulate interest and debate. The poem maintains the waltz’s rhythm and ambiguity throughout. It enables the audience to empathize with the boy, who is handled roughly by the alcoholic father, which is a pointer to something sinister. The boy’s father cannot control himself due to drunkenness and is thus a threat to the home life. On the other hand, the poem provides an innocent gaze down memory lane when the young lad had a fun moment within their home in awe of his father. Thus, the poem provides the audience with the two sides of the boy’s father, humorous and spontaneous, while also struggling with alcoholism. Therefore, the poem has poignant irony, imagery, and symbols that shape the tone and the persona (Roethke, 1942/1961).

The poem confirms the widely accepted notion that people are often apt to recollect their childhood experiences across their entire lives. It is a widely accepted belief that an individual can easily remember the pleasant and unpleasant memories of their childhood. For instance, the description of the dance between the father and the son signifies lots of loving and joyous attitudes between the young lad and his father. Although Roethke uses a blended tone throughout the poem, he can display strong emotions of a grown-up recollecting his childhood memories. The young boy implicates the audience with feelings of love fused with resentment for his father.

The author creates an impression that although the boy had a pleasant childhood memory, something was not sound about it. In the rhyme scheme, the author utilizes assonance; the rhyming ones are not identical (Roethke 2,4). Perhaps these imperfections are indicative of the narrator’s feelings towards his father. Despite having unconditional love for the father, the attachment cannot take away his father’s imperfections. The author resoundingly tells about the father’s drunkenness, and probably it is the reason for abusing his son (Roethke, 1942/1961).

Dark Mood and the Father’s Drunkenness

On the other hand, the first two lines set the poem’s dark mood and tone. They inform the reader about the boy’s feelings about his father’s drunkenness. This sets a frightening tone in the narrator’s voice. The boy refers to the alcoholic odor coming from his father’s breath as they dance. Besides, in his description of his father’s entry into the house, he likens his clinging to him to death. On many occasions, when reference is made to death, it usually paints a somber mood and tone. The author seems to have preceded the poem using this factor to demonstrate his resentment towards the father. However, the two concluding lines show a contrasting feeling from that presented by the first

two lines. For instance, the mention of the fact that the father puts the persona to bed indicates the affectionate feelings the boy shares with his father (Roethke, 1942/1961).

Theodore Roethke's poem, My Papa's Waltz, uses imagery and symbolism to convey the young boy's emotions while dancing with his father late at night. One of the critical metaphors is in the poem's title, which shows that it is the papa's waltz, not the boy's. The author uses tense verbs that indicate that the boy had rough childhood memories. After getting intoxicated with whiskey, he gets hold of his son and starts a wild romp in the house. The boy then senses a reeking smell of the intoxicant. He attempts to overlook it, but the pungent odor makes him dizzy. However, one of the most dreadful images is when the boy hangs on his father to save his dear life while the old man scrambles around the kitchen (Roethke, 1942/1961).

Physical Struggle and Emotional Complexity

Moreover, the boy points out that waltzing with his father was difficult. The audience cannot believe that waltzing was difficult because the father was leading, but because of the manner in which he was leading the dance. The second stanza shows the father exhibiting rough actions, and his mother was not happy, as she could not stop frowning (Roethke, 1942/1961).

Therefore, the poem's title presents an image of a man recollecting his childhood memories and experiences. He goes back down memory lane and recounts the fun moments he had with his drunken father. Besides parental abuse, the poem also presents the symbolic meaning of the love between a father and a son. The father lacks the knowledge of how to express his affection for his son and thus embarks on the journey around the room, which the boy likens to a waltz. The boy even feels safe and secure with his wrists on his father's hand. Although waltzing was not easy, the boy recalls that he usually did not spend enough time with his father, and therefore, he had to hang on him like death to enhance closeness. The boy romped with the father till the pans on the kitchen shelf slid to the floor. The word 'romp' implies lively play, which gives the reader a pleasant memory of how the boy enjoyed his father's presence (Roethke, 1942/1961).

References

Roethke, T. (1961). My Papa's Waltz. In *The collected poems of Theodore Roethke*. Doubleday. (Original work published 1942). https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43330/my-papas-waltz