**Directions: Read and annotate the poem to make meaning…what is this poem saying? What is it focused on?**

MY PAPA’S WALTZ

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

CLosed Read: page 227, Foster:

1. What is he arguing when he says, “don’t read with your eyes?”

**Saturday, June 16, 2007**

**Theodore Roethke: "My Papa's Waltz"**

Each year as my students and I discuss twentieth-century poetry, I always can count upon Theodore Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz” to inspire some of the most interesting and conflicting opinions. Amazingly, examination of this fairly brief and seemingly accessible work usually initiates an elaborate and occasionally emotional conversation that moves beyond the poem’s clever use of rhythm and clear sense of sound into the direction of animated debate about the possible presence of messages covering child abuse and alcoholism.

Rather than reading the poetry as an elegiac tribute by a son to his father, perhaps a belated statement of love by the speaker, many in my classes want to condemn the father for his behavior, especially for the pain they perceive him inflicting upon the young boy in the poem. A few also accuse the mother in the work of acting almost as an accomplice because she witnesses the roughhousing without interfering to stop her husband’s clumsy carousing.

When pressed for evidence of the violence they claim Roethke presents, particular phrases or images are noted. The students begin by citing the opening two lines, which certainly establish drunkenness. In addition, they declare the poem suggests physical injuries to the small boy, whose ear is scraped by his father’s buckle and who feels his father “beat” him. The mother obviously appears upset, the students claim, and they wonder if the father’s battered knuckle resulted from a barroom brawl. Finally, they conclude the first stanza’s allusion to death opens the poem for darker, if not more ominous, interpretation.

When consulting with colleagues at my university and elsewhere, I find this response to be a somewhat common reaction among growing numbers of students as well as some scholars. Indeed, in the last couple of decades, as society’s awareness and alarm over child abuse have increased, and concern over all forms of substance abuse has become more prominent, one can understand why a legion of readers might highlight these issues in their analysis of “My Papa’s Waltz.”

Nevertheless, I find myself repeatedly rising to the defense of the parents in the poem, not so much for their specific actions or inactions, but because I believe we also need to read the piece within the context of its time frame. In the era this poem was authored, the late-1940s, readers would not have shared the same sensibilities about these issues that contemporary readers exhibit. Certainly, the definition of child abuse would not have been as broad as that expressed by my students, and a man returning home with whiskey on his breath after a day of work would not immediately raise great concern since it would not have been very unusual.

If we switch to a different time frame and another frame of mind for the persona in the piece based upon the poet’s autobiography, we would retreat even further a few decades to early in the twentieth century. Roethke was born in 1908 and could not have been very old when the actions might have occurred since the boy’s height only extends to his father’s waist, and that may be with him standing on his father’s shoe tops. Also, we know the father’s work in a greenhouse would have explained the battered knuckle and the caked dirt on his hands.

Therefore, in the current interpretation of this poem by some readers, we see a contrast between contemporary readers’ objections, responding within their own perceptions of proper parenting, and the author’s apparent intention at honoring a more pleasant memory of an enjoyable incident with his father, even if it “was not easy.” After all, the poet refers to his father as “papa,” connoting greater affection. Additionally, the word choice of “romp” reflects a more playful tone. The two dance a carefree version of the upbeat waltz. Indeed, the poet’s use of “beat” pertains to the father keeping the musical beat for their movements, and it possibly foreshadows the poet’s own eventual understanding of rhythm as evidenced in the poem itself, which mostly uses an iambic trimeter line to echo the musical beat in a waltz composition and maybe imitate the swaying of waltzing dancers.

When we remember Theodore Roethke’s father died when the poet was only fourteen, and that loss appeared to impact much of Roethke’s later life as well as his writing, the mention of death seems even more elegiac. In fact, when we find similar lines in the first and last stanzas (“I hung on like death” and “still clinging to your shirt”), we may believe the father’s death is foreshadowed and that the son is unwilling to let the father go despite possible pain, even decades later when Roethke writes the poem.

In any case, one could contend the competing readings of this poem allow for a richer and more rewarding experiencing of Roethke’s lyrical recollection, and the conflicting conclusions help all conjure a more haunting image. As someone who appreciates ambiguity in all forms of art, whether in a Roethke poem or the finale of *The Sopranos*, I suggest “My Papa’s Waltz” for this Father’s Day weekend, and I recommend an additional delight by listening to Theodore Roethke’s [reading](http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/18045) of the poem.

1. What are the two arguments/interpretations of the poem? Which do you think makes more sense?

<http://edwardbyrne.blogspot.com/2007/06/theodore-roethke-my-papas-waltz.html>