

Any interpretation of “My Papa’s Waltz” has to take into account the complexity of the speaker’s feelings that are brought about by his father’s waltz. A dance should bring two people closer together. The dance in this poem acts that way, yet the darker side of this waltz, which is a powerfully unsettling emotion under the surface of this poem, dominates the mood, and the love and intimacy of the dance do not make a strong impression on the reader.

Theodore Roethke manipulates our emotional response to the poem through a number of literary conventions, some of which play on the conventions of a waltz. Waltzes are not technically difficult dances, and they are set to lighthearted, easily accessible music. It is a dance in which couples sway back and forth as they go round and round. Our emotions and sympathies do the same thing in this poem: The speaker carefully orders his images to juxtapose frightening images with comforting images. In the first stanza, for instance, the speaker begins with a frightening image: “The whiskey on your breath / Could make a small boy dizzy” (1–2). The second stanza begins with the words “We romped,” undercutting the serious tone of the first stanza, yet their romping has consequences that remind us again of the seriousness: Pans fall from the shelf, and the speaker’s mother frowns in disapproval. This pattern is repeated throughout the poem, and the waltz spins fast and out of control until we can only focus on a whirling sequence of disturbing emotions rather than a coherent overall feeling.

Roethke uses meter and rhyme to underscore the fact that there is something “off” about this waltz. A waltz is a carefully ordered and technically precise musical form, and this poem mimics that form, but it also reveals moments of imperfection. Playing on the fact that a waltz is written in 3/4 time, Roethke gives each of his lines either six or seven syllables. Yet there is something lurching about the way he strings together these six and seven patterns: The pattern is not exact. Nor is the rhyme scheme exact: Slant rhymes like “dizzy”/“easy” (lines 2 and 4) and “pans”/“countenance” (5 and 7) demonstrate that something is out of place. The speaker makes note of “every step” his father “missed” (11), and we imagine that he wouldn’t make a good dance instructor, at least not when he has “whiskey on [his] breath” (1).

We can only speculate as to whether the father in the poem would make a good worker, a good husband, or a good father. In the last case, the poem leads us subtly to a definite

conclusion. While this is not a poem that screams, "I hate my papa; he was bad to me when I was young," it is a poem that connotes physical control to the point of manipulation and even abuse on the father's part. This waltz is dangerous, ultimately; its imagery contains a disapproving mother (lines 7 and 8), a battered knuckle (line 10), a buckle that repeatedly scrapes a young boy's tender ear (12), and finally a dirt-caked hand that strikes the boy's head repeatedly under the guise of keeping time for the waltz. The fact that the speaker says, "You beat time on my head" (14), instead of "kept time" reinforces this interpretation. The waltzing ritual is not about dancing; it is about a man who asserts and maintains physical control over his son even as he loses control over himself.