

Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz": A Deconstructionist Reading

The rhyming cadence of Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" mimics the ordered steps of the dance alluded to in the poem's title. Yet this structural coherence belies the actual rough pace of the "waltz" and the conflicting representations of father, mother, and child that the waltz exposes within the poem. The speaker's ambiguous recollection, an account striking for its omissions and double entendres, generates multiple narratives that undercut his nostalgic vision of home.

The first two stanzas of the poem convey the festive tenor of the domestic scene. As if giddy from the alcohol on his father's breath, the narrator describes the mayhem of their "romp." Amidst the practical equipment of the kitchen, father and son stir up delirious chaos: as pans crashed down around them, the narrator relates, he coolly observed his mother whose face "[c]ould not unfrown itself."

But the pans that "[s]lid from kitchen shelf," mirrored in his mother's fallen face, call attention to other such moments of discord in the narrative. Rather than a harmonious dance, the waltz consists of gropes and clashes: the speaker clings "like death" onto his father who, with his own "battered" hand, proceeds to "beat time" on his son's head. The use of the word "beat" in the closing stanza of the poem, while directly referring to a musical "beat," also recalls the father's "battered" hand, evidence of physical pain. The narrator's role as author underscores by contrast his utter lack of authority, his helplessness as the child in the poem. Unable to control the "waltz," he can barely keep up with his father's overpowering pace: "at every step [he] missed," he explains, his own "right ear scraped a buckle."

The performance of the dance, rendered always as physical threat in “My Papa’s Waltz,” continually subverts the identities of its audience and participants. Just as the child’s father plays both idol and aggressor, the child occupies the positions of both admirer and victim. The mother becomes negated by the double negative of her sole description--a countenance that could “not unfrown” as she gazes on this violent—and incestuous—site of ambiguity: the father and child, whose uncertain gender suggests at once both son and daughter.

The ironic discrepancy in “My Papa’s Waltz” between the high-class elegance of the traditional waltz and the drunken swagger of the father whose hands are caked with dirt emblemizes the continually fissures between language and meaning throughout the poem. An unstable term in itself, the “waltz” shifts from elaborate dance to figure of speech in the concluding stanza as the child is “waltzed . . . off to bed”—a linguistic slipperiness that disavows any interpretive certainty for “My Papa’s Waltz” as well.