My Papa's Waltz

SUMMARY

Your breath smelled so strongly of whiskey that it would make a small boy like me woozy. But I hung onto you as hard as I could anyway. It wasn't easy to dance with you.

We danced around the kitchen, loudly and roughly, until we knocked the pans from the kitchen shelf. My mother's face was stuck in a permanent frown.

You held my wrist with your hand; I could see that one of your knuckles was bruised. Every time you missed a step in the dance, my right ear scraped against your belt buckle.

You beat the rhythm of the dance on my head with your hard, dirty palm. Then you danced me off to bed, while I clung to your shirt.

THEMES

FATHERS, SONS, AND MASCULINITY

"My Papa's Waltz" is a complex and ambiguous poem. On its surface, it describes a rowdy and charming bit of roughhousing between a father and his young son as they dance together in the kitchen late at night. But the speaker consistently suggests that there's some unease in his relationship with his father, and the poem even hints at the possibility of violence between the two. The waltz the speaker describes isn't just a literal dance, but also an extended metaphor for the speaker's conflicted feelings towards his father—a powerful man the speaker seems to at once admire and fear. The poem describes both the deep love between them and the serious tensions that divide them—tensions fueled, the poem implies, in part by the limitations of traditional masculinity.

Much of the speaker's language suggests that this dance, their "waltz," is lighthearted. For instance, the speaker refers to it as a "romp." Their dancing is a little unsteady, sure, but there's still plenty of tenderness. Indeed, the poem ends with the speaker being carried to bed by his dad—a sweet ending to this late-night rendezvous. However, the speaker also makes a number of subtle suggestions that undermine this happy picture. The poem starts with the father so drunk that just smelling his breath makes the speaker "dizzy." This suggests that the father isn't just having a drink or two; he's seriously drunk and the speaker is unsettled, even scared of him.

The speaker also describes how his father knocks the "pans" from the "kitchen shelf." Even if they're just dancing, this means that things have gotten pretty rough and out of control. And the father's knuckle is "battered"—which suggests that he's injured his hand somehow, perhaps through a violent act. Most tellingly, the speaker describes how the father "beat time" on his head. The phrase has two meanings: on the one hand, the father is just counting the beats of the waltz. On the other hand, "beat" can imply violence, or, maybe, even abuse.

Thus even though the speaker never explicitly claims that his father is violent—or even acknowledges that there's tension between them—the poem is full of moments that suggest conflict. In part, these moments might reflect the limits of conventional masculinity. The father seems to be the head of the household—revealed by the fact that his mother can only stand off to the side and frown during this scene—and is implied to be some sort of laborer as well, a strong, rough man whose palms are "caked hard by dirt." This "hardness" might reflect more than just calloused hands, and can also be taken as a symbol for the difficulty the speaker's father has in expressing affection in a softer way—and the difficulty the speaker has in seeing his father as a source of tenderness in addition to being a voice of authority.

Despite all this, the speaker remains passionately attached to his father. He describes hanging onto him "like death"—even though it's hard to keep up with his drunken father, who keeps stumbling and missing the beat in their waltz. Once again, this is an ambiguous statement. On the one hand, it captures the speaker's devotion to his father. But on the other hand, it suggests that the speaker's love for his father is damaging—it is "like death" for him. Even in moments of tenderness and affection, these two people can't quite connect: they are out of step, their relationship marred by the threat of violence.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

The whiskey on ...
... was not easy.

The poem begins with the speaker describing a memory from his childhood. The speaker's father comes home drunk, and the smell of whiskey on his breath is so strong that it makes the speaker, still a young boy, "dizzy." Father and son waltz around their kitchen (a waltz is a kind of ballroom dance), which is difficult for the boy because his drunken dad is wobbly and unsteady. Even so, the boy clings on tightly—maybe out of fear,

maybe out of love, likely out of a combination of both.

There's something playful and spontaneous about this dance, which is likely a scene familiar to many readers; think of how little kids may stand on their father's feet as the two swirl around. On the surface, at least, it's a touching memory that suggests a close relationship between father and son. However, the speaker makes a couple of hints in these opening lines that his relationship with his father isn't as happy as it might seem. For example, the speaker hangs on "like death." The simile is a little disturbing. Literally, the speaker is just describing how tightly he hangs on to his father. But the simile also suggests that dancing with his father is *like* death: that, when he does so, the speaker is in danger. This danger could be physical: the father might hurt the speaker (accidentally, out of drunkenness, or otherwise).

The end-stop at the end of line 3 emphasizes these ambiguities. It breaks a pattern of enjambments and end-stops that the poem follows elsewhere. Generally, the poem alternates enjambed and end-stopped lines: line 1, for example, is enjambed ("... breath / Could ...") and line 2 end-stopped ("... dizzy;"). The poem breaks that pattern just once, in line 3, which ends with a colon:

> But I hung on like death:

The out-of-place end-stop makes the reader pause over the word "death" and consider its darker implications.

The poem's form also suggests that something's not quite right. Note, for instance, the stanza's uneven meter. The poem generally alternates between lines like line 1, which is in iambic trimeter, and lines like line 2, which is also in iambic trimeter, but ends with an extra unstressed syllable. (This is called a catalectic foot). Remember that an iamb is a poetic foot with an unstressed-stressed, or da DUM, pattern of beats; trimeter just means there are three of these iambs per line. Take lines 1-2:

> The whis- | key on | your breath
> Could make | a small | boy dizzy;

Iambic trimeter is a close approximation of the rhythm of a waltz: a waltz has three beats per measure and a line of iambic trimeter has three stresses per line. So the first line of the poem *feels* like a waltz—and then the second line breaks the rhythm, adding a little hiccup at the end. In a way, the second line mimics the father's drunken dancing—the way he tries to keep the beat but keeps missing steps. Similarly, the slant rhyme in lines 2 and 4, between "dizzy" and "easy," again suggest that something is off, that something doesn't quite line up or connect between father and son.

As such, the poem's form is full of hints of unease and violence. The "waltz" that the father and son share is thus not just a literal event: it is also an extended metaphor for their relationship. Like their relationship itself, this dance is complicated and unsteady, mixing together love, playfulness, and tension.

LINES 5-8

> *We romped until ...*
> *... not unfrown itself.*

In the poem's second quatrain, the speaker continues to describe his "waltz" with his father. He now calls it a "romp"—which makes it sound like something fun, a bit of playful roughhousing. But, yet again, he also makes some subtle suggestions that there are tensions that lie just under the surface.

For instance, the speaker notes that he and his father knock the "pans" off of the "kitchen shelf." This suggests that the two figures are careening carelessly around the kitchen. It's a particularly unnerving moment because the pans can be understood as symbols for the household or family that father and son share together. Their waltz, then, seems to be damaging the stability and security of the family itself. This moment opens up another interpretation: maybe the two aren't really dancing at all, but physically struggling or fighting; that is, maybe this is all a metaphor for abuse.

In lines 7-8, the speaker's "mother" briefly appears in the poem. She's frowning: indeed, she can't stop frowning. The speaker doesn't specifically explain why, but it's implied that she's upset about the fact that they're knocking down the pans—and, more broadly, that the father's drunken, rowdy behavior is disturbing the peace of the family. This suggests that, even if the young speaker is somewhat in awe of his father, his mother is not so easily seduced; as the only other adult present, she is frowning upon her husband's behavior.

The meter here continues to be in iambic trimeter. Unlike the previous stanza, though, the speaker doesn't use any catalectic feet here: all four lines are in pretty smooth meter, with no awkward extra syllables. And the speaker alternates smoothly between enjambed and end-stopped lines: lines 5 and 7 are enjambed ("... pans / Slid ..." and "... countenance / Could ..."), but lines 6 and 8 are end-stopped. The stanza is very tightly formally controlled. This, again, emphasizes the tension between the speaker and his father: where the father is sloppy, off-beat, and drunk, the speaker is capable of exerting precise control over the poem.

But even in this very orderly and controlled stanza there are signs of strain: "pans" and "countenance" in lines 5 and 7 don't really rhyme at all, and are a strained slant rhyme at best. The strain and tension in the relationship between father and son are expressed in these moments of failure and disturbance in the poem's otherwise tightly wound form.

LINES 9-12

The hand that ...
... scraped a buckle.

Throughout the first 8 lines of the poem, the speaker has consistently suggested that there's some tension between himself and his father. In lines 9-16, that tension seems to become more serious—at points, the speaker even suggests, subtly, that his father maybe even be violent and abusive toward him.

The speaker begins in lines 9-10 by noting that his father's "knuckle" is "battered"—that is, scraped or bruised. This might just mean that the father hurt his hand working. But it also might mean that the father has been using his hands violently. And in lines 11-12, the speaker notes that every time his father drunkenly misses a beat in their dance, the speaker's ear scrapes painfully across his belt buckle. This is the first time the speaker explicitly admits that the "waltz" is painful, that his father is hurting him—and, for some readers, it may color the earlier parts of the poem. That is, it's possible to read the poem in its entirety as being an extended metaphor about the father's violence and abuse—though the speaker never comes out and directly says that the reader should read it that way. Instead, he supplies a series of hints and suggestions that might lead a reader to that conclusion.

One such hint can be found in the alliterative /b/ sound in lines 10 and 12. It appears in two key words in the stanza, "battered" and "buckle," linking them together. The reader knows that the "buckle" has hurt the speaker. The alliteration suggests that the reader should think about the father's "battered ... knuckle" in a similar way: it too has hurt the speaker. In this sense, the alliteration implies that the father has used his hands to hurt the speaker. Similarly, the consonant /r/ and hard /k/ sounds in line 12 echo the pain the speaker feels as his ear scrapes across his father's belt buckle:

> My right ear scraped a buckle

In the line's rough sounds one hears the rasping of the speaker's ear as it scrapes across the buckle. The harsh sound of the line reinforces the pain the speaker feels when his father misses a step.

These lines are rhymed in an ABAB pattern—no weird slant rhymes here. They again alternate between enjambed and end-stopped lines: lines 9 and 11 are enjambed; lines 10 and 12 end-stopped. (Indeed, the enjambment in line 11 is especially expressive: it mimics the way the speaker slips when his father misses a step in their waltz.) This quatrain is again written in iambic trimeter, but lines 10 and 12 both contain an extra unstressed syllable—a catalectic foot:

> Was bat- | tered on | one knuck|le;

And:

> My right | ear scraped | a buck|le.

This extra syllable break's the poem's rhythm, mimicking the way that the father drunken slips and loses the beat in their dance.

LINES 13-16

You beat time ...
... to your shirt.

In the final four lines of "My Papa's Waltz," the speaker finishes describing his dance with his father. He focuses on two very different moments in their dance, with very different implications. In lines 13-14, the speaker describes how his father "beat time on my head" with his hand—a hand which is hard and dirty. Literally, the speaker's father is just tapping out the rhythm of the dance on his son's head. But these lines once again contain dark implications and suggestions. The word "beat," for instance, is often used to describe physical violence. And the speaker doesn't describe his father's touch as comforting or soft: instead, he focuses on how hard his father's hand is. Further the sound of lines 13-14 is pounding and insistent, with sharp, plosive consonants:

> You beat time on my head
> With a palm caked hard by dirt...

The consonance and alliteration in these lines underscore the discomfort, even pain, the speaker feels as his father "beat[s] time" on his head. It's possible to interpret this as another subtle reference to real, physical violence—the speaker suggesting, but not explicitly confirming, that his father is abusing him. However, one might also interpret this passage as simply referring to the tensions between father and son. Because they are limited by traditional forms of masculinity and can't communicate effectively, the father's compassionate or playful gestures become threatening and painful for the son.

The poem then ends with a tender moment: the father takes his son up to bed. This underscores how ambiguous and complicated their relationship is: even if there are tensions between them, there is also love. The poem carefully attends to both sides of their relationship—the good and the bad. And the "waltz" that they share expresses these ambiguities.

This stanza follows the formal pattern established in previous stanzas. It is rhymed ABAB and alternates between enjambed and end-stopped lines. It is written in iambic trimeter, with only a little blip in the opening anapest of line 14 ("With a palm"). The rest is metrically smooth, and the poem thus ends with a sense of gentle harmony as the speaker and his father share, however briefly, the same rhythm.

SYMBOLS

PANS

The "pans" that appear in line 5 symbolize the household that father, son, and mother share. Pans are domestic objects. Used for cooking and feeding a family, pans are closely connected to the most intimate and nourishing rituals. They represent how families come together for meals, working together to nourish and support each other. Thus, there's irony in the fact that the father and son knock the pans down as they waltz around the kitchen—they are disrupting symbols of family unity and togetherness, even as they do something that might look like bonding or playing.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "pans"

WALTZ

The "waltz" that father and son dance together in "My Papa's Waltz" is a symbol for the relationship between them. In other words, the father and son aren't—only—literally dancing together. Their dance is also a symbol for the dynamics of their relationship with each other. As the poem describes it, their relationship is complicated and ambiguous: even as the son is dedicated to his father, there is serious tension, even violence, in their relationship. The symbol that describes their relationship is thus similarly ambiguous—and different readers might see different things. On the one hand, it is sweet and charming to imagine father and son dancing together. But on the other hand, their waltz registers the tension—even the violence—between them.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "waltzing"
- **Line 15:** "waltzed"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

"My Papa's Waltz" uses enjambment and end-stop in a very predictable way: usually, every other line is end-stopped. For instance, in the poem's second stanza, lines 6 and 8 are both end-stopped:

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

The stanza is divided into two halves, each of which contains a complete sentence. In lines 5-6, the speaker describes how he and his father knock down the pans as they romp around the kitchen. In lines 7-8, he describes his mother's reaction: she can't stop frowning. The end-stop in line 6 cleanly separates these two sentences. And similarly, the end-stop in line 8 cleanly separates this stanza from the next.

Indeed, each stanza in the poem ends on a period. As a result each stanza feels discrete, almost like a series of snapshots that come together to paint a picture of the speaker's childhood. The poem is thus tightly organized and controlled. This is important: while the father may be drunk and out of control, missing steps in the waltz, the speaker is very much in control of the poem. The poem's tightly organized end-stops thus underline the differences between father and son—and emphasize the tensions between them.

There is one place in the poem where the speaker breaks his pattern of enjambments and end stops. Line 3 is end-stopped, even though elsewhere in the poem the third line of each stanza is enjambed:

> But I hung on like **death:**
> Such waltzing was not **easy.**

The speaker breaks the pattern here for a good reason. In line 3, he describes how he hangs on tightly to his father. The line is a testament to the love that the speaker feels for his father. The speaker remains attached to his father, despite the ambiguity of this dance. But the simile ("**like** death") also introduces some disturbing implications: the word "death" makes it seem like the speaker is in danger of hurting himself because of his attachment to his father. The end-stop emphasizes and underlines this implication. It makes the line feel abrupt and final—just like death. In other words, the end-stop makes it feel like the speaker's commitment to his father isn't simply a matter of touching dedication—it is, itself, a kind of death.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "dizzy;"
- **Line 3:** "death:"
- **Line 4:** "easy."
- **Line 6:** "shelf;"
- **Line 8:** "itself."
- **Line 10:** "knuckle;"
- **Line 12:** "buckle."
- **Line 14:** "dirt,"
- **Line 16:** "shirt."

ENJAMBMENT

The speaker of "My Papa's Waltz" uses enjambment in a fairly regular way. In every stanza but the first, he switches between

enjambed and end-stopped lines. (We discuss the first stanza—and the way that it breaks the poem's pattern—in more detail in our entry on end-stop.) Usually, the first and third line of each stanza are enjambed; the second and fourth are end-stopped.

This pattern is clear in the poem's third stanza, lines 9-12:

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

This tight pattern of enjambment and end-stop underlines the speaker's control over the poem. Unlike the speaker's father, who is drunk and keeps missing steps in the dance, the speaker is fully in command of the poem. He almost never misses a step: once he establishes a pattern, he sticks to it. The poem's pattern of enjambments and end-stops thus underlines the differences—and the tensions—between father and son.

At the same time, the poem's enjambments help capture the jerky, rough rhythm of the speaker's waltz with his father. For example, the enjambment in line 11 almost feels like the father's bad, off-beat dancing. At the end of the line, the sentence is incomplete—so the reader speeds down the page to see how it finishes. This quick drop almost feels like the speaker slipping, sliding down and scraping his ear against the father's belt buckle in that enjambment. The poem's enjambments thus quietly echo the dance they describe: its rough, jerky rhythm—and the tension (and violence) that rhythm implies.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "breath / Could"
- **Lines 5-6:** "pans / Slid"
- **Lines 7-8:** "countenance / Could"
- **Lines 9-10:** "wrist / Was"
- **Lines 11-12:** "missed / My"
- **Lines 13-14:** "head / With"
- **Lines 15-16:** "bed / Still"

ALLITERATION

"My Papa's Waltz" uses alliteration throughout the poem. Often, the speaker turns to alliteration to subtly reinforce the darker implications he makes about his relationship with his father. Though the poem ostensibly describes a happy moment—father and son waltzing in the kitchen together—it makes a number of subtle suggestions that the relationship between them is marred by serious tensions, even violence. The speaker never explicitly confirms these suggestions, but his use of alliteration helps to underline them.

For example, note the /b/ sound that appears in lines 10 and 12:

> Was battered on one knuckle (10)
>
> My right ear scraped a buckle (12)

The sounds are far apart, but because the poem's lines are so short, they do resonate, echoing against each other. As they do so, they link together two otherwise discrete images. In lines 9-10, the speaker describes how one of his father's knuckles is "battered." In other words, it's bruised or scraped. Notably, though, the speaker doesn't say *how* his father hurt his knuckle.

Then in lines 11-12, the speaker describes something different: every time his father misses a step, the speaker slips and scrapes his ear against the father's belt buckle. This is an important moment in the poem: it's the only time the speaker admits that his "waltz" with his father *hurts*, that his father is, intentionally or not, injuring him. The speaker doesn't give the reader any explicit hints about the relationship between the two halves of this stanza.

But the alliteration binds them together. In doing so, it suggests that the father's "knuckle" is as frightening and damaging as his belt buckle. In other words, the alliteration implies that the father's "knuckle" is also a violent and scary thing, something that hurts the speaker. The stanza already suggests there are serious tensions between father and son. The alliteration deepens that implication, suggesting that those tensions might explode into violence and abuse.

Similarly, in lines 13-14, the speaker uses an alliterative /h/ sound:

> You beat time on my head
> With a palm caked hard by dirt…

The alliteration gives the reader a sense of how it feels to have the father "beat time" on the speaker's "head." The father's hand is not soft or comforting: instead, it is "hard" and rough. The alliteration thus suggests that the speaker doesn't welcome or enjoy his father's touch—instead he finds it threatening and painful. The poem's alliteration thus consistently works to undermine the idea that the poem describes a happy and playful interaction between father and son. Instead, it often suggests that the tensions between them are serious and severe—so serious that they may include violence and abuse.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "b"
- **Line 2:** "b," "d"
- **Line 3:** "d"
- **Line 4:** "w," "w"
- **Line 5:** "W"
- **Line 6:** "k"
- **Line 7:** "M," "m," "c"

- **Line 8:** "C"
- **Line 9:** "h," "h"
- **Line 10:** "b"
- **Line 11:** "m"
- **Line 12:** "M," "b"
- **Line 13:** "b," "h"
- **Line 14:** "c," "h"
- **Line 15:** "b"
- **Line 16:** "c"

ASSONANCE

"My Papa's Waltz" uses assonance throughout. Much of this assonance adds to the bouncy rhythm of the poem, the steady repetition of sound making the poem itself feel like a dance. Throughout the first stanza, for example, there's assonance of the /aw/ sound. This sound appears in every line, like a musical note that repeats throughout a song:

> The whiskey on ...
> Could make a small ...
> But I hung on ...
> Such waltzing was not easy.

The poem's assonance thus adds a sense of musicality that echoes throughout the poem—and which may, at times, obscure the tension that bubbles beneath the surface of this seemingly happy scene. In other words, the poem's repetitive vowel sounds give it a sing-song quality, perhaps making things seem less serious than they are. Take the assonance of the third stanza, which repeats an /uh/ and /eh/ sounds:

> Was battered on one knuckle;
> At every step you missed
> My right ear scraped a buckle.

The assonance here, combined with the da DUM rhythm of the poem's iambic meter, makes these lines feel bouncy and loose. But what's being described is a little disturbing, the references to battered knuckles and scraping buckles imbuing the happy scene with the threat of violence.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "o," "ea"
- **Line 2:** "a"
- **Line 3:** "l," "o," "i," "ea"
- **Line 4:** "a," "o"
- **Line 5:** "i"
- **Line 6:** "i," "i," "e," "e"
- **Line 7:** "ou," "e"
- **Line 8:** "ow," "e"
- **Line 9:** "i"
- **Line 10:** "o," "u"
- **Line 11:** "e," "e," "i"
- **Line 12:** "u"
- **Line 13:** "i," "y," "ea"
- **Line 14:** "y," "i"
- **Line 15:** "a," "o," "e"
- **Line 16:** "i," "i," "i," "i"

CONSONANCE

"My Papa's Waltz" is full of consonance. It uses rough, heavy consonant sounds to convey the tension between father and son. For example, listen to the /r/ and /k/ sounds in line 12:

> My right ear scraped a buckle

The /r/ sound is guttural, the /k/ sharp. Together, they evoke the rasping sound as the speaker's ear scrapes across his father's belt buckle. The line not only describes the damage that the father does to his son as they dance together, it also *imitates* that damage, the way it sounds and feels.

Similarly, the speaker uses consonant /t/ and /m/ sounds in line 13:

> You beat time on my head

Literally, the speaker's father is just tapping out the beats of their dance on the speaker's head. But the word "beat" is unsettling: it suggests that there's something more violent going on. And the crisp /t/ and humming /m/ sounds reinforce that sense. They are insistent: they sound like something pounding or beating. In that sense, the consonance in the line mimics the way it feels to the speaker to have his father "beat[ing] time" on his head. It's not a soft caress, but a powerful blow.

Often, these sounds echo from the beginning of the stanza to the end, as when the /w/ in "whiskey" in line 1 reappears in "waltzing" in line 4. In other poems, this might not be noticeable. But because the poem's lines are relatively short, and its use of sound is so precise, the poem is able to make these connections over gaps of several lines.

The poem's consonance thus consistently emphasizes the tension between father and son, by suggesting that their "waltz" isn't a playful romp but a terrifying, even violent, experience for the speaker.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "w," "r," "b," "r"
- **Line 2:** "d," "m," "m," "b," "d," "zz"
- **Line 3:** "l," "d"
- **Line 4:** "S," "w," "z," "w," "s," "s"

- **Line 5:** "m," "p," "l," "p"
- **Line 6:** "l," "m," "k," "n," "l," "f"
- **Line 7:** "M," "m," "c," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 8:** "C," "n," "n," "f," "n," "l," "f"
- **Line 9:** "Th," "h," "d," "th," "t," "h," "d," "s," "t"
- **Line 10:** "b," "tt," "n," "n," "n," "ckl"
- **Line 11:** "t," "r," "st," "p," "m," "ss"
- **Line 12:** "M," "r," "r," "s," "cr," "p," "b," "ckl"
- **Line 13:** "b," "t," "t," "m," "m," "h," "d"
- **Line 14:** "m," "h," "d," "d," "rt"
- **Line 15:** "l," "t," "t," "b," "d"
- **Line 16:** "ll," "l," "t," "r," "rt"

SIMILE

"My Papa's Waltz" contains a single simile, but it's a complicated and important one. It appears in line 3:

> But I hung on like death…

The speaker starts the poem by describing how his father's breath smells so strongly of whiskey that it "could make a small boy dizzy." In other words, the speaker is in danger of fainting or falling down—which would break the connection between father and son and interrupt their waltz. Although the speaker suggests throughout the poem that there are serious tensions between himself and his father, he doesn't want the dance to end—so he hangs on "like death."

On one level, the speaker's simile just means that he hangs onto his father as hard as he can, refusing to let go. In that sense, the simile testifies to the love and dedication that the speaker feels toward his father. But on another level, the simile suggests that there are tensions and complications in the relationship between father and son. After all, the word "death" is startling and even a little scary. It suggests that the speaker is putting himself in danger by being so ferociously dedicated to his father. One might interpret this in a few different ways. It could mean that the speaker is in physical danger. Or the danger might be less direct: it could mean he's at risk of being hurt emotionally. In either case, the simile suggests that the speaker's love for his father is complicated and ambiguous—passionate, but also fraught and threatening.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "But I hung on like death"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

In "My Papa's Waltz," the speaker describes how—when he was a child—he and his father danced together in the kitchen. The poem treats this as a real event: something that literally happened. Indeed, the speaker focuses on the kind of intimate, personal details that make memory powerful: the smell of his father's breath, the look on his mother's face. Despite these precise and rich details, one can also read the "waltz" as an extended metaphor for the relationship between father and son. In other words, the "waltz" is both a real event and a metaphor that helps the speaker describe his relationship with his father. (Note that the waltz is also covered in the symbols section of this guide.)

Like the speaker's relationship with his father, the waltz is an ambiguous and complicated extended metaphor. At times, it suggests that their relationship is loving and playful. In line 5, for example, the speaker describes it as a "romp"—a kind of rough game. And the speaker notes that he doesn't want to let go of his father: he hangs onto him "like death." But this simile also suggests that there are some unresolved issues in this relationship. "Death" is an alarming word: it suggests that the speaker is in danger because of his love for his father. And there are other tensions that manifest in their dance: the father is drunk; he keeps missing beats, and when he does so, he scrapes the speaker's ear; they knock the kitchen pans—symbols of family—down as they romp around; and the speaker uses disturbing words like "beat" to describe the way his father touches him.

All of this suggests that their waltz is not simply a joyous and playful game. It is also full of tension and miscommunication. This may even be an implicit criticism of masculinity—of the ways certain ideals of masculinity prevents fathers and sons from connecting affectionately. And it may even suggest that there is violence and abuse in their relationship. The waltz is thus an extended metaphor for the relationship between father and son—and so it contains all the love, tension, and even violence that exists between them.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

Where appears in the poem:

VOCABULARY

Waltz (Line 4, Line 15) - A ballroom dance. The music for waltzes is in ¾ time. In other words, there are three beats in each musical measure. Roethke recreates the feeling of a waltz with the meter of his poem, iambic trimeter, which also has three beats per line.

Romped (Line 5) - To play roughly.

Unfrown (Line 7) - Someone's *countenance* is their face or facial expression. In other words, the mother can't stop frowning.

Unfrown (Line 8) - Stop frowning.

Buckle (Line 12) - The father's belt buckle.

Beat Time (Line 13) - Keep the beat for their dance, by tapping out the rhythm on the speaker's head.

Caked Hard (Line 14) - Covered in a thick layer. In other words, the speaker's father's hand is so dirty that it's covered with a thick, hard layer of dirt.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"My Papa's Waltz" has four stanzas, each of them four lines long. That means the poem has a total of 16 lines, divided into quatrains. It's written in a modified version of iambic trimeter and rhymed *ABAB*. The poem thus might best be described as a kind of modified ballad. (The standard rhyme scheme for a ballad is *ABCB*, and the meter is slightly different, but this one still comes pretty close.)

The poem's form thus gives the reader some important clues about "My Papa's Waltz." The ballad is closely connected to popular music—indeed, many folk songs are written in ballad meter. The poem thus feels very musical. Reading the poem is almost like reading the lyrics of a popular song. This is intentional and important. The speaker of the poem doesn't just want to describe dancing with his father in the kitchen. Instead, he wants his poem to embody the music and the rhythm of their dance—even when that rhythm gets out of whack (hence the frequent variations in the poem's meter).

The poem is, in a sense, the "waltz" that the speaker and his father dance to in the kitchen. This makes the poem more immediate—and, depending on how one reads it, possibly more disturbing. Instead of observing the dynamics of this dance from a distance, readers feel like they're present for it, even participating in it.

METER

"My Papa's Waltz" is written in iambic trimeter. Iambic trimeter has a da-DUM rhythm, with three feet per line. Take the poem's first line:

> The whis- | key on | your breath

The speaker uses this meter because its rhythm is somewhat similar to the rhythm of a waltz. A waltz is a kind of dance. Its rhythm is traditionally in 3/4 time, so each measure of the music has three beats. Similarly, a line of iambic trimeter has three stressed syllables. So reading the poem almost feels like listening to—or dancing—a waltz. Instead of just describing the speaker's dance with his father, the poem's meter helps to recreate it—and gives the reader the sense of participating in this dance.

Indeed, the speaker recreates his "waltz" with his father so precisely that even the tensions between father and son are evident in the poem's meter. Note that the odd lines of the poem tend to be in strong iambic trimeter. But the even lines of the poem sometimes have a feminine ending. In other words, there's an extra unstressed syllable at the end of these lines. One can hear this in line 2:

> Could make | a small | boy dizzy;

The extra unstressed syllable throws off the rhythm of the waltz. The lines are off beat, out of step—just like the speaker's father, who's drunk and can't quite manage to keep up with the dance: he keeps falling out of time and missing steps. And as he does so, he hurts his son: as the speaker notes in lines 11-12, every time his father misses a step, the speaker scrapes his ear against a "buckle."

The poem isn't consistent about this—lines 6 ("Slid from the kitchen shelf;") and 8 (Could not unfrown itself.") are both good lines of iambic trimeter, with no extra syllable, as is line 16 ("Still clinging to your shirt."). Sometimes the father manages to get the rhythm of his waltz right. But generally speaking, the poem alternates between lines of good iambic trimeter like line 1 and off-beat, awkward lines like line 2. The back and forth between these rhythms mimics the "waltz" that the speaker describes between himself and his father, with one partner keeping the beat and the other partner out of step.

RHYME SCHEME

Each stanza of "My Papa's Waltz" is rhymed:

> ABAB

This is a common rhyme scheme for a ballad. Ballads are closely associated with folk music and traditional songs—indeed, many popular songs are written in ballad meter. Using this rhyme scheme thus helps the speaker make his poem feel like a piece of music: instead of describing a waltz, it *is* a waltz. But the poem's rhyme scheme is often a little bit off, a little bit awkward. For instance, the rhyme in lines 2 and 4, "dizzy" and "easy," is a slant rhyme. The same goes for the rhyme between lines 5 and 7, "pans" and "countenance," which hardly sounds like a rhyme at all—the two words share some consonance and assonance, but they don't really line up.

These awkward rhymes capture the tension and danger of the waltz they describe. The speaker's father is drunk, clumsy, potentially violent. The rhymes mimic the moments when he loses the rhythm, when he misses a step in the waltz—and when, in doing so, he threatens to injure the speaker. (Indeed, the speaker notes that every time his father misses a step, he scrapes his ear painfully against his father's belt buckle.) The rhyme scheme thus works in a similar way to the poem's meter. Like the meter, the moments of roughness and failure in its rhyme scheme register the tension and, potentially, the

violence in the relationship between father and son.

SPEAKER

"My Papa's Waltz" describes a tense—potentially violent—moment in the life of a family. The father has come home drunk and dances, roughly, with his son in the kitchen, knocking the pans off the shelves in their kitchen as he does so. The mother watches, powerless to intervene or stop the dance. The speaker of the poem is the son, the child who waltzes with his drunk father.

The tension between father and son—and potentially the violence between them—is thus something that the speaker has experienced himself. And it is something that has stayed with the speaker. The poem is in the past tense: the speaker is describing a memory, from potentially a long time ago. But the speaker can't shake this memory. The poem thus finds him returning to, and reflecting on, a difficult—even traumatic—moment from his childhood.

SETTING

"My Papa's Waltz" is set inside the kitchen of a family's home. The speaker describes waltzing around this kitchen with his drunk father, then eventually going upstairs for bed. This gives the reader at least a hint about where the family lives—probably in a house, rather than an apartment. But the speaker doesn't give many other hints. He doesn't focus on larger details of the environment that surrounds him. So the reader never learns, for instance, whether the family lives in the country or the city.

Instead, the speaker focuses on things that are more immediate, like the smell of his father's breath, his mother's expression, or the dirt on his father's hand. In one sense, this reflects the speaker's perspective. He is describing what he saw as a child: he thus focuses on things that are close and immediate. On the other hand, it also reflects the tensions between the speaker and his father. Because the speaker is afraid of his father, he narrows his vision, focusing on the things right in front of him—things that threaten to hurt him, emotionally or physically.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Theodore Roethke is widely considered to be one of the most important 20th-century American poets. Alongside contemporaries like John Berryman, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath, he pioneered a new style of writing poetry called confessional poetry. This poetry was "confessional" because it included autobiographical details from the poet's own lives—as if they were making a confession. Roethke was familiar with the radical innovations introduced by modernist poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, but his poems just as often get their energy from traditional forms. They describe universal themes and conflicts, but they are often autobiographical, emerging from the particular details of Roethke's own life.

"My Papa's Waltz" is a good example of these priorities. It is written in a traditional form—a ballad. But Roethke strategically breaks the form, using breaks in its rhyme scheme and its meter to represent the father's sloppy dancing. He's interested in twisting and modifying traditional forms, not in perfectly reproducing them. Furthermore, the poem is usually read autobiographically. Roethke had a famously conflicted relationship with his own father, a relationship marked by tension—with love and hatred mixed together.

The poem thus exemplifies a new set of priorities for American poetry (or, at least, one group of American poets), after the extraordinary innovations of modernism. Less concerned with radical innovation than a poet like Pound or Eliot, Roethke's poetry uses the traditional resources of poetry to register the deep wounds in his own relationship with his father.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"My Papa's Waltz" was written in the early 1940s and first published in 1942. These were the early years of World War II—a time of enormous conflict and transformation in American society. However, the poem doesn't engage with its own historical moment. Instead, it looks backward, to the speaker's childhood.

The poem is often read autobiographically as a description of Roethke's own childhood in Saginaw, Michigan, where his father and grandfather worked in a greenhouse. (Roethke later described this greenhouse as "my symbol for the whole of life, a womb, a heaven-on-earth.") His father and grandfather were German immigrants. The poem reflects the hard-scrabble lives of immigrants in the 1910s and '20s. For instance, the father's hand is "caked hard by dirt"—reflecting the hard, physical work that he does.

For the speaker, this moment in his life is decisive and important: he remembers all its details—the way his father's breath smelled and the look on his mother's face. Even during a World War, these details from the past press in on him—so much so, that everything else in the world seems to fall away.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Theodore Roethke Museum — The website of the Theodore Roethke Museum, with photos, recollections from friends, and recommendations for further study.

(https://friendsofroethke.org/)

- Introduction to Roethke's Collected Poems — The full text of Edward Hirsch's introduction to Roethke's Collected Poems. (https://www.edwardhirsch.com/prose/theodore-roethke-selected-poems-introduction/)
- A Tribute to Roethke — Former U.S. Poet Laureate, Stanley Kunitz, reflects on the importance of Roethke's poetry. (https://poetrysociety.org/features/tributes/stanley-kunitz-on-theodore-roethke)
- Roethke's Life — A detailed biography of Theodore Roethke from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/theodore-roethke)
- Roethke Recites "My Papa's Waltz" — Listen to the poet read his poem aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yurYXtkbwU)

HOW TO CITE

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