Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz": A Reader's Response

As reader-response critics have long noted, opening up discussions of a poem to accommodate multiple interpretations can reveal striking things about how individual readers' assumptions and cultural positions affect their understanding of what they read. Rarely has this set of expectations surprised me as much, however, as it did in a recent discussion I had with students about Theodore Roethke's poem "My Papa's Waltz." I was teaching the poem in a creative writing class, on a day when we were talking about uses of metrical patterns in poetry. I went into class prepared to discuss what I thought of as a tidy little poem that does a particularly good job of replicating the cadence of a waltz in the meter of its stanzas. I was shocked to find that most of my students, on the other hand, had an angry and vehement reaction against a poem that they saw as describing systematic child-abuse.

"Child-abuse?" I asked, mystified, and not sure I'd heard correctly. Most of the heads in the class nodded.

My immediate thought was that my students must be reading something into the poem that wasn't there, since the poem for me had always conjured up a vivid image of a nighttime ritual that shows the connection between father and son. In my mind's eye, I saw a hard-working man who danced awkwardly but enthusiastically, creating a moment of intimacy with his child. For me the poem's tone was one of fond recollection: that the adult speaker still remembers small details of this waltzing suggested to me that the child thoroughly enjoyed this dance.

But my students were convinced that the father was beating his son. I was so surprised by this unexpected understanding of the poem that without even mentioning my reading, I asked to hear the evidence for theirs. Most of them grimaced when they talked about the poem, as

though even discussing it was almost as offensive as the actions they felt it portrayed. Their primary argument that this poem depicts a harsh father-son relationship was that the description of the dancing is violent. The father "beat time" on the child's head and crashed around the room so much that "the pans / Slid from the kitchen shelf." The word "beat," they said, is a clear indication of abuse, and the fact that the child is held still by a hand that is itself "battered" strengthened their sense that manual violence is the subject of the poem. My students seemed to be implying that no one would voluntarily use the word "beat" in the context of an adult's relationship to a child unless intending to suggest child abuse. The image of the father's belt buckle scraping the child's ear in the third stanza confirmed for the class that the father uses whatever tools are available to accomplish this beating.

The mother's stance contributes to this reading. She is guilty of not preventing her husband from beating her son; she looks on but doesn't interfere. Yet she doesn't condone it either, since we see that she looks on with a "countenance [that] / Could not unfrown itself." Her stern disapproval of what is going on seemed to my class to be further evidence that the father is acting inappropriately with his child. In fact, the relationship between the mother and the father in this poem reveals exactly the dynamic that we understand as typical of abusive family situations: the ambivalence of one parent in effect permits the other to perpetuate abuse on the children. Although my students did not articulate this concept of ambivalence, their critiques of the mother's simultaneous disapproval and inaction certainly point in this direction.

Furthermore, my students claimed, the child doesn't appear to be enjoying himself in all of this. He describes the "waltz" as requiring him to hang on "like death" – hardly a positive description of something a little boy would welcome. For my students, the specter of "death" raised in a poem that contains the volatile word "beat" to describe the action of a father with his

son was nearly conclusive proof for their reading of the poem. "Death" raises the threatening reminder that child-abuse all too often has fatal consequences. And if any doubts remain, the fact that the man is drunk tops it all off, one student pointed out. The opening line of the poem emphasizes his drunkenness by drawing our attention to the "whiskey" on the father's breath as the very first detail we learn about him and his waltz. My class didn't discuss this detail, as though merely pointing it out were enough. Heads nodded affirmation as if the combination of "whiskey" on a father's breath, a frowning mother, and a little boy nearly "dizzy" with all the things whizzing by his head could lead to only one obvious conclusion: this father, like so many others we've heard about on yet another drunken bender, is beating his son.

There was a long pause in the room after my class had finished their explanations. I'd always understood "My Papa's Waltz" as positive if not downright nostalgic, so my students' reading initially struck me as partly compelling but ultimately misguided. I said I'd like to offer an alternate reading and then to evaluate both as a group: I had always read "My Papa's Waltz" as though the narrator was talking about a literal "waltz," and I imagined the scene looked something like this.

A hard-working father comes home after a long day just in time for his son's bedtime. He doesn't even take time to clean up (he still has "a palm caked hard by dirt") because he wants to spend their few minutes together doing something really fun. So, he dances his son around the little house. The word "romped" in the second stanza signified for me that this was a positive, playful experience, since it implies the kind of wild abandon of activity that small children love. Envisioning a heavy, awkward man romping through the house with his small son, it was easy to see why a mother might frown at the spectacle. It's nearly time for bed, and the father is doing everything to get the son riled up rather than calmed down for sleep. The fact that the romping

dance is even disrupting the order of the mother's "kitchen shelf" surely contributes to her frowning countenance. I was struck, as my students had been, by the fact that although she seems to disapprove, she does nothing to stop this waltzing. For me, this suggested that although she didn't appreciate the disruptive qualities of the dance, she didn't want to hinder the father-son bond the moment was creating.

As for the belt buckle, I remember my own childhood, dancing with my father: in my socks, I would stand on the tops of his feet, and he would dance me awkwardly around the room while I clung to his hands or held fistfuls of the back of his shirt. I saw several students nod as if they too remembered such dancing. In such a posture, I suggested, the boy's head would be at his father's waist-level, so that whenever his father "missed" a step or lost his balance, the boy's "right ear scraped a buckle" on the father's belt. The last two lines of the poem confirm that this is the relative position of father and son, as the boy recalls that his father "waltzed me off to bed / Still clinging to your shirt." In the context of this kind of dancing, the notion that the child is "clinging" to his father suggests both that he depends on his father and that he has a childish reaction to the threat that the dancing will end because of bedtime.

Thinking of this poem as describing real attempts at dancing helps me account not only for the idea of the father's "missed" steps but also for his efforts to "beat time" to music he's apparently humming or imagining as they dance. I am unwilling to separate the word "beat," which so troubled my class, from the noun that follows it. As I read this poem, the father is not beating his son, according to line 13, he's beating time on the son's head. Assuming the waltzing of the poem is not a metaphor for anything else, to "beat time" simply means that he's trying to keep the rhythm of the dance steady. The poem for me creates a wonderful

juxtaposition in the image of a man whose hands are dirty and "battered" by hard physical labor trying to use those same hands to tap out the rhythm of a waltz on his small son's head.

Furthermore, that juxtaposition illuminates why the poem opens by drawing attention to the man's "whiskey" breath. From the very beginning of the poem, we learn that "My Papa's Waltz" is a dance that defies what we expect from waltzing. The waltz conjures up images of well-dressed people dancing sedately in grand ballrooms wearing fancy clothes. The formality of the simple rhythm is as old-fashioned as it is controlled. To title the poem with the word waltz is to set the reader up to expect precisely the opposite of an evening romp in a modest house, led by a whiskey-drinking father. That "My Papa" can both waltz and hold his whiskey thus immediately alerts the reader that this poem will revise the idea of waltzing without completely losing it. The lines, after all, do an excellent job of mimicking the 3/4 time of the waltz in their stresses and timing. Yet the details of this waltz contradict nearly all of our expectations about who does this dance, when, and where. For me, that contradiction does a lot to create interest in the poem.

My reading of this poem, as essentially a fond boyhood memory so contradicted my students' impression of violence that most of them were unwilling to relinquish their understanding of the poem. So we began a class discussion to try to work through what was most and least convincing about each of our interpretations. First, my students claimed, they didn't think that my reading adequately dealt with the issue of the father's drunkenness—which seemed to them to be such a large factor in proving he was abusing his son. Suddenly, the motivation for their reading of the poem started to become more apparent. My students' vehement responses to the abuse they perceived in this poem derived largely from their cultural position as readers raised in the last decades of the 20th century. Our country has become

increasingly intolerant of alcohol abuse as it has become more aware that alcohol can be abused. The links between alcoholism and child-abuse are widely documented now, although the subject was nearly unheard-of when this poem was written in 1948. Written at a time when to have a drink was still macho and when the dynamics that lead to child abuse were far from public knowledge, "My Papa's Waltz" imagines an ideal reader very different from the college students of the late 1990s, who are conditioned to notice even the slightest hints of abuse and alcoholism and to view them as glaring signs of problems. I tried to draw the class's attention to the historical issues at stake in reading a poem written 50 years ago according to prevailing assumptions and stereotypes. And ultimately, we agreed to disagree on what the more compelling reading of the poem was.

However, that solution—of assuming both our readings must be equally valid and allowed to stand as separate entities—left me unsatisfied. I felt that there were portions of my students' arguments that simply didn't make sense with the poem as a whole, such as their heavy emphasis on the word "beat" which didn't acknowledge the fact that the line specifically mentions the father beating "time." Simultaneously, however, their strong sense that the poem contain violence helped explain some things that my reading didn't take into account. Most notably, the third line of the poem, "But I hung on like death," had always troubled me as an oddly negative description in what otherwise seemed to me to be a poem about a positive memory. Considering the abuse reading of this poem raised interesting issues that complicated my understanding of it. Just as I was intrigued by the juxtaposition of a rough worker waltzing, I was interested in the violence that I thought my students very astutely pointed out throughout the whole poem. Although this moment of waltzing with papa still seems to me a positive memory, there is also something vaguely frightening in it. The whiskey breath and dizzying speed, the

powerful father whom the mother cannot criticize, and the noisy, beating romp of this waltz all combine to suggest an activity that is exhilarating perhaps BECAUSE it is somewhat frightening. Children, after all, are often most impressed by things that scare and thrill them at the same time.

Considering my students' sense that violence is being done to the son in this poem thus modifies my own reading in a way that I think makes it more compelling. This childhood memory, of a kind of dancing that "was not easy" but was thrilling, creates an image of a child at once delighted and frightened by the power of his father. Physically, the father's tight hold on the child's wrist is mirrored by the child's "clinging to [the father's] shirt," giving us an image of fatherly power that can't be resisted, but that the child also doesn't want to resist. Thus while I see no evidence in the poem that the child is actually being beaten, I see many details that suggest a kind of danger in this dancing and hint at underlying violence. A reader must wonder what caused the father's hand to be "battered on one knuckle," for example. Was he injured in his work, or did he hurt himself in a fight or punching a wall in anger? As I re-read this poem, it seems that the threat of powerful masculinity is kept in check by the controlled rhythm of the waltz and by the father's desire to maintain an intimacy with his son. For if in 1948 the whiskey on his breath might have been less stigmatized as a sign of maltreatment, the fact that he waltzes his son off to tuck him in bed might have been even more noticeable as an extraordinary moment of connection.

I wish I could say that in my classroom we talked about how to fit these two readings together by modifying portions of each to reflect the other. In fact, we chose to decide that there were two equally-valid responses rather than working to produce a new, unified interpretation. It nevertheless strikes me as especially satisfying to have my own reading of a poem so radically challenged by my students and to have their reading push me to account for issues I'd never

considered within this poem before. At its very best, this is the benefit of reader-response criticism as I see it. Rather than providing a forum for free-for-all interpretation, it allows individual, emotional responses to be channeled into considered readings of a text that take into account the historical positions of both the reader and the writer and enable a valuable complexity of understanding.