

"My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Roethke

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Biography

Theodore Roethke (1908-1963). Born in Saginaw, Michigan, Roethke was the son of a greenhouse owner; greenhouses figure prominently in the imagery of his poems. He graduated magna cum laude from the University of Michigan in 1929, where he also earned an M.A. in 1936 after graduate study at Harvard. He taught at several universities, coached two varsity tennis teams, and settled at the University of Washington in 1947.

Intensely introspective and demanding of himself, Roethke was renowned as a great teacher, though sometimes incapacitated by an ongoing manic-depressive condition. His collection *The Waking: Poems 1933-1953*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1954. Other awards include Guggenheim Fellowships in 1945 and 1950, and a National Book Award and the Bollingen Prize in 1959 for *Words for the Wind* (1958).

Elements of Fiction and examples of use in "My Papa's Waltz"

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| | <p>DEFINITION OF ALLEGORY</p> <p>An allegory is a whole world of symbols. Within a narrative form, which can be either in prose or verse, an allegory tells a story that can be read symbolically. You may have encountered <i>The Faerie Queen</i> by Edmund Spenser, or a short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne such as <i>Rappacini's Daughter</i>, or maybe you've heard that <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> was originally an allegory. Interpreting an allegory is complicated because you need to be aware of what each symbol in the narrative refers to. Allegories thus reinforce symbolic meaning, but can also be appreciated as good stories regardless of their allegorical meaning.</p> |
| <p>The whiskey on your breath Could make a small boy dizzy; But I hung on like death: Such waltzing was not easy.</p> <p>We romped until the pans Slid from the kitchen shelf; My mother's countenance Could not unfrown itself.</p> <p>The hand that held my wrist Was battered on one knuckle: At every step you missed My right ear scraped a buckle.</p> <p>You beat time on my head With a palm caked hard by dirt, Then waltzed me off to bed Still clinging to your shirt.</p> | <p>DEFINITION OF ALLITERATION</p> <p>Alliteration occurs when the initial sounds of a word, beginning either with a consonant or a vowel, are repeated in close succession.</p> <p>Examples: Athena and Apollo Nate never knows People who pen poetry</p> <p>Note that the words only have to be close to one another: Alliteration that repeats and attempts to connect a number of words is little more than a tongue-twister.</p> <p>The function of alliteration, like rhyme, might be to accentuate the beauty of language in a given context, or to unite words or concepts through a kind of repetition. Alliteration, like rhyme, can follow specific patterns. Sometimes the consonants aren't always the initial ones, but they are generally the stressed syllables. Alliteration is less common than rhyme, but because it is less common, it can call our attention to a word or line in a poem that might not have the same emphasis otherwise.</p> |

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| | <p>DEFINITION OF ASSONANCE</p> <p>If alliteration occurs at the beginning of a word and rhyme at the end, assonance takes the middle territory. Assonance occurs when the vowel sound within a word matches the same sound in a nearby word, but the surrounding consonant sounds are different. "Tune" and "June" are rhymes; "tune" and "food" are assonant. The function of assonance is frequently the same as end rhyme or alliteration: All serve to give a sense of continuity or fluidity to the verse. Assonance might be especially effective when rhyme is absent: It gives the poet more flexibility, and it is not typically used as part of a predetermined pattern. Like alliteration, it does not so much determine the structure or form of a poem; rather, it is more ornamental.</p> |
| | <p>DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION EXERCISE</p> <p>Can everything have a connotative meaning? Poets gravitate toward words with strong connotative possibilities because they are so rich with connotative possibility, like leaves falling in autumn (graceful and beautiful, but signifying a kind of death) or roses (undulating and sensual, but don't grab one by the stem). What is the connotation of, say, the following sentence?: <i>The man drank whiskey quietly.</i> The denotative meaning is simple: a guy drank whiskey and didn't make much noise. But to get at the connotative meaning, think about the emotional impact of the line, and about the associations you have with these words. Drinking can be celebratory; parties are sometimes accompanied by alcohol. But this man does not seem to be in the company of others. The word "quietly," in association with alcohol, seems to mean "alone." Intensifying this feeling is the fact that "the man" is anonymous to the reader (he isn't "Jack"), and he is drinking whiskey. How might it have been different if he were drinking scotch, a kind of whiskey that is generally associated with sophistication? What if he were drinking a milder, "fun" drink like a pina colada? "Quietly" and "whiskey" allow us to read a connotation into a simple sentence. If a poem makes you feel a certain way, ask yourself why.</p> |
| <p>The whiskey on your breath Could make a small boy dizzy; But I hung on like death: Such waltzing was not easy.</p> <p>We romped until the pans Slid from the kitchen shelf; My mother's countenance Could not unfrown itself.</p> <p>The hand that held my wrist Was battered on one knuckle; At every step you missed My right ear scraped a buckle.</p> <p>You beat time on my head With a palm caked hard by dirt, Then waltzed me off to bed Still clinging to your shirt.</p> | <p>DEFINITION OF DICTION</p> <p>Diction refers to both the choice and the order of words. It has typically been split into <i>vocabulary</i> and <i>syntax</i>. The basic question to ask about vocabulary is "Is it simple or complex?" The basic question to ask about syntax is "Is it ordinary or unusual?" Taken together, these two elements make up diction. When we speak of a "level of diction," we might be misleading, because it's certainly possible to use "plain" language in a complicated way, especially in poetry, and it's equally possible to use complicated language in a simple way. It might help to think of diction as a web rather than a level: There's typically something deeper than a surface meaning to consider, so poetic diction is, by definition, complex.</p> |

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| <p>The whiskey on your breath Could make a small boy dizzy; But I hung on like death: Such waltzing was not easy.</p> <p>We romped until the pans Slid from the kitchen shelf; My mother's countenance Could not unfrown itself.</p> <p>The hand that held my wrist Was battered on one knuckle; At every step you missed My right ear scraped a buckle.</p> <p>You beat time on my head With a palm caked hard by dirt, Then waltzed me off to bed Still clinging to your shirt.</p> | <p>DEFINITION OF IRONY</p> <p>As a figure of speech, irony refers to a difference between the way something appears and what is actually true. Part of what makes poetry interesting is its indirectness, its refusal to state something simply as "the way it is." Irony allows us to say something but to mean something else, whether we are being sarcastic, exaggerating, or understating. A woman might say to her husband ironically, "I never know what you're going to say," when in fact she always knows what he will say. This is sarcasm, which is one way to achieve irony. Irony is generally more restrained than sarcasm, even though the effect might be the same. The woman of our example above might simply say, "Interesting," when her husband says something that really isn't interesting. She might not be using sarcasm in this case, and she might not even be aware that she is being ironic. A listener who finds the husband dull would probably understand the irony, though. The key to irony is often the tone, which is sometimes harder to detect in poetry than in speech.</p> |

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| | <p>DEFINITION OF METAPHOR</p> <p>Closely related to similes, metaphors immediately identify one object or idea with another, in one or more aspects. The meaning of a poem frequently depends on the success of a metaphor. Like a simile, a metaphor expands the sense and clarifies the meaning of something. "He's such a pig," you might say, and the listener wouldn't immediately think, "My friend has a porcine boyfriend," but rather, "My friend has a human boyfriend who is (a) a slob, (b) a voracious eater, (c) someone with crude attitudes or tastes, or (d) a chauvinist." In any case, it would be clear that the speaker wasn't paying her boyfriend a compliment, but unless she clarifies the metaphor, you might have to ask, "In what sense?" English Renaissance poetry is characterized by metaphors that turn into elaborate <i>conceits</i>, or extended metaphors. Poets like John Donne and William Shakespeare extended their comparisons brilliantly, with the effect that the reader was dazzled. Contemporary poets tend to be more economical with their metaphors, but they still use them as one of the chief elements that distinguishes poetry from less lofty forms of communication.</p> |
| <p>The whiskey on your breath Could make a small boy dizzy; But I hung on like death: Such waltzing was not easy.</p> <p>We romped until the pans Slid from the kitchen shelf; My mother's countenance Could not unfrown itself.</p> <p>The hand that held my wrist Was battered on one knuckle; At every step you missed My right ear scraped a buckle.</p> <p>You beat time on my head With a palm caked hard by dirt, Then waltzed me off to bed Still clinging to your shirt.</p> | <p>DEFINITION OF METER</p> <p>Meter is the rhythm established by a poem, and it is usually dependent not only on the number of syllables in a line but also on the way those syllables are accented. This rhythm is often described as a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. The rhythmic unit is often described as a foot; patterns of feet can be identified and labeled. A foot may be iambic, which follows a pattern of unstressed/stressed syllables. For example, read aloud: "The DOG went WALKing DOWN the ROAD and BARKED." Because there are five iambs, or feet, this line follows the conventions of iambic pentameter (pent = five), the common form in Shakespeare's time. Stressed syllables are conventionally labeled with a "/" mark and unstressed syllables with a "U" mark.</p> |

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| <p>The whiskey on your breath Could make a small boy dizzy; But I hung on like death: Such waltzing was not easy.</p> <p>We romped until the pans Slid from the kitchen shelf; My mother's countenance Could not unfrown itself.</p> <p>The hand that held my wrist Was battered on one knuckle; At every step you missed My right ear scraped a buckle.</p> <p>You beat time on my head With a palm caked hard by dirt, Then waltzed me off to bed Still clinging to your shirt.</p> | <p>DEFINITION OF RHYME</p> <p>The basic definition of rhyme is two words that sound alike. The vowel sound of two words is the same, but the initial consonant sound is different. Rhyme is perhaps the most recognizable convention of poetry, but its function is often overlooked. Rhyme helps to unify a poem; it also repeats a sound that links one concept to another, thus helping to determine the structure of a poem. When two subsequent lines rhyme, it is likely that they are thematically linked, or that the next set of rhymed lines signifies a slight departure. Especially in modern poetry, for which conventions aren't as rigidly determined as they were during the English Renaissance or in the eighteenth century, rhyme can indicate a poetic theme or the willingness to structure a subject that seems otherwise chaotic. Rhyme works closely with meter in this regard. There are varieties of rhyme: <i>internal rhyme</i> functions within a line of poetry, for example, while the more common <i>end rhyme</i> occurs at the end of the line and at the end of some other line, usually within the same stanza if not in subsequent lines. There are <i>true rhymes</i> (bear, care) and <i>slant rhymes</i> (lying, mine). There are also a number of predetermined rhyme schemes associated with different forms of poetry. Once you have identified a rhyme scheme, examine it closely to determine (1) how rigid it is, (2) how closely it conforms to a predetermined rhyme scheme (such as a <i>sestina</i>), and especially (3) what function it serves.</p> |
| <p>The whiskey on your breath Could make a small boy dizzy; But I hung on like death: Such waltzing was not easy.</p> <p>We romped until the pans Slid from the kitchen shelf; My mother's countenance Could not unfrown itself.</p> <p>The hand that held my wrist Was battered on one knuckle; At every step you missed My right ear scraped a buckle.</p> <p>You beat time on my head With a palm caked hard by dirt, Then waltzed me off to bed Still clinging to your shirt.</p> | <p>DEFINITION OF SIMILE</p> <p>Have you ever noticed how many times your friends say, "It's like . . ." or "I'm like . . ."? They aren't always creating similes, but they are attempting to simulate something (often a conversation). The word <i>like</i> signifies a direct comparison between two things that are alike in a certain way. Usually one of the elements of a simile is concrete and the other abstract. "My love is like a red, red rose" writes Robert Burns. He's talking about the rose's beauty when it's in full bloom (he tells us that it's May in the next line). "Love is like a rose" is a simpler version of the simile, but it's a more dangerous version. (A black rose? A dead rose in December? The thorns of a rose?) Sometimes similes force us to consider how the two things being compared are dissimilar, but the relationship between two dissimilar things can break down easily, so similes must be rendered delicately and carefully.</p> |

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| <p>The whiskey on your breath Could make a small boy dizzy; But I hung on like death: <u>Such waltzing was not easy.</u></p> <p>We romped until the pans Slid from the kitchen shelf; My mother's countenance Could not unfrown itself.</p> <p>The hand that held my wrist Was battered on one knuckle; At every step you missed My right ear scraped a buckle.</p> <p>You beat time on my head With a palm caked hard by dirt, <u>Then waltzed me off to bed</u> Still clinging to your shirt.</p> | <p>DEFINITION OF SYMBOL</p> <p>A symbol works two ways: It is something itself, and it also suggests something deeper. It is crucial to distinguish a symbol from a metaphor: Metaphors are comparisons between two seemingly dissimilar things; symbols associate two things, but their meaning is both literal and figurative. A metaphor might read, "His life was an oak tree that had just lost its leaves"; a symbol might be the oak tree itself, which would evoke the cycle of death and rebirth through the loss and growth of leaves. Some symbols have widespread, commonly accepted values that most readers should recognize: Apple pie suggests innocence or homespun values; ravens signify death; fruit is associated with sensuality. Yet none of these associations is absolute, and all of them are really determined by individual cultures and time (would a Chinese reader recognize that apple pie suggests innocence?). No symbols have <i>absolute</i> meanings, and, by their nature, we cannot read them at face value. Rather than beginning an inquiry into symbols by asking what they mean, it is better to begin by asking what they <i>could</i> mean, or what they have meant.</p> |
| | <p>DEFINITION OF TONE</p> <p>The tone of a poem is roughly equivalent to the mood it creates in the reader. Think of an actor reading a line such as "I could kill you." He can read it in a few different ways: If he thinks the proper tone is murderous anger, he might scream the line and cause the veins to bulge in his neck. He might assume the tone of cool power and murmur the line in a low, even voice. Perhaps he does not mean the words at all and laughs as he says them. Much depends on interpretation, of course, but the play will give the actor clues about the tone just as a poem gives its readers clues about how to feel about it. The tone may be based on a number of other conventions that the poem uses, such as meter or repetition. If you find a poem exhilarating, maybe it's because the meter mimics galloping. If you find a poem depressing, that may be because it contains shadowy imagery. Tone is not in any way divorced from the other elements of poetry; it is directly dependent on them.</p> |

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