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Paper on Poetry

### The Shadow: Trauma in Poetry

In “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath and “My Papa’s Waltz” by Theodore Roethke, both authors use poetry to detail abuse and trauma. In “Daddy”, Plath uses metaphor and powerful imagery to describe an abusive paternal figure. In “My Papa’s Waltz”, Roethke recalls the violent dance between a drunkard father and his innocent child. Literary critic Donald E. Morse argues in his article “Sylvia Plath And The Trope of Vulnerability” that Plath used her poetry to deal with the issues and abuse plaguing her personal life. Stephen Tapscott analyzes “My Papa’s Waltz” and other poems detailing trauma in his article “The Poem of Trauma”. This paper will examine the ways in which Plath and Roethke use diction, imagery and metaphor in “Daddy” and “My Papa’s Waltz” to describe abusive parental relationships.

In “Daddy”, Plath describes her harmful relationship to the men in her life including her husband Ted Hughes and her father. Through selecting “Daddy” as the title of the poem, Plath leads the reader to believe the poem is only about her father. However, according to Morse in “Sylvia Plath And The Trope of Vulnerability” the origin of “Daddy” is “in Plath’s discovery that Hughes had been unfaithful to her” (Morse 80). Furthermore, he maintained that “Plath held the personal “opinion that the most interesting poetry was that written out of personal experience” (Martin-Wagner, *Biography* 194).<sup>7</sup>” (Morse 79). Plath begins her poem “Daddy” with a metaphor for her existence and struggles, “black shoe/In which I have lived like a foot/ For thirty years...Barely daring to breathe or Achoo” (Lines 2-5). These lines refer to Plath’s lifelong battle

with depression which lasted until her death by suicide at age thirty. Plath maintains that her life has been restrictive as though she's a foot stuck inside a pair of old shoes. She personifies the grief and sadness that her father's death brought during childhood "Any less the Black man who/Bit my pretty red heart in two./ I was ten when they buried you." (Lines 55-57). She describes the grief as violent, biting her "pretty red heart in two" (Line 56). Plath describes an attempt to reconnect with her dead father, "At twenty I tried to die/ And get back, back, back to you." (Lines 58-59). Morse notes that Plath's "mental and emotional breakdown...led to her first suicide attempt" (77). These lines may refer to a failed suicide attempt by Plath at age twenty in which "she suffered a serious breakdown, attempted suicide, and was institutionalized" (Gardner et. al 1398). Plath describes her attempts to heal and rid herself of the relationship with her father by saying "Daddy, I have had to kill you. You died before I had time" (Lines 5-6). This means that Plath has spent her life trying to process the hurt that she received from her father. She wishes that she could've killed him before he died as vengeance for his abuse. Plath compares her husband to her father in that "If I've killed one man, I've killed two— / The vampire who said he was you/And drank my blood for a year, /Seven years, if you want to know" (Lines 71-74). The vampire in this line may refer to Ted Hughes, her husband of seven years. Plath implies that Hughes reminds her of her father in describing him as "The vampire who said he was you" (Line 72). She uses the metaphor of Hughes drinking her blood to describe her marriage as one of parasitism in which Hughes harmed her. Prior to the writing of this poem, they separated owing to his infidelity. Therefore in this poem she draws parallels between the trauma from her father and her failed relationship with Ted Hughes, "For Plath, the death of her father when she was eight—rather than ten as she claims in "Daddy" (57)—and, most immediately, the loss of her husband by separation becomes joined in the poem" (Morse 84).

Lastly, "Daddy" is a poem surrounding the grief Sylvia has for her father and the end of her marriage to Ted Hughes.

In "My Papa's Waltz", Roethke details the dance between an abusive father and his son. In "The Poem of Trauma" Tapscott maintains that Roethke's poem is an example of the trauma poem which he describes as a piece "informed by trauma in that the poem becomes like a hall of mirrors; like a memory, the poem repeats the traumatic incident, and then it re-forms the memory...uses the rage of memory accurately, as its in-formation (Tapscott 40). The title "My Papa's Waltz" is misleading to the reader in that it sounds like a formal dance between father and son. However, "My Papa's Waltz" might be about a physical altercation between the speaker of the poem and his father. In "My Papa's Waltz" waltzing is conceived of as an activity that requires endurance and causes pain, "I hung on like death:/ Such waltzing was not easy" (Lines 3-4). Throughout "My Papa's Waltz", Roethke implies violence in that "We romped until the pans/ Slid from the kitchen shelf;" (Lines 5-6) and "You beat time on my head/ With a palm caked hard by dirt" (Lines 13-14). Roethke shows the brutality of the incident in that the speaker and his father fought so hard that it physically shook the kitchen shelf. The speaker uses the words "caked hard" (Line 14) to show the harshness and grit of his father's hand which is described as an instrument of violence to "beat time on my head" (Line 13). He uses these words synonymous with fighting and those for dancing simultaneously as shown by the third stanza where Roethke says "The hand that held my wrist/ Was battered on one knuckle; /At every step you missed/ My right ear scraped a buckle" (Lines 9-12). Next, in "My Papa's Waltz" the speaker of the poem seems to be remembering the event with the piece being written within past tense. The speaker remembers the grim reality of his father's presence as a child, "The whiskey on your breath/ Could make a small boy dizzy;/ But I hung on like death:/ Such waltzing was not

easy” (Lines 1-4). Through these lines, the speaker shows that his father was an alcoholic. This is important in that Tapscott describes the genesis of the trauma poem as “The first event was a trauma that preceded the poem; the second event is private memory tending toward repetitive dream; the third is a dream-repetition tending toward artistic representation, not dream but sharable public “vision.” (Tapscott 40). Lastly, “My Papa’s Waltz is a naive retelling of an abusive relationship between a father and son.

In conclusion, poetry is a form of writing that can be deeply personal and impactful. Roethke and Plath used the medium to detail traumatic and harmful situations. Through their poems both Roethke and Plath were able to empathize with and bring visibility to the plight of their audiences. Plath dealt with the rampant abuse and sexism facing women. Roethke illuminated the evils of parental abuse and addiction. Finally, through their usage of diction, imagery and metaphor both “My Papa’s Waltz” and “Daddy” are able to provide catharsis for the suffering that comes from trauma.

### Work Cited

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