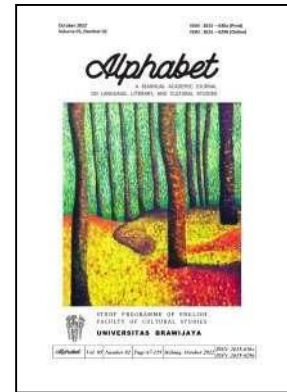


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# Toxic Parenting in “My Papa’s Waltz” By Theodore Roethke

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## Abstract

This study investigates toxic parenting portrayed in Theodore Roethke’s poem, “My Papa’s Waltz”, by applying the Reader-response theory. This poem is chosen due to its lines that portray toxic parenting. This study is descriptive qualitative research, so this study focuses on words rather than numbers. The data source is Theodore Roethke’s poem, “My Papa’s Waltz”. The result shows that there is evidence of toxic parenting in “My Papa’s Waltz” such as the father having more power in the family than the mother, the father feeling frustrated and easily emotional, and the son does not have the power to stand out for his rights. The researchers also find the reason why his parents become toxic. Then the researchers apply reader-response theory to analyze in deep regarding the findings. This study concludes that toxic parenting has influenced children’s psychology. It is due to that parents play an important role in encouraging children’s early learning.

**Keywords:** Toxic parenting; reader-response; child abuse; violence; psychology

Toxic parenting has been a fascinating topic that has piqued the interest of academics for decades. Toxic parenting has a meaning about parental behavior patterns that have a negative impact on children’s lives. When someone discusses toxic parenting, they usually describe parents who consistently behave in a way that causes fear and guilt in their children (Marcin, 2020). Toxic parenting comes from the word parenting, which according to Mahapatra and Batul (Mahapatra & Batul, 2016) describes that parenting is a process to support the physical, emotional, social, financial, and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood. Hence, toxic parenting has been the majority consent of scholars nowadays.

Furthermore, the term toxic parenting has been widely known nowadays due to the

important role of parents. Parents play an important role in encouraging children’s early learning. However, most parents have abused it, causing physical and mental violence against children, which is called toxic parenting. In line with these statements, Munyua and Disiye (2020) assert that toxic parenting indicates that parents have failed to meet their children’s physical, psychological, or emotional needs. Various forms of toxic parenting include harassing children physically, verbally, and sexually. Besides, toxic parenting leads to parents who manipulate and control their children through fear, shame, obligation, ridicule, or humiliation (Hidayah et al., 2022).

In this study, the researchers aim to identify toxic parenting, described in Theodore Roethke’s poem, “My Papa’s Waltz.” Since this

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poem was published in 1942 in *Hearst Magazine*, it has attracted literary lovers' attention to be analyzed because it contains many meanings that can be lessons for us about parenting. The authors also found some previous research on this poem, "My Papa's Waltz." The first is from William Barillas in 2015 with the title *Meter in Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz"* and the second from Masar Nasir and Masar A. Razzaq (n.d.) with the title *Childhood in Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz"*. The previous research had a difference. William Barillas raised the topic of the ambiguity of the story in this poem. In contrast, Masar Nasir and Masar A. Razzaq submitted the childhood perspective in the poem.

In his article, Barillas (2015) stated that the discussions about the poem are underlining its ambiguity, where some of the words imply that the child reacts with fear and pleasure. William focused on the dominant meter of the story. Another study comes from Masar Nasir and Masar Abdul Razzaq (n.d.) about childhood in "My Papa's Waltz." In this study, the researchers stated that the story is talking about the memory of his father, who has a bad attitude toward his child. Since the previous studies only focus on the child, there isn't much information about the parents. Based on those previous studies, the researchers will focus on the toxicity of parenting in "My Papa's Waltz" poem by Theodore Roethke.

## DISCUSSION

In this part, the researchers present the results of the data analysis based on the research problem. This study uses the Reader-Response theory to find out more about why the main character as a father in the poem "My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Roethke is considered toxic parenting according to the reader's perspective. In this discussion, the researchers raise several important points related to the issue of toxic parenting. Those points are the factors that cause toxic parenting in this poem, such as how it affects the child, what the readers think about the poem, and whether it is

appropriate to be applied in family life or not. Furthermore, the explanation of the points above will be discussed in sequence.

### A Drunken Attitude

In the poem "My Papa's Waltz," it can be highlighted that the poem depicts a family scene where a father, mother, and son are involved. This short poem consists of only four stanzas, and each stanza consists of 4 lines with ABAB rhymes which tell of a drunken father who is waltzing with his son in the kitchen, but the mother is not too happy about it because the father and son are playing and ruffling the kitchen. Based on the reader's point of view, the poem contains elements of violence perpetrated by a father against his son. It can be seen in stanza three as follows:

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

That stanza tells that the dance may not be fun because every time the father misses a step in his waltz, the son's ear scrapes against his belt buckle. Meanwhile, the words "battered" and "scraped a buckle" indicate that the father beats his son, and there is violence in the relationship between them. So the evidence above shows examples of physical violence that occurs in family life.

Besides, some factors lead to acts of violence committed by a father to his children in the poem. Based on the reader's point of view, the poem shows that the father is drunk, so the child only smells his breath and feels dizzy. This situation is a simple example of toxic parenting, namely the drunken attitude that is not suitable for a father to apply in family life because it can be a bad example for his child.

### Presence the Masculine Strength

Moreover, it can be seen that the poem shows the presence of masculine strength that is applied to a father. If the father is the head of the household, and there is the fact that the

mother can only be silent when her husband messes up the kitchen. This evidence can be seen in lines 7 and 8 of the second stanza,

*My mother's countenance  
Could not unfrown itself*

From this evidence, it is concluded that the strength of women is lower than that of men. According to the reader's perspective in interpreting the poem, the father's factor in becoming a toxic parent is that the father has full power in the family over the mother who is only a housewife. So, the mother does not dare to speak up or scold her husband's bad attitude.

### **Frustrated and Feels Tired**

On the other hand, the factors that influence the father to cause violence are the father is frustrated and feeling tired after work. It can be seen in the second lines of the four stanzas,

*With a palm caked hard by dirt.*

From this evidence, it is known that the father was a worker, so his palms were covered with dirt, and after coming home from work, the father vented his fatigue by drinking. This father's behavior allows violence in the family to occur. This situation is a picture of society in general. When father comes home from work, they get angry easily, and they can act harshly toward their children.

### **A Hard Life of Poverty**

Furthermore, another factor related to the previous one is the existence of a hard life of poverty. The situation in the family contained in the poem is fraught with difficulties. This condition relates to the author's background of the poem "My Papa's Waltz," in which Theodore is a modern-era American poet. In that era, many people experienced difficulties and struggles in fulfilling their lives. The evidence for this statement is seen in the first stanza of lines 3 and 4.

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

In the above evidence, it is shown that the poet "I" endured a hard life. In line 4, the words "waltzing" refer to a life that is difficult to live. However, this little boy has a strong love for his father even though he is in a difficult life. In the poem, a father is described as frustrated because he is tired of working. This condition is a picture in which the father feels frustrated and easily emotional because he is tired of working hard to meet his family's needs who are experiencing poverty. Due to the harshness of life, it is easier for fathers to act out of their control and abuse a child both physically and mentally.

Moreover, parents' attitude towards their children has influenced their children's psychology. In the previous study conducted by Jennifer and Margaret (2020), toxic parenting negatively correlated with a student's academic performance. The results of the study below show that there are several consequences caused by toxic parenting on children's psychology:

### **Children haven't the Power to Refuse**

According to this part, the poem itself has reflected the children's psychology related to the children who hasn't the power to refuse which can be seen in the last stanza:

*Then waltzed me off to bed  
Still clinging to your shirt.*

The son, who is forced to do the waltz, has no power to refuse. Even when his father leads him to bed with waltzing, the son doesn't want to let his hand dismiss from the father's shirt. The son doesn't want to let go if the father didn't order him to do. It shows that the father has fully controlled the son. This situation is evidence of toxic parenting; the son cannot fight back. He cannot use his right to refuse or decline his father's order.

### **Children Feel Lonely**

People always need support and communication from their surroundings. So they can get motivated to do something, or it can encourage them to move forward. Yet, it

does not seem to happen in this poem. The son did not receive any support from his surroundings and he has nowhere to talk. It is portrayed in the second stanza.

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

The son already does the waltz with his father. The settings show that it happens in the kitchen. But, when his mother saw them waltzing, especially when the son was forced to do so, the mother didn't do anything. The mother seems to let the son waltz with his father, even though she knows that his father is drunk. She does not support his son to refuse waltzing.

This kind of circumstance of toxic parents has let the son lose his power. He does not have the right to refuse. He does not have someone to talk to. He becomes a doll of his parents, and his parents do not care at all about it. Therefore, toxic parenting is portrayed in "My Papa's Waltz."

After discussing the factors and causes of toxic parenting in this poem and its impact on children, the researcher will explain the opinion in this paragraph. According to researchers, what the father did to the child was too much. The father's bad attitude also has a direct impact on the child's psychology. The child might become emotional because he imitates the parents' attitude. The child can be stressed even if it has over the limit; it can hurt themselves or their parents, and become a human being who has a grudge against anyone, including the parent. This opinion also strengthens the study conducted by Pratiwi et al. (2020) who argues that Parents should also not abuse children, whether physically or psychologically abuse. Parents should make their children as good as possible, provide them with the necessities of a decent life, and learn the meaning of a good life. Even though a child makes a mistake, parents should explain what the child's mistake is

without using emotion, even to the point of damaging the child's mental and physical health.

## CONCLUSION

This article analyzes the main issue of toxic parenting, described in Theodore Roethke's poem, "My Papa's Waltz." Furthermore, it can be concluded that the little boy got physical violence by his father. Some factors lead to acts of violence committed by a father to his children because the father has more power in the family than the mother. The other factor is that the father is frustrated and feels tired after work. As we know that the father was a worker, so his palms were covered with dirt, and after coming home from work, the father vented his fatigue by drinking. The last factor is the existence of a hard life of poverty, so the father feels frustrated and easily emotional because he is tired of working hard to meet his family's needs who are experiencing poverty.

The second point that the researchers found is the evidence of toxic parenting on children's psychology based on Roethke's poem entitled "My Papa's Waltz." Based on the finding, the son does not have the power to refuse or stand for his rights. He must obey his father's orders. The other evidence is that the son feels lonely and did not get support from his surroundings. His mother, who should be supporting his son, did not do anything when she saw his son waltzing with his drunk father. This circumstance at home affects the son's psychology.

From the results of this study, there are still many opportunities for future researchers who want to analyze toxic parenting. The researcher suggests that further researchers analyze the prose or story with the other theory related to literary criticism. Finally, the researchers hope that this analysis can contribute knowledge to readers about toxic parenting and hope this analysis can be a useful reference for literature learners.

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