

# **An Analysis of Poetic Text and Language: A Reference to Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz"**

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## **Abstract**

Poetry is sonic language and it is meant for reading aloud with lyrical and musical tone. Furthermore, poetry is figuratively rich language where mere linguistic meanings cannot purport the implied meanings of words and poetic contexts and the readers need to explore both covered and overt meanings to make a better understanding of poetry. Readers can grasp overt meanings by reading the outward shape of the poems like word and syntax. The covered meaning of poetry, however, is explored through special treatments to poetic writing. Considering this basic premise, this article tries to analyze poetic art and language by making an analysis of the famous poem, "My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Roethke, one of the famous American poets. To prove the claim, I have relied on literary views and scholarly arguments by great scholars and eminent poets. This article, therefore, makes an analytical approach of poetic writing, thereby examining distinct poetic elements like linguistic, rhetoric, figurative and sonic in the poem "My Papa's Waltz": exposing why poetic language differs from normal prosaic writing in terms of stylistic corpus and its form and presentation. The analytical part of the article examines aspects of linguistic, rhetorical and sonic elements in the poem to be different from prosaic genre of expression.

*Keywords:* articulation, connotation, innate, rhetorical, simultaneous, sonic, versification

## **Introduction**

Poetry is considered as a supreme form of expression with esthetic and artistic elements in it. Poetry differs from other literary genres like prose and fiction. This difference exists not only in outward linguistic form alone, but also in rhetorical expression and sonic effect it embodies. Poetic art, thus, comprises distinct layers of expressions: the syntactic, the figurative, rhetorical, and sonic. Because of these

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elements, poetic art commands a special form of expression. That is, poetry makes use of stylistically rich and sonically vibrant language which can rouse reader's feelings when they read aloud. Poetry is an ancient form of language universally accepted in the world. We find many spiritual, religious, and philosophic ideas put in verse or poetic textures because of its appealing expression and memorable quality. Kriszner & Mandel, in this regard, state:

To the ancient Greeks and Romans, poetry was the medium of spiritual and philosophic expression. Epics such as *Illaid* and *Anneid* are written in verse, and so are dramas such as Oedipus the King. Passages of the Bible, the Koran and Hindu holy books are also written in poetry. Today, throughout the world, poetry continues to delight and to inspire. For many people in many places, poetry is the language of the emotions, the medium of expressions they use from the heart. (2000, p. 22)

It is considered that poetic art is universal and old and it captures literary attentions. Because of the beautiful language and sonic effect, readers enjoy reading poetry. Moreover, the use of words and sonic expressions, poetry emits musical effects through repetitions, refrain, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and rhythm. This sonic effect, being the distinct element in poetic language, appeals to readers in reciting it. Universal practices of recital and reading indicate that people have relied on versification to be effective way in transmitting serious spiritual and religious messages. It is based on a common consideration as well as people can easily memorize ideas and information when they are put into versification as compared to other prosaic forms.

However, we cannot limit poetic language just because it has sonic properties. Apart from this, poetry is the language of imagination and passion fundamentally associated with human life. That is, poetic language embodies figurative expressions suffused with symbol, metaphor, and imagery which help us sense creative delight, making us more enthusiastic and impassioned, as is stated:

Poetry is the language of the imagination and passion. It relates to whatever gives immediate pleasure or pain to the human mind. It comes home to the bosoms and business of men; for nothing but what so comes to home to them in the most general and intelligible shape, can be subject for poetry. Poetry is the universal language which the heart holds with nature itself. (Hazlitt, 1985, p. 59)

That is to say, poetry sparks human imagination, being peculiar type of language emboldened with rhetorical features. It impacts readers and they are delighted with piquing rhetorical expression. Diverse feelings like joy, sorrow, amusement,

sacrifice, love, and sympathy are roused. Besides, poetry embodies a serious meaning. Furthermore, literary and rhetorical connotations arouse our response to the ideas and things and we involve in the process in sustained engagement and empathy. It is because of this quality readers memorize some best lines of poems throughout their lives and recite them like chanting of hymns.

When we read, we are not reading words but we are reading imagery, metaphor, symbol, irony and many other literary expressions. These figurative expressions sometimes take us beyond words and literal meanings. Somewhat similar things has been maintained by Robert Frost (1991 ) as he contends:

The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can readily hold that the ecstasy should be static in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes the direction with the first line laid down, it runs course of lucky events, and ends in clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in momentary stay against confusion. (p. 55)

Frost states a poem makes figure, or an identity through figurative expressions. As readers, we interact with the figures and get delight in it. However, this delight is not static. It springs from the active participation with the figure the poem makes. The delight we get in poetry is not to end. Moreover, it can be enhanced though versification and sonic elements in it.

The literary delight is not the ultimate outcome, however. There are many other elements in poetic language. Versification is basic tenet of poetry, without which a poem cannot be thought to be complete. For example, children do not know the meanings of the nursery rhymes, but they enjoy a lot. It is because literature is both the intelligible and delightful sonic experiences. Since it is meant for performance through human voice with proper articulation, it creates verbal muse to readers and the listeners both. That is what expressed here:

A poem is composition written for performance by the human voice. What your eyes see on the page is the composer's verbal score, waiting your voice to bring it alive as you read it aloud or hear it in your mind's ear. Unlike our reading of newspaper, the best reading—that is to say, the most satisfying reading—of a poem involves simultaneous engagement of eye and ear: the eye attentive not only to the meaning of words, but to their grouping and spacing as lines on page; the ear attuned to grouping and spacing of sounds . (Ferguson et al. , 2005, p.1).

Poetry reading is joyful act. We read aloud and enjoy each sound and music it provides to us. That is, poetic reading invites us to interact with our sound, eye, ear,

and mouth, and utterances of words in beautiful sonic articulation. The joy is further enriched when we articulate sounds being aware of it. We have such experiences in daily life as well. When a person sings our favorite songs, we murmur with them. By doing so, we get delight being associated with it emotionally and psychologically.

The artistry in poetry, however, comes from words. They are organized or arranged with poetic diction. Poetry is an artistic language often considered ornate and full of rhetorical elements. Besides, poetic language is generally thought to be complex, implicit, technical, and de-familiarized. Because of this typical expressive quality, some contend that poetry is not a common because people with specialized knowledge and scholastic traditions can only master poetic language.

Commonly, poetic writing is different form of genre, as it is stylistically rich which is not only understood by mere understanding of linguistic utterances or meanings. Linguistic elements like syntax and words in poetry are mere tips of the icebergs. Metaphorically to put, they just expose some bleak references which may not be substantial in the vast terrain of poetic structures. Considering this basic principle and premise, I have two research questions:

- a. Why is poetic language different from prosaic language?
- b. What special elements does poetic language have to make it a special craft?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical approach of this research article is analytical. I have tried to explore some of the dominant views and ideas expressed by poets and scholars to justify why poetic language is different from the prosaic language. By enumerating some of the quotations and of view points by eminent poets and scholars, I show typical features of poetic writing with an analysis. In addition, I have also made an analysis of a short poem, "My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Roethke, thereby giving an explanatory treatment of poetic language in terms of linguistic, rhetorical, and sonic components inherent in poetic art.

### **Poetic Art**

Poetry is different engagement for the readers and poets alike. It is not just to infer meaning, but it engages us emotionally, verbally, and creatively. From this stand point, poetic language is not just matter of understanding or coding and decoding of meanings. Rather, it is meant to appeal to readers and explore the artistry inherent

in it. Readers have chance to play with each word and imagination where they can feel a great sense of empathy with roused interests and delight. The rhetorical impact turns out quite rewarding when readers play with the poetic lines with spectacular sonic effects. The poetic lines are suffused with cadence therefore and musicality and do not only reflect meanings, but rouse our interests through typical arrangements of the words and rhetorical implications.

That said, poetic language has two distinct poles: the artistic or esthetic and linguistic. The artistic is the use of technical features that shape poetry with figures of speech, and esthetic is the sense that is created to arouse sense of appeal and joy to the readers. Somewhat similar idea is expressed here concerning reading of any literary text by Iser :

The text as such offers different schematized views through which the subject matter of the work can come to light is an action of "*Konkretization*". If this is so, then the literary text has two poles, which we might call artistic and esthetic: the artistic is the text created by author, an aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the readers. (2014, p. 212)

Iser brings forth two poles of literary works like poetry, namely the esthetic and artistic. The artistic is part of the author with the help of linguistic, rhetorical and sonic effect. The readers, according to Iser, see and respond to a literary work in terms of its embodiment of esthetic elements.

### **How Poetic Text Works**

Commonly, a literary language can be categorized into two ways: the form and content. The form is the outward frame of language that can be put into linguistic structures, whereas the content is meaning aspect of that form. In other words, this can be classified as the overt and covert aspect. The overt language is roughly the form and covered language is the meaning. In this general proposition, poetic language is associated with spectacular forms because of its formalistic constituents and rhetorical expressions. Lennard (2005) sees poetry ideologically set in meter and rhyme. He states, "To name and define the elements of poetic craft is, of course, in part a set of ideological decisions, but the influence of ideology on meter or rhyme is very much slower than its influence on what is put into a meter or made to rhyme" (p. xxii). To further elaborate, poetic language is compressed with many hardened layers which can be manifested in stylistic interpretation. That is to say, poetic art is immensely inherent in forms, meter, cadence, sonic compositions and rhetoric features.

Similarly, Peter Widdowson (1999) makes a point as he quotes Aristotle to have taken poetry as an ancient form of literature. He further mentions poetry

with specific form that can imitate human life more than any other genre. He says, "Plato's disciple Aristotle, in his *Poetics* fosters the process by accepting the notion of mimesis ('art imitates life'), but proposes that, this is in fact, its high moral dimension, because in its synthetic and generalizing tendency it is truer to reality than are the particulars of the history" (p. 28).

Clearly, poetry is not merely ancient form of art, but also is associated closely with human life than any other sources of history and human knowledge. That is to say, poetic text more often works with its expressive quality because it comprises peculiar expression. Langer (2008) specifically sees a work of art to have spectacular expressive quality, as she states:

A work of art presents feeling for our contemplation, making it visible or audible or in some way perceivable through a symbol, not inferable from a symptom. Artistic form is congruent with the dynamic forms of our direct sensuous, mental and emotional life; works of art are projections of "felt life", as Henry James called it, into spatial, temporal and poetic structures. (p. 202)

According to Langer, a work of art is composite of several dynamic forms; some of which are not clearly expressible. However, many of these forms help identify certain aspects of life beyond linguistic inference. In the same vein, William Butler Yeats (1989) makes an exploration how poetic forms come to work:

The form of sincere poetry, unlike the form of 'popular poetry' may indeed be sometimes obscure, or ungrammatical as in some of the best of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, but it must have the perfections that escape analysis, the subtleties that have a new meaning everyday, and it must have all this whether be it but a little song made out of a moment of dreamy indolence, or some great epic made out of dreams of one poet and hundred generations whose hands were never weary of the sword. (p. 34)

Here, Yeats makes a distinction between sincere poetry and popular poetry. These two different poetic forms obviously would have two different characteristics. In some case, there may prevail certain ambiguities and inconsistencies. However, the poetic text may embody certain perfections in terms of form.

Poetic language, by nature, is complex as it incorporates linguistic, rhetorical and sonic elements. However, feeling is the elemental entity in any poem without which ideas are not properly exerted. J. Paul & Hunter (1998) put, "In poems, ideas and feelings are packed tightly into just few lines. The experiences of life are very concentrated here, and meanings emerge quickly, words by words. Poems often show us the very process of putting feelings into language that can be shared with others -- to say feelings in a communicable way" (p. 597).

Obviously to note, poetic language is compressed which embodies, words, figures of speech, sonic elements and rhetorical fecundity. That is, in a simple line of a poem, we find many things abundant rousing our feeling and interest.

### **Poetry Exists Beyond Language**

It is commonly thought that poetry is beyond syntax and literal meanings. If poetry is just taken as language, ignoring its verbal play and artistic and sonic constituents, it might be a simple piece of prose. When we read a piece of poem, we are eventually invited to read language and then we are appealed to its rhetorical elements: the words and figures of speech. Furthermore, we are amazed to be interacting with sounds, rhyme, rhythm and sonic impact of the text. Besides, poetic language has multi layer clusters and each of them complements the other.

Considering this dynamic entity, poetry exclusively tries to engage readers to interact with the text in several stages of reading. Besides, the poetic delight becomes rewarding when we engage closely. To be precise, only the competent reader can have the joy of all these intricate delicacies of poem. Klaus et al (1997) opine "Poetry is essentially a game, with artificial rules, and it takes two—a writer and reader – to play it. If the reader is reluctant, the game will not work" (525). Hence, artificial rules, verbal tricks, and playful games engage both readers and poets to make delightful experiences turn by turn.

However, it does not mean that we can handle poetic language all the time and understand it. Some poems are quite strange to us; we cannot enjoy them even we know meanings and syntax. Such poems need profound interactions with them. Gill Richard (1995) in this regard remarks:

One of the problems of thinking about poetry is that we find it difficult to recognize what is before us. To many of us, particularly when we are starting to study, the poems before us seem to be vague and blurred. It is as if we cannot get them into focus. The first is to remember is that this is not unusual; most of us feel like this. Even after many years of reading, there are poems which at first seem to me to be in kind of mist. (p.7)

Richard, in this sense, justifies that poetic language is not clear and easy to comprehend. As readers, we cannot grasp all layers of poetic language and its artistic appeal. Having that said, what poetic language gives is not the meaning in clear form, but the poetic taxonomy. Somewhat similar claim is maintained by Shklovsky as he states, "Poetry is special way of thinking; it is precisely, a way of thinking in images, a way which permits what is generally called "economy of mental effort", a way which makes for "a sensation of the relative ease of the process" (2013, p. 8).

Specialty in poetic language is dominant aspect. According to Jakobson (2002), poetic language has some patterns and forms that need to be taken into account:

Poetry is organized violence committed on ordinary speech. That is, poetry both disturbs and reforms the pattern of routine language. And it does so at three distinct linguistic levels: (i) sound structure (alliteration, assonance, rhyme, meter, etc); (ii) choice of words (metaphor, archaism, varieties of vocabularies, etc); and combination of words (e.g. unusual collocations, inverted word order, marked parallelism, ellipsis. (cited in Pope, p. 89)

Poetic language, according to Jakobson, comprises linguistic, figurative, sonic, and rhetorical features to be special way of expression. As a result, poetic art gives us creative joy as long as we make interactive approach to poetic reading.

**My Papa's Waltz**  
**Theodore Roethke**

The whisky on your breath  
Could make a small boy dizzy  
But I hung on like death:  
Such waltzing was not easy.  
We romped until the pans  
Slid from the kitchen shelf;  
My mother's countenance  
Could not unfrown itself.

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

You beat time on my head  
With palm caked hard by dirt,  
Then waltzed me off to bed  
Still clinging to your shirt.

(From Claus et al (Ed.), *Elements of Literature*)

**Analysis of the Poem**

As noted earlier, poetry is special form of expression which is beyond linguistic expressions. The poem is simple as if it is a song to be sung in informal setting like a



family drama. There does not seem any complex things; it is simple event of family life. A woman is working in the kitchen when her husband and the son waltz. The husband makes a drunken waltz in the room along with his son who does not enjoy the waltz at all. If this poem is put in simple linguistic expression, it is mere drunken dance in intoxication. To be precise, it is a common place event in low middle working class family where the people drink, quarrel, dance, and cry. The poem, however, has poetic and artistic elements in it beyond mere linguistic expression which makes this poem constituent of rhetorical and sonic imports. Besides, the poem has deep meanings if it is considered in terms of its rhetorical and figurative meanings. It can be interpreted as a great lyrical poem, embodying musical elements like rhyme and rhythm, figurative meanings like irony and symbolic, exposing the socio economic setting of lives of the people. Linguistically, we just see the words and meanings as is put in these simple linguistic expressions. That is to say, the linguistic expressions can only treat poetic language partially. They become just tip of the iceberg-- because they may or may not hint the inner structures of the poem. This innate structure of the poem expands condensed and rhetorical meanings and the readers have to explore this through linguistic, rhetorical and sonic comprehension and skill. Linguistically therefore, we can find the meaning of the poem as the following:

**First stanza:** The whiskey smelled from my father's mouth and it made me dizzy but I had to dance with him, which was difficult work.

**Second stanza:** We danced through the kitchen sliding across pans and pots, making commotion, but my mother did not show any anger.

**Third stanza:** My father clasped my hand tightly and forced me to dance and if any mistake occurred, I felt hurt on my ear.

**Fourth stanza:** The father heat me with his dirty hands on the head and I was still clinging to him till the midnight.

### **Rhetorical Interpretation**

The poem is profuse with metaphoric expression connected with simile, extended metaphor and irony. It captures mood of kitchen dance in the midnight between father and son. The waltz is metaphor for family drama posed in conflict, violence, and ambivalent relationship between husband and wife. Furthermore, it also hints about the husband's domination in the family setting. The mood of dance does not give us any sense of joy and fun. Rather, it gives a note of violence and sardonic remark: why the drunken father is such violent in course of dance. Is it because of his intoxication? Or is he doing this just to release pain of work as he belongs to a lower class family gripped by poverty?

As we note further, the dance for the child becomes something like "death" (line 3). He is feeling uneasy because of the whisky and the difficult paces of the waltz. While the father and the son dance there, the mother does not become angry, "unfrown" (line 8). It is quite ironical. The mother is working in the kitchen and the father and son make mess, but she is silent. She does not make any comment even if she feels uncomfortable with the dance. We can also assume that the mess created by the drunken father and son is to be settled by herself. Why is she helpless? Perhaps it is because he is the bread earner in the family. In this sense, the poem brings us the helpless female folks in life who have to bear torture and brutality of the males.

There can be another rhetorical interpretation in the poem. The dance of the husband can be ironic because he is helpless. He has hard times to settle his family life. He has financial troubles and he is mentally irritated. So he drinks and dances to let himself loose from this mental burden. Metaphorically put, the dance is taken as something that can show the poverty stricken context of poor American life at the time of Theodore Roethke.

If we explore other poetic elements in the poem, we will find other rhetorical constituents as well. "With palm caked hard by dirt" (line 14), "still clinging to your shirt"(line 16) express rather unsympathetic and brutal relationship between the father and son. Rhetorically, the father can be taken as the country and the son can be a helpless individual. That is, the American materialistic society is not in the favor of common goods of the people. Or it may also indicate that son is helpless against the wish of his father, like a citizen is helpless against the will of the nation.

### **Sonic Interpretation of the Poem**

This beautiful poem has lyrical form. It is beautifully ordered in set quatrain stanza which have uniformity. Each stanza has alternative rhyme scheme, making it a piece of song, thereby creating compact sonic effect and musicality. And each line is combined with unstressed and stressed syllables as in Iamb line. Besides, the lines have enjambment and end stopped pattern. Each second line has enjambment pattern that is connected in the larger metrical combination. The regular metrical pattern enhances lyrical cadence flow from the beginning to the end of the poem. All words are monosyllabic, and only few are disyllabic. This is effective in creating sonorous musical effect in the poem. Each line is composed of six syllabic words, as if is limerick, a song like poem with humorous note that is sung by young children. In this sense, the child sings a song as the narrator. Because the poem is directly related to the life of the child and it is nicely done in musical form, he memorizes it. Many children have heard such songs or seen such things in the family, they forget many of them in course of times. However, those poems with great sing song quality leave lasting impressions. The same element is available in the poem.

## Conclusion

Poetry is master craft and the most universal form of human expressions. We know all valuable and sacred books are written in verse because of power of expressions and persuasions. The sonic and musical quality of the poem makes it a special form of expression. Moreover, poetic reading and writing are special way of creative pursuits which enrich our delight and intelligibility. At the same time, poetry involves us spontaneously and requires our responses to engage into it and for rewarding literary experiences. All these qualities therefore make it a master craft of universal theme. To conclude, poetic language is not only linguistic expressions, but also rhetorical and sonic elements inherent in it.

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