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Dealing with Damaged Relationships

Damaged relationships, especially those between close family members, are often never repaired. Unfortunately, this damage commonly leads to a situation in which one is left alone to reconcile after the other has passed. Those who have experienced this situation know the difficulty of accepting and forgiving. Lucille Clifton, in her poem "forgiving my father," and Theodore Roethke, in his poem "My Papa's Waltz," explore their own turbulent relationships with their fathers. Both poets comment on the painful nature of these relationships and use writing as a means of reconciliation. The two styles, which include a resentful confrontation and an ambiguous narrative, show the versatility of this process.

The diction Clifton uses demands a response; she shows clearly the pain her father caused her. She uses the metaphor of financial debt to reveal her feelings of being owed, calling on her father to make a payment that is overdue. She calls to her father to reconcile: "today is payday, payday old man" (line 5). She yearns to collect the repayment of the emotional deficit with which she was left. She also uses this metaphor to show how she eventually concedes to her father's passing. She uses an eerie metaphor for her father's coffin, commenting on "debtor's boxes," for which "no accounting will open them up" (22-23). With this metaphor, Clifton reveals that she accepts that her father has moved on, even if the debt has not been collected. Though she is left to endure the anguish left by her father, lamenting over his passing only causes more agony.

Unlike Clifton's address to her father, "My Papa's Waltz" narrates a memory of Roethke's childhood, and he does not directly address his father. The ambiguity of the poem's plot leaves the

reader to deduce its meaning. However, one aspect is clear; Roethke wants to reveal something about his relationship with his father. In order to determine exactly what his meaning is, one must consider the writer's intention. If Roethke intended on simply commenting on the abuse, which could be physical or emotional, he would have no reason to hide his feelings. Because of this more complicated notion of addressing the issue so that he can reconcile, he uses phrases which could be argued as specific instances of abuse or written off as part of a playful game: "We romped until the pans / Slid from the kitchen shelf" and "You beat time on my head / With a palm caked by dirt" (5-6, 13-14). His ambiguity attempts to explain the complex division of emotions that he feels for his father. Clearly, his father's actions have caused discontent for Roethke, but the indirect style in which he reveals this suggests that he wishes to protect the memory of his father. Though it is not actively expressed in the text, Roethke begins a notion of approval of his father with this nod toward protecting his memory. In this manner, Roethke shows a method of reconciliation which contrasts with Clifton's direct style.

Both poets offer a commentary on their emotions using tone and syntax. "forgiving my father" is a carefully constructed and meticulous response to complex emotion. The text is aggressively directed; Clifton speaks personally to her father, calling him "old man" and "old pauper old prisoner, old dead man" (5, 20). The overarching tone of the piece is, at first, pained and unforgiving. However, it should be noted that this is not the only voice that Clifton uses. The poem, and even the title, are notably written in lower case, which gives the author's voice a soft spoken, almost apologetic tone. "My Papa's Waltz" employs a much different approach. In his poem, Roethke presents a narrative that is purposefully ambiguous. He does not make clear whether the plot actually alludes to a dance that he and his father once shared or an instance of abuse. A case could certainly be made for either side. He begins with "The whiskey on your breath / Could make a small boy dizzy," which sets a dark and strident initial tone (1-2). The tone subtly shifts throughout the work to one that is more affectionate and pure. Toward the end, he remarks that after the events of the night, the father "waltzed me off to

bed / Still clinging to [his] shirt" (15-16). This change in the author's portrayal of his father indicates that he, like Clifton, has competing emotions of resentment and compassion.

As we read closer, we find that Clifton uses a similar strategy, as she hints at possible conflicted emotion. While her language is harsh and her attitude toward her father is bitter, she hints that this may not be her sole sentiment. Immediately following a comment about her feeling of being owed, she presents a statement which appears to counter her demands of reconciliation. She admits to her father that "you were the son of a needy father, / the father of a needy son" (12-13). She goes on to concede that "you gave her all you had / which was nothing. You have already given her / all you had" (14-16). These words, especially when read aloud in the reserved, anguished tone that the lower case style proposes, plainly reveal Clifton's alternate emotions. Within these lines, she admits to a justification that she may need if she is to truly forgive her father. Similarly, Roethke uses diction to indicate his willingness to accept his father's flaws by identifying positive aspects of their relationship. He does this primarily by alluding to the father's role as a caretaker. He mentions his father's "palm caked hard by dirt" (14). When considering that the father's work entailed tending to a large greenhouse, the reader surmises that this is not a disapproving remark about the father's hygiene, but rather an admiration of his exhausting labor. Through this remark, Roethke, like Clifton, deftly and skillfully presents himself with justification for his father's behavior. Here, the reader begins to see the hints of forgiveness and the implication of reconciliation

In essence, "forgiving my father" is a personal exploration of resentment with undertones of forgiveness and compassion, while "My Papa's Waltz" is an affectionate narrative with conflicted feelings of animosity and regret. Each poem has a unique delivery, but neither appears to be distinctly less effective than the other in its purpose. Both poets eventually reach a resolution that is at least productive, if not satisfying. To these poets, it seems that merely talking about their problems is enough to elicit improvement. The authors prove to the reader that this type of cognitive process is worth the

pain that it sometimes entails. Though it is often difficult, relationships can be mended, as Roethke and Clifton demonstrate, if one makes a substantial and impartial attempt at forgiveness.

Works Cited

Clifton, Lucille. "forgiving my father." *Making Literature Matter: An Anthology for Readers and Writers*. Ed. John Schilb and John Clifford. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012. 270-71. Print.

Roethke, Theodore. "My Papa's Waltz." *Making Literature Matter: An Anthology for Readers and Writers*. Ed. John Schilb and John Clifford. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012. 273. Print.