To begin with, the word choice in this poem plays an important role. For example, the use of the word “waltz” in both the title of the poem and in the poem itself makes the reader think beyond the dance. The waltz is an old fashioned dance, one that requires a partner. Perhaps the author chose this because it was something the father grew up with, and was the only dance he knew. It also could show the close relationship and trust that is necessary to dance well, without stepping on your partner’s toes or tripping over their feet. It is supposed to be a graceful dance, but instead, the father and son do the best they can. Next, Roethke writes, “we romped until the pans slid from the kitchen shelf.” This word choice helps demonstrate to the reader how the father and son are acting in the kitchen. According to dictionary.com, romp means “to play roughly and energetically.” As we know from the poem, the father is being rough with the son while they are dancing. This word choice fits in nicely with the rest of the poem, as it illustrates an active and energetic, slightly rough dance. Lastly, Roethke writes that “the hand that held my wrist was battered on one knuckle.” Many people believe from this poem that the father is abusive or hits the son. However, when reading closer, the reader can understand that the father has a battered knuckle because of his work, probably outside or some kind of manual labor.

In addition, there are several examples of imagery that help illustrate the poem to the reader. These examples help communicate to the reader certain images that contribute to the experience of the poem. The first example is when the author writes “with a palm caked hard by dirt.” This brings to mind, as mentioned above, that the father probably does some sort of work outside, maybe in landscaping or construction. I can picture that his hands are always so dirty, that no matter how hard the father tries to wash them, the dirt just won’t come off. Another example of imagery is when Roethke writes, “at every step you missed my right ear scraped a buckle.” Because we know that the boy is young, we can assume he is much shorter than his father. This means he is probably only as tall as the father’s waist, or belt buckle. Instead of picturing a dad hitting his son with a belt buckle, as originally thought by some readers, we understand the actual meaning of this phrase. The son is probably standing on his dad’s feet to dance, as most young children do. Or perhaps the son is just dancing on the ground. Either way, he is dancing close with his dad, and trying to keep up.

Finally, Roethke uses a simile, just once, in this poem. In the first stanza, he writes, “but I hung on like death.” This simile is important because it really shows the reader how tightly the little boy is hanging onto his father. He is gripping on so tightly so he does not fall off during their crazy dancing. We can also interpret this more symbolically, as he is clinging onto the memories and fun times he has shared with his dad. If he doesn’t hang on tight, these times may escape his memory and may be in the past forever.

To conclude, now after reading and analyzing Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz,” I understand that it is important to look beyond what’s written on the page. When reading this poem, it is easy to imagine a scene of an alcoholic father, beating or abusing his young son. However, when really taking the time to review the literary tools used of imagery, simile, and word choice, the reader can better understand this special relationship between father and son. I can relate to this poem because when I was younger, my dad and I would have fun moments like this. The best moments are the simple, unplanned ones. I can think back to times where we would be fooling around or wrestling with my brother, as my mom looked on with a glare, since we were being rowdy. “My Papa’s Waltz” helps show the importance of always making time to have fun with family.