

## MEET THEODORE ROETHKE

At 6 foot 2 inches tall and 200 pounds, Theodore Roethke didn't fit most people's idea of a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer. As he once told a job interviewer, "I look like a beer salesman, but I'm a poet."

Despite his size, Roethke wrote delicate, lyrical poems that explored the inner mind. He used many different styles to create love poems, children's verses, and stream-of-consciousness confessions. His deceptively simple lyric poetry inspired a generation of poets to look inward for the spark of creativity.

**His Father's Son** Born in 1908 in Saginaw, Michigan, Roethke was deeply influenced by his father Otto. Working in his father's greenhouse, the young Theodore developed an appreciation of nature, later reflected in the "greenhouse poems" of his collection, *The Lost Son and Other Poems*.

Otto's influence also appears in the poet's ambivalence about father figures. When Theodore was 15 years old, Otto died of cancer, leaving his son with many unresolved feelings. Critics have seen this influence in one of Roethke's best-loved poems, "My Papa's Waltz," which describes a humorous but brutal moment shared by a father and son.

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Any serious writer uses the imagery he saw and heard and felt about him as a youth. This is the

imagery most vivid to him. It becomes symbolic. —  
Theodore Roethke

**Poet and Professor** Early on, Roethke showed promise as a writer. In grade school, he wrote a speech for the Junior Red Cross which was translated into 26 languages. He later studied literature at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Though his family wanted him to become a lawyer, he quit law school after one semester and enrolled in graduate courses in poetry at the University of Michigan and Harvard.

During the Great Depression (1931-1935), Roethke could no longer afford tuition, so he left Harvard to start a career teaching poetry. Over the course of his career, he was favorite professor at a variety of schools including the University of Washington and Pennsylvania State University.

While teaching, Roethke began writing poetry, and almost immediately found success with poems published in *Commonweal* and *The New Republic* in the early 1930s. He published his first volume of verse, *Open House*, in 1941, which poet W. H. Auden called “completely successful.” Subsequent collections earned Roethke a Pulitzer Prize a Bollingen Price and two National Book Awards.

### **Creativity and Madness**

Roethke was influenced by a wide range of poets who shared his lyrical style and mystical themes. Some key figures include John Donne, William Blake, William Wordsworth and William Butler Yeats. Critics also draw parallels with a number of

American poets. Like Emily Dickenson, Roethke often adopted a spare, concentrated style, and he frequently echoed Walt Whitman's celebration of the individual. His works inspired an entire generation of poets, including Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Robert Bly.

While Roethke's professional life thrived, his personal life was frequently troubled. He suffered from frequent depressions for which he was hospitalized. Roethke felt these bouts with mental illness fueled his creativity, allowing him to "reach a new level of reality."

*Theodore Roethke was born in 1908 and died in 1963.*