

Commentary on He Qiaoyi's "Father"

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Abstract:

Singaporean poet He Qiaoyi's poem "Father" portrays a silent yet resilient father figure, metaphorically likened to "a pile of old, dry wood" that endures hardships—depicted through parallel phrases like "throw their cigarette butts at him"—while retaining a "spark" waiting to rekindle. The father's silence, emphasized by words such as "silent" and "solitary," contrasts with his fortitude and optimism ("Spreading sunlight over the earth"). Beneath the plain diction lies profound love and respect for the father. The poem echoes themes in Luo Zhongli's 1980 oil painting *Father* (depicting a weathered yet courageous elder) and Ezra Pound's "Pact" (exploring intergenerational connection), highlighting the father's silent strength as a source of enduring love and potential rekindling of affection.

Keywords: He Qiaoyi; "Father"; father image; metaphor; silence; intertextuality

Father

He Qiaoyi

Like a pile of old, dry wood,
Passersby, with careless hands,
Throw their cigarette butts at him,
Throw the cold wind at him,
Throw their discarded worries at him,
And he remains silent.
Once,
He was a towering green tree,
Scattering hope across the fields,
And a beloved one, with a smile, repaid him,

He stood tall against the wind,
Spreading sunlight over the earth,
His branches full of birdsong.
Then,
He was cut down, gathered,
Scorched by the burning sun,
Transformed into a tall stack of firewood,
With unwavering posture,
Awaiting the moment of his end.
Day by day,
He gazes silently ahead,
Rain or shine, never wavering,
The world around him, bustling,
Yet he grows ever quieter,
As if nothing concerns him.
When did he become this way?
Since when did he sit there,
Silent, solitary,
Eternally sitting there,
Like a pile of old, dry wood.
Yet,
In his heart, a spark remains,
He waits,
For the moment of rekindling. (He, n.d.)

The Singaporean poet He Qiaoyi's poem "Father" presents the silent and strong image of the father. Father's love and the love for father are both difficult to write about. But the poem realistically likened the father to "a pile of old, dry wood". And the silent and solid dry wood can wait "for the moment of rekindling". The father has had to face a variety of difficulties.

The three parallel phrases “throw their cigarette butts at him”, “throw the cold wind at him”, and “throw their discarded worries at him” vividly describe the bad environment the father has to put up with. And the father is like a tree cut down and “gathered, scorched by the burning sun, transformed into a tall stack of firewood”. In the process, the tree, or the father remain silent. The father has great fortitude to experience all these unfair vicissitudes. The father remains optimistic: “Spreading sunlight over the earth”, “Scattering hope across the fields” and “His branches full of birdsong”.

The most prominent characteristic about the father presented in the poem is the father’s silence. The poem has repeatedly mentioned this feature: “silent”, “silently”, “solitary” and “eternally sitting”. But in the heart of the father, there remains a “spark”. And “He waits, /For the moment of rekindling”. There is strong connection between the dry wood and the spark waiting for rekindling. On the whole, the poem uses the metaphor “the dry wood” to indicate the father. And the poem seems to be very plain and simple. However, the reader can feel the deep love and respect for the father between the poetic lines.

This poem reminds me two artistic works where the father is straight presented. One is the Chinese painter Luo Zhongli’s oil painting *Father* painted and published in 1980, just after the cultural revolution in China. All the painting is filled with an old man’s face full of wrinkles gazing straight. The old man seems to have weathered all and still kept great courage and fortitude. The painting has greatly moved the whole nation right after the disaster. The recovering spirit is embodied in the simple face. The father in the painting is just like the father in the poem who is like a pile of ole wood. Another artistic work is Ezra Pound’s poem “Pact”. In the poem, the adult poet realizes that Walt Whitman and he himself both come from the same

root, the same “sap”, although as a child, he often detests Walt Whitman. The cultural heritage between Whitman and himself is presented like the relationship between father and son. The poem says: It was you that broke the new wood, /Now is a time for carving. /We have one sap and one root. /Let there be commerce between us. In He Qiaoyi’s poem, there is also respect and love for the father, although the cognitive process of the son for the father is not directly described in the poem. Nevertheless, the silent, solitary and wood-like father, with his optimistic spirit, awaits for all, including perhaps the child’s re-evaluation and deep understanding, and also, love. The father’s silent love can kindle and rekindle the child’s love for the whole world. All these ideas are hidden in the plain diction of the poem.

References

He, Q. Y. (n.d.). “Father” [Unpublished poem].