

# **Presenting the Past: An Analysis of Robert Kroetsch's “Birthday” and “I Am Getting Old Now”**

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Robert Kroetsch occupies an illustrious position in the gallery of the twentieth century Canadian literature. He is a poet, novelist, editor and teacher, all rolled into one. He is renowned for his adept use of postmodern techniques in his writings. His poems “Birthday: June 26, 1983” and “I Am Getting Old Now” spins around the mother-son relationship. The presence of the poet who is in his childhood is captured in both the poems (visibly or invisibly) and his intimate bond with his mother is clearly portrayed. But these poems differ in the technique, the poet has used to portray his childhood and the image of his mother. In “Birthday” it is framed in the form of a photograph while in the poem “I Am Getting Old Now”, it is portrayed in the shape of a dream. Both the poems deal with the evolution of time and its effect on the poet by bringing in the contrasting images of his childhood and agility. The poet who has grown older than his mother also occupies a significant place in both the poems. Thus, many similarities can be traced between both the verses and most significant among them is the representation of time, i.e., the past and the present. The paper therefore strives to explore the significance of time in these select poems, focusing on how ‘past’ is represented in relation with the present in both the texts.

Robert Kroetsch is regarded as a stalwart figure in Canadian literature. His poems are innovative in their themes and techniques. He has written diverse experimental poems and is positioned gallantly in the seat of the avant-garde poets of the twentieth century. Digging into the past appears as a recurring imagery in most of his writings which are most often interlaced with the notions of myth and memory. The “Introduction” to *Canadian Voices* states that: “The most successful poet who effectively converted postmodern attitudes into poetry is Robert Kroetsch. Emphasizing his mistrust of fixity and reaching out into the archaeological past, Kroetsch creates a poetry of discontinuities within history and personal imagination” (Kudchedkar and Jameela 8). His two poems “Birthday” and “I Am Getting Old Now”, written on a personal note, peep into the past. The “Bio-critical Notes on the Poets” appended in *Canadian Voices* suggest that these poems “deal with a personal history that is inextricably linked into a holistic vision of reality...the

photograph of himself and his mother functions as a heuristic device that sets up spatial limits while breaking down the finiteness of geography: it helps the poet locate himself in a familial territory” (Kudchedkar and Jameela 287).

His poem “Birthday: June 26, 1983” describes a snapshot. It was the fifty sixth birthday of the poet and he mimics the framed snapshot of his mother. In the photograph, his mother is “standing beside an empty chair” (Kroetsch, “Birthday” 179), against the wall of his house, made of woods. He also explains that a window is present on the back of the chair, to her right. When the photograph is clicked, the poet wasn’t born. In the poem the poet assumes that “I am in the house, out of sight, hiding, / so that she won’t remember I am not yet / born” (Kroetsch, “Birthday” 180). The poet holds the snapshot in his hands and he says that he rehearses his mother in the poem. Thus the poem can be considered as reminiscence about the past. The photograph represents a freezed state of a past moment. The poem knots the past with the present. He narrates how the photograph alludes the future, thereby connecting it to the present. When the photograph is shot, more than fifty six years ago when his mother was a young lady. The poet was not born and hence she is not even a mother at all. But the poet adeptly traces his presence. He believes himself to be in the yard. But the window on her back reflected only the trees. The window and the photograph are here synonymous with each other. Both reflect the past but an invisible future lurks in them.

The poet assumes that his mother herself carries hints about him. She, in herself holds the images of the poet unknowingly. Hence, the poet is omnipresent but invisible. Kroetsch here evokes the idea of trace which implies a sort of presence of the absent. The hints of the Derridean notion of the metaphysics of presence which involves the “search for a core meaning, in its privileging of presence and rejection of absence and difference” (Nayar 42) can also be traced from the poem. The invisible child (poet) in the photograph is an absent presence, “because it shows something that is not here, but makes us alert to the fact that something is not here” (Nayar 42). Thus the poem conveys the inevitable link between past and present. In the poem, the poet is said to be rehearsing his mother. He is seated in the chair. His impending future also may be invisibly present around him. The mother in the poem is standing still. The entire scenery is static. But the invisible poet who is her futuristic son is believed to be playing out in the yard, which is suggestive of an invisible motion. Here the past is not still. It has evolved with the poet to his present. Thus the poem illuminates the intricate connection between past and present.

The other poem “I Am Getting Old Now” also presents the poet’s memories about his mother. Here, the place of photograph in the poem is replaced by a dream of the poet. The poet begins the poem by the statement: “I’m getting old now, I can tell” (Kroetsch, “I am” 180). He dreams a lot about his mother. In the last dream, both the poet and his mother were in the garden behind their house. The poet first assumes that he is playing in the pea vines. But later rejects this assumption and says that he was kneeling to pick peas. His mother collected the peas in her apron. According to Kroetsch, both were happy but static. He later emphasizes that his mother is standing still watching him grow “like a bad weed” (Kroetsch, “I am” 180). The poet then changes the tone of the poem and engages in a philosophic rumination about aging and death. He says he is not happy about his agility. He is calm and serene. He doesn’t consider death as a foe. Death to the poet was like a friend who is almost forgotten but remembers then again. Death though invisible is an inevitable truth which is always present with living beings. It represents a form of trace, where if life is the core, death is a sort of essence. The present life of the poet is therefore a sign which will be completed by death, which according to Derridean notion can be regarded as an ‘absent presence’. May be it is because of the philosophical moorings, that poet accepts the inevitability of the death calmly, without being scared of it like seeing an enemy. The poet concludes the poem by repeating that “In my dream, / last night, I was playing in the garden” (Kroetsch, “I am” 181).

The poem intertwines the notions of age, time and death. The poet’s mother who silently watches him growing can be regarded as a metaphor of time that witnesses everything. In one sense, it was his dream about his mother that persuades him to ruminate about his age and death. In the other sense it was his unconscious thought about his mother that takes the shape of dreams that subsequently leads to his ruminations. The poem also oscillates between different time frames- the past and the present. This again implies the significance of time in the poem.

In the poem, the poet recollects his dream similar to his collection of peas. The poet dreams about his past and both his mother and the poet are still in his dream. But he suggests that though everything looks motionless, the poet’s age is not in a freezed state. He is growing and his mother is watching him. So even when everything appears unchanged, there is something that is changing every day. All the activities appear in a stationary state in the dream, which the poet emphasizes by adding that he is not playing but kneeling to pick peas. But the ‘growing’ poet and the ‘watching’ mother implies invisible motions. The dream is something that happened in his sleep and it has waded off when he is awake; and hence is a matter of the past. The mother and the

poet's childhood which appears in the poet's dream is again another matter of the past. But it is these stuffs about the past that persuade him to ponder about his age in the present situation.

The past, here, is represented by the dream of the poet which can be hazy and so it depends on his recollection. The hazy dream here may be a symbol of the evading memory of the old poet. He is recollecting the pieces of memory like the peas. Fiona McMahon notes: "Thanks to the underlying archival context of Kroetsch's writing, the poem functions as a site of collection or recollection partaking in an effort to reveal an imaginative site" (73-82). The dream may be a sort of jigsaw puzzle. It is not sure whether the poet has forgotten any fragment of the dream or replaced it with a new one. The poet's correction that he is kneeling to pick the peas rather than playing in the garden, as he mentioned at first, can be considered as such a remark from the poet's hazy memory. The poem thus resembles a journey from past to present, but simultaneously strengthens the bond between the two.

The "Introduction" to *Canadian Voices* states: "Kroetsch's 'Birthday' and 'I Am Getting Old Now' dwell on the mother-son relationship..." (22). The early death of Kroetsch's mother, during his childhood seems to have affected him a lot. As his mother died young, she appears as young in his thoughts, dream and in the photograph. She remains young forever in his memories. May be this is the reason why she appears standing, freezed in both the poems. The two poems frame an image of the past; one in the form of a photograph and the other as a slice of dream. Both these images of the past are narrated in the form of a story. The poet also plays with the concepts of trace and absence in both his poems. In his essay "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues", Kroetsch says: "...Where I had learned the idea of absence, I was beginning to learn the idea of trace. There is always something left behind. That is the essential paradox..." (2). In both the photographs and the dream, everything is in a static state. The playing poet in the poem "Birthday" and the growing poet in the poem "I Am Getting Old Now" are invisible. The poet is a child in the photograph and in the dream; only difference is that in the poem "Birthday", he is invisible but in the other poem he is visible. But both the poems do not permanently dwell in the past - it also represents the present, where the poet had grown older than his mother (present in the dream and in the photograph). The poet shows the essence of past in his life. T.S Eliot calls this as "historical sense" in his "Tradition and Individual Talent", which is a sense perception "not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (42-53). Both the poem depict how the 'past' has influenced the poet in his present thoughts, actions and imagination, thereby forging an inextricable link between the past and the present.

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