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July 8, 2009

### **Power and Failure in Theodore Roethke's "Child on Top of a Greenhouse"**

Theodore Roethke's "Child on Top of a Greenhouse" could be understood in many different ways. It could be seen as an adventurous child out to find greater excitement by climbing on top of a greenhouse. One could see it as a mischievous child out to stir up the souls of nervous adults by standing on a greenhouse. Roethke uses all of these to show that there is only a thin line between power and failure.

In lines 1-2, Roethke describes the child's initial experience of being on the glass roof of the greenhouse : "The wind billowing out the seat of my britches/My feet crackling splinters of glass and dried putty" (1-2). Although many adults would feel frightened, the child feels a sense of accomplishment. The fact that the wind is blowing too hard or a small slip could send the child crashing through a glass roof has not occurred to the child. Being up there has brought the child into a new world. It is the child's world. No one controls it but the child. The child's power is on glass, which could crack easily and turn into his failure. It would bring him out of his world and back down to earth where he has no control. Everything is controlled by adults. He has no voice.

The persona uses images in line 4 that may stir up fear in the adults looking up to the child. : "Up through streaked glass, flashing with sunlight". At first the reader may see this as only a description of the glass holding up the child, but it also shows danger. The

glass being streaked would make it harder to see small cracks or thin areas of glass. The sunlight flashing may be blinding to a person looking up. All these become dangers.

From lines 5-6, the child may be realizing that failure may be closer than he expects : “A few white clouds all rushing eastward/ A line of elms plunging and tossing like horses” (5-6). Using personification, the persona describes how even the chrysanthemums realize that the child should not be on the roof. The persona also uses very strong verbs to describe the child’s surroundings. He uses words like “rushing” instead of moving, “plunging” instead of diving, and “tossing” instead of swaying. He intensifies the mood by using these words. It makes the reader aware of danger and enhances nervousness.

Even though it is a rising fear in lines 5-6, line 7 lets the reader know that the child still feels powerful: “And everyone, everyone pointing up and shouting”. The emphasis on the word “everyone” makes the reader know the child enjoys the attention. The shouting may encourage the child, making him feel powerful. It makes him forget that his failure may only be a thin glass line away. The child enjoys the shouting and attention. It empowers him.

Theodore Roethke’s “Child on Top of a Greenhouse” represents a thin line between power and failure. The child standing on the roof enters his own world and is in total control. He becomes aware of the failure that could come by him falling through the glass, but it is pushed away from his mind when he hears the shouting of adults. He may be so far up that he can not hear what they are saying and only hears what seems to be shouts of encouragement. It could also be the fact that no one can make him come back

down, but the child feels empowered. He has power on that roof, and even though failing is an option, the child enjoys the power he has gained.