

Breaking clod:
hierarchical
transformation in
pope's an essay on
man



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Pope's "An Essay on Man" can be read as a self-conscious consideration of the idea of formal systems, both at the level of the poem and of the world. Pope moves philosophically from the lowest- to the highest-ranked levels of being and back, charting these hierarchies through a series of rhymed iambic pentameter couplets. While this structure is not in itself noteworthy, as it is a common phenomenon in Pope's work, it gains significance when one considers it in the context of the poem's subject matter. The concept of hierarchy, both as a cause of limitation and as praise of man's place in the world, is brought into focus as Pope considers the confines of these hierarchies, and the ways in which a lower and a higher level might merge. For example, with the question "The lamb thy riot dooms to bleed to-day, / Had he thy Reason, would he skip and play?", Pope highlights the limited mental world of the lamb, and suggests that the limitation may, in this case, be purposeful. Because of man's brutality, Pope argues, the lamb is better off in a state of ignorance; in this way, he will not have to suffer the presentiment of death. Such passages, Nuttall suggests, argue that "Man, so limited [to a particular state,] would never know that he was limited" (Nuttall 54), and as such raise the issues of hierarchy and knowledge within the poem. By questioning the boundaries between lamb and man, between man and God, and so on, Pope attempts to understand the essence of particular hierarchies, as well as the possible transformation of one thing into the next. Far from espousing a quietist viewpoint, Pope seeks to understand the very nature of the world's distinctions, to juxtapose elements of different levels against each other and see what equation will result. His use of the couplet, rather than a list or other form, allows chiasmus to occur throughout the poem, with room for comparison or contrast of elements in every set of

<https://assignbuster.com/breaking-clod-hierarchical-transformation-in-popes-an-essay-on-man/>

rhymes. Through the placement and grammatical linking of each of the four parts of the couplet, Pope posits distinctions between concepts at the very level of the line. Through the use of poetic enactment, he is able to envision the transformation of one being into the next, to move a creature from the lowest to the highest level of society through words. It is this poetic enactment, Pope suggests, this particular structuring and breaking of the line, which allows for dramatic departures from the hierarchies the world traditionally holds. Through describing and enacting transformations in the hierarchy of things, Pope utilizes his own metaphor of concentric circles (“As the small pebble stirs the peaceful lake;/The centre mov’d, a circle strait succeeds”), examining hierarchies at the smallest, most reduced level of the line in the hope that they will radiate out into the world of the poem. Pope’s consistent usage of the iambic pentameter couplet has been often discussed, with critics sometimes decrying the rigidity and formality this verse form imposes. Whether or not the couplet does represent a particular ideology (a question Hunter’s “Form as Meaning” discusses), it is clear that its formal requirements must be carefully considered by the poet composing in such relatively strict verse. As Hunter notes in “Form as Meaning,” “Absolute and unbending loyalties or essential values for the heroic couplet as a verse form may be impossible to establish, but expectations, patterns, leanings, tendencies, and appropriate formal associations can all be culturally described” (Hunter 259). Because of the tradition arising from such a recognizable form, it is inevitable that a “canon” of heroic-couplet poems have come into being, all with similar concerns as to the form’s particular constraints. With little leeway metrically and even less in rhyme, the poet must choose those elements strategically, in order that he might both hold

<https://assignbuster.com/breaking-clod-hierarchical-transformation-in-popes-an-essay-on-man/>

to the requirements of the heroic couplet and have the freedom for the expression he desires. While such strategy clearly exists in other forms, such as the sonnet, the heroic couplet is unusual, in that it has both open and closed elements. There is no set line length, fourteen or otherwise, which offers the poet a prescribed place to draw the poem to a close. Because of this dichotomy – a strict limitation in rhyme and meter at the level of the pair, and the absence of any length limitation but that of the poet's capacities – the heroic-couplet poem requires that the poet have both the ability to work within tightly-prescribed limits and the consideration to build these limited pairs into a self-regulated, self-sized whole. The form offers neither the freedom of vers libre nor the comfortable rules of a set-length poem; thus, the poet must define the balance of regulation and freedom himself. Because of this open-closed dichotomy, the form seems already suited to a self-conscious questioning of itself. As the form is, from the very beginning, obvious to the reader, it is perhaps tempting for a writer to foreground this formal obviousness when constructing a poem of this kind. Yet Pope, in writing "An Essay on Man," takes this questioning a step farther, in that he makes the concept of boundaries, the open and closed nature of hierarchies, into the very subject of his poem. Hunter calls Pope "a conscious worker in the couplet tradition" (Hunter 266); as such, it seems he has transferred his knowledge of that tradition's limitations into the questioning of the world's. The poem's form supports this questioning, in that it allows for two sets of pairs to be placed next to each other – if nothing else, to be displayed in the space of the poem as they would not normally be in the world. Hunter argues that Pope is not only able to display his terms through this poetic form, but is in fact able to suggest a sense of causality: "<https://assignbuster.com/breaking-clod-hierarchical-transformation-in-popes-an-essay-on-man/>

Each couplet involves a structure of four fundamental units divided rhetorically by a caesura and syntactically by some crucial grammatical relationship that implies cause/effect..." (Hunter 267). In this way, Hunter argues, the four "fundamental units" are both separated, in the sense that the caesura and the punctuation divide them, and are brought together, in that a "crucial grammatical relationship" links their terms. Through such a statement, Hunter seems to assert not only that the form itself is conducive to claims of causality and comparison, but also that Pope's particular use of the English grammar causes them to be further linked. For example, in Epistle I, the lines "When the dull Ox, why now he breaks the clod,/ Is now a victim, and now Egypt's God" (l., 63-4) not only propose a strict progression of events, but actually move the image of the ox through a series of philosophical and mythological transformations. In part one (first half of the first line), the ox is simply "dull" and presumably motionless; though there is the time marker "when" given, there is no verb at all, and one is able to characterize the ox only through the adjective "dull". This initial characterization marks perhaps the least dramatic of a series of transformations, in which the reader's expectations will be radically shifted within the space of the two lines. In part two, for example (the second half of the first line), the characterization has become dramatic and full of motion – not only through the interjection "why," which suggests surprise as well as conjunction, but also through the straightforward word order, the strong action verb "breaks" and the extremely present-tense adverb "now". Through this adverb, Pope moves the line from describing an instance, "when," to a particular, contemporaneous moment in time, "now." The "now" forces the reader to reconsider the ox, which was first only

<https://assignbuster.com/breaking-clod-hierarchical-transformation-in-popes-an-essay-on-man/>

characterized as “dull,” as a creature who makes strong movements in the present time. The presence and immediacy of the stresses also changes, from two in the first half-line to three in the second, and from a vague or secondary stress in the first (perhaps on “When” and “dull”) to a very articulated and regular sense of stress in the second (strong stress on “now,” “breaks,” and “clod”). The meter has moved from uncertain and partially stressed in the first to completely regular in the second, reflecting not only the completion of an iambic pentameter line, but more significantly, the difference in metrical description of the first two parts. One might even perhaps consider the significance of “breaks” in the second half-line; though used to refer to the ox, it is possible that it references the poet as well, and the “breaking” occurs, not only of the clod, but of the line as well. If this theory of enacted metaphor is continued, it might suggest that the poet himself is implicitly being compared to the ox – dull in the first half-line, and then, as the breakage and turning of the line occurs, transformed into an active, transformative being. Indeed, as the Latin *versus* derives from the turning of the plow, this self-reflexive metaphor has a basis in the language itself. The line breaks right after “now he breaks the clod,” enacting what may have been first considered simply descriptive terms. Whether or not this metaphor is borne out by the reader’s ear, it does at least seem that Pope transforms the figure of the ox from a state of “dull” stasis into a more exciting, consequential one, as he goes through the action of breaking. The placement of these two terms, “part one” and “part two,” directly beside one another, and separated by a comma, allow them to be considered as equivalencies, not necessarily equal terms, but terms whose equality comes, through their placement, into question. Through reading the two terms, one

<https://assignbuster.com/breaking-clod-hierarchical-transformation-in-popes-an-essay-on-man/>

after the other, one is struck by the dramatic movement from one to the other state. Similarly, in terms three and four, an equally stark transformation takes place. Both terms include, through parallelism, the being verb “ is”; both also contain the word “ now” and the sense that the ox is being renamed. Because of the similarities in structure between the two parts, one might initially assume that the sharp distinction of parts one and two is not here taking place. The meter also does remain relatively regular and iambic, rather than moving from less to more regular as in parts one and two. However, the parallelism of parts three and four allows a different sort of transformation to take place: one based not on a difference of sentence structure, but rather on the violence of the animal renamed. The phrase is not structured around the difference between the “ dull” ox and the ox breaking clod, but rather around the opposition between the ox’s status as a “ victim” and that of “ Egypt’s God”. The opposition is as dramatic as can be imagined, and may be said to parallel, in more drastic terms, that of the first two parts. The ox as victim is one who has been beaten, who is inactive because of a stronger force; the ox as Egypt’s God is one who has triumphed, has won over the hearts and minds of the people and attained the status of a deity. Taken by themselves, these two phrases force the reader to consider a simple opposition between the two; taken together, though, they force the reader to make a philosophical and chronological link between the two. Pope’s use of the word “ now” twice in this line creates a sense not only of contemporaneousness and spontaneity – “ now” this happens, and “ now” this happens, as though the author could not get down the words fast enough – but also a sense that the author is all-powerful, capable of making the impossible real through the use of his pen. The use of <https://assignbuster.com/breaking-clod-hierarchical-transformation-in-popes-an-essay-on-man/>

the double “ now” suggests that the author has the power to create the ox anew, perhaps not in physical reality, but at least in the minds of the perceived audience. It seems either that the ox, perhaps through his breaking of the clod, has actually changed from a victim to a deity, or that the author, with his use of the adverb marking time, has the ability to create it so. The perception of the animal changes as Pope changes from part three to four; perhaps a change in perception is all that is necessary to re-envision the ox as a god. Through the use of “ now,” Pope allows the reader to follow along as he makes this change; indeed, through the proximity of parts three and four, Pope suggests that almost no time is needed for the change to occur. In addition, because this line involves only the verb “ is,” the reader is invited to contrast it with the previous line, in which an action verb occurs. There is, Pope suggests, an analogy-based relationship between the dull ox and the ox as Egypt’s God, and alternately between the ox breaking clod and the victim. Though such relationship is not made explicit, it seems that, based on the use of enactment before, Pope implies that the action is itself transformative, that it is the breaking of clod which allows the ox to become more grand. To follow the enactment metaphor, this suggests that it is the work of the poet itself which causes change, the writing of “ now” and “ now” again which forces the reader to consider concepts in a new way. The ox is not physically recreated in three different guises; it is rather the lines of the poet which, through juxtaposition, force such recreation to occur. Indeed, as the ox moves from being “ dull” to “ breaking clod,” to a “ victim” to “ Egypt’s God,” it seems it is undergoing a parallel transformation in both lines. The ox moves from a dull, passive object to an active force, and from a victim, one of the lowest states in society, to one of the highest, as Egypt’s

<https://assignbuster.com/breaking-clod-hierarchical-transformation-in-popes-an-essay-on-man/>

God. This quick, seemingly miraculous transformation becomes believable if created poetically by the author himself; if the reader's perception is made to shift with each clause the author makes after "now." Without necessarily proposing hierarchies, then, Pope suggests them implicitly through the very pairing of the images he selects. An apparently simple couplet, when examined, expands to reveal the author's insistence on the transformative properties of his own hand. Though the terms themselves may not be of particular importance, they help to reveal the consideration of the juxtaposing process itself, and thus enter into importance as terms of a logical argument. For instance, Hunter argues that "the closed couplet tends to privilege the balancing itself – the preservation and acceptance of difference rather than a working out of modification or compromise" (Hunter 266) and Nuttall, in Pope's *Essay on Man*, suggests that "it is best to speak of the elements of the line as positions, which may be variously occupied" (Nuttall 21). In considering the verse, then, it seems that explicit commentary on Pope's part may not be necessary for elements to be compared. The form itself seems a kind of argument, whose logic allows for pairs of premises and terms. When these premises are read more closely, it seems evident that they suggest a kind of transformation that cannot occur in reality. The heroic couplet, it seems, acts as a kind of Gedankenexperiment in which wildly different terms may be worked out to their own conclusions. As Sissela Box says of Pope's metaphor of concentric circles, "It is a metaphor long used to urge us to stretch our concern outward from the narrowest personal confines toward the needs of outsiders, strangers, all of humanity" (Nussbam 39); Pope's four-part juxtaposition seems to be doing much the same work, though considering humanity's

<https://assignbuster.com/breaking-clod-hierarchical-transformation-in-popes-an-essay-on-man/>

essences more than its needs. Through comparison by the written word, the narrow concept of a “dull ox” may be quickly transformed into grandeur, and then back into dejection again. Through the writing of verse, the “breaking” of the line as well as the ox’s clod, the poet may enact such hierarchical transformations, thus envisioning a broadening and a transforming of the (at least poetic) world.