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Pope's Uses of Order

Alexander Pope's works reflect three aspects of the order or hierarchy he sees in the universe. These aspects are order in poetry, in Nature, and in society. Order in poetry refers to the hierarchy of poetical forms and devices that exist; order in Nature relates to the great Chain of Being in which all things in Nature exist on graduated levels of importance; and order in society refers to the hierarchy of social values in which certain things are necessarily of more value than others. One approach to understanding The Dunciad, perhaps Pope's most complex work, is through defining his uses of order with examples from An Essay on Man for poetical order, An Essay on Criticism for order in Nature, and Rape of the Lock for social order. The Dunciad's meaning unfolds through examining his uses of order as defined in these poems.

Pope uses order in poetry on two levels. First, there is a hierarchy in poetical forms. Less poetic skill is needed to write a pastoral than an epic. His career demonstrates this concept of hierarchy. Beginning with the Pastorals, he graduates to the mock heroic form in Rape of the Lock, and ultimately to the epic form in The Dunciad. The second level of poetry's order applies to the mechanical construction of poems. As seen in Pope's poetry, order in a poem is the symmetrical development

of ideas expressed in couplets.

An Essay on Man reflects Pope's definition of order in a poem. In An Essay on Criticism, he suggests that poets should try to find a means of expression that adds corresponding meaning to the idea expressed:

true Expression, like th' unchanging Sun,  
Clears, and improves whate'er it shines upon,  
It gilds all Objects, but it alters none.<sup>1</sup>

By using paradoxes to achieve symmetry within couplets in An Essay on Man, he establishes the twofold state of Man's nature. In the introduction to Alexander Pope: Selected Poetry and Prose, William K. Wimsatt, Jr. states that "Two basic paradoxes run through the Essay . . . that humanity is both a very important and a very trivial thing; that we know a lot, but that we know very little."<sup>2</sup> Pope compresses the paradoxes into single couplets to attain maximum contrast in Epistle II. Man is

Created half to rise, and half to fall;  
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;  
Sole judge of Truth, in endless Error hurl'd:  
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!<sup>3</sup>

Pope parallels the idea that Man is "Created half to rise" and "Great lord of all things" with the idea that he is also created "half to fall" and "a prey to all." In a similar manner, he builds the paradox in the second couplet. Man

is "Sole judge of Truth" and "glory;" he lives in "endless Error" and is the "jest, and riddle of the world!" In four lines he develops Man's image as important, "Great lord," yet trivial, "a prey to all," knowledgeable, "Sole judge of Truth," but living in error, "jest, and riddle of the world!" Through the symmetrical development of these ideas within the couplets, he illuminates the paradox in Man himself.

An Essay on Criticism conveys Pope's idea of order in Nature. In An Essay on Man, he directly states that order in Nature is "the great chain, that draws all to agree" (I, l. 33). God created the Chain of Being in creating the world. In this essay, Pope establishes the hierarchy in Nature. Everything is "in exact proportion to the state . . . Each beast, each insect, happy in its own" (I, ll. 183, 186). Since "'Whatever IS in Nature, is RIGHT'" (I, l. 294), he uses this order in Nature to create the norm, the example poets and critics should follow in their art in Criticism. Critic John A. Jones states that "The ideal toward which everything in the Essay points is one of wholeness and corporateness. . . ."4

Pope felt that most ancient poets were able to discover and conform to Nature's order. Thus, the rules they set in art's creation should be followed by neoclassic artists. "Those RULES of old discover'd, not devis'd,/ Are Nature still, but Nature Methodiz'd . . ." (ll. 88-9). Good poetry fits into Nature's order, which may explain classic poetry's survival. Poets who fail to restrain themselves in Nature's order "Strain out the last, dull droppings of their Sense,/ And Rhyme with all

the Rage of Impotence!" (ll. 608-9). Poets who use "dull droppings of their sense" are not in harmony with art. The examples of bad poets and critics in the essay reflect corruption of order and support Pope's concept of Nature's hierarchy as the constant, unchanging guide to Man's conduct.

Rape of the Lock exemplifies a third aspect of order that Pope uses. Social order refers to the hierarchy of values in society and is an integral part of Nature's order. He satirizes lack of social order in the detailed account of Belinda's typical day. The opening lines set the disorder that will appear in the poem's context: "What mighty Contests rise from trivial Things. . . ." <sup>5</sup> Canto I relates some of the things which concern fair coquettes and gentlemen. Pope refers to their activities as "This erring Mortals Levity may call . . ." but they are "blind to Truth . . ." (I, ll. 103-4), blind to the hierarchy of values in society. He uses the satiric form to support their blindness and to imply that social order is the opposite of what occurs in Rape. In Belinda's society, "sleepless Lovers, just at Twelve, awake . . ." (I, l. 16), and "The hungry Judges soon the Sentence sign, / And Wretches hang that Jury-men may Dine" (III, ll. 22-3). Through satire, Pope says that in an orderly society, people would not lounge in bed all morning, nor would justice depend on the selfish whims of judges and jurymen. When the Baron cuts Belinda's lock, Pope observes that "Not louder Shrieks to pitying Heav'n are cast, / When husbands or when Lap-dogs breathe their last . . ." (III, ll. 157-58). Here he points out the misplaced

values in her society that equates dying husbands with dying pets or hair that has been cut. He further emphasizes the corrupted values by capitalizing "Lap-dogs" but not "husbands." Continuing examples of what order is not, he warns of an impending disaster for Belinda in Canto II. The disaster might "stain her Honour, or her new Brocade . . ." (II, l. 107), cause her to "Forget her Pray'rs, or miss a Masquerade,/ Or lose her Heart, or Necklace . . ." (II, ll. 108-9). In the hierarchy of values, honor would be on a higher level than a stained dress, forgotten prayers be of greater consequence than a missed masquerade, and a lost heart be more sorrowful than a lost necklace.

The card game between Belinda and the Baron is war and the height of disorder. Critic Donald B. Clark says "The very use of the epic form--ceremonious, grand, and dignified--to discuss a trivial or unworthy subject set [sic] up an ironic contrast . . ." <sup>6</sup> by which Pope establishes the discrepancies between order in society and Belinda's world. After spending many hours dressing, Belinda "now whom thirst of fame invites,/ Burns to encounter two adventurous Knights . . ." (III, ll. 25-6) in the card game. The game is brought to the height of an epic battle. In an orderly society, a card game would not exceed its proper limits of simple entertainment. Clarissa points out the poem's corruption of social order in her speech:

Say, why are Beauties prais'd and honour'd most,  
The wise Man's Passion, and the vain Man's Toast?  
Why deck'd with all that Land and Sea afford,

Why Angels call'd and Angel-like ador'd  
Why round our coaches crowd the white-glov'd Beaus,  
Why bows the Side-box from its inmost Rows?  
How vain are all these Glories, all our Pains,  
Unless good Sense preserve what Beauty gains:

V, ll. 9-16.

Clarissa speaks of the social vanities in Belinda's world, and how inconsequential are the lives not governed by good sense. Here Pope equates good sense with the ability to recognize the existence of order, the hierarchy of values, and to perceive the corruption of that order. In satirizing her world, he conveys his disfavor of a society in which trivia assumes epic grandeur. He gives Belinda, a coquette, a tragic hero's position. He takes the card game out of its proper perspective and places it in epic battle's realm. This must be his comment on the need for order in society, order in which common sense upholds the hierarchy of values.

Pope brings all three aspects of order into view in The Dunciad. Critic Maynard Mack states that the poem's theme is "the dissolution of literary and human values in the present."<sup>7</sup> In the poem's plot, the reign of Dullness appoints a bad poet as ~~the~~ the realm's king and poet laureate. Book II celebrates the king's appointment with dunces (booksellers, critics, patrons, and poets) participating in foolish games. In Book III, the Goddess gives the king a vision in which he travels to the Underworld and sees the past, present, and future reign of Dullness.

According to the vision he had, Book IV fulfills the prophecies, and as critic Austin Warren observes, "civilization dies."<sup>8</sup> The meaning of the work's events is apparent in examining Pope's uses of order as previously defined.

For Pope, order in poetry implies some attention to rules and the symmetrical development of ideas. Dullness reigns over poetry because the poets do not strive for such order. The poet king "Plung'd for his sense, but found no bottom there,/ Yet wrote and flounder'd on, in mere despair."<sup>9</sup> These lines suggest that he wanders aimlessly through his thoughts and writes without direction, without any governing rules. If observed, rules in good writing, the hierarchy of poetical forms, and exactness in expression can help poets achieve order in poetry. Throughout The Dunciad, Pope comments on the quality of literature, void of this order, that appeals to the dunces. In literature, the Goddess

sees a Mob of Metaphors advance,  
Pleas'd with the madness of the mazy dance;  
How Tragedy and Comedy embrace;  
How Farce and Epic get a jumbled race

I, ll. 67-70.

Unobserved rules and rejection of hierarchy corrupt poetic order when the means of expression become a "mazy dance," when tragedy envelops comedy, and when farces and epics become confused in a "jumbled race." Tragedy would be above comedy and epics would be above farces in the hierarchy of poems. Without a knowledge of Pope's attitude toward order in poetry, the reader might over-

look the force of his satire in this instance.

The Goddess takes the king to her ethereal realm. Here, she shows him her treasured works which are "Prose swell'd to verse, verse loit'ring into prose . . ." (I, l. 274); they "leave all memory of sense behing . . ." (I, l. 276). As in Rape, Pope relates "sense" to the hierarchy of values in this example. The dunces are undermining the value of art. Satirizing literature's degradation as a result of corrupted order in poetry is one part of his "concentrated attack . . . on abuses against knowledge."<sup>10</sup> He does not sympathize with those writers who practice their art without the necessary knowledge or skill; they must join the other dunces in the world.

The Dunciad also reflects corruption of Nature's order. As defined in An Essay on Man, order in Nature in "the great chain, that draws all to agree" (I, l. 33). The Dunciad is an imaginary realm in which Dullness and dunces corrupt Nature's order. The impact of the poem's meaning is evident in the construction of disorder in the dunces' ignorance and folly. If there is no order in Nature, if the Chain of Being does not unite all things in Nature's hierarchy, chaos is all that may exist. As Dullness replaces order, "Time himself stands still at her command,/ Realms shift their place, and Ocean turns to land" (I, ll. 71-2). Pope expresses disapproval of the state of affairs described in the work in his definition of the order in Nature which brings all things to exist harmoniously. In dullness, anarchy rules. When the king visits the Underworld and envisions the new reign of Dullness, he sees "The forests dance, the rivers

upward rise,/ Whales sport in woods, and dolphins in the skies . . ." (III, ll. 245-46). This is the picture of the chaos in Nature which replaces harmony. The king also sees the ultimate fate of a world cast into disorder: "Hell rises, Heav'n descends, and dance on Earth . . . 'Till one wide conflagration swallows all" (III, ll. 237, 240). The universal system falls when even a small part in the chain is broken. Since order in Nature is the guide to Man's conduct, Man has no example to follow when the hierarchy is broken. Thus, because Dullness has caused the chain to break, because this "new world [is ] to Nature's laws unknown" (III, l. 241), nothing good or fruitful can exist in it. Disorder in Nature is not only a result of, but also a cause of the injury that bad poets, patrons, critics, and booksellers do to literature. Dullness and dunces cause a chaotic state in which "Science groans in Chains,/ And Wit dreads Exile, Penalties and Pains" (IV, ll. 21-2). Dullness, darkness, and chaos are the visible effects evolving from the absence of order. In such a chaotic state, good poets, sincere patrons, and honest booksellers cannot exist.

Disorder in Nature and in society are interrelated. Similar to the technique in Rape, Pope describes a chaotic society in The Dunciad to imply what order ought to exist. He establishes the images related to disorder in Book I. Personifying disorder in the Goddess of Dullness, he calls her "Daughter of Chaos and eternal Night . . ." (I, l. 12). In the beginning, dullness is contained within a single college in the empire. As the Goddess chooses a new poet laureate, the public becomes

involved in the celebration and dullness spreads. Due to the hierarchical Chain of Being that operates in Nature, society's order must necessarily be affected when Nature's order is disturbed. Donald B. Clard says in Alexander Pope that the "dunces who worship Dullness . . . deny their kinship with the spiritual, upper half of nature, preferring to relate themselves to the lower animal realm only."<sup>11</sup> Thus, in rejecting the spiritual part of life, Man corrupts the hierarchy of values in which the spiritual element would be valued more than life's animal, physical aspect. In Book IV, Dullness establishes her reign over the earth and so totally corrupts social order that "The vulgar herd turn off to roll with Hogs,/ To run with Horses, or hunt with Dogs . . ." (IV, ll. 525-26). Not only the masses reflect the state of social chaos, but also the government shows signs of disorder: "The Judge to dance his brother Sergeant call/ The Senator at Cricket urge the Ball . . ." (IV, ll. 591-92). Men forget their positions and the hierarchy of values under Dullness' influence. Critic Donald B. Clark says that "chaos and darkness threaten to blot out all of Man's significant activity . . ."<sup>12</sup> Judges dancing and senators playing cricket are void of "significant activity" in respect to their offices. Pope implies an ethical comment on society's condition by saying "Lost was the Nation's Sense . . ." (IV, l. 611). This line echoes Clarissa's comment in Rape for the need for good sense to achieve order in society. Pope closes Book IV by giving civilization what it deserves for heeding dullness:

Lo! thy dread Empire, CHAOS! is restor'd;

Light dies before thy uncreating word:  
Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;  
And Universal Darkness buries All

IV, ll. 653-56.

Understanding his concept of order helps the reader realize that Pope explains why chaos and darkness replace order in poetry, Nature, and society in The Dunciad.

The three aspects of order in poetry, Nature, and society are interrelated. For clarity of definition, each aspect was discussed in relation to a particular poem. The Dunciad reflects the dependency of these aspects upon one another. Poetic order is based upon Nature's order and guidance. The hierarchy in Nature ceases to exist if there is disorder in society. Likewise, society falls apart without Nature's hierarchical guidance. The Dunciad reflects the dullness, chaos, darkness, and literary and social deterioration that result from the corruption of these aspects of order.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Pope, An Essay on Criticism, rpt. in The Poems of Alexander Pope, ed. John Butt, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), ll. 315-17.

<sup>2</sup> William K. Wimsatt, Jr., "Introduction" to Alexander Pope: Selected Poetry and Prose (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1951), p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Pope, An Essay on Man, rpt. in The Poems of Alexander Pope, ed. John Butt, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), II, ll. 15-18.

<sup>4</sup> John A. Jones, Pope's Couplet Art (Athens, Ohio: University Press, 1969), p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Pope, Rape of the Lock, rpt. in The Poems of Alexander Pope, ed. John Butt, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), I, ll. 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Donald B. Clark, Alexander Pope (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1967), p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Maynard Mack, as quoted in Alexander Pope, Clark, p. 149.

<sup>8</sup> Austin Warren, Rage for Order (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1948), p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Pope, The Dunciad, rpt. in The Poems of Alexander Pope, ed. John Butt, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), I, ll. 119-20.

<sup>10</sup> Wimsatt, p. xlviii.

<sup>11</sup> Clark, p. 153.

<sup>12</sup> Clark, p. 154.

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## Outline

Thesis: The "Dunciad's" meaning unfolds through examining Pope's uses of order as defined in "Essay on Man," "Essay on Criticism," and "Rape of the Lock."

- I. Examples from these works provide definitions for Pope's uses of order.
  - A. "Essay on Man" defines Pope's use of order in style.
  - B. "Essay on Criticism" defines Pope's use of order in Nature.
  - C. "Rape of the Lock" defines Pope's use of order in society.
- II. Pope builds the "Dunciad" on these aspects of order.
  - A. The "Dunciad" reflects Pope's comment on the need for order in style.
  - B. The "Dunciad" reflects the consequences of order's corruption in Nature.
  - C. The "Dunciad" reflects the consequences of order's corruption in society.