

Transformative Dimensions:

An Analysis of Change and Perception in 'Reuben Bright'

"The world is not a prison house, but a kind of spiritual kindergarten, where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks."

E. A. Robinson

In the poem "*Reuben Bright*," the speaker initially harbors a prejudiced view of Reuben, a butcher, but this prejudice transforms into awe as the speaker observes Reuben's profound change following the death of his wife. The poem delves into the theme of loss experienced by a wife and the ensuing pain endured by her husband, resulting in a profound and shattering event that triggers significant personal growth. The central focus of the poem lies in the consequential changes that Reuben undergoes as a result of this tragic event. Despite the dramatic context, the reader is guided through the poem by a distanced speaker who consistently refers to Reuben in the third person.

This distancing creates two layers of separation between the reader and Reuben: one between the speaker and Reuben and another between the reader and the speaker. This sense of detachment is evident in the poem's sestet, part of an Italian sonnet, and contains symbolic imagery in the form of chopped-up cedar boughs, alluding to Reuben's spiritual transformation. Additionally, the communal change in perception of Reuben is highlighted in the only two instances where the lyric "I" of the speaker appears in the poem, emphasizing the shift in the speaker's viewpoint from prejudice towards Reuben to a profound sense of awe.

The choice of the verb "chopped" in describing the image of the "chopped-up cedar boughs" is laden with symbolism, drawing a poignant connection to Reuben's profession as a butcher. This imagery resonates with Reuben's idea that his wife has been mercilessly cut from his life. This transformation motif in Reuben's spirit is powerfully evoked through the speaker's skillful use of sound repetition, word repetition, and enjambments. The act of stowing away these "chopped-up cedar boughs" alongside the "lot of things [his wife] had made" encapsulates Reuben's deep sense of loss, as if a vital part of his life has been cleaved apart. The phrase "In an old chest of hers" is an external manifestation of what remains of his wife's memory, as it is carefully preserved within. This tragic theme is spatially symbolized earlier in the poem, notably in the gap between the octave and sestet of the sonnet. In the octave's final lines, Reuben is depicted as externally tormented, characterized by his stares, shakes, and tears.

However, as the sestet unfolds with the imagery of the chopped cedar boughs, his suffering is internalized, emphasized by the repeated use of "and" (as in "**And** after she was dead, **and** he had paid The singers **and** the sexton **and** the rest") in the rhythmic cadence of the initial couplet. This repetition carries a touch of irony, signifying that Reuben is no longer conjoined with his wife; the conjunction itself has become wearisome, thus warranting repetition. Reuben's suffering matures after the initial shock conveyed in the second quatrain of the octave. The speaker bears witness to this profound transformation of spirit and is left in awe of Reuben. This sentiment is underscored in the final four lines of the sestet, where a sense of "awe" is repeatedly articulated through the words "lot," "mourn," "chopped," "tore," and "slaughter." These words collectively contribute to the

poem's resonating emotional impact, echoing the depth of Reuben's transformation and the speaker's profound reverence for it.

Moreover, the two strategically placed enjambments at the outset of the final couplet within the sestet, "of hers" and "in with them," serve as poignant punctuations marking the climax of Reuben's profound transformation in spirit. This transformation culminates in an action that surpasses anything the ordinary butcher, Reuben, might have anticipated: the demolition of his slaughterhouse. This act signifies the conclusion of a haunting presence, where the once-chopped meat, which Reuben used to slaughter, metaphorically returns to haunt him through the tragic loss of his wife's life. This dramatic and transcendent event carries profound spiritual implications, elevating Reuben beyond the mere expectations one might have had for a butcher, a profession often associated with brutality.

The speaker's initial perception of Reuben as a brute becomes evident in the two instances where the speaker's first-person pronoun "I" emerges within the poem. In this way, the poem encapsulates the evolution of Reuben's character, drawing a compelling parallel between his spiritual transformation and the dismantling of his slaughterhouse. It is a testament to the profound and unexpected changes that life can bring, challenging preconceived notions and inviting the reader to reevaluate their initial judgments.

This particular moment in the poem unveils the inherent prejudice harbored by the speaker, reflecting not only the speaker's bias but also the broader biases within their community. It invokes a sense of awe and parallels the reader's potential preconceptions. The speaker's tone carries a hint of apology as they express that they "would not have you,

the reader, think that Reuben Bright was any more a brute than you or I." In this statement, the speaker takes for granted that the reader might share their initial assumption that Reuben was a brute, representing a preconceived prejudiced view. This complexity arises because the appearance of the first-person pronoun "I" in the poem creates a distance between the reader and the speaker. It reveals that the speaker's bias against Reuben may not necessarily align with the reader's perspective.

The first-person pronoun "I" introduces an unexpected self-reproach on the speaker's part, magnified by the antithetical phrase parallelism within the poem. This antithesis becomes apparent in the second couplet of the first quatrain of the octave of the sonnet, where the speaker conveys their intention not to label Reuben as a mere brute due to his profession as a butcher. This intention contradicts the speaker's earlier assertion in the first couplet of the same quatrain, where they seemed to consider Reuben as just a brute. However, the speaker has since altered their opinion about the butcher, acknowledging that Reuben earns an honest living and conducts himself righteously.

This oscillating and opinionated stance of the speaker towards Reuben is mirrored in the near rhymes within the quatrain. While they are technically rhymed as abba (thereby, right, Bright, I), they could be perceived as aaaa due to the near rhymes of "by," "I," "ri," and "bri." If interpreted as aaaa, these near rhymes infuse the quatrain with a certain flatness, reflecting the speaker's seeming nonchalance as they continually shift their judgment of Reuben, evaluating his actions and emotions. As Reuben's character unfolds and surprises the reader, the same element of surprise reverberates within the speaker's community, leading the speaker to express their awe for Reuben again. This

sense of awe is conveyed through the words "because," "was," "not," "more," and "or," signifying the evolving perception of Reuben within both the speaker and their community.

This dual sense of awe unfolds in two distinct phases: first, as Reuben undergoes a profound spiritual transformation, and second, as the speaker articulates the communal shift in perception regarding the butcher. This twofold awe emerges when Reuben, through a deliberate personal transformation, opens himself up to change, a transformation that becomes evident through the speaker's adept use of robust diction, repetition, and inverted parallelism in the second quatrain of the octave. This linguistic interplay effectively mirrors the change process within Reuben himself. The speaker employs the verb "stared" (as in "he stared at them") to vividly depict Reuben's initial personal astonishment and bewilderment.

Furthermore, the verb "shook" (as in "and shook with grief and fright") within the same line ultimately conveys the depth of Reuben's emotional turmoil. This bewilderment encompasses a spectrum of emotions in the speaker's description, ranging from "grief" to "fright." Notably, the letters "g" and "f," which respectively begin and conclude the word "grief," are inverted in the word "fright," with the "f" initiating the word and the "g" occurring as the first letter of the final syllable. This inversion creates a distinctive, jumpy cadence in the line, effectively mirroring Reuben's initial, jarring response to the news about his wife's passing. The sudden revelation leaves him stunned, bewildered, and fundamentally transformed. Reuben must find a way to calm his tumultuous emotions in the aftermath.

The speaker employs parallelism through the repetition of sounds, such as "cried" and "like," "great" and "baby," "half," and "that," to further emphasize the rollercoaster of emotions that Reuben grapples with but ultimately allows to pass. It is through this process of letting his feelings ebb and flow that Reuben can internalize the events that have transpired, ultimately leading to a transformation of his spirit. This transformation brings the reader full circle, returning to the evolving spirit within the sestet as Reuben sheds the communal biases depicted in the preceding octave. The sestet encapsulates the profound changes Reuben undergoes, effectively shedding the preconceived judgments held by the community and symbolizing the power of internal transformation.

Within the structured confines of an Italian sonnet, "Reuben Bright" unfolds as a narrative that traverses both spatial and temporal dimensions, expertly manipulated by the poet through the adept use of poetic devices such as rhyme, diction, repetition, and parallelism. This intricate threefold change process is a central theme in the poem, progressively moving from external to internal and innermost realms of experience. As the poem progresses, it introduces a layered sense of distance between the speaker and Reuben and, subsequently, between the reader and the speaker. This dual distancing effect challenges readers to fully immerse themselves in the perspective of the lyric "I" embodied by the speaker. It requires readers to take not one but two steps back in order to comprehend the broader narrative. This challenge is heightened by the initial impression that the use of the lyric "I" by the speaker serves merely as an excuse for their prejudiced stance against Reuben.

However, for the discerning and sensitive reader, the layers begin to unfold, revealing the complexity of the narrative. Through the speaker's apologies and the pains experienced by the character Reuben, the sensitive reader can ultimately resonate with both lyric personas—the speaker and the reader. This resonance comes to life as they witness the courageous transformation of Reuben, moving from the shattering loss of his wife to a transcendent and impactful act—the dismantling of his deeply ingrained, symbolic, and, as the poet conveys, "God-damned" slaughterhouse. In this way, the poem transcends its initial superficial impressions, inviting readers to engage with its deeper layers and evoking a sense of emotional resonance and admiration for Reuben's transformative journey.

Reuben Bright

BY EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

Because he was a butcher and thereby
Did earn an honest living (and did right),
I would not have you think that Reuben Bright
Was any more a brute than you or I;
For when they told him that his wife must die,
He stared at them, and shook with grief and fright,
And cried like a great baby half that night,
And made the women cry to see him cry.

And after she was dead, and he had paid
The singers and the sexton and the rest,
He packed a lot of things that she had made
Most mournfully away in an old chest
Of hers, and put some chopped-up cedar boughs
In with them, and tore down the slaughter-house.