

Violence and the Irony of Modern Humanity in Don Baker's Formal Application

Original Article

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Abstract

The twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented normalization of violence, as global conflicts, technological advancements in warfare, and bureaucratic systems of destruction reshaped the way societies understood cruelty and moral responsibility. This study analyzes Don Baker's poem Formal Application as a literary critique of modern humanity and the normalization of violence in the twentieth century. Written in the historical context of World War II, the poem employs irony, symbolism, and vivid imagery to challenge the concept of "Modern Man" as a figure of progress and rationality. Using a qualitative descriptive method and close textual analysis, this study examines the poem's narrative progression, poetic form, and use of historical allusions to reveal how violence is gradually learned, justified, and disguised through euphemistic language. The findings indicate that Baker deliberately contrasts bureaucratic civility with acts of cruelty to expose moral detachment and the erosion of empathy. Furthermore, the betrayal and killing of birds symbolize humanity's destructive relationship with both nature and other human beings. The poem's allusions to World War II, including references to technological warfare and ideological slogans, reinforce its condemnation of modern civilization's ethical decline. This study concludes that Formal Application not only reflects the brutality of its historical moment but also offers a broader warning about the dangers of normalizing violence in everyday life. The findings contribute to literary studies on war poetry by highlighting the intersection of personal action, institutional violence, and moral responsibility in modern society.

Keywords: Don Baker, Formal Application, Irony, Modern Humanity, War Poetry.

1. Introduction

Literary works have long functioned as powerful mediums through which writers interrogate the moral, social, and historical conditions of their time (Panigrahi, 2025). Poetry, in particular, possesses a unique capacity to condense complex emotional and ethical concerns into symbolic language, allowing poets to respond critically to periods of crisis and transformation (Arcilla Jr, 2024). Throughout the twentieth century, poetry emerged as a significant site of reflection on modernity (Beach, 2003), especially as rapid technological advancement, industrialization, and global conflict reshaped human values and social structures (Harrington, 2002; Keyser, 2020). In this context, poets increasingly questioned traditional notions of progress, civilization, and humanity itself.

One of the most defining forces shaping twentieth-century literature was World War II, a conflict marked by unprecedented levels of destruction, mechanized warfare, and mass civilian casualties (Khan, 2025). The war challenged long-held beliefs about moral superiority, rational progress, and human exceptionalism. As a result, many literary works produced during and after this period express deep moral unease, disillusionment, and skepticism toward the idea of modern civilization (Bell, 1997). War poetry, in particular, shifted away



from romanticized depictions of heroism toward critical examinations of violence, dehumanization, and ethical collapse (Hart, 2015; Kendall, 2006).

Don Baker's *Formal Application* emerges from this historical and cultural landscape. Written by a poet who personally served in World War II, the poem reflects an acute awareness of the ways in which violence becomes systematized and morally obscured in modern society. Rather than depicting warfare directly, Baker employs irony to portray "Modern Man" as someone who must qualify for humanity through deliberate acts of control, deception, and violence. The poem's unsettling narrative, moving from knife practice to the calculated betrayal and killing of a bird, serves as a metaphor for the broader processes through which modern societies normalize cruelty while disguising it as discipline, progress, or professionalism.

This study aims to examine how Baker's use of free verse, imagery, symbolism, and historical allusion constructs a narrative in which violence is progressively learned, normalized, and justified. The study focuses on three key aspects: (1) the gradual normalization of violence within the poem's structure; (2) the role of literary devices in establishing irony and moral tension; and (3) the function of World War II references in reinforcing the poem's critique of technological and ideological justifications for cruelty. By situating the poem within its historical context while attending closely to its language and form, this analysis aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of *Formal Application* as a poetic indictment of modern civilization's ethical decline and its destructive relationship with both humanity and nature.

2. Literature Review

Previous scholarly discussions of war poetry and post-war literature have predominantly emphasized three broad themes: trauma, patriotism and heroism, and the psychological impact of combat (Gennaro, 2016). These approaches offer valuable insight into large-scale historical suffering and battlefield experience, yet they leave less room for examining how violence quietly infiltrates everyday human behavior (Subanti, 2018).

Three elements in particular remain underexamined: irony, euphemistic language, and symbolic interactions with nature as critiques of moral desensitization. *Formal Application* is often read simply as an anti-war poem. Such a reading, however, risks overlooking its deeper concerns—namely, the loss of empathy, the betrayal of trust, and the redefinition of humanity within modern ethical frameworks.

By attending closely to how these three literary strategies operate together, this study departs from readings that treat the poem primarily as historical commentary, and instead positions it as a sustained ethical interrogation of how ordinary language and everyday ritual can normalize extraordinary cruelty.

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method using close textual analysis to examine Don Baker's poem *Formal Application*. The analysis focuses on interpreting the poem's language, structure, and imagery in order to uncover its underlying meanings and thematic concerns. Rather than relying on numerical data, this method emphasizes careful reading and critical interpretation of the text as a literary artifact.

The primary data source of this study is the poem *Formal Application* itself. Supporting data are drawn from relevant literary concepts and theoretical perspectives, including theories

of symbolism, irony, imagery, and historical allusion, particularly in the context of war literature and twentieth-century poetry. These frameworks are used to guide the interpretation of how meaning is constructed within the poem.

The analytical procedure consists of several stages. First, the poem is read repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of its literal meaning. Second, key poetic elements such as form, diction, imagery, figurative language, and sound devices are identified and analyzed. Third, the poem is examined within its historical and cultural context, especially its references to World War II and modernity. Finally, the findings are interpreted to explain how these elements collectively convey Baker's critique of modern humanity and the normalization of violence. By applying this qualitative literary analysis, the study seeks to provide a systematic and coherent interpretation of Formal Application, ensuring that the conclusions are grounded in textual evidence and relevant literary theory.

4. Results and Discussion

*I shall begin by learning to throw
the knife, first at trees, until it sticks
in the trunk and quivers every time;*

*next from a chair, using only wrist
and fingers, at a thing on the ground,
a fresh ant hill or a fallen leaf;*

*then at a moving object, perhaps
a pine cone swinging on twine, until
I pot it at least twice in three tries.*

*Meanwhile, I shall be teaching the birds
that the skinny fellow in sneakers
is a source of suet and bread crumbs,*

*first putting them on a shingle nailed
to a pine tree, next scattering them
on the needles, closer and closer*

*to my seat, until the proper bird,
a towhee, I think, in black and rust
and gray, takes tossed crumbs six feet away.*

*Finally, I shall coordinate
conditioned reflex and functional
form and qualify as Modern Man.*

*You see the splash of blood and feathers
and the blade pinning it to the tree?
It's called an "Audubon Crucifix."*

*The phrase has pleasing (even pious) connotations, like Arbeit Macht Frie,
"Molotov Cocktail," and Enola Gay.*

—Don Baker, from Formal Application, 1982 1944

4.1. Research Findings

4.1.1. Literal meaning

Donald Whitelaw Baker, Wabash College professor emeritus of English and poet-in-residence, died Thursday, August 15 from complications of Parkinson's Disease. He was born January 30, 1923, in Boston, Baker was an English professor and poet-in-residence at Wabash College for 34 years. His poetry was widely published in literary magazines and anthologies, and he was the author of seven books. He was a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Writing Fellowship, and he received the Pushcart Prize, the Borestone Mountain Prize, and a Pulitzer Prize nomination. After his retirement from Wabash, he moved to Brewster, on Cape Cod, where he taught courses in poetry, Shakespeare's sonnets, and the work of Emily Dickinson in several continuing education programs, as well as teaching for several seasons in the Cape Cod Writers' Conference. For 10 years he conducted a poetry workshop at the Brewster Ladies Library. Baker was a navigator in the Army Air Corps' 382nd Bomb Group, serving in B-29 bombers in the American, European, and Asian theatres during World War II. He graduated from Worcester's (Mass.) Classical High School in 1941 and received A.B., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees from Brown University, where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

The author, Donald Baker, wrote his "Formal Application" for re-admittance into humanity. His ironic reply shows how little humanity there is left to join, as human kind descends into the violence and brutality of the twentieth century. Baker wants the readers to understand his perception of humanity that characterizes human beings as barbaric and has an instinct of death. The poem is about the absence of humanity in the twentieth century. Where in that century, there were wars everywhere. So, it had many casualties. The poem was in World War II, because the word "Enola Gay" which was the name of the specially modified B-29 US Army Air Force long-range bomber of the 509th Composite Group that dropped the atomic bomb nicknamed Little Boy on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on the morning of 1945-08-06. It also mentions "Molotov Cocktail", Molotov cocktail is a fire bomb made from a glass bottle filled with gasoline. The tone of this poem is serious, because the author wants to share that the humanity in that time was brutal. In World War 2, there were a lot of casualties so the writer made this poem to make the reader aware of how important it is to make peace, so that there are no more casualties.

4.1.2. Poetic form and literary devices

This poetry is a kind of free verse because it lacks a consistent rhyme scheme, metrical pattern, or musical form. It could be read from the poem that the poet uses different patterns of rhymes in every line of the poem. Rhyme scheme of the poetry is the pattern of rhyme that comes at the end of each verse or line in poetry. As we could see, there is no rhyme scheme in this poetry. For example, in the first stanza the poet ends the first line with 'throw', the second line with the word 'sticks', and the third line with the word 'time'. We could not see any similarities of rhyme in the first stanza, so do in the next stanzas.

When we talk about literary devices of a poetry, we can also talk and spot its sound devices. Sound devices can be an alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, etc. These sound devices usually can be easily spotted when we read the poem carefully and with the right pronunciation of words.

*"then at a moving object, perhaps
a pine cone swinging on twine, until
I pot it at least twice in three tries"*

There are some alliterations in this poetry. Alliteration is repetition of the same letter sound across the start of several words in a line of text. In the third stanza above, “*A **pine** cone swinging on **twine** ...*” is one of the examples of alliteration. Another example of alliteration in this stanza is “*I pot it at least **twice** in three **tries***”.

Another sound device contained in this poem is assonance. Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds across a line of text or poetry. In the sixth line of Formal Application poetry, it is written that, “and **gray**, takes tossed crumbs six feet **away**.” Focus on the long e on those two highlighted words. This is the example of assonance.

*“I shall begin by learning to throw
the knife, first at trees, until it sticks
in the trunk and quivers every time”*

Even Formal Application by Don Baker seems quite straight in meaning, but actually it contains some figures of speech. The poet uses personification in some lines of the poetry. In the first stanza above, the poet uses personification and hyperbole in the third line. It is written that the knife is thrown and then sticks in the trunk and quivers every time, but actually the knife can’t quiver every time.

The poet uses some personifications in this poetry. According to the dictionary, the attribution of a personal nature or human characteristics to something nonhuman, or the representation of an abstract quality in human form. For example, in the words “*a pine cone swinging on twine*” in the third stanza, the second line. The pine is described as something alive that can swing on twine, but in fact the pine couldn’t swing. Another example of personification is in the eighth stanza, the second line. It is written that “*and the blade pinning it to the tree?*” The blade here is described as something alive and could pin something to the tree, but in fact, the blade is just something nonhuman.

*“Meanwhile, I shall be teaching the birds
that the skinny fellow in sneakers
is a source of suet and bread crumbs”*

Another figure of speech in this poetry is metaphor. Metaphor is a figure of speech that compares two different things without the terms ‘like’ or ‘as’. In the fourth stanza above, the poet describes himself as the skinny fellow in sneakers that became a source of suet and bread crumbs to attract the birds. It seems that the poet uses the word “fellow” to make an impression if he would not do something bad to the birds, and he wants the birds to see him as a best friend. Don Baker also uses symbols in this poetry. He uses the word “Modern Man” after he kills the bird to make an impression that to become a modern man, someone should throw his humanity away and have enough courage or power to ‘wound’ others.

4.1.3. Historical and Cultural Context

Therefore, we can conclude that this poem is about contemporary phenomena. The title allows us to think directly about indoor work, just like in the office, because it is an application. Firstly, the speaker as the Modern Man learns about something that is described as throwing knife practice. When he has mastered the technique, he starts to look for a job, and then establish contact with someone (the bird). After having good connections and trusting each other, he betrayed his partner. We think the reason Baker finally mentioned the cause of World War II is because he wants to show the consequences of becoming an enemy and you will cause losses if you betray someone that helps you.

4.1.4. Imagery

When we practice a creative writing, maybe we have heard about draw a picture with the word. this is known as imagery in poetry. the use of figurative language to stimulate a sensory response from the reader. Imagery the reader to feel what the reader wants to explain and tell about a sense

The crucifix is an allusion to the sacrifice of Jesus which is the same like the bird - they are both betrayed and pinned to their deaths. Audubon was a famous bird painter, and therefore this is insulting for Audubon. His love for birds being free in nature is great and yet Baker describes him painting a gruesome death of a bird. However, this name is an euphemism- it is an indirect word which does not make most people think of a barbaric murder of a bird by a sharp knife through the betrayal of a human.

The mood in this poem is pleasant until the bird is killed. Baker imagery the stunning slaughter of a bird with a knife utilizing horrible images. Baker utilizes the visual after describing the 'Modern Man' on purpose because he wants readers to link violence with the 'Modern Man.'

In poetry, an allusion alludes to a person, location, historical event, or ancient source, such as the Bible, mythology, or old poets. By hinting, indicating, showing, or suggesting deeper meaning to the reader, the allusion frequently generates a metaphor that amplifies and vivifies the poet's message. Bakes in the last stanza when he references "*Arbeit Macht Frei*", "*Molotov cocktail*" and "*Enola Gay*". That is what World War II has left us with

By associating the '*Audubon crucifix*' with the allusions to World War II, Baker makes a strong statement that he is opposed to human development, as modern man perceives violence as the norm and is oblivious to the negative impact of killing, which is highlighted further by the euphemisms. That's why there are more deaths and murders every day.

4.1.5. Tone and Themes

The title refers to the capability required for the persona to return to society and qualify as a modern man. Skills that represented humanity's most heinous nature. The title is an allusion to the current day, when we apply for jobs or colleges. We should avoid employing violence and euphemisms; none of us have the right to diminish violence it as though it were insignificant in today's society.

Birds are a sign of freedom and the future. The speaker gains the trust of strange birds by attracting them with food. The bird that will be most suited to the speaker's plans is the bird that has the most belief in the speaker. Even though the knife has a negative connotation of violence and danger, it is not related with anything horrible in this case. Negative connotations hidden by pleasing images.

The poem's focus is humankind's devastation of nature. The poem begins with him simply destroying a tree, although he able to contextualize to ruin more and more until he begins to murder the birds, and the poetry title even symbolizes the formal application of man in nature (destruction).

Don Baker wrote this poem to call the people in the world to stop using violence in the world during world war 2. as we know how horrific world war 2 gave impact to a lot of people in the world. Don Baker wants all of the people in the world to be united and no more violence and kill people in the world.

4.2. Discussion

The findings of this analysis align with and extend previous studies on twentieth-century war poetry, which emphasize literature's role in exposing the moral consequences of modern warfare. Scholars of war poetry such as Dahrendorf (2011) have argued that modern conflict

is often characterized by irony, disillusionment, and the collapse of traditional moral values. *Formal Application* reflects this tradition by rejecting heroic narratives of war and instead presenting violence as calculated, normalized, and morally hollow.

Previous studies on post-war and modernist poetry also highlight the use of irony and bureaucratic language as tools to critique institutional violence (MacKay, 2017). Baker employs ordinary, procedural language, suggested by the title *Formal Application*, to reveal how systems of order and progress can coexist with extreme brutality. However, while much of the existing literature focuses on battlefield experiences or direct representations of war, Baker's poem differs by shifting violence into a seemingly domestic and controlled setting. This shift exposes a gap in prior analyses that often separate large-scale warfare from everyday ethical behavior.

Research on ecocriticism and human–nature relationships further supports this interpretation. Studies have shown that modern literature frequently portrays the exploitation of nature as a reflection of humanity's broader moral failures (Akter, 2024; O'Grady, 2003). In *Formal Application*, the betrayal and killing of birds function as a symbolic parallel to wartime destruction, reinforcing arguments from previous research that violence against nature and violence against humans are interconnected. Yet, compared to earlier studies, Baker's poem intensifies this critique by framing ecological destruction as a prerequisite for becoming "Modern Man."

Additionally, earlier scholarship on euphemism and language in war discourse notes how terms such as "collateral damage" or weapon names obscure the reality of death. Baker's reference to "Arbeit Macht Frei," "Molotov Cocktail," and "Enola Gay" echoes these findings, demonstrating how language can sanitize atrocity. This analysis builds on prior studies by showing how such euphemisms are not confined to political rhetoric but permeate cultural consciousness and individual behavior. Thus, this discussion suggests that *Formal Application* contributes a distinctive perspective to war and modernity literature. It bridges the gap between institutional violence and personal action, revealing how the ethics of war infiltrate everyday life. By doing so, Baker's poem not only supports existing critical arguments but also expands them, offering a nuanced critique of modern humanity's complicity in normalized violence.

5. Conclusion

This analysis concludes that Don Baker's *Formal Application* is a powerful poetic critique of modern humanity, exposing how violence becomes normalized, justified, and even ritualized in the twentieth century. Through irony, symbolism, vivid imagery, and historical allusions to World War II, the poem challenges the notion of "Modern Man" as a figure of progress and rationality. Instead, Baker presents modern identity as one shaped by betrayal, moral detachment, and the loss of empathy toward both humans and nature. The gradual progression from practice to killing, along with the use of euphemistic language, underscores the poem's central argument that brutality is often masked by civility, professionalism, and technological advancement. This study is limited by its reliance on a single close reading of one poem, and future research may benefit from comparative analysis with other war poets to validate and extend these findings.

Based on these findings, several suggestions can be offered. First, future literary studies may explore *Formal Application* through interdisciplinary perspectives, such as trauma studies or ecocriticism, to further examine the psychological and environmental implications of normalized violence. Second, comparative analyses with other war and post-war poets could deepen understanding of how different authors respond to similar historical conditions.

Finally, this poem may be effectively used in educational settings to encourage critical discussions on ethics, language, and the human cost of modern progress, helping readers develop greater awareness of how violence is constructed and justified in both literature and real life. Ultimately, Formal Application remains strikingly relevant beyond its historical moment, reminding contemporary readers that the mechanisms of normalized violence, bureaucratic language, technological detachment, and the erosion of empathy, continue to shape how societies rationalize cruelty in everyday life.

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