

Robert Burns Introduction

Introduction to Robert Burns and His Poetry

Robert Burns (born January 25, 1759, Alloway, Ayrshire, Scotland—died July 21, 1796, Dumfries, Dumfriesshire) was the national poet of Scotland, who wrote lyrics and songs in Scots and in English. He was also famous for his amours and his rebellion against orthodox religion and morality.

Life

Burns's father had come to Ayrshire from Kincardineshire in an endeavor to improve his fortunes, but, though he worked immensely hard first on the farm of Mount Oliphant, which he leased in 1766, and then on that of Lochlea, which he took in 1777, ill luck dogged him, and he died in 1784, worn out and bankrupt. It was watching his father being thus beaten down that helped to make Robert both a rebel against the social order of his day and a bitter satirist of all forms of religious and political thought that condoned or perpetuated inhumanity. He received some formal schooling from a teacher as well as sporadically from other sources. He acquired a superficial reading knowledge of French and a bare smattering of Latin, and he read most of the important 18th-century English writers as well as Shakespeare, Milton, and Dryden. His knowledge of Scottish literature was confined in his childhood to orally transmitted folk songs and folk tales together with a modernization of the late 15th-century poem "Wallace." His religion throughout his adult life seems to have been a humanitarian [Deism](#).

Proud, restless, and full of a nameless ambition, the young Burns did his share of hard work on the farm. His father's death made him a tenant of the farm of Mossgiel to which the family moved and freed him to seek male and female companionship where he would. He took sides against the dominant extreme [Calvinist](#) wing of the church in Ayrshire and championed a local gentleman, [Gavin Hamilton](#), who had got into trouble with the kirk session (a church court) for Sabbath breaking. He had an affair with a servant girl at the farm, Elizabeth Paton, who in 1785 bore his first child, and on the child's birth he welcomed it with a lively poem.

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Development as a poet

Burns developed rapidly throughout 1784 and 1785 as an “occasional” poet who more and more turned to verse to express his emotions of love, friendship, or amusement or his ironical contemplation of the social scene. But these were not spontaneous effusions by an almost illiterate peasant. Burns was a conscious craftsman; his entries in the commonplace book that he had begun in 1783 reveal that from the beginning he was interested in the technical problems of versification.

Though he wrote poetry for his own amusement and that of his friends, Burns remained restless and dissatisfied. He won the reputation of being a dangerous rebel against orthodox religion, and, when in 1786 he fell in love with Jean Armour, her father refused to allow her to marry Burns even though a child was on the way and under Scots law mutual consent followed by consummation constituted a legal marriage. Jean was persuaded by her father to go back on her promise. Robert, hurt and enraged, took up with another woman, Mary Campbell, who died soon after. On September 3 Jean bore him twins out of wedlock.

Meanwhile, the farm was not prospering, and Burns, harassed by insoluble problems, thought of emigrating. But he first wanted to show his country what he could do. In the midst of his troubles he went ahead with his plans for publishing a volume of his poems at the nearby town of Kilmarnock. It was entitled *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* and appeared on July 31, 1786. Its success was immediate and overwhelming. Simple country folk and sophisticated Edinburgh critics alike hailed it, and the upshot was that Burns set out for Edinburgh on November 27, 1786, to be lionized, patronized, and showered with well-meant but dangerous advice.

The Kilmarnock volume was a remarkable mixture. It included a handful of first-rate Scots poems: “The Twa Dogs,” “Scotch Drink,” “The Holy Fair,” “An Address to the Deil,” “The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie,” “To a Mouse,” “To a Louse,” and some others, including a number of verse letters addressed to various friends. There were also a few Scots poems in which he was unable to sustain his inspiration or that are spoiled by a confused purpose. In addition, there were six gloomy and histrionic poems in English, four songs, of which only one, “It Was Upon a Lammas Night,” showed promise of his future greatness as a songwriter, and what to contemporary reviewers seemed the stars of the volume, “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” and “To a Mountain Daisy.”

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Burns selected his Kilmarnock poems with care: he was anxious to impress a genteel Edinburgh audience. In his preface he played up to contemporary sentimental views about the “natural man” and the “noble peasant,” exaggerated his lack of education, pretended to a lack of natural resources, and in general acted a part. The trouble was that he was only half acting. He was uncertain enough about the genteel tradition to accept much of it at its face value, and though, to his ultimate glory, he kept returning to what his own instincts told him was the true path for him to follow, far too many of his poems are marred by a naïve and sentimental moralizing.

After Edinburgh

Edinburgh unsettled Burns, and, after a number of amorous and other adventures there and several trips to other parts of Scotland, he settled in the summer of 1788 at a farm in Ellisland, Dumfriesshire. At Edinburgh, too, he arranged for a new and enlarged edition (1787) of his *Poems*, but little of significance was added to the Kilmarnock selection. He found farming at Ellisland difficult, though he was helped by Jean Armour, with whom he had been reconciled and whom he finally married in 1788.

In Edinburgh Burns had met James Johnson, a keen collector of Scottish songs who was bringing out a series of volumes of songs with the music and who enlisted Burns’s help in finding, editing, improving, and rewriting items. Burns was enthusiastic and soon became virtual editor of Johnson’s *The Scots Musical Museum*. Later he became involved with a similar project for George Thomson, but Thomson was a more consciously genteel person than Johnson, and Burns had to fight with him to prevent him from “refining” words and music and so ruining their character. Johnson’s *The Scots Musical Museum* (1787–1803) and the first five volumes of Thomson’s *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs for the Voice* (1793–1818) contain the bulk of Burns’s songs. Burns spent the latter part of his life in assiduously collecting and writing songs to provide words for traditional Scottish airs. He regarded his work as service to Scotland and quixotically refused payment. The only poem he wrote after his Edinburgh visit that showed a hitherto unsuspected side of his poetic genius was “Tam o’ Shanter” (1791), a spirited narrative poem in brilliantly handled eight-syllable couplets based on a folk legend.

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Meanwhile, Burns corresponded with and visited in terms of equality a great variety of literary and other people who were considerably “above” him socially. He was an admirable letter writer and a brilliant talker, and he could hold his own in any company. At the same time, he was still a struggling tenant farmer, and the attempt to keep himself going in two different social and intellectual capacities was wearing him down. After trying for a long time, he finally obtained a post in the excise service in 1789 and moved to Dumfries in 1791, where he lived until his death. His life at Dumfries was active. He wrote numerous “occasional” poems and did an immense amount of work for the two song collections, in addition to carrying out his duties as exciseman. The outbreak of the French Revolution excited him, and some indiscreet outbursts nearly lost him his job, but his reputation as a good exciseman and a politic but humiliating recantation saved him.

Legacy of Robert Burns

Burns was a man of great intellectual energy and force of character who, in a class-ridden society, never found an environment in which he could fully exercise his personality. It may be argued that Scottish culture in his day was incapable of providing an intellectual background that could replace the Calvinism that Burns rejected, or that Burns’s talent was squandered on an Edinburgh literati that, according to English critics, were second-raters. Yet he lived during the cultural and intellectual tumult known as the Scottish Enlightenment, and the problem was ultimately more than one of personalities. The only substitute for the rejected Calvinism seemed to be, for Burns, a sentimental Deism, a facile belief in the good heart as all, and this was arguably not a creed rich or complex enough to nourish great poetry. That Burns in spite of this produced so much fine poetry shows the strength of his unique genius, and that he has become the Scottish national poet is a tribute to his hold on the popular imagination.

Burns perhaps exhibited his greatest poetic powers in his satires. There is also a remarkable craftsmanship in his verse letters, which display a most adroit counterpointing of the colloquial and the formal. But it is by his songs that Burns is best known, and it is his songs that have carried his reputation round the world.

Burns wrote all his songs to known tunes, sometimes writing several sets of words to the same air in an endeavor to find the most apt poem for a given melody. Many songs which, it is clear from a variety of evidence, must have been substantially written by Burns he never claimed as his. He never claimed “Auld Lang Syne,” for example, which he described simply as an old fragment he had discovered, but the song we have is almost certainly his, though the chorus and probably the first stanza are old. (Burns wrote it for a simple and moving old air that is *not* the tune to which it is now sung, as Thomson set it to another tune.) The full extent of Burns’s work on Scottish song will probably never be known.

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It is positively miraculous that Burns was able to enter into the spirit of older folk song and re-create, out of an old chorus, such songs as “I’m O’er Young to Marry Yet,” “Green Grow the Rashes, O,” and a host of others. It is this uncanny ability to speak with the great anonymous voice of the Scottish people that explains the special feeling that Burns arouses, feelings that manifest themselves in the “Burns cult.”

A Red Red Rose:

Summary of the poem:

The poem was first published in 1794 in a collection of traditional Scottish songs set to music. Burns’s poem was inspired both by a simple Scots song he had heard in the country and by published ballads from the period. The poem has the form of a ballad and is meant to be sung aloud. It describes the speaker’s deep love for his or her beloved and promises that this love will last longer than human life and even the planet itself, remaining fresh and constant forever.

The speaker describes his or her love—meaning either the *person* the speaker loves or the speaker's *feelings* of love for that person—as being as beautiful, vivid, and fresh as a flower that has just recently bloomed. This love is as sweet as a beautiful song played by a skilled musician.

The beloved is so beautiful that the speaker loves her with a deep and strong passion—so strong, in fact, that the speaker's love will last until the oceans have become dry.

Even after the seas have evaporated and the earth has decayed, the speaker will still love the beloved. This love will endure until their own lives have ended and even until all human life has ended.

The speaker concludes by saying goodbye to the beloved—who is, the speaker reminds her, the *only* person the speaker loves. The speaker wishes her well during their temporary separation. The speaker reaffirms his or her faithful love by promising to return even if the journey covers a very long distance and takes a very long time.

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Thematic Concerns of the Poem

Symbols Used in the Poem

About the Speaker of the Poem

About the Setting of the Poem

Literary and Historical Context of the Poem

To A Mouse:

Summary of the Poem:

"To a Mouse" was written in 1785 by Scotland's national poet, Robert Burns. After accidentally destroying a mouse's nest with his plough, the poem's speaker expresses sorrow for the animal's plight. The mouse's homelessness and hunger prompt the speaker to feel compassion for all vulnerable creatures and also to reflect on the unpredictability and pain of human life. "To a Mouse" features Burns's characteristic use of Scottish dialect and a six-line stanza form known as the habbie or Burns stanza.

It is November of 1785, and the speaker has just accidentally destroyed a mouse's nest with his plough.

The speaker addresses the mouse as a small, sleek, huddled, frightened little animal and notices how scared she is. He tells her that she doesn't need to try and scurry away in such a rush—he has no desire to chase and attack her with a deadly plough-scraper.

He also tells her that he is sorry that humankind has come to dominate the earth and its creatures and has ruined the harmony that naturally ought to exist between people and animals. This domination makes it understandable that the mouse would be frightened of the speaker, even though he is a needy, vulnerable creature just as the mouse is.

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The speaker knows that the mouse sometimes steals food from his stores, but asks whether that should matter—the poor mouse has to stay alive after all! The occasional ear of corn from a large bundle is a small thing to ask. The speaker counts himself lucky to have what is left over and will never suffer because of what the mouse takes.

Then the speaker turns his attention to the mouse's little nest, which is destroyed; its weak walls are being blown around by the wind. Unfortunately, there is no more grass left for the mouse to use to build a new nest, for the biting, bitter December winds are already starting to blow, meaning that winter is coming.

The mouse, the speaker sees, realized that the fields were empty and that the dangerous season of winter was approaching, and had hoped to live comfortably in its nest, sheltered from the winds—until the destructive plough crashed right through its home. The speaker reflects that the tiny dwelling made of leaves and shorn plants took a great deal of exhausting effort for the mouse to build. Now, after all that work, the mouse is left without any home to shelter it through the winter's sleet, rain, and frost.

But the mouse is not the only creature to realize that planning for the future can sometimes prove to be useless. Even the most carefully made plans, created by animals or by humans alike, often go wrong. When that happens, the planner experiences sorrow and distress instead of the happiness he expected.

The mouse is lucky, however, compared to the speaker. The mouse is affected only by the present moment. But, the speaker exclaims, he can look back into the past at painful memories. He can also look forward into the future and, although he cannot know for certain it will bring, he can anticipate and be afraid of what might happen.

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Thematic Concerns of the Poem

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References and Further Reading:

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