A Red, Red Rose Study Guide

A Red, Red Rose by Robert Burns

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

After the 1786 publication of *Poems, Chiefly in the* **Scottish** *Dialect,* Robert Burns spent the last ten years of his life collecting and editing songs for *The Scots Musical Museum,* an anthology intended to preserve traditional Scottish lyrical forms. During this time, Burns also composed more than three hundred original works for the volume, songs that relied heavily on forms and sentiments popular in the folk culture of the Scottish peasantry. "A Red, Red Rose," first published in 1794 in *A Selection of Scots Songs,* edited by Peter Urbani, is one such song. Written in ballad stanzas, the verse□read today as a poem□pieces together conventional ideas and images of love in a way that transcends the "low" or non-literary sources from which the poem is drawn. In it, the speaker compares his love first with a blooming rose in spring and then with a melody "sweetly play'd in tune." If these similes seem the typical fodder for love-song lyricists, the second and third stanzas introduce the subtler and more complex implications of time. In trying to quantify his feelings□and in searching for the perfect metaphor to describe the "eternal" nature of his love□the speaker inevitably comes up against love's greatest limitation, "the sands o' life." This image of the hour-glass forces the reader to reassess of the poem's first and loveliest image: A "red, red rose" is itself an object of an hour, "newly sprung" only "in June" and afterward subject to the decay of time. This treatment of time and beauty predicts the work of the later Romantic poets, who took Burns's work as an important influence.

Author Biography

Burns was born in Alloway, Scotland, in 1759. His father, a poor tenant farmer, tutored his sons at home and sought to provide them with as much additional education as his resources allowed. An avid reader, Burns acquired a grounding in English before studying the poetry of his Scottish heritage. During his youth Burns endured the hard work and progressively worsening financial difficulties which beset his family as they moved from one rented farm to another. As a young man Burns developed a reputation for charm and wit, engaging in several love affairs that brought him into conflict with the Presbyterian Church. He also angered the church by criticizing such accepted beliefs as predestination and mankind's inherent sinfulness, which he considered incompatible with human nature. In 1786 Burns proposed marriage to Jean Armour, who was pregnant with his twin sons. Her parents rejected his offer and demanded financial restitution. As a result, Burns determined to sail to the West Indies and start a new life. However, with the successful publication that year of his *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect,* Burns abandoned his plans and traveled to Edinburgh, where he was much admired in literary circles. While in Edinburgh Burns met James Johnson, a printer involved in a project to publish all the folk songs of Scotland. Burns subsequently traveled throughout the country, collecting over 300 songs, which were printed in Johnson's six-volume *Scots Musical Museum* (1787-1803) and George Thomson's five-volume *Select Collection of Original Airs for the Voice* (1793-1818). Many of the songs he collected were revised or edited by Burns□as with "John Anderson My Jo"□or, in some cases, newly written by him□as with "A Red, Red Rose." One consequence of his journeys around Scotland was his rise to national prominence and popularity. Burns finally married Armour in 1788 and divided his time between writing poetry and fanning until he obtained a government position three years later. He died from rheumatic heart disease in 1796.

Poem Text

O my Luve's like a red, red rose,

That's newly sprung in June:

O my Luve's like the melodie

That's sweetly play'd in tune.

As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,

So deep in luve am I;

And I will luve thee still, my Dear,

Till a' the seas gang dry.

Till a' the seas gang dry, my Dear,

And the rocks melt wi' the sun:

And I will luve thee still, my Dear,

While the sands o' life shall run.

And fare thee weel, my only Luve!

And fare thee weel, awhile!

And I will come again, my Luve,

Tho' it were ten thousand mile!

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2:

The reader may be already familiar with the poem's much-quoted first line. Its appeal over time probably stems from the boldness of its assertion the speaker's love conveyed through the conventional image of the rose and through the line's four strong beats. The poet's choice of a rose may at first seem trite, and the color "red" may seem too obvious a symbol of love and passion. Yet if the comparison between the beloved and the rose verges on cliché, a careful reading reveals the subtler ways in which the speaker expresses his conviction. Why, for instance, is the word "red" repeated? The answer might be found in the second line. While red is the expected hue of the flower, the repetition of the adjective represents the fullest and most lovely manifestation of the rose: its ideal state. Such also is the nature of the speaker's love. "Newly sprung," it exists in its purest and most perfect state none of its vitality has faded; time has not scarred it with age or decay. Yet this embodiment of love is a temporary one. Like the rose, which can exist in this lush form only "in June," the speaker's feelings and his beloved's beauty cannot remain frozen in time: they, like all other forms of beauty, are passing.

Lines 3-4:

Perhaps it is the speaker's recognition of the rose's brief beauty that compels him to pursue another metaphor for his love. This time he chooses to compare her to a lovely melody from a song, but this is also a temporary form of beauty. While a song may be "sweetly play'd in tune," it too is a product of time, of beats and measures. When the song has ended, its beauty lives on only in abstraction as the *idea* of the beautiful song.

Lines 5-8:

The second stanza plays on the word "luve," revealing the elusive nature of the concept. When the speaker says "I will luve thee still," he plays on the concept of time. The line seems to indicate that the speaker will love continuously or forever, but the following line does put a limit on the amount of time he will love. His passion will continue "Till" a certain time when "the seas gang dry." Though the prospect of the seas drying up seems remote, it exists nonetheless. Thus, while the sentiment seems wholly romantic, there remains in it a hint of melancholy: The speaker is saying his love will last a long time but that it is not eternal in the purest sense.

Lines 9-11:

The repetition here of "Till a' the seas gang dry" is in keeping with the song's musicality. But in it there is also a hint of reconsideration, as if the speaker has just understood the implications of what he has said. From this, he moves to another attempt to express eternity, yet this too depends on the word "Till": he will love until the rocks "melt wi' the sun." But the rocks may indeed melt one day, or erode, in any case, under the effects of the sun, wind, and weather. At that point his love will cease, so again, his sentiments are not wholly timeless.

Line 12:

Line 12 also casts some doubt on the speaker's intentions, since it can be interpreted two ways. In one sense, he could mean that their love is separate□above or beyond□the sands of time. This indicates that it will last forever and won't change or end because of time. On the other hand, he almost seems to emphasize the fact that the sands are running, which is to say time is running out, as sand runs out of the hourglass. This direct reference to time also reminds us of the first two lines in the poem: the momentary, time-bound state of a "red, red rose that's newly sprung in June." Read in this way, the poem becomes more than the simple love ballad that it seemed initially; instead, it can also be a seen as a meditation on the speaker's consciousness of time and on limits that time can place upon human emotions.

Lines 13-16:

The last stanza seems to shift away from the predominant concerns of the first three: the speaker turns from the concept of time to that of parting. He is journeying away from his love, assuring her that he will be true and will return. Yet the concept of time enters here as well: the speaker will transcend not only vast distance ("ten thousand miles") to be with his love, but also time itself, with words like "awhile" and "again" drawing the poem back to the main concerns of the first three stanzas.

Themes

Love and Passion

Because modern readers are well familiar with the poetic imagery that Burns uses in this poem, and also because "A Red, Red Rose" was originally written to be sung as popular music, some of the poem's impact may be lost to the contemporary audience. The poem expresses love, but it does not try to stir up deep feelings of passion□instead, it reminds readers of love, making the speaker's feelings sound more theoretical than real. In the first stanza, the word "Luve" is used twice as a pronoun, describing a particular person that the speaker has in mind. By talking about this person, the poet draws attention to the other person and to how he relates to that person, rather than examining his own emotions. This raises the impression that the love affair might be more for show, for the approval of other people, than for the experience of it. In the first half of stanza 2, the poem actually says that the amount that the speaker is in love can be measured by how fair the woman is. There is a simpler reading, that because his love is great her fairness (or beauty) must be great too, but it is clearly implied that if she were now or were to become less beautiful then his love would diminish.

Lines 7 and 11 both contain promises that this poem's speaker makes to his lover. The problem, however, is that his promises are exaggerated, made in over-inflated terms that are common among passionate young lovers but are difficult to take seriously. His claim that he will still love her when the seas dry up and the sun melts rocks, or until the sands stop flowing, may or may not be true: no one will be around to see these events, so who would ever know? The final stanza mirrors the first in its use of "my Luve," but this time the phrase is directed directly to the lover. It is here that the speaker makes a specific claim: that he is leaving now, but that he will come back. Given the over-exaggeration that precedes it, readers are invited to question his commitment to love and to question whether, once he is out of sight of her beauty, he will be as committed to her as he says he will.

Time

"A Red, Red Rose" seeks to strike a balance between the temporary and the eternal. It starts with images of things that last for only a short time and then are gone. Any flower can be used by poets to remind readers of the fact that beauty is fleeting, because the life of a flower is so short when compared to human life. Flowers are often used to remind us of the interconnection of life and death because of their quick succession of budding, blossoming, and wilting. In this poem, the flower that Burns uses is especially short-lived: it is not just red but a *red, red* rose. A flower can only stay at its peak brightness for a short time. It is *newly* sprung; it is presented in June, hinting at the fate that awaits it in the autumn. Similarly, the "melodie" used to describe the lover is another image of fleeting time. This sense would have been clearer to readers in the 1700's, a

time before recording equipment, when any rendition of a song could only occur once, to be imitated later perhaps but never reproduced exactly. Melodies, like moments, evaporate into the air and become history.

These initial examples of the ways time constantly passes are in conflict with the poem's main claim. By the time they have finished with "A Red, Red Rose," readers are left with the impression that Burns is talking about love as being eternal, not fleeting. In the third stanza he claims that his love will outlast events that will take more time than humans could even imagine: seas going dry, rocks melting in the sun, etc. In the end he claims he will love her after traveling ten thousand miles, which, we assume would have to take place by horseback or sailing ship at a laborious pace. The conflicting images of love as fleeting and also measured by centuries is used to highlight the different uses of the words "my Luve": when the Luve is a person, its life is brief like a melody or a rose, but when the word is used to discuss emotions the poem uses images that time cannot affect.

Duty and Responsibility

The first three stanzas of this poem present the speaker's claims about love, while the last stanza creates an actual social situation in which he is able to act upon this great love. Readers find out at the end that there is a reason why this speaker is telling the object of his affection, his "bonnie lass," how much he cares for her. He is going away, and for some reason he expects her to doubt that his love for her will last while they are apart. Most of the poem is taken up with open-ended, unsupported claims that he loves and reveres her, but it is only at the end that he mentions something that he can take action on. In promising to come back to her, the speaker takes on a responsibility for his future action. The words "I will come again" create a moral commitment. It is not complicated with any qualifiers (such as "I will come again *unless* ..."); in fact, the last line assures that he will allow no unforeseen difficulty to keep him from her.

Readers' faith in his returning, in how serious this speaker is about his responsibility, depends on how much sincerity they see in the words he uses. If the love he describes is sincere, then there is probably no force strong enough to keep him from returning to her. If, on the other hand, the grandeur of his statements is read as a tendency toward exaggeration, then he might just be promising to return because he feels that he ought to promise, just as he is overstating his love because he feels it is what she wants to hear. Love is such a powerful emotion that it would be easy to understand someone being carried away, expressing himself with hyperbolic, flamboyant terms, but in making a promise this speaker has brought upon himself the responsibility to fulfill it.

Style

"A Red, Red Rose" is written in four four-line stanzas, or quatrains, consisting of alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines. This means that the first and third lines of each stanza have four stressed syllables, or beats, while the second and fourth lines have three stressed syllables. Quatrains written in this manner are called ballad stanzas. The ballad is a old form of verse adapted for singing or recitation, originating in the days when most poetry existed in spoken rather than written form. The typical subject matter of most ballads reflects folk themes important to common people: love, courage, the mysterious, and the supernatural. Though the ballad is generally rich in musical qualities such as rhythm and repetition, it often portrays both ideas and feelings in overwrought but simplistic terms.

The dominant meter of the ballad stanza is iambic, which means the poem's lines are constructed in two-syllable segments, called iambs, in which the first syllable is unstressed and the second is stressed. As an example of iambic meter, consider the following line from the poem with the stresses indicated:

That's *sweet* / ly *play 'd* / in *tune.*

This pattern exists most regularly in the trimeter lines of the poem, lines which most often finish the thoughts begun in the previous line. The rhythm's regularity gives the poem a balanced feel that enhances its musical sound.

Historical Context

Robert Burns is often considered a writer ahead of his time, who often embraced the idea of using common language to reach the common person just slightly before this idea became popularized as the Age of Romanticism swept across the globe. When Burns published "A Red, Red Rose" in 1794, the Age of Enlightenment was dwindling to an end. As with all historical ages, there is no definitive way of measuring the beginning or the end of the Enlightenment historians can't point to an exact moment when people across the earth agreed to adopt a set of beliefs, or when they stopped believing but the term is useful in measuring the prevailing mood of the time. As far back as the 1500s, scientists and philosophers began to believe that it was possible to understand how the universe works by establishing laws and principles: they turned from the religious explanations that were provided by the church to scientific explanations that were supported by reason. Today, people take for granted the idea that scientific inquiry should be conducted according to reason, but in the sixteenth century, nearly two hundred years before Burns's time, the idea was new and bold and slightly dangerous. The theory that Earth orbits the sun, which was first put forth by Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus in 1543 and later supported by Galileo, was opposed by the powerful Catholic Church, which sentenced Galileo to life imprisonment for suggesting that God did not place humans at the center of the universe. A key discovery that prodded Enlightenment thinking along was Isaac Newton's 1684 Laws of Motion, which included the theory of Universal Gravity that could explain events and physical actions just as clearly as referring to God's divine will could. By the 1700s, writers and philosophers were expanding out from the idea that reason could explain the way the physical universe works. Since rational theory worked so well when applied to the physical universe, they decided that there was no reason that political and social interactions could not be explained with scientific equations in the same way. During the early part of the Enlightenment, writers, based mainly in France, faced social persecution for publishing ideas that challenged the reigning authorities. One of the key figures of the time was Voltaire, who was one of the most versatile writers of his time: his essays, plays, novels and poems supported the belief that neither the church nor the monarchy had any special knowledge of the world that people of ordinary intelligence could not attain. Another key figure was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who published his philosophical work *The Social Contract* in 1762: it supported the will of the people over the previously-accepted "divine rights" of the monarchy. Voltaire spent eleven months in the Bastille for his writings, and Rousseau was exiled from France. However, later thinkers, who were strongly influenced by the French thinkers, ended up having enormous impact on how society imagined itself. One example was the German philosopher Immanuel Kant's 1781 book *Critique of Pure Reason,* which argued that moral choices must apply to all people at all times, thereby bringing the Enlightenment worship of logic to every decision a person makes. One of the results of the Age of Enlightenment was the American Revolution: the thinkers who wrote the Declaration of Independence in 1776 did so believing the untested idea that people could rule themselves at least as well as monarchs could. The United States was structured on rationalist principles that derived from the Enlightenment. Following the War of

Independence came the French Revolution, from 1789 to 1799: while the American Revolution established a new state according to democratic principles, the revolution in France reorganized an old, established state, taking power out of the hands of the aristocracy and trusting the common people's ability to follow reason.

Overlapping with the Age of Enlightenment is another era which stressed the common people over the rules of the elite: literary historians call this period the Age of Romanticism. Like the Enlightenment, the thinkers of the Romantic Age did not think that one had to come from a certain privileged class to experience the world fully or to understand it. The key difference, though, was that Romantic writers stressed emotion, not reason. Romantic writers were not interested in finding new equations to let them measure and control the world, as Enlightenment thinkers had been. Romanticism was more concerned with experiencing nature, not understanding it. As such, Romanticism allowed for the possibility of an inexplicable, supernatural world. Writers in this movement were drawn to the mysteries of the exotic, the lure of romance. Because of this emphasis on experience, the Romantic poets moved even further than the Enlightenment away from the idea of elitism: they not only rejected the idea that anyone from higher social classes was particularly knowledgeable, they also refused to believe that educated people understood the world better than uneducated people, who felt experiences more deeply. Society was corruption of humanity's natural goodness, so social success indicated a further distance from nature. Historians generally measure the Romantic period in literature as beginning with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1798, although, as "A Red, Red Rose" demonstrates, the Romantics' faith in simple, common, accessible language is one of the ideas that was around before the movement in general took root.

Critical Overview

Critics discuss "A Red, Red Rose" in terms of the delicacy of its craft and the power of its expression. Franklyn Bliss Snyder sees "A Red, Red Rose" as an example of Burns's proficiency at English verse. Calling it "one of the perfectly cut and polished gems in Burns's song collection," the critic points out that "four touches of the vernacular□bonie, gang, a', and weel□are all that save the song from being pure English." Iain Crichton Smith calls "A Red, Red Rose" an example of the sentiments of a by-gone era, suggesting that we cannot enjoy such a direct anticipation of an enduring relationship in modern times. "A poem like 'A Red Red Rose' begs too many questions, is too set in one inflated mood for us to write like it, because we would be far more concerned with the shadows. How could we possibly, in our world, speak of such permanency," he writes, possibly yearning for those by-gone times. In contrast, David Daiches writes fondly of the poem's depiction of the tenderness and swagger of the young man in love.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

David Kelly teaches courses in Creative Writing, Poetry and Drama at College of Lake County and Oakton Community College, in Illinois. The following essay examines the idea of "simplicity" in "A Red, Red Rose," questioning whether it is really as easy to understand as most readers would like to believe.

I have seen readers bulldoze through Robert Burns's "A Red, Red Rose" in thirty seconds, or however long it takes to sift all of the letters through their visual screen, and then sit back and say they know it. A bad sign is when, asked to explain it, they start with, "It's just ..." or "All he's saying is ...," to prepare the listener for the fact that there isn't much to be said. I don't know why anyone thinks poetry is something to be understood as quickly as it is read. I do know that sometimes students are forced to read something they do not like, and so want to get the whole experience over as quickly as possible, but if I were them I would be very, very surprised to find a poem that had no secrets, that presented all that it was about to the naked eye. I must admit, though, that Robert Burns, of all poets, tends to make us feel that there is no mystery beneath the surface of his work, and of all his poems "A Red, Red Rose" does the most to make readers feel that they are going over material they already know.

If you are old enough to read, and you grew up in the Anglicized world or have lived long enough in it, then you have either come in contact with Robert Burns's work or have at least encountered some source influenced by it. Poems that might ring a bell include: John Barleycorn: A Ballad," "John Anderson, My Jo," "Coming Thro' the Rye" (from which J. D. Salinger took the title of his novel *The Catcher In The Rye),* "Tarn o Shanter," and "To A Mouse" (from which John Steinbeck took the title of his novel *Of Mice and Men).* On New Year's Eve, as the clock reached the stroke of midnight, you might have sung some form of the traditional folk song "Auld Lang Syne"□perhaps even the rendition that Robert Burns set down in print as a poem. These examples, a mere speck in Burns's canon of hundreds of poems and songs, point to several of the major reasons why Burns is so familiar today. First, other writers quote him often. He was a fun writer who enjoyed using words cleverly, and he was a man of the people and not of the intellectual establishment, and these are both traits that writers often admire and emulate. Second, and perhaps most importantly, is the fact that so much of Burns's writing was taken, either in whole or in part, from songs that had already been around Scotland for years. In those days before copyright law had reached to such diverse forms of intellectual property as songs, popular music was spread by being heard and repeated, for hundreds of years sometimes. If Burns heard a set of lyrics he liked he would write them down, modifying them as he saw fit. In this way he became, not just an important writer in Scottish history, but an integral thread in the weave of Scottish culture. Unlike most authors whose works spawn forward from their time, Burns's poems stretch in both directions, future and past, from the poet himself. The third element to Burns's popularity was his use of the Scottish dialect. This stylistic tendency is often a source of trouble and vexation for non-Scottish readers, who have to slow down their reading with frequent trips to the glossary or dictionary, but it has cemented

his eternal popularity among Scots. The love of his fellow citizens is so powerful that it is felt beyond the nation's borders and throughout the world.

"A Red, Red Rose," one of Burns's most popular and most anthologized works, actually has the opposite effect on students than his reputation does. Readers may find themselves to be more familiar with the poet's works in general than they had realized, but they also find that the ideas in this poem are not as familiar as they first seem. The poem is a declaration of love, particularly a vow, upon the occasion of leaving, to keep love alive. It is a situation that does not change throughout the ages, and so impatient readers tend to read this poem once and think that they understand all that it has to say. Too often, readers proceed with a set of assumptions that does not serve them well.

One major mistaken assumption is that life was simpler in the past. The world is always becoming more and more complex, with scientists uncovering more facts, computers enabling us to send the facts around and the arts developing newer ways to turn facts into ideas. People constantly talk about how complicated life is, how simple the good ol' days were. I myself have heard students try to explain how complex modern family life is now, at the turn of the century, contrasting it to the 1970's when the standard was the intact nuclear family of Mom, Dad and two-point-five children: the explanation reminded me of how, in the 1970s, I used that same "Mom, Dad and 2.5 kids" formula to explain how much simpler life had been in the 1950s. We were all drawing on the oversimplification of television. So long as we can understand events in historical perspective better than we understand them as they are happening□that is, forever□we will always look on the past as a simpler time.

And so, many modern readers assume that "A Red, Red Rose" is straightforward, with no particular guile. They write this assumption off to their concept that people in the past did not know how to present a complex relationship, even if they knew how to have one. Such readers give up analyzing after they realize that the red rose symbolizes love in this poem, a realization that any Valentine card could explain. They think that it was all Burns could do, in his backward time, to set his ideas down on paper. Without a historical perspective (and who in American schools has much of a sense of history anymore?), Burns's poem from the late 1700s is as crude and basic as some cartoon caveman in an off-the-shoulder pelt grunting, "Me like."

If the speaker of this poem seems to lack guile, couldn't it be that he wants to seem naive? It is, after all, a love poem, and unfortunately there is as much trickery in love, as much subtext, as in poetry or in the arts in general. There is, for instance, one open and ambiguous line that could be read as an indication of the speaker's deep sincerity, but could also, with a different set of assumptions, be taken to mean that the speaker is shallow and superficial. In the second stanza, the first two lines say, in effect, "As beautiful as you are, that is how much in love with you I am." Readers who accept this poem at face value, thinking that the person's love must be great because he says it is, read these lines to mean that his love and her beauty are of such magnitude that they can only be compared to each other. But the poem does not say that they are huge, just equal: if her level of fairness is mediocre, his love is lukewarm. Equating love and beauty is not necessarily an indicator of great love, and Burns, if his ambiguous

phrasing is any clue, knew that his line would be open to many interpretations. There are other indicators that this speaker's concept of love is less heartfelt than presented, but that is not the issue here: the point is to raise the question of whether Burns could have designed this poem to be more than a sincere declaration of love.

Another reason readers assume that the speaker is being sincere is that the average person gets their greatest exposure to poetry in schools, where positive, affirmative values, including honesty, are emphasized. We are taught that, all other things being equal, poets' intentions are most likely noble, and this assumption is fed by the examples of morally uplifting poetry that are, quite properly, used in classrooms. Readers tend to go straight for a poem's uplifting message because experience tells them that poems often affirm goodness. What this assumption ignores, however, is the power of irony. It is quite possible for Burns to make the world a better place by presenting a lover who is fickle, insincere or even downright conniving. We do not have to agree with the speaker of the poem, we only have to understand him the way he understands himself, so that we know how to deal with attitudes like his when we encounter them in our lives. If we fail to wonder whether there are motives beneath the surface, we run the risk of becoming gullible. The same people who would laugh at someone for believing that an advertisement for "the great American carpet deodorizer" is *really* about patriotism, as it presents itself to be, are for some reason willing to accept this speaker's claim of his great love.

He certainly does talk like someone in love. His language is hyperbolic: he appears to think in extremes, the way lovers do. Someone who is head-over-heels in mere fondness might claim to love his bonnie lass until the creek goes dry, or until the rocks erode, but a lover in the heat of passion uses excessive language, as Burns does here. The fact that the poem is written using the plain vernacular, the common language of the average Scotsman and not the elevated English of the educated, makes the speaker that much more credible. But even while this speaker's excitement about this girl makes us trust that he believes what he is saying, at the same time it raises the suspicion that he does not know himself very well. He might be too infatuated with her to understand whether he is in love or not, or he might be working just a little too hard to convince her of his love. There are a number of things that the poet might be indicating with the simple strong language of love, other than love itself.

Readers who feel that an "old" poem like Burns's "A Red, Red Rose" is a simple piece to understand need to put more effort into their reading. Poets do sometimes state simple truths simply, but there is not much fun in that: we understand the implications of the world we live in by understanding the implications of works of art. If a poem like "A Red, Red Rose" has more to tell us than what we all want to hear□that love is wonderful□we may never know it if we don't look past its surface.

Source: David Kelly, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Bruce Meyer is the director of the creative writing program at the University ofToronto. He has taught at several Canadian universities and is the author of three collections of poetry. In the following essay, Meyer suggests that the poet desires to multiply the images of his beloved, to elevate her above mortal beings, and to provide a test to prove his love.

It seems extremely clinical, if not criminal to examine something as tender and beautiful as Robert Burns's "A Red, Red Rose" under the scrutiny of critical consideration. So delicately, so intricately is it wrought that the poem is, in itself, a frail rose. Yet the poem's delicacy, its fragility, is achieved through a wonderful series of similes that flow from one image into the next and build an argument picture by picture to form, not only a masterpiece in itself, but a wonderful addition to the ongoing tradition of love poetry.

Love poetry is more than mere flattery. It is a high form of rhetorical persuasion. The Song of Solomon, perhaps the model from which Western love poetry has evolved, is a rare piece of epideictic rhetoric where the beloved is praised. In the dialogue of the Song of Solomon, two characters frantically seek each other out throughout the city. Night is falling, and the urgency and necessity of the search is highlighted by the ways in which each voice describes the other it is seeking through a series of similes. The beloved is not seen in his or her own terms but in comparison to other things the most beautiful things and the process of finding the likeness of the beloved in other images only adds to the overwhelming sense of desire that the voices convey. Not only does the reader seek the "beloved" in himself in the Song of Solomon; he is driven to seek him, at least partially in other images. And that is part of the appeal of interwoven similes: the love object to which they are applied draws so much into his or her appearance and reflect that appearance back onto so many other objects to the point that the beloved seems to rise out of himself or herself and become not one thing but many. The comparison, in this process, becomes a much broader process than a mere metaphor might accommodate, and the single image proliferates into many images.

This is the process Burns is attempting to highlight in his poem "A Red, Red Rose." Like John Ruskin, who saw twenty-eight different colors of red in a single rose, Burns is attempting to see a kind of multifoliate array of ideas attached to his beloved. This process of extension, of adding one simile to another can be seen in the way Burns connects one verse to another by repeating the final image from the previous stanza as the first line of the next, either verbally or conceptually. But there is more to Burns's process of epideictic than mere imagistic or conceptual connectivity. The entire poem turns upon a rather commonplace conceit in the vocabulary of love poetry: the comparison of a woman with a flower.

The first stanza opens with the lines "O, my luve is like a red, red rose / That's newly sprung in June, / O, my luve's like the melodie, / That's sweetly play'd in tune." These two comparisons, the love with the rose and the love with the melody, establish not only two consecutive similes, but a juxtaposing of two very essential concepts: beauty of

appearance and beauty of sound. The poem's imagery looks after the matter of the beauty of appearances. But what catches the reader by surprise is that the beloved, in being compared to a "melodie / That's sweetly play'd in tune," is established not only as the subject of the lyric but as the lyric itself. To say that his "luve is like a melodie" is to association the beloved with the poem itself and its very lyricism.

Burns's use of the quatrains gives the poem a wonderful sense of sonic flow and an overwhelming sense of song. The song is something that the persona carries with him through time ("While sands of life shall run") and space ("Tho it were ten thousand mile!") and it is the lyric utterance that connects him to his beloved. But this is no mere song: in the opening stanza Burns repeats the in-vocative "O" which is another way of calling upon divine assistance for the singing process. The in-vocative "O", a means of calling upon either the assistance of the Muses or the help of heavenly song as in the opening lines of Shakespeare's *Henry V,* connects the idea of song to the concept of vatic "seeing," the process where the voice of the poet becomes the medium for some sort of higher utterance and observation than mere reality can provide. The invocative "O" also serves to elevate the entire series of connections and comparisons that Burns undertakes in the poem. The song to which the beloved is compared in line two, therefore, is divine song and Burns has very subtly lifted his subject matter above the mortal concerns of time and space. His love for her will last beyond the time span of the seas and is stronger than any geographical distance that might come between them. It is divine love by process of allusion.

In the scope of love poetry, what the masters of the sub-genre attempt to do is to elevate their subjects not only through praise but through connection. This was undoubtedly the process behind the Provencal poets of the eleventh century when they co-opted the structures of liturgical hymns to the Virgin Mary and applied them to the praise of mortal women. It was the same impetus of comparison that triggered the sonnet tradition□albeit that tradition is more rhetorical and discursive than lyrical□and it is the reason why even the simplest and corniest love poems, such as "Roses are Red, Violets are Blue" refract the beloved through some sort of comparative mechanism.

But beyond the standard conventions of love poetry, what makes this poem so touching is that it is a poem of departure. In the final stanza, he bids "fare thee weel" "a while" to his beloved and promises to "come again" no matter how far he may roam. Parting love poems are always difficult to evaluate because part of their ancestry lies in works such as Ovid's *Remedium* which advises the reader in the ways and means of breaking off a love affair in the classiest way possible. But regardless of the poem's ancestry and possible underhanded intent, what the reader is confronted with in Burns's lyric is a situation that strikes a note of pathos. There is a pledging of love which seems sincere because its value and strengths are compared to the question of tests□"I will love thee still my dear / Till a' the seas gang dry" or "While sands of time shall run." In a very subtle allusion to the language and structure of Medieval love romances such as Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's *La Ro-main de la Rose* (yet another nod of acknowledgment to that horticultural wonder and symbol of both martyrdom and divine, blood-pledged love), the lover of "A Red, Red Rose" is pledging himself to a test in order to prove his love, not just proffer it. The tests of time and space, the true tests of

love, are laid out with great sincerity because they address considerable magnitudes of temporality and spatiality. Such are the linguistic and imagistic conventions of love poetry.

"A Red, Red Rose," however, is more than a mere exercise in convention. The balance and delicacy of the lyricism, the simplicity of the language in its earthy Scots dialect, and the directness and accessibility of the comparisons make for a very sincere and heartfelt utterance. "So deep in luve am I," notes the persona in the second stanza, that one does not question the profundity or the verity of the emotion. The series of comparisons are intriguing in their own right, but it is the pledging that drives the poem home as a personal note of dedication and an expression of timeless love.

Source: Bruce Meyer, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Adaptations

Scotland's Burns Country: The Life and Landscape of Robert Burns. Video cassette. Lewis-ton, NY: Lapwing Productions. 1994.

Love Songs of Robert Burns. Video cassette. Phoenix, AZ: ELM Productions. 1991.

The Complete Songs of Robert Burns. Audio compact disc. Nashville, TN: Honest/Linn Records. 1996.

Redpath, Jean. *The Songs of Robert Burns.* Five audio cassettes. North Ferrisburg, VT: Philo. 1985.

Love Songs of Robert Burns. Audio cassette. Ocean City, NJ: Musical Heritage Society. 1991.

Topics for Further Study

What do you think are the circumstances of the speaker of this poem that cause him/her to leave his/her love? Write a short story or dialogue that explains why the speaker is leaving, and how this poem affects the situation.

Look through magazines and find at least five examples of red things. Which do you think could be described as "red red"? Why?

Which of the symbols used to express love in this poem works the best? Why?

Adapt this ballad to the music of a contemporary song, and explain what elements of the music you think are appropriate to what the poem is saying.

Compare and Contrast

1786: Fanners in Massachusetts, burdened by the debt of the Revolutionary War, participated in Shays' Rebellion in order to protest against having to pay the colonial government with cash. The rebellion was fairly small-scale rebels broke up a session of the state Supreme Court and tried unsuccessfully to take the state arsenalbut symbolically it was reminiscent of the uprising against oppression that led to the foundation of the country. The rebellion was one of the most glaring proofs that the Articles of Confederation that then governed the United States were inadequate: the following year the Constitution was drafted.

1990s: Twenty-seven amendments have been added to the Constitution, representing very little change needed in a document written over two hundred years ago.

1786: Inventor Ezekiel Reed developed a machine that could produce nails. Previously, all buildings were held together with wooden pegs or handmade nails.

1990s: The world's tallest buildings, thePetronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, stand at 1,483 feet each.

1786: The first public golf club in the United States was opened in Charleston, South Carolina. The game had been popular in Scotland since the 15th Century.

1990s: There are private golf courses with high membership fees, but the game of golf has been embraced by the general public in the United States, and public courses abound.

1786: The population of the United States was around 3.7 million people. The largest city, New York, had 32,000, with roughly 17,000 more on the surrounding farms that would later be incorporated into the city.

1990s: The population of the United States is estimated to be around 260 million. New York is still the most populous area, with 7.5 million inhabitants.

1786: Coal miners in Scotland worked under conditions that resembled slavery, under an edict from George III: they were subject to long hours in deplorable conditions and were treated as criminals if they tried to leave. An edict allowing them freedom was signed in 1788 and enacted in 1789.

1990s: Scotland is still a part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain, having members elected to the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

What Do I Read Next?

The definitive collection of Scottish ballads, of which Burns is considered the master, is Francis James Childs's collection *the English and Scottish Popular Ballads.* It was originally published by Houghton Mifflin in ten volumes between 1882 and 1898. In 1965 Dover Publications issued a condensed five-volume reprint.

In 1971 Greenwood Press reprinted the famous multi-volume *Scottish Poetry of the Eighteenth Century,* first published in 1896. The editor, George Eyre-Todd, has assembled the best writings of Burns and his contemporaries, many of whom are not familiar to modern audiences.

Thomas Carlyle was a famous Scottish historian from the generation after Burns (he was born in 1795: Burns died in 1796). Carlyle's book-length essay on Burns might seem a bit too complex for some modern readers, but, remembering the time it came from, it is a helpful piece for putting the poet in historical perspective. The essay was printed *as An Essay on Burns* in 1910 by Charles E. Merrill Co., and has appeared in several different formats since.

A handy reference, written for contemporary students, that puts Burns's ballads in historical perspective is *The Penguin Book of Ballads,* edited by Geoffrey Grigson and published in 1975.

The University ofIowa Press published a collection of essays in 1997 called *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority,* consisting of eleven essays by literary critics about the poet and his relation to social issues, such as "Burns and God" and "Burns and Sex."

In the 1760's Scottish poet James MacPherson published several volumes that claimed to be translations of ancient stories about a legendary Scottish folk hero, Ossian. Scholars suspect that MacPherson made the stories up himself. Those interested on Scottish literature at the time Burns was writing can read *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works (The Ossianic Works of James MacPherson).* Edited by Howard Gaskill, published by Edinburgh University Press, 1996.

Alan Bold made life immeasurably easier for students of Robert Burns by publishing^ *Burns Companion* in 1991 (St. Martin's Press). This comprehensive volume contains biographical info and literary criticism that covers the poet's career.

The book *Auld Lang Syne* by Joanne Findon and Ted Nasmith, was written for children, but it serves all ages as an intelligent (if simplified) introduction to Burns and Scotland of his time. This book imagines life in Eighteenth-Century Scotland from the poet's first-person point-of-view. Published in 1998 by Stoddard Kids Publishing.

Further Study

Hill, John C, *The Love Songs andHeroines of Robert Burns,*

London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1961.

Hill's book gives a good sense of Burns the man and of his view of romance by exploring the poems that he wrote for particular women, with biographical background material.

Kinsley, James, ed., *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns, volumes I III,* Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1960. This is the most comprehensive collection of all that Burns wrote: three volumes, each more than 1500 pages, with extensive explanations and references given for each of the works.

Rogers, Charles, *Book of Robert Burns: Genealogical and Historical Memoirs of the Poet, His Associates and Those Celebrated in His Writing,* AMS Press, 1988.

This scholarly work gives a detailed explanation of the poet's life and his influences.

Smith, Ian Crichton, "The Lyrics of Robert Burns," in *The Art of Robert Burns,* edited by R. D. S. Jack and Andrew Noble, Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Press, 1982. This poem was originally a song, and Smith examines it, along with many of Burns's other famous songs.

Sprott, Gavin, *Robert Burns: Pride and Passion: the Life, Times and Legacy,* New York: Seven Hills Book Distributors, 1996.

This huge overview of Burns's career gives readers and students a useful look at who Burns is and why we still study him today.

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Crawford, Thomas, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs,* Stanford, CA:Stanford University Press, 1960. Daiches, David, "The Identity of Burns," in *Restoration and Eighteenth Century Literature: Essays in Honor of Alan Dugald McKillop,* edited by Carroll Cam den, The University of Chicago Press, 1963, pp. 323-40.

Fitzhugh, Robert, *Robert Burns, The Man and the Poet: A Round, Unvarnished Account,* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970.

Smith, Iain Crichton, "The Lyrics of Robert Burns," in *The Art of Robert Burns,* edited by R. S. Jack and Andrew Noble, Vision Press, 1982, pp. 22-35.

Snyder, Franklyn Bliss, *Robert Burns: His Personality, His Reputation and His Art,* 1936, reprinted by Kennikat Press, 1970.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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