

# *Robert Burns*

*Teaching notes and discussion questions  
for National 6 English*

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## TO THE TEACHER

It is of course essential that your students hear a good reading of the texts before studying them, but if you lack expertise or confidence in this area, there are plenty of good readings available online, especially the BBC's Robert Burns audio archive.

Possibly a good place to start is to discuss the many myths or legends surrounding Robert Burns and to consider how these are perpetuated, exploited or presented in different ways, especially via our annual celebrations or by the tourism industry. Perhaps you might ask your students to think of reasons why he has become our 'National Bard' and how far they think he deserves this status, questions that could be asked before and after studying his work to see if there have been any shifts of opinion.

Once the class has been given an introduction to Burns as a poet, the class should be given a short introduction to each text before reading / listening to the whole work to gain an overall impression, without getting bogged down in any detail at this stage. They should also be encouraged to make their own preliminary notes after the first reading before hearing the text a second or third time. Perhaps you might want to go over the comments on each text below, with the class or amend them with your own material, before asking them to do a closer examination of each text. They should be encouraged to compile their own notes on each text after class discussion of any questions.

The sets of questions are not intended as specimen exam questions, but simply as an aid in studying the poems in class, though a couple of context type questions have been included. You will also probably want to adapt them to suit your own class. Please feel free to download, copy or amend as required.

**RANGE:**

- National 6 English

**KEY TEXTS:**

- 'To a Mouse'
- 'Holy Willie's Prayer'
- 'Address to the Deil'
- 'Tam o' Shanter'
- 'Welcome to a Bastard Wean'
- 'A Man's a Man'



## INTRODUCTION – OUR NATIONAL BARD

In spite of the annual ritual of Bardolatry every January, Burns's work is often not as well known or as well taught in our schools as it deserves. This is rather odd for a country that honours him as our national bard. It is also rather sad because in spite of all the nonsense that is spoken about him, Burns was in fact a very great poet: a brilliant satirist, a clever letter writer in verse and prose and above all perhaps one of the greatest song writers of all time.

However, like most writers, not everything he wrote was great and this was not because he lacked education or skill. Firstly he was no simple 'ploughman poet,' the sort of 'Heaven-taught, noble peasant' that many of his contemporaries so much admired. He was in fact very well educated for someone of his background and probably far more widely-read than most people today.

However, like many Scots of his time he was a product of a split culture and he was often torn between his Ayrshire or Scots identity and an 'educated' identity which taught him that polished English was the 'proper' way a gentleman and scholar should speak and write. In his desire to be accepted as a 'man of letters' by the gentry and posh Edinburgh critics of his age, he often wrote in the rather flowery sentimental style that was fashionable in English literature at the time. Thus we find a lot of his work marred by poetic clichés, lofty sentiments, vague abstractions and pious moralising as he poses as the 'man of feeling' for the benefit of 'polite' society, something that we can clearly see in poems like 'To a Mountain Daisy' or many of his pastoral songs that he wrote for women like 'Clarinda'.

The Edinburgh literati (literary critics and writers) advised him to imitate the most polished

English poets of their age and to avoid so many 'Scotticisms' in his work as they saw their native tongue as coarse, debased, incorrect English, unfit for educated discourse. Ironically when Burns followed their advice, he produced some of his poorest poetry, not simply because it is written in what we now look on as very posh English, but because it is verbose, lifeless, largely imitational and often insincere. However he also assimilated many positive features from the best English writers that he was able to use creatively for his own purposes, e.g. using more formal English for contrasting purposes or in fact using a mixture of plain English and Scots in his best work, with one complementing the other rather than conflicting with it.

Fortunately, in much of his work Burns trusted his own instincts to write about the world he knew best, in the language of his own land, to create great poems and songs which are timeless and universal.

### **The Burns Stanza**

Most of the verse forms that Burns used were inherited from the vernacular or folk tradition. The most important of these was known as the Habbie Simson stanza (made famous by the seventeenth-century elegy for the piper of Kilbarchan by Robert Sempill of Beltrees). This consists of six lines rhyming *aaabab*, with lines 1–3 and 5 having four feet or beats and the short fourth and sixth lines only two feet – very effective for creating opposing or contrasting ideas and moods, often a sort of bob in the tail. Burns used this so often and with such skill that it became known as the Burns stanza; it is used in all the poems that you will study, apart from 'Tam o' Shanter'.

### *To A MOUSE*

As well as being an age of political revolutions, Burns's period was also an era of social and economic upheaval. While industrialisation was gathering momentum, much of Scotland was still a subsistence economy, with the majority of the population only just scraping a living from the land. Although it was the age of the agricultural revolution, with improved methods and larger farms, many poorer folk were forced off the land because of enclosures, higher land prices and rents. There were also massive Lowland Clearances as well as Highland ones.

Burns and his father William Burnes (Robert changed the spelling to Burns) struggled to survive on one poor farm after another during a succession of very poor summers and harsh winters, possibly caused by volcanic eruptions in Iceland, which devastated the whole of Europe. William Burnes, like many of his kind, did not have the necessary capital to pay for the improvements needed and it was the backbreaking labour of farm work from a young age that permanently ruined Robert's health. They lived in constant fear of not being able to pay the rent and his father died with the threat of bankruptcy hanging over him. When Burns describes poor folk trembling at the hands of an angry factor in 'The Twa Dogs' he was speaking from personal experience and in 'Epistle to Davie' he even expresses the fear of ending up in one of the many packs of beggars that swarmed the countryside at this time.

As the mouse's fate was too close to his own, the emotions expressed in the poem are very genuine, unlike the pious moralising of 'To a Mountain Daisy' where he was posing for the benefit of a genteel audience. Thus we really have to see 'To a Mouse' against this background to appreciate it as more than just a sentimental poem about 'a wee sleekit, cowerin, tim'rous beastie.' Indeed the Burns scholar Thomas Crawford has argued that the coulter (the plough blade) is in reality 'part of the metaphoric plough of social change that breaks down the houses of Lowland and Highland cotters' (cottagers, farm tenants). Whether we place the poem in this particular social context or not, Burns certainly uses the mouse to make us aware of its wider symbolic significance to life on planet Earth as a whole.

While the poem gives us an insight into the peasants' battle to survive and keep starvation

from the door (as in third world economies today), the poet's sympathy for the mouse establishes a bond with all living creatures sharing the same plight and leads him on to a vision of the precarious nature of life as a whole, but especially his own. As in his other poems about farm animals and men sharing a close working relationship with the soil and seasons, we finally see the lives of mice and men closely interconnected, as we are all creatures of common clay after all. The poetic triumph of the poem lies in moving from sympathy for one particular mouse and man to make us share a more profound vision of all earthly life.

### **Questions (marks given in brackets)**

1. Explain any techniques used in stanza one to create a very vivid picture of the mouse. (2)
2. (a) Explain what he means in lines 1–2 of stanza two. (2)  
(b) What change of perspective takes place here and how does his choice of language indicate this? (2)  
(c) Show how the last two lines of this stanza express key ideas in the poem as a whole. (3)
3. What attitude is shown towards the mouse in stanza 3 and which words show this best? (2)
4. Show how he develops a sharp contrast between the mouse's efforts and hostile elements in stanzas 4–6. (3)
5. Bearing Thomas Crawford's above comment in mind, how many parallels can you see between the lives of mice and men in stanzas 4–6? (2)
6. In stanzas 7–8 these parallels are made quite explicit. Explain how and why he switches perspective again and what vision of life he develops in this last section. (4)
7. Comment on the tone or mood of the last stanza and explain why he says 'thou art blest compared wi me'. (3)
8. Burns uses some very effective contrasts in language style in this poem e.g. between formal, almost biblical English and Scottish folk idioms or proverbs. Give a couple of examples and say what you think each register adds to the poem (2)

**Total marks: 25**

## The Religious Satires

Try to read some of Burns's other religious satires (e.g. 'Address to the Unco Guid' or 'The Holy Fair') to put the poems you are studying in their wider context. The 'unco guid' (the awfully good, very holy and rigidly righteous) are in fact the main objects of many of Burns's greatest satires and though he depicts their eighteenth-century Scottish incarnation, their self-righteous condemnation of others can be found in many shapes and forms in today's world. Perhaps you could ask your students to discuss who or which groups they think might be considered as the equivalent of the 'unco guid' today.

In the eighteenth century the Kirk still exerted very strict control over all aspects of life, often in a conscientious and caring way, but in the hands of more fanatical ministers and zealous elders it often became an instrument of social and spiritual tyranny. The 'unco guid', because they held firmly to the more extreme 'auld licht' Calvinist theology, took a very dim view of anyone who did not adhere to these austere beliefs, seeing them as sinners bound for hell and eternal damnation (John Calvin was the sixteenth-century French Protestant reformer who inspired John Knox, the leader of the Scottish Reformation).

According to the more zealous adherents of the Calvinist doctrine of Predestination, God has planned everything since the beginning of time, especially the selection of 'the Elect', the chosen few who are 'saved' and granted entry to the kingdom of Heaven, as opposed to the vast majority who are doomed to eternal damnation, as if God is taking his revenge for the 'original sin' of the Garden of Eden and all the consequent evils of mankind, inspired by Satan.

The perverse irony of this doctrine is that if you are chosen at birth as one of the elect, then it doesn't matter how wicked you really are, as you will still be saved and, conversely, no matter how good a life you lead you will still be damned at the end of the day! The perversity of these concepts are memorably exposed in James Hogg's *The Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, a grimly satirical novel on self-righteous religious fanaticism.

It is often said that the Church, both Catholic and Protestant, has sometimes been more concerned with Satan and preaching about sin, Hellfire and damnation than with the love of God, and this was certainly still true in Burns's time, when the 'deil' and his servants were seen as lurking everywhere, responsible for every evil that beset mankind (the last witch burning in Scotland was as recent as 1728) and forever trying to tempt us with evils of the flesh, even innocent pleasures like music and dancing (hence the orgy in Kirk Alloway), while it was also thought that God permitted Satan to punish sinners in this world as well as the next.

However these 'Auld Licht' views were increasingly being challenged by the 'New Licht' views of the more liberal, reforming element in the Kirk who, in keeping with the spirit of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, believed in a compassionate, forgiving God of the New Testament who offered hope to sinners as well as those who led a good life. It was essentially this more humane view of the Creator that Burns was taught from an early age by his own father, William Burnes, whose moral values played a very formative role in the shaping of Robert's outlook on life.

However when the errant and mischievous young poet acquired the reputation of being a 'fornicator' in Mauchline he soon became a target of the disapproval of 'the unco guid', something that led him into exercising his scathing wit to ridicule their narrow, superstitious beliefs, as in *Address to the Deil*, and their smug, hypocritical outlook on life, exemplified by kirk elders like the notorious William Fisher who attempted to land Robert's landlord and friend, the lawyer Gavin Hamilton, in trouble with the Mauchline Kirk Session for breaking the Sabbath and failing to attend the church. Yet the case backfired spectacularly on Fisher and the minister, the Rev William ('Daddy') Auld when it was thrown out on appeal to the Presbytery of Ayr. Burns soon put pen to paper to create one of the sharpest poetic satires ever written in 'Holy Willie's Prayer,' though it was never published in his lifetime, only circulated by hand.

### *HOLY WILLIE'S PRAYER*

Using the form of a dramatic monologue, Burns creates a convincing, complex character who is completely oblivious to the fact that he condemns himself out his own mouth, exposing his supreme egotism, smugness, hypocrisy, spite, hate and greed. His combination of apparent piety and self interest are in fact quite breathtaking and he combines the two with such conviction that in some ways he isn't a hypocrite at all. In creating this comic masterpiece, Burns not only makes us laugh at his exposure of hypocrisy but uses ridicule to destroy any credibility in the narrow creed of the 'unco guid' as well as the religious concepts that they built their faith on.

#### **Questions (marks given in brackets)**

1. What picture of Willie's God and of mankind do we get from the opening section of adoration (stanzas 1–5) where Willie addresses and praises his God? (3)
2. How does he illustrate the following religious concepts: predestination, the elect, original sin? (3)
3. How does the poet use irony very effectively in this section? (2)
4. What is Willie's picture of himself and his role in God's plans and how is this effectively undercut in the next section (confession)? (3)
5. How does he excuse himself and what does this reveal about his character? (2)
6. In the last section of the prayer (the intercession, i.e. asking God to intercede on his behalf, from 'Lord bless thy chosen'), Willie's true motives are revealed. Explain what these are, what further light it sheds on his character and how this further undermines his vision of himself. (3)
7. What ultimate picture are we given of Willie's God and Willie's relationship to him in the last two verses? (2)
8. How does the final satirical bite in the last stanza provide an effective conclusion to the poem? (2)
9. Show how the use of the prayer form, structure and language provide the foundations for the poet's satire (i.e. setting up certain expectations that are ironically undercut by the opposite). (5)

**Total marks: 25**

#### **Essay Question**

- How successful do you think Burns is in exposing hypocrisy and evil in this poem, and how far do you think it is still relevant to our own age?

#### **ADDRESS TO THE DEIL**

Burns was undoubtedly a bit of a rebel in more ways than one and he even claimed to be an admirer of Satan as portrayed in John Milton's 'Paradise Lost' (the seventeenth-century epic poem about the rebellion of the fallen angels against the Almighty). Yet his Address presents 'Auld Nick' as a very human figure, full of fun and mischief, almost like an impish practical joker that rural folk need to be on their guard against as his tricks are legendary, stretching away back into biblical times. As the devil of folklore, rather than the Satan of auld licht theology, he seems to represent some vital joyful aspect of the human spirit that the kirk has repressed and forbidden and hence the friendly tone with which he is addressed almost suggests that he is an old crony of the poet's, while the concluding suggestion that the devil might yet have a chance of being saved ridicules the whole idea of predestination as the 'Auld Lichts' maintained that a sinner's repentance could only mean something if that person was already one of the elect.

#### **Discussion**

- What is your view of religious concepts like Heaven and Hell, the role of a Supreme Being or Creator behind the universe, and life on planet Earth?
- Do you believe in the concepts like the will of God/Allah, etc., fate and predestination, original sin and its part in the evils of human behaviour or 'nature'?
- What do you understand by the term human 'nature'? Is it something fixed and permanent or is it something that is variable and subject to change? Is it more a matter of nature or nurture?
- Are you superstitious in any way? How and why? Is this wise, or dangerous, or just daft?



**Questions (marks given in brackets)**

1. How would you describe the tone of the poet's invocation (summons, calling up) to the devil in stanzas 1–2 and which particular expressions or images support this? (3)
2. In his praise of Satan in stanza 3, how do we know that he is being mock-serious? (2)
3. The poet has more than one reason for describing what his granny used to tell him, one functional and one satirical. What are his reasons, and considering what she told him, what is ironic about the line in stanza 6, 'To say her pray'rs douce honest woman'? (3)
4. Which stanza do you think best recreates superstitious fears of the devil and what techniques help to bring these to life? (3)
5. How does he show that Satan was blamed for all their troubles and how does he suggest that he might sometimes be a convenient excuse, especially for male impotence (stanzas 10–11). (2)
6. How does he suggest several perfectly natural explanations for encounters with the devil? (stanzas 6–8 and 12–13). (2)
7. How does he make us see biblical figures as very human and Satan's biblical exploits as mischievous practical joking? How is the satire advanced by these two methods? (4)
8. How would you describe the change of mood in the last two stanzas and how does this bring about an effective conclusion? (2)
9. Look at the overall structure of the poem. How would you divide it into different sections? Explain why and show how he provides links between each. (4)

**Total marks: 25**

**TAM O' SHANTER**

It is unfortunate that Burns only attempted the narrative form of poetry once, as it produced what many consider to be his poetic masterpiece. Considering the masterly narrative skill Burns reveals here, it is hard to believe he wrote it all in one day to supply 'a pretty tale' to accompany a drawing of the ruined Kirk Alloway in a book about Scottish Antiquities by the English antiquarian, Captain Grose.

However its origins lie much further back in the prolific oral tradition of Lowland Scotland, especially the tales he often heard at his own fireside as a boy and in the rich assortment of colourful characters from his own Ayrshire background. Burns therefore learned the oral storyteller's art at an early age and it is perhaps significant that he supposedly composed much of it in his head while walking along the banks of the River Nith, at Ellisland farm, near Dumfries.

His narrative craft is brilliantly displayed in the opening section which acts as a short prologue, introducing us to all the key elements: the setting and atmosphere, the main character in his familiar haunts, a humorous tone, but a forewarning of a dangerous journey ahead and a 'warm' reception at the end of it, plus various key ideas in the theme, especially pleasure and punishment. He also gains our confidence and credibility right at the start by beginning in the ordinary everyday world of Ayr on market day and establishing a genial familiar tone with the reader, which helps us to suspend our disbelief when we later encounter the extraordinary, while it also prepares us for his satirical asides and undercurrents.

Note how the narrative is as neatly constructed in sections and each block neatly supports the other and they are all firmly cemented together by forewarnings, clever thematic links and repetitions, such as the forewarning of a dark journey home and Kate's warning all coming to pass, plus a final 'warning' at the end, the image of 'nicht's black arch' and 'the keystone' of Brig o' Doon, repeated references to Kirk Alloway and the Doon or the repeated references to Kate, Meg and the witches, drink and the devil and other contrasts of pleasure and punishment, such as through the contrasting images of bees. Note also how within each section there is a familiar pattern of atmospheric description,

narrative development and author's ironic comments or asides.

We can also see his great narrative skill in using various narrative hooks like foreshadowing and forewarnings and a growing sense of inevitability; clever varying of the pace of the story, speeding it up and holding it back, increasing and slackening the tension and suspense; gradually developing the atmosphere and displaying great dramatic skill in building up the highlights; cleverly varying the narrative voice, tone and mood, while also making effective use of cinematic techniques in varying the focus and perspective of the narrative.

All this is carried along by the technical mastery of his verse, where his deft handling of the short four foot (or octosyllabic) line, with its fast-flowing iambic rhythms and neat rhyming couplets all serve to drive the narrative on with such speed that we are led swiftly from one scene to another before we know where we are.

Thus we are led from the cosy warmth, and drunken revelry of the pub, out into the thunderstorm, where Tam's alcoholic confidence soon evaporates and the world seems about to end, drawing him inevitably towards the supernatural horrors (or drunken fears) and temptations of Kirk Alloway, leading us with gathering momentum and excitement towards the wild crescendo of the dance, freezing the action in the momentary breathless silence after 'weel done, Cutty-sark', before the demented panic of Tam fleeing for his very life at breakneck speed and being saved at the last minute by the powerful combination of his horse's tail and running water, an old pagan superstition, which leaves us all with the final cold words of warning, delivered tongue-in-cheek, as if mocking the 'unco guid' and all their sermonising.

This mock-moral at the end highlights the underlying satirical strand of the tale, though we have been prepared for it by all his comic asides and use of parody. Indeed the whole tale is a gleeful send-up of just about everything in sight. At the centre of the poem is a larger than life comic character who is treated with a combination of sympathy and mockery by the poet. While he has a

dig at nagging wives ('Ah, gentle dames', etc.), most of the humour is at Tam's expense as he is reduced from a braggart to a mouse of a man, fleeing from the witches or whatever he thinks he saw in Kirk Alloway. 'Heroic Tam' indeed! He is in reality 'a skellum, a blethering, blustering, drunken blellum.'

Here Burns uses a common pattern in Scottish literature of using alcohol as a possible explanation for the supernatural, but he leaves it up to us to decide for ourselves. Tam, torn between two contrasting types of women – the angry reality of Kate and the wild fantasy of Nannie – is confronted in Kirk Alloway with a vision of all the things he enjoys or desires, like music, dancing, drinking, and sex, but all these things are associated with the Devil who possesses all the pagan vitality that the Kirk had tried to suppress. Surrounded by the grotesque horrors of Calvinist guilt and fear, Tam ends up fleeing for his life, though he only escapes to face Kate's wrath which has no doubt been simmering all night. However, all that has really happened, in spite of all the dire warnings, is that a horse has lost its tail, not quite the dreadful consequences of the hellfire preachers.

Yet as well as satirising the 'unco guid' and their like, perhaps Burns also unearths a deeper and more bitter truth about such a repressed culture which emerges 'in vino veritas' (literally, the truth is in wine, i.e. the truth emerges via alcohol). For Tam, drink represents an escape from a cold harsh, forbidding world to a world of warmth, pleasure and momentary happiness where he reaches out desperately for all the pleasures he desires, but cannot have without being pursued by fear, guilt and an obsessive sense of sin. 'Pleasures are like poppies spread', etc., and bees that 'flee hame wi' lades o treasure' in the pub, later turn into bees that 'bizz out wi' angry fyke' as he is chased by Nannie.

Thus real pleasure or permanent happiness is something beyond the grasp of fallen man, 'defiled wi' sin' and so 'Tam o' Shanter' strikes a shaft of lightning into the dark pit of a repressive, judgemental and hypocritical society as well as the perverse moral universe of a punitive and sin-obsessed religion.

**Questions (marks given in brackets)**

1. Study the prologue and show how it makes use of cinematic techniques, like panoramic, long, medium and close-up shots. (3)
2. Show how the prologue leads on to Kate's nagging and how both prepare us for the journey home and Tam's adventures. (3)
3. What do we make of Burns's comments about 'honest' Tam and 'honest men' as well as 'gentle dames'? (2)
4. Within each section of the poem there is a familiar structural pattern of description, narrative and comment. Show how this is done in any one section. (3)
5. From any part of the poem, explain how any three narrative techniques are used to hook and hold our interest. (don't use the last main section). (3)
6. Study any two examples of Burns's vivid use of imagery, show how they create their effect and what they add to the theme. (4)
7. Pick two examples where repetition and sound effects are cleverly used (e.g. lines 168–70, 183–92 or 193–200) and show what they contribute to the impact of these lines. (4)
8. Pick one example of a comic aside or comment by Burns. What do you think its purpose is and how would you describe the tone? Is he being serious, comic or is his attitude maybe ambivalent, i.e. trying to have it both ways? (3)

***Total marks: 25***

**Context Questions (marks given in brackets)**

Extract from line 179 ('But here my Muse ...') to 218 ('scarce a stump').

1. Show how Burns varies the following in building up the dramatic climax in this section: narrative focus, pace, suspense. (3)
2. At 'my Muse', Burns switches from direct narrative action to commentary on the difficulties of telling the story. Trace the changes in narrative stance and tone throughout this section. (3)
3. Look at any comic aspect of this extract (e.g. visual or verbal or arising from the character or situation, etc.). Explain why you think it is funny and show how it fits into the overall mood. (2)
4. Select any linguistic feature that you think makes an important contribution to the atmosphere and show how it does so. (2)
5. Select any feature from this extract that you think reveals an important element or theme in Burns's poetry and show how he handles it in a similar and/or different way in one other poem. (10)

***Total marks: 20***



*WELCOME TO A BASTARD WEAN,  
OR, A POET'S WELCOME TO HIS  
LOVE-BEGOTTEN DAUGHTER*

This poem offers us a great deal of insight into Burns's life and art and provides a bridge from the poems to the songs. It defiantly celebrates the birth of his first child in 1785, a 'bastard wean' begot with Betty Paton, his mother's servant girl, for which he had to sit on the 'cutty-stool' for three consecutive Sundays to do penance for his 'fornication'. (See also his song 'The Fornicator'.)

Yet there is not the slightest trace of regret, humiliation or repentance in the poem, but quite the opposite, as his love for both the child and her mother outshines everything and amounts almost to a passionate statement of his creed that love, physical and spiritual, between a man and woman, represents the most positive aspect of human life and should be viewed as something joyful and sacred. Thus he ignores the dirty minds of gossips and scorns the kirk's black life-denying creed. In defiance of their disapproval, he thus celebrates the 'funny toil' of their love and the 'sweet fruit' of their relationship, even though it came 'a wee unsought for'. Indeed the whole moral basis of the poem is built on the contrast between this honesty and affection and the negative values of the 'unco guid' as well as the material values of the well-off, all recurring themes in Burns's work.

It is interesting to compare this poem with his song 'The Rantin Dog the Daddie o't', which also displays the same swagger, tenderness and utter defiance of the stool of repentance, the 'creepie chair', but this time it is written from the mother's point of view. The birth of children, especially those born out of wedlock, seems to have brought out Burns's most tender feelings. (See also 'On the Birth of a Posthumous Child'.) In spite of his reputation and his occasional outbursts of sexual boastfulness, he was in fact a very proud 'loving father' whose ideal of domestic bliss, was to sit by the fireside surrounded 'wi' weans and wife' and he always provided for his own illegitimate children as best he could, though usually, like wee Betty Burns, brought up by his mother.

**Questions (marks given in brackets)**

1. Compare the shorter title (Burns's choice) with the longer one (his editor's). Explain the contrasts in language and style between the two. Which do you prefer and why? (3)
2. How does the opening stanza set the tone for the whole poem? (2)
3. What conflicting feelings are revealed in stanza three and what do they show about his state of mind? (3)
4. How does he view 'their' love in the 'sweet fruit' stanza and how is this shown by his choice of words? How do his feelings in the last two lines complement this attitude? (4)
5. What is his attitude to both gossips and 'priests' and how is this shown by choice of words and images? (4)
6. How are contrasting images of poverty and wealth used to develop his feelings and what does his 'inheritance' to the child show about his sense of values? (3)
7. Show how the last stanza draws together many of the different strands in the poem. (3)
8. In one draft of the poem Burns used the 'wee image' stanza as his fourth (i.e. before the 'sweet fruit' stanza). Do you think this improves the structure or not? Why? (3)

**Total marks: 25**

## BURNS'S SONGS

A wish, that to my latest hour  
Shall strongly heave my breast,  
That I for poor auld Scotland's sake  
Some usefu plan or book could make,  
Or sing a sang at least.

(Answer to the Guidwife o Wauchope House)

While Burns was undoubtedly a great world poet, his worldwide fame is mainly due to his songs, albeit a very limited number of them, while even in Scotland only a relatively small number of them are really well known. This is rather a shame considering that he 'produced' around 370 songs (about 250 of which he could claim as his own) a very high percentage of them memorable, and many of them truly immortal.

In artistic terms, folk song was in fact Burns's first and last love, as his first composition at the age of fifteen was a song to his harvest companion Nelly Kilpatrick, and he was still writing songs on his deathbed ('O Wert Thou in the Cauld Blast'). In his *Commonplace Book* he wrote 'I never had the least thought or inclination of turning poet till I got once heartily in love, and then rhyme and song were, in a manner, the spontaneous language of the heart' while the great Burns's scholar David Daiches refers to the poet's propensity to fall in love and to associate his love with Scottish song. It is true that the majority of his songs are love songs of one kind or another, but it takes more than powerful emotions to produce great songs. He was in fact a very skilful craftsman in the folk song tradition, always polishing the art of fusing the right words to the right tune and taking great care with the technical aspects of his musical craft.

Yet his skill and genius only bore fruit because there was a vast store of music and song to work with that had been passed on orally or collected by others like Allan Ramsay or David Herd. From his own mother he inherited a wide knowledge of folk songs, but especially after 1786 and his tours to other parts of the country, he became 'absolutely crazed' about

collecting and publishing 'all the Scotch songs, with the music that can be found.'

Although many of his critics thought that he was wasting his time on trivial material, Burns dedicated the last ten years of his life to rescuing from oblivion, hundreds of songs without words or with only a few lines remaining, or finding new tunes to old lines. In so doing he performed, according to the novelist James Barke, 'a feat unique in the history of art' (Intro to his edition of Burns) and he refused any payment for his labours, regarding it as a work of 'patriotic duty'.

Burns must have possessed a superb ear for a good tune and the clever rearranging of a melody, but his songs resound with many moving, merry, memorable melodies whose roots are in the folksong and dance tradition. He also had a great passion for dancing and many of his songs are set to old fiddle tunes (which explains why some are difficult to sing) though the key or tempo has often been subtly changed to alter the mood, while his songs also echo to the rhyming and rhythmic patterns of folksong and dance.

Thus above all we have to appreciate that his songs are not just poems set to music, as the tune usually came first with Burns and, in his best work, the musical qualities of the song almost create the words. It is also vitally important that you hear the songs sung in a style that respects the nature of the songs. Fortunately the Scottish folksong revival in more recent times has rediscovered not only many fine Burns's songs, but also reminded us of the way they should be sung: often in a simple unaccompanied style or accompanied by a fiddle or guitar / lute (instruments Burns possessed and could play) instead of the formal drawing room piano performance which often attempted to 'gentrify' or 'polish' the songs, something that was being done to many of them as soon as they were published and something Burns disliked intensely.

## Political Songs

Here's freedom to them that wad read  
Here's freedom to them that wad write!  
There's nane ever fear'd that the truth  
    should be heard  
But they whom the Truth wad indite.  
    (from 'Here's a Health to them that's awa')

It is important to set these songs in their wider political context. During Burns's lifetime, revolutionary social and political changes were sweeping Europe and the poet's outlook was profoundly affected by them. His admiration of the American Revolution and his support of the French Revolution, at least initially, are clearly expressed in his writing as he saw them as championing freedom and liberty against the old repressive feudal monarchies of Europe.

Scotland at this time was politically little more than a corrupt colony where relatively few people had the vote and most of these were controlled or bought by a handful of landed gentry and wealthy merchants.

Greatly influenced by Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*, with its defence of republicanism in general and the French Revolution in particular, Burns became an outspoken supporter of reforming societies like The Friends of the People, which demanded universal suffrage and annual Parliaments, not exactly revolutionary demands to us, but they were then. Yet once the war with Revolutionary France began, Britain became an even more repressive and undemocratic society, with free speech and the right to assemble banned and people arrested without being charged or put on trial.

It was during this period that Burns was accused of revolutionary sympathies and to keep his job in

the excise service, and his family from poverty, he had to crawl to his superiors and make a public show of loyalty to the crown. He was warned that his duty was 'to act and not to think ... to be silent and obedient', an instruction which Burns commented on as follows:

In politics if thou wouldst mix  
And mean thy fortunes be,  
Bear this in mind, be deaf and blind  
Let great folks hear and see.

If he had to learn to remain silent about oppression in the present, he could always write about his heroes who had fought for human rights and freedom in the past. In particular his patriotic Scottish feelings had always been stirred by the heroic deeds of William Wallace and in 'Scots Wha Hae' he used the Scottish Wars of Independence to celebrate his ancestors who had fought for liberty with Wallace and Bruce, but he was also making a covert statement about 'oppressions woes and pains' and 'servile chains' in his own day.

If Burns's political sympathies sometimes lay with the Jacobins (French Revolutionaries), his patriotic sentiments could also be stirred by the Jacobites (followers of King James of the Stuart dynasty). Although it almost became fashionable to proclaim Jacobite sympathies once the cause was well and truly lost and its tragic failure became part of a nostalgic lament for Scotland's past, Burns's grandfather was 'out', in the 1715 rebellion and Jacobite songs clearly appealed to both the romantic and the patriot in him. Many of them were also protest songs which tapped into the widespread anti-Union feelings of the time.

*FOR A' THAT, OR, A MAN'S A MAN, OR,  
IS THERE FOR HONEST POVERTY*

A year before he died Burns sent a copy of this song to George Thomson (editor of *A Select Collection of Scottish Airs*) but it was not published until 1805. No doubt he was somewhat disillusioned by the way the French Revolution had turned out, but he still believed in its ideals and supported the movement for reform in his own country. It was the middle of a European War and a paranoid British Government, with its spies hunting for radicals everywhere, was imprisoning and sending reformers like the young lawyer Thomas Muir and the Rev. Thomas Palmer to Botany Bay. Criticising the government or being seen as a radical was therefore increasingly dangerous and Burns was forced to keep a low profile, though he continued using various pseudonyms to have his letters published in the Edinburgh and London press.

Yet 'A Man's a Man', or whichever title you prefer, shows Burns's true feelings on the politics of his day. It is clearly inspired by Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* (with its attack on aristocratic power and privileges), though the 'honest man' theme was a popular one with earlier eighteenth-century poets like Alexander Pope ('an honest man's the noblest work of God', a line quoted by Burns and often attributed to him). Burns however developed these ideas into a powerful anthem in celebration of equality, liberty and the individual worth of ordinary men (and he also meant women and wrote 'The Rights of Women') regardless of rank or wealth. It has been called the 'Marseillaise of Equality' by Auguste Angellier, a French Professor who admired Burns greatly, while the great German Burns scholar, Professor Hans Hecht, has called it 'the poet's profession of faith'.

The whole song is effectively structured round a series of opposites, from the opening rhetorical question and scornful answer which contrasts the 'coward slave', who is ashamed of his poverty, with the real man who disregards his lowly position and takes pride in his dignity as a human being. This develops into a further contrast between honest poverty and the empty pride of the high born, expressed via contrasting images of real gold (i.e. real human worth) and a worthless paper stamp, a mere representation of a golden guinea, a symbol of false worth and emptiness.

This monetary symbolism forms the basis of a whole series of vivid illustrations which develop the main theme over the next three verses via images of glossy material wealth and pomp set against wholesome images of simple living and real human worth, from which come the qualities that make the honest man the 'king o' men', something wealth cannot purchase or princes command. The last verse then draws universal conclusions from these contrasts and, reinforced by the simplicity of the language, the internal rhymes and other forms of repetition, he builds up to a great inspirational climax in his vision of universal brotherhood and equality at the end.

Once again we can see here how Burns blends Scots and English to good effect. Overall the language of the poem is simple, but dignified, as befits the theme, but in contrasting homely Scots with more formal English he reflects the contrast between the lives of the poor and the gentry, while he also fuses abstract English like 'man o independent mind', 'Sense and Worth', with simpler Scots and many of the key ideas are expressed in down-to-earth folk idioms like 'the man's the gowd', or 'bear the gree' all of which firmly roots his vision in the language of the common folk.

If we look closely at the air Burns uses we can see another fine example of his skill in fusing words and music as the development of his theme is matched by the tempo and the melodic structure. Firstly the lively iambic rhythms of the old tune are slowed down to a more dignified tempo, suitable for an anthem, though it still has a marching rhythm and the mood of a cheerful hymn. Also notice that although five out of eight lines in each verse end with 'a' that', plus the repeat in the fifth line, this simple repetition doesn't become monotonous but like a drumbeat it suggests the driving power of the poet's belief in the irresistible and inevitable triumph of the common man and the brotherhood of man.

Likewise the melody itself is repetitive but powerful as the verbal repetition matches that of the tune. The second two lines repeat the first two and they lay down the main idea of each verse which is then developed in the second half where the recurring second line of the melody is repeated in lines six and eight, but enhanced by the rising

inflexion and longer stresses of the fifth line repeat. It then rises to a melodic climax in line seven which Burns reserves for key images or his most passionate statements, while he concludes with final emphatic repetition as the melody descends to its refrain line.

### Discussion

- How far do you feel Burns would be uplifted or downcast if he could see how far or how little his vision had come to pass?
- Do you share his belief in universal brotherhood or is it just romantic idealism?
- Do you think Burns's criticism of the rich and powerful is still relevant?
- How equal, free and democratic do you think our country is? Does democracy mean different things to different people and different cultures? What does it mean to you?

### Questions (marks given in brackets)

1. The first three verses all begin with a rhetorical question. Show how one of these develops an answer to the question posed. (2)
2. Show how the contrasting images of 'gowd' and 'the guinea's stamp' are developed in verses 2–4. (2)
3. How does he show his attitude to the gentry in verse 3 and what is implied by the phrase 'ca'd a lord'? (2)
4. Why does he say 'an honest man's aboon his might' in verse 4? (2)
5. Explain the difference between 'an a' that' and 'for a' that' and show how the phrase is used to good effect in the song. (2)
6. If this song is a confession of faith for Burns, show how the ideas or issues expressed here complement the ideas or issues explored in another of his works. (10)

*Total marks: 20*