



Understanding

ROBERT BURNS

VERSE, EXPLANATION AND GLOSSARY

George Scott Wilkie

foreword by James Cosmo

To a Mouse

Wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie,
Oh, what a panic's in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa' sae hasty
Wi' bickerin' brattle!
I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee
Wi' murdering pattle!

The poet is doing his utmost to assure this terrified little creature that he has no intention of causing it any harm.

bickerin' brattle = scurry/run; *laith* = loath;
pattle = a small spade for cleaning a plough



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How many times have you heard or read one of the wonderful poems of Scotland's national bard, Robert Burns, and not completely understood it? For many readers of Burns, the beauty of his writing cannot be fully appreciated until the Lowland Scots used in much of Burns' poetry is translated and the meaning of every unfamiliar word made clear. When George Wilkie's first book, *Select Works of Robert Burns* was published in 1999 it was met with critical acclaim. Murdo Morrison (past President of the Burns Federation) described the book as, 'an absolute essential in the comprehension of the work of Robert Burns.'

This revised and extended edition, with over 130 poems, is a testament to the endearing popularity of Burns. Each poem is annotated with an explanation of its meaning with a glossary where necessary. Many of Burns' more famous poems are included, such as *Tam O'Shanter* and *Holy Willie's Prayer* as well as some of his more unusual works.

Understanding Robert Burns finally allows the work of Burns to be read by any English speaker and is an essential primer to those coming to the bard for the first time.



George Scott Wilkie became a fan of Burns as a Leith schoolboy and has retained this interest throughout adult life. He is retired and lives in a riverside village near Cambridge.

NWP

UK: £10
USA: \$15
CANADA: \$23.95

www.nwp.co.uk

ISBN 1-903238-48-X



9 781903 238486

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Thanks to my son, Stuart, for his help on the computer front,
and to Diana Peacock for pushing me into the first edition.

First published in 2002 by
Neil Wilson Publishing
303a The Pentagon Centre
36 Washington Street
GLASGOW
G3 8AZ
Tel: 0141-221-1117
Fax: 0141-221-5363
E-mail: info@nwp.co.uk
www.nwp.co.uk

All text excluding the original works of Robert Burns
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A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN-10: 1-903238-48-X
ISBN-13: 978-1-903238-48-6

Typeset in Jenson

Designed by Mark Blackadder

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd., King's Lynn, Norfolk

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Foreword

In the forerunner to this book, *Select Works of Robert Burns*, George Wilkie displayed his comprehensive knowledge of the bard's works and his understanding of Burns as both man and poet.

Understanding Robert Burns develops this idea, bringing the reader an easily accessible glossary with an interpretation of those verses that may be difficult to understand. For the newcomer to Burns, George will give invaluable insight into the works. The aficionado, too, will gain from the excellence of George's research.

It gives me great pleasure to commend George Wilkie's book, *Understanding Robert Burns*, and I hope it brings you as much enjoyment as it has to me.

James Cosmo

James Cosmo is one of Scotland's most celebrated actors, and has starred in many film and television productions over the years, including the Inspector Rebus TV series and the Oscar-winning *Braveheart*. He is also passionate about the works of Robert Burns.

Introduction

As January 25 approaches each year, thousands of people in countries all over the globe prepare to celebrate the life of Scotland's most famous son. The kilts are brought out and the sporrans and skean-dhus are given a polish. The speeches are rehearsed, the haggis is prepared along with the tatties and the neeps, and, of course, a few wee drams will be consumed during the evening.

The Bard's most popular works will be brought out, given an airing, and we'll hear what a lad he was for the lassies, and what a terrible fellow he was for fathering so many children by so many women. There'll be all sorts of scandalous stories regarding his private life that will be dressed up as the 'Immortal Memory', his life-style seemingly more important than his life's work.

Then, at the end of the evening, everyone will go home feeling that they've had a great night and promptly forget about Robert Burns until the same time next year.

They don't know what they're missing!

Burns, in common with many other great figures in history, did indeed have a colourful and eventful life during his 37 short years upon this earth, his early demise due in no small part to the doctors of the time who believed that standing immersed in the freezing waters of the Solway Firth would benefit his failing health.

But his lifestyle is not the reason for his everlasting fame. That is due simply to the wonderful legacy of poems and songs that he left to the world, and which most certainly deserve to be read more than once a year.

Robert Burns was a man of vision. He believed absolutely in the equality of man, irrespective of privilege of rank or title. He detested cruelty and loved the gifts of nature.

It is undeniable that Burns liked the company of women, but what is not generally recognised is that he was a strong advocate of women's rights, at a time when few men were.

He despised false piety and consequently was unpopular with the church as he mocked their preachers mercilessly.

I have, however, heard an eloquent Church of Scotland minister describe some lines from the Bard's works as being no less than modern proverbs, and it is difficult to disagree with that statement when one considers the depth of meaning in some of the words that Burns wrote.

'The best laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft agley!'

'Man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn!'

'O wad some Power the giftie gie us to see oursels as ithers see us!'

'An honest man's the noblest work of God!'

The works of Robert Burns are indeed full of wisdom!

Burns' poems and songs are wonderful to read, but as many are composed in what is virtually a foreign language to the bulk of English speakers, they can be heavy going to the non-Scot, or non-Scots speaker.

This book contains a varied selection of Burns' works, some well known, others less so. It is designed to make the understanding of the verses simpler than constantly having to refer to the glossary, but without interfering in any way with the original. Burns' words remain sacrosanct! Where necessary, each verse is annotated with a simple explanation that allows the reader to follow the poem without constant interruption, and hopefully to appreciate with ease what the Bard is saying.

Let me stress that the explanations are merely my own thoughts as to the meaning of the works. If you would prefer to work them out for yourself I would recommend sitting down and writing out or typing each verse. This is essential if you are a student with exams to sit on Burns, and will ensure that your eyes do not skate across the lines, missing out much of what is contained in them.

Read and enjoy the words of Robert Burns and you will join the many millions who have fallen under his spell.

George Scott Wilkie
Hemingford Grey

Handsome Nell

O Once I Lov'd

This particular poem merits attention simply because it was the Bard's first venture into verse, written when he was merely 15. During the gathering of the harvest, it was the custom at that time to pair off male and female workers, probably to combine physical strength with nimbleness of finger. Young Robert's co-worker that year was a 14-year-old lass, Nelly Kilpatrick, daughter of a local farmer.

The following lines are a precursor to many others written by Burns in honour of the countless young ladies who caught his eye.

O once I lov'd a bonie lass

Ay, and I love her still!

ay=yes

An' while that virtue warms my breast,

I'll love my handsome Nell.

As bonie lasses I hae seen,

hae=have

And mony full as braw,

mony=many

But for a modest gracefu' mien

mien=look/demeanour

The like I never saw.

A bonie lass, I will confess,

Is pleasant to the e'e;

e'e=eye

But without some better qualities

She's no' a lass for me.

But Nelly's looks are blythe and sweet,

And what is best of a'—

Her reputation is compleat,

And fair without a flaw.

She dresses ay sae clean and neat,

Both decent and genteel:

And then there's something in her gait

Gars ony dress look weel,

gars=makes

A gaudy dress and gentle air
May slightly touch the heart;
But it's innocence and modesty
That polishes the dart.

"Tis this in Nelly pleases me,
"Tis this enchants my soul!
For absolutely in my breast
She reigns without controul.

O Tibbie, I Hae Seen The Day

Robert Burns was 17 when he composed this song. It relates to Isabella Steven, daughter of a wealthy local farmer. The sense of injustice that young Rab felt at the class divisions between the rich and the poor, which was to be the source of so many of his later works, comes pouring out in these verses.

CHORUS

O Tibbie, I hae seen the day,
Ye wadna been sae shy!
For laik o' gear ye lightly me,
But, trowth, I care na by.

laik o' gear = lack

Yestreen I met you on the moor,
Ye spak' na but gaed by like stoure!
Ye geck at me because I'm poor—
But fient a hair care I!

spak' na but gaed by like stoure = didn't speak
but went by like blowing dust, *geck* = toss
the head, *fient a* = not a

When comin' hame on Sunday last,
Upon the road as I cam' past,
Ye snufft an' gae your head a cast—
But trowth, I care'na by!

snufft = sniffed; *trowth* = truth;
care'na = cared not

I doubt na lass, but ye may think,
Because ye hae the name o' clink,
That ye can please me at a wink,
When'er ye like to try.

clink = wealth

But sorrow tak' him that's sae mean,
Altho' his pouch o' coin were clean,
Wha follows ony saucy Quean,
That looks sae proud and high!

No matter how poor a boy is, only misery
will become of marrying a girl for money.

Altho' a lad were e'er sae smart,
If that he want the yellow dirt,
Ye'll cast your head anither airt,
An' answer him fu' dry.

Even if he were very smart, you would
still scorn him for being poor.
anither = another; *airt* = direction; *fu'* =
full/completely

But if he hae the name o' gear,
Ye'll fasten to him like a breer,
Tho' hardly he for sense or lear,
Be better than the kye.

However, if he were wealthy, you wouldn't
care how stupid he was.
gear = money; *breer* = briar, *lear* =
learning, *kye* = cattle

But, Tibbie, lass, tak' my advice;
Your daddie's gear maks you sae nice.
The Deil a ane wad spier your price,
Were ye as poor as I.

Without her father's money she would
soon sell her soul to the devil.
gear = money, *spier* = ask

There lives a lass beside yon park,
I'd rather hae her in her sark
Than you wi' a' your thousand mark,
That gars you look sae high.

There's another girl with nothing who I'd
rather have than you with all your money.
sark = shift, *gars* = makes

The Rigs O' Barley

CORN RIGS ARE BONIE

Burns composed this verse in 1782. One of his early tales of love and romance, it is still very popular now.

It is obvious that the Bard has lost his early innocence and that shy modesty in a girl is no longer a prime factor in his estimation of her.

CHORUS

*Corn rigs. an' barley rigs,
An' corn rigs are bonie;
I'll ne'er forget that happy night
Amang the rigs wi' Annie.*

rigs = the ridges and furrows in the fields

It was upon a Lammas night,
When corn rigs are bonie,
Beneath the moon's unclouded light,
I held awa to Annie;
The time flew by, wi' tentless heed;
Till, 'tween the late and early,
Wi' sma' persuasion she agreed
To see me thro' the barley.

Lammas = the night of August 1st;

bonie = pretty

tentless heed = undue haste

The sky was blue, the wind was still,
The moon was shining clearly;
I set her down, wi' right good will,
Amang the rigs o' barley;
I ken't her heart was a' my ain;
I lov'd her most sincerely;
I kissed her owre and owre again,
Amang the rigs o' barley.

ken't = knew

owre = over

I lock'd her in my fond embrace;
Her heart was beating rarely;
My blessings on that happy place,
Amang the rigs o' barley!
But by the moon and stars so bright,
That shone that hour so clearly!
She ay shall bless that happy night
Amang the rigs o' barley.

amang = among

ay = always

I hae been blythe wi' comrades dear;
I hae been merry drinking;
I hae been joyfu' gath'rin gear;
I hae been happy thinking:
But a' the pleasures e'er I saw,
Tho' three times doubl'd fairly—
That happy night was worth them a'.
Amang the rigs o' barley.

Nothing he has experienced in life could
compare to the joy of that night.
blythe = cheerful; *gath'rin gear* = gathering
possessions; *e'er* = ever

The Lass of Cessnock Banks

Burns was so smitten by the subject of this poem, Alison Begbie, that he sent her a formal proposal of marriage which she rejected. The compliments that he pays her in the following lines need no explanation as his feelings towards Alison are abundantly clear.

On Cessnock banks a lassie dwells,
Could I describe her shape and mien!
Our lasses a' she far excels,
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een!

mien = demeanour;

twa = two; *een* = eyes

She's sweeter than the morning dawn
When rising Phoebus first is seen,
And dew-drops twinkle o'er the lawn;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een!

Phoebus = the sun (after Apollo, the Greek sun god)

She's stately, like yon youthful ash
That grows the cowslip braes between,
And drinks the stream with vigour fresh;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een!

yon = yonder; *braes* = hillsides

She's spotless, like the flow'ring thorn,
With flow'rs so white and leaves so green,
When purest in the dewy morn;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een!

Her looks are like the vernal May,
When ev'ning Phoebus shines serene,
While birds rejoice on every spray;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een!

vernal = spring tide

Her hair is like the curling mist
That climbs the mountain-sides at e'en,
When flow'r-reviving rains are past;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een!

e'en = evening

Her forehead's like the show'ry bow
When gleaming sunbeams intervene,
And gild the distant mountain's brow;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een!

Her cheeks are like yon crimson gem,
The pride of all the flowery scene,
Just opening on its thorny stem;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een!

Her teeth are like the nightly snow
When pale the morning rises keen,
While hid the murmur'ing streamlets flow—
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een!

Her lips are like yon cherries ripe
Which sunny walls from Boreas screen;
They tempt the taste and charm the sight;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een.

Her breath is like the fragrant breeze
That gently stirs the blossom'd bean,
When Phoebus sinks beneath the seas;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een!

Her voice is like the ev'ning thrush,
That sings on Cessnock banks unseen,
While his mate sits nestling in the bush;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een!

But it's not her air, her form, her face,
Tho' matching Beauty's fabled Queen:
'Tis the mind that shines in ev'ry grace—
An' chiefly in her rogueish een!

A Prayer In The Prospect of Death

There were many occasions for Burns when life itself was nothing but intolerable hardship, and death offered release and eternal peace. This short poem shows how Burns had no fear of death and trusted God to forgive him for his transgressions.

O Thou unknown, Almighty Cause
Of all my hope and fear!

In whose dread presence, ere an hour, *ere = ever*
Perhaps I must appear!

If I have wandered in those paths
Of life I ought to shun;
As *Something*, loudly, in my breast,
Remonstrates I have done—

Thou know'st that Thou hast formed me
With passions wild and strong;
And list'ning to their witching voice
Has often led me wrong.

Where human weakness has come short,
Or frailty stept aside,
Do Thou, All-Good, — for such Thou art—
In shades of darkness hide.

Where with intention I have err'd, *err'd = errored*
No other plea I have,
But, Thou art good; and Goodness still
Delighteth to forgive.

I'll Go and be a Sodger

At 23, ruin was staring Burns in the face. His business partner in a flax-dressing shop had defrauded him, and on top of that, while indulging in the New Year festivities, his shop burned down. Little wonder he contemplated a career in the army.

O why the deuce should I repine,
And be an ill-foreboder?
I'm twenty-three and five feet nine,
I'll go and be a sodger!

deuce = devil; *repine* = feel discontent;
ill-foreboder = forecaster of misfortune;

sodger = soldier

I gat some gear wi' meikle care,
I held it weel thegither;
But now it's gane, and something mair;
I'll go and be a sodger!

gear = wealth, *meikle* = much,
weel thegither = well together,
gane = gone; *mair* = more

John Barleycorn: A Ballad

Barley has always held a position of great importance in the farming economy of Scotland, not least for its contribution to the worlds of brewing and distilling. John Barleycorn describes the process.

There was three kings into the east,
Three kings both great and high,
And they hae sworn a solemn oath
John Barleycorn should die.

They took a plough and plough'd him down,
Put clods upon his head,
And they hae sworn a solemn oath *hae = have*
John Barleycorn was dead.

But the cheerful Spring came kindly on,
And show'rs began to fall,
John Barleycorn got up again,
And sore surpris'd them all.

The sultry suns of Summer came,
And he grew thick and strong;
His head weel arm'd wi' pointed spears,
That no one should him wrong.

The sober Autumn enter'd mild,
When he grew wan and pale;
His bending joints and drooping head,
Show'd he began to fail.

His colour sicken'd more and more,
He faded into age;
And then his enemies began,
To show their deadly rage.

They've ta'en a weapon, long and sharp,
And cut him by the knee;
They ty'd him fast upon a cart,
Like a rogue for forgerie.

They laid him down upon his back,
 And cudgell'd him full sore. *cudgell'd = clubbed*
 They hung him up before the storm,
 And turn'd him o'er and o'er.

They filled up a darksome pit
 With water to the brim,
 They heav'd in John Barleycorn—
 There let him sink or swim!

They laid him upon the floor,
 To work him further woe;
 And still, as signs of life appear'd,
 They toss'd him to and fro,

They wasted, o'er a scorching flame,
 The marrow of his bones;
 But a miller us'd him worst of all
 For he crush'd him between two stones.

And they hae ta'en his very heart's blood,
 And drank it round and round;
 And still the more and more they drank,
 Their joy did more abound.

John Barleycorn was a hero bold,
 Of noble enterprise;
 For if you do but taste his blood,
 'Twill make your courage rise.

'Twill make a man forget his woe;
 'Twill heighten all his joy;
 'Twill make the widow's heart to sing,
 Tho' the tear were in her eye.

Then let us toast John Barleycorn,
 Each man a glass in hand;
 And may his great posterity
 Ne'er fail in old Scotland!

ne'er = never

The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie

THE AUTHOR'S ONLY PET YOWE:

AN UNCO MOURNFU' TALE

Burns had bought a ewe and her two lambs from a neighbouring farmer, really just to keep as pets. The ewe was kept tethered in a field adjacent to his house.

Unfortunately, the ewe managed to entangle herself in her rope and fell into a ditch where she lay, apparently dying. The poem tells the story of the poor old ewe's dying wishes which she related to a passerby who happened upon her as she lay there, but who was unable to be of any assistance to her.

This poem is one of the Bard's earliest works, if not his first, to be written in the Auld Scots tongue, and here the glossary is essential to the understanding of the poem.

As Mailie, an' her lambs thegither,
Was ae day nibblin' on the tether
Upon her cloot she coost a hitch,
An' owre she warsl'd in the ditch;
There, groanin', dyin', she did lie,
When Hughoc he cam doytin by.

Wi glowrin een, an' lifted han's,
Poor Hughoc like a statue stan's
He saw her days were near-hand ended
But, wae, my heart!!
He could na mend it!
He gaped wide, but naething spak—
At length poor Mailie silence brak.

'O thou, whase lamentable face
Appears to mourn my woefu' case!
My dying words attentive hear,
An' bear them to my Master dear,

Mailie the ewe gets herself tangled in her tether and falls into the ditch where she is found by Hughoc, a farm labourer.

thegither = together; *ae* = one; *cloot* = hoof; *coost a hitch* = caught in a loop; *owre* = over; *warsl'd* = wrestled; *cam doytin by* = came doddering by

Hughoc can only stand and stare, unable to move and speechless until Mailie breaks the silence.

wi' glowrin een = with staring eyes; *han's* = hands; *near-hand* = close-by; *wae* = woe, *could na mend it* = could not help it; *naething spak* = said nothing; *brak* = broke

She instructs him to listen to her dying words and make certain that he relates them to her master.

whase = whose; *lamentable* = sad; *woefu' case* = deplorable state

'Tell him, if e'er again he keep
As muckle gear as buy a sheep,
O, bid him never tie them mair,
Wi' wicked strings o' hemp or hair!
But ca' them out to park or hill,
An' let them wander at their will;
So, may his flock increase an' grow
To scores of lambs and packs o' woo!

'Tell him he was a Master kin',
An' ay was guid to me an' mine;
An' now my dying charge I gie him,
My helpless lambs, I trust them wi' him.

'O, bid him save their harmless lives,
Frae dogs, an' tods, an' butcher's knives!
But gie them guid cow-milk their fill,
'Till they be fit to fend themsel';
An' tent them duly, e'en an' morn,
Wi' raets o' hay an' rippis o' corn.

'An may they never learn the gaets,
Of other vile, wanrestfu' pets!
To slink thro' slaps, an' reave an' steal
At stacks o' pease, or stocks o' kail!
So may they, like their great forbears,
For monie a year come thro' the sheers:
So wives will give them bits o' bread,
An' bairns greet for them when they're dead.

'My poor toop-lamb, my son an' heir,
O, bid him breed him up wi' care!
An' if he lives to be a beast,
To put some havins in his breast!

Should her master ever be able to afford
more sheep, then he is to let them roam
freely and nature will increase the size of
his flock and produce more wool.
muckle gear = much wealth; *mair* = anymore;
woo = wool

Her dying wish is that her master be
responsible for the upbringing of her lambs.
kin' = kind; *ay* = always

The master should ensure that the lambs
are not savaged by dogs or foxes. He must
not allow them to be butchered but must
see that they are fed carefully both
morning and night.
tods = foxes; *raets* = small quantities; *rippis*
= handfuls

They must not become thieving wastrels.
With pride in their ancestry they will
supply wool for years to come, and when
they die they will be sadly missed.
gaets = manners; *wanrestfu'* = restless; *thro'*
slaps = through gaps in hedges; *come thro' the*
sheers = be sheared; *greet* = cry

The eldest child must learn good
behaviour and grow up to be a proud ram.
toop = tup; *put some havins* = put some
good manners

'An' warn him, what I winna name,
To stay content wi' yowes at hame;
An' no' to rin an' wear his cloots,
Like ither menseless, graceless brutes.

'An' niest, my yowie, silly thing,
Gude keep thee frae a tether string!
O, may thou ne'er forgather up,
Wi' onie blastit, moorland toop;
But ay keep mind to moop an' mell.,
Wi' sheep o' credit like thysel'

'And now, my bairns, wi' my last breath,
I lea'e my blessin wi' you baith;
An' when you think upo' your Mither,
Mind to be kind to ane anither

'Now, honest Hughoc, dinna fail,
To tell my master a' my tale;
An' bid him burn this curs'd tether
An' for thy pains thou's got my blather.'

This said, poor Mailie turn'd her head,
An' clos'd her een amang the dead!

He must stay with the flock, unlike other
ill-behaved oafs.
no to rin = not to run; *wear his cloots* = wear
out his hoofs; *menseless* = stupid.

The silly baby ewe must be told to watch
out for tethers, and to save herself for
sheep of her own class and not to get
involved with the wild rams that wander
the moorlands.
niest = next; *moop an' mell* = nibble and mix

Maillie blesses her children and reminds
them to be kind to each other.
baith = both

Hughoc must tell the master of her wishes
and see to it that the tether is burned.
blather = bladder

All this said, Maillie closes her eyes and
dies.

Poor Mailie's Elegy

Following the death of his pet sheep and his poem of her dying wishes, Burns shows his own feelings for Mailie the ewe, and expresses his deep sorrow for her departure from this earth.

Lament in rhyme, lament in prose,
Wi' saut tears trickling down your nose;
Our Bardie's fate is at a close,
Past a' remead!
The last, sad cape-stane of his woes;
Poor Mailie's dead.

saut = salt; *past a' remead* = is incurable;
cape-stane = cope stone

It's no' the loss o' warl's gear,
That could sae bitter draw the tear,
Or mak our bardie, dowie, wear
The mourning weed;
He's lost a friend and neebor dear,
In Mailie dead.

He does not regard her simply as a piece of property he has lost, but believes her to have been a true friend.

warl's gear = worldly wealth; *dowie* = sad;
mourning weed = mourning clothes

Thro' a' the town she trotted by him;
A lang half-mile she could descry him;
Wi' kindly bleat, when she did spy him,
She ran wi' speed:
A friend mair faithfu' ne'er came nigh him,
Than Mailie dead.

She'd trot by him, recognising him at a distance, running to him when she did.
descry = recognise; *ne'er came nigh* = never came close

I wat she was a sheep o' sense,
An' could behave hersel' wi' mense;
I'll say 't, she never brak a fence,
Thro' thievish greed,
Our Bardie, lanely keeps the Spence
Sin' Mailie's dead.

She really was a sensible and graceful sheep who never attempted to break through into other fields to steal food.
wat = know; *mense* = good manners; *brak* = break; *lanely* = lonely; *keeps the spence* = stays in the parlour

Or, if he wanders up the howe,
Her living image in her yowe,
Comes bleating to him, owre the knowe,
For bits o' bread;
An' down the briny pearls rowe
For Mailie dead.

She was nae get o' moorlan tips,
Wi' tauted ket, an' hairy hips;
For her forbears were brought in ships,
Frae 'yont the Tweed;
A bonnier fleesh ne'er cross'd the clips
Than Mailie's dead.

Wae worth the man wha first did shape,
That vile wanchancie thing – a rape!
It maks guid fellows girn and gape
Wi' chokin dread;
An' Robin's bonnet wave wi' crape
For Mailie dead

O, a' ye Bards on bonie Doon!
An' wha on Aire your chanter's tune!
Come, join the melancholious croon
O' Robin's reed!
His heart will never get aboon!
His Mailie's dead!

The ewe lamb is so like Mailie that the Bard is reduced to tears when she comes looking for bread, just as her mother did. *howe* = dell; *owre the knowe* = over the hills; *briny pearls* = salt tears; *rowe* = roll

Mailie had good ancestry, unlike the sheep that roamed the moors. She came from foreign parts and gave the finest wool. *fae get o' moorland tips* = not the offspring of moorland rams; *wi' tauted ket* = with matted fleece; *a bonnier fleesh ne'er cross'd the clips* = a better fleece was never sheared

He curses the first man to shape a rope. Good men dread it and Burns is mourning Mailie because of it. *wae worth* = woe befall; *wanchancie* = unlucky; *rape* = rope; *girn and gape* = whimper and stare; *bonnet* = hat; *ave wi' crape* = adorned with black crepe

Finally he calls on all poets and pipers to join in a lament for Mailie. He, Robert Burns, is himself heart-broken – His Mailie is dead. *a' ye* = all you; *chanter* = bagpipes; *melancholious croon* = lament; *reed* = music pipe; *aboon* = above

Remorse

Burns was in full agreement with the philosopher, Adam Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, that remorse is the most painful of sentiments. Rab had great experience of remorse in his life and these words are written with deep feeling.

Of all the numerous ills that hurt our peace,
That press the soul, or wring the mind with anguish,
Beyond comparison the worst are those
That to our Folly, or our Guilt we owe.
In ev'ry other circumstance, the mind
Has this to say, 'It was no deed of mine.'
But, when to all the evil of misfortune
The sting is added, 'Blame thy foolish self!'
Or, worsen far, the pangs of keen remorse,
The torturing, gnawing consciousness of guilt,
Of guilt, perhaps, where we've involved others;
The young, the innocent, who fondly lov'd us;
Nay, more that very love their cause of ruin!
O! burning Hell! in all thy store of torments
There's not a keener lash!
Lives there a man so firm, who, while his heart
Feels all the bitter horrors of his crime,
Can reason down its agonizing throbs,
And, after proper purpose of amendment,
Can firmly force his jarring thoughts to peace?
O happy, happy, enviable man!
O glorious magnanimity of soul!

The Ruined Farmer

The following verses were doubtless inspired by the death of the poet's father, William Burnes, whose Calvinistic attitude towards learning ensured that Robert was well-schooled in many subjects. Sadly, Burnes' move to Ayrshire led him into a life of toil and hardship, ending with a court appearance because of rent arrears. Although he won on appeal, he died shortly afterwards through 'physical consumption aggravated by hardship and worry.'

The sun he is sunk in the west,
All creatures retired to rest,
While here I sit, all sore beset,
With sorrow, grief, and woe;
And it's O, fickle Fortune, O!

The prosperous man is asleep,
Nor hears how the whirlwinds sweep;
But Misery and I must watch
The surly tempest blow:
And it's O, fickle Fortune, O!

There lies the dear Partner of my breast;
Her cares for a moment at rest:
Must I see thee, my youthful pride,
Thus brought so very low!
And it's O, fickle Fortune, O!

There lie my sweet babies in her arms;
No anxious fear their little hearts alarms;
But for their sake my heart does ache,
With many a bitter throe:
And it's O, fickle Fortune, O!

I once was by Fortune carest,
I once could relieve the distress,
Now life's poor support, hardly earn'd,
My fate will scarce bestow:
And it's O, fickle Fortune, O!

No comfort, no comfort I have!
How welcome to me were the grave!
But then my wife and children dear —
O, whither would they go!
And it's O, fickle Fortune, O!

O, whither, O, whither shall I turn!
All friendless, forsaken, forlorn!
For, in this world, Rest or Peace
I never more shall know:
And it's O, fickle Fortune, O!

Mary Morrison

This poem is one of the Bard's earlier works, written in praise of one of the countless young ladies who happened to catch his eye. It is generally thought to be dedicated to a lass of that name who died from consumption at the age of 20, and whose tombstone can be seen in Mauchline churchyard. This is possible, but is not certain, as she would have only been 13 or 14 when the poem was written.

O Mary, at thy window be,
It is the wish'd, the trysted hour.
Those smiles and glances let me see,
That make the miser's treasure poor.
How blythely wad I bide the stoure,
A weary slave frae sun to sun,
Could I the rich reward secure—
The lovely Mary Morrison!

bide the stoure = bear the struggle
frae = from

Yestreen, when to the trembling string
The dance ga'd thro' the lighted ha',
To thee my fancy took its wing,
I sat, but neither heard, nor saw;
Tho' this was fair, and that was braw,
And yon the toast of a' the town,
I sigh'd, and said amang them a',
"Ye are na Mary Morrison!"

yestreen = yesterday
ha' = hall

braw = good
yon = those

O, Mary, canst thou wreck his peace
Wha for thy sake wad gladly die?
Or canst thou break that heart of his
Whase only faute is loving thee?
If love for love thou wilt na gie,
At least be pity to me shown:
A thought ungentle canna be
The thought o' Mary Morrison.

whase = whose; *faute* = fault;
gie = give

Address to The Unco Guid or The Rigid Righteous

*My son, these maxims make a rule
An' bump them a' thegither;
The Rigid Righteous is a fool,
The Rigid Wise anither;
The cleanest corn that e'er was dight
May have some piles o' caff in ;
So ne'er a fellow creature slight
For random fits o' daffin,*

SOLOMON —Eccles Ch vii verse 16

Robert Burns was never one to tolerate the 'Holier Than Thou' attitude held by others.

O ye, wha are sae guid yoursel'.
Sae pious and sae holy,
Ye've naught to do but mark and tell
Your neebour's fauts and folly!
Whase life is like a weel-gaun mill,
Supply'd wi' store o' water;
The heaper happier's ebbing still,
An' still the clap plays clatter!

Hear me, ye venerable core,
As counsel for poor mortals
That frequent pass douce Wisdom's door
For glaikit Folly's portals;
I, for their thoughtless, careless sakes,
Would here propone defences—
Their donsie tricks, their black mistakes,
Their failings and mischances.

Ye see your state wi' theirs compared,
And shudder at the niffer;
But cast a moment's fair regard,
What maks the mighty differ?
Discount what scant occasion gave;
The purity ye pride in;
And (what's aft mair than a' the lave)
Your better art o' hidin'.

Self righteous people believe their orderly lives permit them to criticise others who they believe to have inferior standards of behaviour. *wha are sae guid* = who are so good; *naught* = nothing; *neebor* = neighbour/friend; *fauts and folly* = faults and foolishness; *whase* = whose; *weel-gaun* = good going; *heaper happier* = heaped hopper; *ebbing* = sinking; *plays clatter* = acts noisily

Burns offers a defence for those who might have been foolish in their lives, whose sexual adventures may have caused them some regret, and who are generally regarded as failures by society. *venerable core* = revered company; *douce* = grave; *glaikit* = foolish; *propone* = propose; *gonsie tricks* = stupid pranks; *mischance* = ill-luck

The self-righteous may shudder at being compared with such people, but often the only difference is that they may never have been put to the test.
niffer = comparison; *scant occasion* = slight opportunity; *aft mair* = often more;
a' the lave = all the rest

Think, when your castigated pulse
 Gies now and then a wallop,
 What ragings must his veins convulse,
 That still eternal gallop!
 Wi' wind and tide fair i' your tail,
 Right on ye scud your sea-way,
 But in the teeth o' baith to sail,
 It maks an unco lee-way.

See Social-life and Glee sit down,
 All joyous and unthinking,
 Till, quite transmugrify'd, they're grown
 Debauchery and Drinking;
 O would they stay to calculate
 Th' eternal consequences,
 Or, your more dreaded hell to state –
 Damnation of expenses!

Ye high, exalted, virtuous dames,
 Ty'd up in godly laces,
 Before ye gie poor Frailty names,
 Suppose a change o' cases;
 A dear-lov'd lad, convenience snug,
 A treach'rous inclination –
 But let me whisper i' your lug,.
 Ye're aiblins nae temptation.

Then gently scan your brother Man,
 Still gentler sister Woman;
 Tho' they may gang a kennin wrang,
 To step aside is human:
 One point must still be greatly dark,
 The moving *Why* they do it;
 And just as lamely can ye mark,.
 How far perhaps they rue it.

Who made the heart, 'tis He alone
 Decidedly can try us;
 He knows each chord, its various tone,
 Each spring its various bias;
 Then at the balance let's be mute,
 We never can adjust it;
 What's done we partly may compute,
 But know not what's resisted.

Remember how it feels when your pulses
 race. All may may be fine when all is going
 their way, but it may be different when
 faced with adversity.
castigated = chastised; *scud* = drive before
 the wind; *baith* = both; *an unco lee-way* =
 uncommonly hard-going

While ordinary people regard socialising
 as an occasion for enjoyment, the self-
 righteous tend to see such events as deeply
 sinful, and therefore a direct path to hell.
transmugrify'd = transformed

Burns then questions how the good ladies,
 all tied up in their corsets, would react if
 offered the opportunity for pleasure with
 someone they deeply admired, but then
 cuttingly doubts if they would be capable
 of attracting any man.
snug = sheltered; *aiblins* = perhaps

He asks that consideration and forgiveness
 be given to one's fellow man and woman
 who may have erred in life. Without
 knowing what prompted them to have
 sinned in the first place, there is no
 knowing the sorrow and regret that a
 person may now be suffering.
a kennin = a little bit; *wrang* = wrong

Only God has the ability to judge us.
 Only He knows the full story. Although
 we may have witnessed some transgres-
 sions, we have no way of knowing how
 many others have been resisted.

The Ronalds of the Bennals

This poem refers to a family, the Ronalds, who farmed the Bennals, a prosperous 200-acre farm close to where the Burns family were desperately scraping a living from their under-nourished land. One can feel a strong touch of resentment, and possibly a little spite, on the part of Robert as both he and brother Gilbert were considered to be unlikely suitors for the daughters of such a well-to-do family.

In Tarbolton, ye ken, there are proper
young men,
And proper young lasses and a', man;
But ken ye the Ronalds that live
in the Bennals?
They carry the gree frae them a', man.

Their father's a laird, and weel he can spare't,
Braid money to tocher them a', man;
To proper young men, he'll clink in the hand
Gowd guineas a hunder or twa, man.

There's ane they ca' Jean, I'll warrant ye've seen
As bonie a lass or as braw, man;
But for sense and guid taste she'll
vie wi' the best,
And a conduct that beautifies a', man.

The charms o' the min', the langer they shine
The mair admiration they draw, man;
While peaches and cherries, and
roses and lilies,
They fade and they wither awa', man.

If ye be for Miss Jean, tak this frae a frien',
A hint o' a rival or twa, man
The Laird o' Blackbyre wad gang through
the fire,
If that wad entice her awa', man.

There may be plenty young ladies and
gentlemen in the area, but the Ronalds are
a cut above the rest.

ken = know; *carry the gree* = bear the bell

The father is wealthy enough to offer a
good dowry to the correct suitor.

braid = broad; *tocher* = dowry; *gowd* =
gold; *hunder* = hundred

You may well have seen others as lovely as
Jean, but her sense and good taste set her
apart.

Better an intelligent woman than one
whose beauty is merely skin-deep.

Jean is a very popular young lady who is
already being pursued by some wealthy
suitors.

The Laird o' Braehead has been on his speed,
 For mair than a towmond or twa, man;
 The Laird o' the Ford will straught
 on a board,
 If he canna get her at a', man

towmond = twelve months;

straught = stretch

Then Anna comes in, the pride o' her kin,
 The boast of our bachelors a', man;
 Sae sonsy and sweet, sae fully complete,
 She steals our affections awa, man.

Anna is the one that the local swains really admire.

If I should detail the pick and the wale
 O' lasses that live here awa, man
 The faut would be mine, if she didna shine
 The sweetest and best o' them a', man.

She is positively the pick of the bunch.
wale = choice; *faut* = fault.

I lo'e her mysel', but darena weel tell,
 My poverty keeps me in awe, man;
 For making o' rhymes, and working at times,
 Does little or naething at a', man.

The poet loves Anna but dare not tell her
 as he has no wealth to offer. His poetry
 and his farm work earn him very little.

Yet I wadna choose to let her refuse
 Nor ha'et in her power to say na, man;
 For though I be poor, unnoticed, obscure,
 My stomach's as proud as them a', man.

He would never confess his love to her.

Though I canna ride in weel-booted pride,
 And flee o'er the hills like a crow, man,
 I can haud up my head wi' the best
 o' the breed,
 Though fluttering ever so braw, man.

He may not be able to afford a fine steed
 to carry him over the hills, but he can hold
 his head high in any company.

My coat and my vest, they are Scotch o'
 the best;
 O' pairs o' good breeks I hae twa, man,
 And stockings and pumps to put
 on my stumps,
 And ne'er a wrang steek in them a', man.

His clothes are of good quality, he owns
 two pairs of breeches, and his stockings
 are whole and undarned.

breeks = breeches; *steek* = stitch

My sarks they are few, but five o' them new,
 Twal'-hundred, as white as the snaw, man!
 A ten-shillings hat, a Holland cravat—
 There are no monie poets sae braw, man!

I never had freen's weel stockit in means,
 To leave me a hundred or twa, man;
 Nae weel-tocher'd aunts, to wait on
 their drants,
 And wish them in hell for it a', man;

I never was cannie for hoarding o' money,
 Or claughtin 't together at a', man;
 I've little to spend and naething to lend,
 But devil a shilling I awe, man.

He owns five new shirts of top quality linen,
 and with his fine hat and cravat believes few
 poets can equal him for elegance. *sarks* =
 shirts; *twal'-hundred* = a grade of linen

No friends nor relatives have ever left him
 money in their wills.
weel stockit = wealthy; *tocher'd* = dowered;
drants = sulks, moods

He'd never been good at saving money, but
 in spite of having so little, owes nothing to
 anyone.
claughtin = grasoing

The Belles of Mauchline

Robert has by now got over the earlier rejection of his marriage proposal to Alison Begbie, and his eye is now taken by the girl who was to eventually become his wife, Jean Armour. Here he compares her favourably with the other young girls in the village.

In Mauchline there dwells six proper young belles,
The pride of the place and its neighbourhood a',
Their carriage and dress, a stranger would guess,
In Lon'on or Paris they'd gotten it a'.

Miss Miller is fine, Miss Murkland's divine,
Miss Smith she has wit, and Miss Morton is braw,
There's beauty and fortune to get wi' Miss Morton;
But Armour's the jewel for me o' them a'.

Epistle to John Rankine

John Rankine was a local tenant-farmer who was a close friend of Robert Burns. On discovering that Elizabeth Paton was pregnant by Burns, Rankine joshed him mercilessly. Burns retaliated with the following verses which hardly show remorse for the situation in which he had found himself. The church adopted a very hard attitude towards anyone found indulging in sex outside marriage. The culprits were publicly chastised and had fines imposed upon them.

O rough, rude, ready-witted Rankine,
The wale o' cocks for fun an' drinkin!
There's mony godly folks are thinkin,
Your dreams and tricks
Will send you, Korah-like, a-sinkin,
Straught to auld Nick's.

Ye hae sae mony cracks an' cants,
And in your wicked drucken rants,
Ye mak a devil o' the saunts,
An' fill them fou;
And then their failings, flaws an' wants,
Are a' seen thro'.

Hypocrisy, in mercy spare it!
That holy robe, O, dinna tear it!
Spare't for their sakes, wha aften wear it—
The lads in black;
But your curst wit, when it comes near it,
Rives't aff their back.

Think, wicked sinner, wha ye're skaithing;
It's just the Blue-gown badge an' claithing,
O saunts; tak that, ye lea'e them naething,
To ken them by,
Frae onie unregenerate heathen,
Like you or I.

Rankine may be a popular fellow with the drinking fraternity, but some people think that his actions will send him to Hell.

wale = pick; *mony* = many; *Korah-like* = Numbers xvi verses 29-33, his soul will be cut off forever; *straught* = straight

You have so many stories to tell, but in your drunkenness you make fools of the good people, revealing all their failings.

cracks and cants = anecdotes; *saunts* = saints; *fou* = full

Don't be a hypocrite. Leave the preaching to the priests.

rives't = rips

He points out that without their badges and gowns, the priests would be just like everyone else.

skaithing = wounding; *Blue-gown badge* = a badge given to beggars on the king's birthday; *claithing* = clothin

I've sent you here, some rhymin' ware,
 A' that I bargain'd for, an' mair;
 Sae, when ye hae an hour to spare,
 I will expect,
 Yon sang ye'll sen't, wi' cannie care,
 And no neglect.

Tho faith, sma' heart hae I to sing;
 My Muse dow scarcely spread her wing!
 I've play'd mysel' a bonie spring,
 And dan'd my fill!
 I'd better gaen an' sair't the King
 At Bunker's Hill.

'Twas ae night lately, in my fun,
 I gaed a rovin' wi' the gun,
 An' brought a pairtrick to the grun'—
 A bonie hen;
 And, as the twilight was begun,
 Thought nane wad ken.

The poor wee thing was little hurt;
 I strakit it a wee for sport,
 Ne'er thinkin' they wad fash me for't;
 But Deil-ma-care!
 Somebody tells the Poacher-Court
 The hale affair.

Some auld, us'd hands hae ta'en a note,
 That sic a hen had got a shot;
 I was suspected for the plot;
 I scorn'd to lie;
 So gat the whistle o' my groat,
 An' pay't the fee.

He has enclosed some songs and poems
 for Rankine to look over.

He has little to sing about at the moment,
 and might have been better off fighting for
 the King in America.

dow = scarcely; *sair't* = served; *Bunker's Hill*
 = a battle-field in the American war

His sexual exploits are disguised by using
 the analogy of the hunter in pursuit of
 game, and explains that as it was dusk, he
 did not expect to be discovered.

pairtrick = partridge; *grun'* = ground.

Nobody was hurt by the encounter and he
 was very surprised to be reported to the
 Kirk Session for his misdemeanours.
strakit it a wee = stroked it a little, *fash* =
 worry; *Poacher-Court* = Kirk Session, *hale*
 = whole.

Someone has reported that the girl is
 pregnant and he is the main suspect.
 Rather than try to lie his way out, he
 accepts responsibility and pays the fine.

gat the whistle o' my groat = lost my money

But by my gun, o' guns the wale,
 An' by my pouter an' my hail,
 An' by my hen an' by her tail,
 I vow an' swear!
 The game shall pay, owre moor an' dale,
 For this, niest year!

As soon's the clockin-time is by,
 An' the wee powts begun to cry,
 Lord, I'se hae sportin' by an' by
 For my gowd guinea;
 Tho' I should herd the buckskin kye
 For't, in Virginia

Trowth, they had muckle for to blame!
 'Twas neither broken wing nor limb,
 But twa-three chaps about the wame,
 Scarce thro' the feathers;
 An' baith a yellow George to claim,
 An' thole their blethers!

It pits me ay as mad's a hare;
 So I can rhyme nor write nae mair;
 But pennyworths again is fair,
 When time's expedient:
 Meanwhile, I am, respected Sir,
 Your most obedient.

He feels aggrieved and is determined that he will get full value for his money in the following year.

wale = pick; *pouter an' hail* = powder and shot; *niest* = next

As soon as the mother is able, he intends to pursue her again even although he might have to flee to America to herd cattle.

clockin-time = incubation period; *powts* = chicks; *buckskin kye* = longhorn cattle

There were many others who could have been blamed, and it's not as if she had been injured, merely lightly touched, and it's cost him a guinea to shut them up.

chaps = knocks; *wame* = belly; *yellow George* = golden guinea; *thole* = tolerate

He is so angry about the situation that he cannot concentrate on his writing, but he will get his own back in due course.