

Man Was Made to Mourn – A Dirge

This cheerless poem is yet another version of the Bard's loathing of the class differences between the workers and the land-owners. It shows again his deep compassion for the man trying to find work in order to feed and house his family.

As is the case with many of Burns' works, two lines raise it to the level of a modern proverb.

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

How sadly appropriate the words are long after the death of Robert Burns.

When chill November's surly blast
Made field and forests bare,
One ev'ning, as I wander'd forth
Along the banks of Ayr,
I spied a man, whose aged step
Seem'd weary, worn with care;
His face was furrow'd o'er with years,
And hoary was his hair.

'Young stranger, whither wand'rest thou?'
Began the rev'rend Sage;
'Does thirst of wealth thy step constrain,
Or youthful pleasures rage?
Or haply, prest with cares and woes,
Too soon thou hast began,
To wander forth, with me to mourn
The miseries of Man.

'The sun that overhangs yon moors,
Out-spreading far and wide,
Where hundreds labour to support
A haughty lordling's pride;
I've seen yon weary winter-sun
Twice forty times return;
And ev'ry time has added proofs,
That Man was made to mourn.'

When out walking, the poet met a man
who was carrying the strain of life's toils
engraved upon his face.

hoary = white or grey with age

The stranger wanted to know if Burns was
constrained by poverty, and if he was
already cast down by care with no future
except one of misery and toil.

haply = perhaps

For eighty years he has toiled in order that
some aristocratic land-owner might live a
life of sustained luxury.

O man! while in thy early years,
How prodigal of time!
Mis-spending all thy precious hours,
Thy glorious, youthful prime!
Alternate follies take the sway,
Licentious passions burn;
Which tenfold force gives Nature's law,
That Man was made to mourn.

'Look not alone on youthful prime,
Or manhood's active might;
Man then is useful to his kind,
Supported is his right;
But see him on the edge of life,
With cares and sorrows worn,
Then Age and Want – oh! ill-matched pair!-
Shew Man was made to mourn.

'A few seem favourites of Fate,
In pleasure's lap carest;
Yet, think not all the rich and great,
Are likewise truly blest;
But oh! what crowds in ev'ry land,
All wretched and forlorn,
Thro' weary life this lesson learn,
That Man was made to mourn!

'Many and sharp the num'rous ills
Inwoven with our frame!
More pointed still we make ourseves,
Regret, remorse, and shame!
And Man, whose heav'n-erected face
The smiles of love adorn,
Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn!'

When one is young and carefree, there is little thought given to what life has in store in the years to come.

When one is young, the problems are a long way off, but as one grows old and work becomes more and more difficult to obtain, then life is harsh and survival is difficult.

Although it appears that some are greatly favoured by being born into wealth and care-free existence, this is not always the case, for all over the world people are bowed down under the harshness of their existence.

The Bard's amazing perception of mankind is abundantly clear here as he explains that although man was born of God with the ability to love, he is also capable of inflicting cruelty and misery upon his fellows.

'See yonder poor, o'er labour'd wight,
 So abject, mean and vile,
 Who begs a brother of the earth
 To give him leave to toil;
 And see his lordly fellow-worm,
 The poor petition spurn,
 Unmindful, tho' a weeping wife,
 And hapless offspring mourn.'

If I'm design'd yon lordling's slave,
 By Nature's law design'd,
 Why was an independent wish
 E'er planted in my mind?
 If not, why am I subject to
 His cruelty, or scorn?
 Or why has Man the will and pow'r
 To make his fellow mourn?"

'Yet, let not this too much, my son,
 Disturb thy youthful breast;
 This partial view of human-kind
 Is surely not the last!
 The poor, oppressed, honest man
 Had never, sure, been born,
 Had there not been some recompense
 To comfort those that mourn!'

'O Death! the poor man's dearest friend,
 The kindest and the best!
 Welcome the hour my aged limbs
 Are laid with thee at rest!
 The great, the wealthy fear thy blow,
 From pomp and pleasure torn;
 But Oh! a blest relief to those
 That weary-laden mourn!'

The employer will casually refuse work to a fellow man with no thought at all of the consequences which will befall his starving family.

If his destiny was to be no more than a slave, then why was he given an independent mind, and why should he be considered a less worthy person than his employer, and what is it in some men that makes them seek power over others?

The old man tries to reassure the poet by explaining that there must be a reason for his poverty, and that his suffering will be rewarded in a future existence.

Death may be a source of fear to the rich, but it is a welcome relief from the strain of a lifetime of hard toil to those who have had no respite during their lifetime.

Young Peggy

The story of Young Peggy, or Margaret Kennedy, to give her full name, is one that is sadly familiar throughout the ages, and in all levels of society. She was a good-looking girl who was seduced by an army captain, resulting in the birth of a daughter. The unchivalrous captain denied all responsibility for the child and the case was subsequently taken to court where it was decided that a secret marriage had indeed taken place, and that the child was the legitimate offspring of wedded parents. The court also awarded a very substantial sum of money to Peggy, but sadly, by the time the award was finally made, she had died at the tender age of twenty-nine.

Burns' verses concerning Peggy were written some ten years earlier, but Young Peggy's destiny was far removed from the Bard's wishes for her future life.

Young Peggy blooms our boniest lass,
Her blush is like the morning,
The rosy dawn, the springing grass,
With early gems adorning.
Her eyes outshine the radiant beams
That gild the passing shower,
And glitter o'er the crystal streams,
And cheer each fresh'ning flower.

Her lips, more than the cherries bright,
A richer dye has graced them;
They charm th' admiring gazer's sight,
And sweetly tempt to taste them.
Her smile is as the ev'ning mild,
When feather'd pairs are courting,
And little lambkins wanton wild,
In playful bands disporting.

Were Fortune lovely Peggy's foe,
 Such sweetness would relent her,
 As blooming Spring unbends the brow
 Of surly, savage Winter.
 Detraction's eye no aim can gain
 Her winning powers to lessen,
 And fretful Envy grins in vain,
 The poison'd tooth to fasten.

Ye Pow'rs of Honour, Love, and Truth,
 From ev'ry ill defend her!
 Inspire the highly-favour'd youth
 The destinies intend her!
 Still fan the sweet connubial flame
 Responsive in each bosom;
 And bless the dear parental name
 With many a filial blossom.

To a Mouse

ON TURNING UP THE NEST OF A FIELDMOUSE

WITH HIS PLOUGH, NOVEMBER, 1785

Surely one of the finest poems written by Burns, containing some of the most famous and memorable lines ever written. It is not fully understood by the mass of English-speaking poetry lovers, however, as it is written in Scots.

All readers of Burns know of the 'Wee sleekit cow'rin tim'rous beastie' but how many understand the sadness and despair contained within the lines of this poem. What was the Bard saying when he was inspired by turning up a fieldmouse in her nest one day while out ploughing?

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!

I'm truly sorry Man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion,
Which makes thee startle,
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion
An' fellow mortal!

I doubt na, whyles, but though may thief;
What then? Poor beastie, thou maun live!
A daimen icker in a thrave
'S a sma' request
I'll get a blessin' wi' the lave
An' never miss 't!

Thy wee-bit housie, too, in ruin!
Its silly wa's the win's are strewin'
An' naething, now, to big a new ane
O' foggage green!
An' bleak December win's ensuing,
Baith snell an' keen!

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

He then goes on to apologise to the mouse for the behaviour of mankind. This gives some understanding as to what made Burns such a greatly loved man.

He tells the mouse that he understands its need to steal the odd ear of corn, and he does not mind. He'll get by with the remainder and never miss it.
daimen = occasional; *icker* = an ear of corn;
thrave = twenty-four sheaves; *lav* = remainder

Dismay at the enormity of the problems he has brought upon the mouse causes him to reflect on what he has done – destroyed her home at a time when it is impossible to rebuild. There is no grass to build a new home and the December winds are cold and sharp. Her preparations for winter are gone!
big = build; *foggage* = moss; *baith* = both

Thou saw the fields laid bare an' waste
 An' weary winter comin' fast,
 An' cozie here, beneath the blast,
 Thou thought to dwell,
 Till crash!
 The cruel coulter past
 Out thro' thy cell.

That wee bit heap o' leaves an' stibble,
 Hast cost thee monie a weary nibble!
 Now thou's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble
 But house or hald,
 To thole the Winter's sleety dribble,
 An' cranreuch cauld!

But Mousie, thou art no' thy lane,
 In proving foresight may be vain:
 The best-laid schemes o' Mice an' Men,
 Gang aft agley,
 An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain
 For promis'd joy!

Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!
 The present only toucheth thee;
 But Och! I backward cast my e'e
 On prospects drear!
 An' forward, tho' I canna see,
 I guess an' fear!

Where the mouse thought that she was prepared for winter in her comfortable little nest in the ground, she is now faced with trying to survive in a most unfriendly climate, with little or no hope in sight.
cosie = comfortable; *coulter* = iron cutter in front of a ploughshare

It seems probable that here the poet is really comparing his own hard times with that of the mouse. A life of harsh struggle with little or no reward at the end.
monie = many; *thole* = to endure; *dribble* = drizzle; *cranreuch* = hoar-frost; *cauld* = cold

How many times have people glibly trotted out 'The best laid schemes' without realising that they were quoting Burns? The sadness, the despair, the insight contained within this verse are truly remarkable and deeply moving.
no thy lane = not alone; *gang aft agley* = often go awry

The final verse reveals the absolute despondency that Burns was feeling at this stage in his life. Not at all what one would expect from a young man of twenty-six, supposedly so popular with the lassies, and with his whole life ahead of him, but nevertheless expressing sentiments with which many of us can easily relate.

Epistle to the Rev John McMath

INCLOSING A COPY OF HOLY WILLIE'S PRAYER,
WHICH HE HAD REQUESTED. SEPT. 17, 1785

John McMath had been educated at Glasgow University and joined the ministry as one of the New-Licht liberal preachers. His liking for drink was the cause of his downfall as a minister and this failing appears to have been seized upon by the old brigade, forcing his resignation. Burns had huge sympathy with his plight as the following lines show.

While at the stook the shearers cow'r
To shun the bitter blaudin' show'r,
Or, in gulravage rinnin, scow'r:
To pass the time,
To you I dedicate the hour
In idle rhyme.

My Musie, tir'd wi' monie a sonnet
On gown an' ban', an' douse black-bonnet,
Is grown right eerie now she's done it,
Lest they should blame her,
An' rouse their holy thunder on it
And anathem her.

I own 'twas rash, an' rather hardy,
That I, a simple, countra Bardie,
Should meddle wi' a pack sae sturdy,
Wha, if they ken me,
Can easy, wi' a single wordie,
Louse Hell upon me.

But I gae mad at their grimaces,
Their sighin, cantin, grace-proud faces,
Their three-mile prayers, and hauf-mile graces,
Their raxin conscience,
Whase greed, revenge, an' pride disgraces
Waur nor their nonsense.

While others are sheltering from the wind
and rain, or indulging in horseplay, he
decided to write this epistle.

stook = corn-stack; *blaudin'* = teeming;
gulravage = romp; *rennin* = running; *scow'r*
= a shower/squall

His Muse, who is responsible for so many
of his sober poems, thinks that perhaps
she will be cursed for this letter.

douse = sober; *anathem* = curse; *monie* =
many; *eerie* = scary

It is foolhardy of such a lowly person to
criticise such a powerful bunch of people,
as they can cause him great hardship.

But he finds them totally aggravating with
their hypocritical attitude and falseness.

cantin = furious; *raxin* = elastic; *waur* =
worse than; *gae* = go; *raxin* = growing

There's Gau'n, misca'd waur than a beast,
 Wha has mair honour in his breast
 Than monie scores as guid's the priest
 Wha sae abus't him:
 An' may a Bard no' crack his jest
 What way they've use't him?

See him, the poor man's friend in need,
 The gentleman in word and deed,
 An' shall his fame an' honor bleed
 By worthless skellums,
 An' not a Muse erect her head
 To cowe the blellums?

O Pope, had I thy satire's darts
 To gie the rascals their deserts,
 I'd rip their rotten, hollow hearts,
 An' tell aloud
 Their jugglin', hocus-pocus arts
 To cheat the crowd!

God knows, I'm no' the thing I shoud be,
 Nor am I even the thing I could be,
 But twenty times I rather woud be
 An atheist clean,
 Than under gospel colors hid be
 Just for a screen.

An honest man may like a glass,
 An honest man may like a lass;
 But mean revenge, an' malice fause
 He'll still disdain,
 An' then cry zeal for gospel laws,
 Like some we ken.

Gavin Hamilton has been verbally abused by them, yet he has more honour than any of them, so why should Burns not make a joke of them.

skellums = scoundrels;

blellums = blusterings; *cowe* = surpass

He wishes that he had the talent of Alexander Pope to satirise them properly.

He knows that he is no saint, but would prefer to be an atheist with a clear conscience than one who uses religion as a cover-up for their own faults.

An honest man may like drinking and women but would not resort to the meanness and spite that those people adopt.
fause = false

They take religion in their mouth;
 They talk of Mercy, Grace an' Truth;
 For what? to gie their malice skouth
 On some puir wight;
 An' hunt him down, o'er right an' ruth,
 To ruin streight.

All hail, Religion! maid divine!
 Pardon a Muse sae mean as mine,
 Who in her rough imperfect line
 Thus daurs to name thee;
 To stigmatize false friends of thine
 Can ne'er defame thee.

Tho' bloch't an' foul wi' monie a stain,
 An' far unworthy of thy train,
 With trembling voice I tune my strain,
 To join with those,
 Who boldly dare thy cause maintain
 In spite of foes:

In spite o' crowds, in spite of mobs,
 In spite of undermining jobs,
 In spite o' dark banditti stabs,
 At worth an' merit,
 By scoundrels, even wi' holy robes,
 But hellish spirit!

O Ayr! my dear, my native ground,
 Within thy presbyterial bound
 A candid lib'ral band is found
 Of public teachers,
 As men, as Christians too, renown'd,
 An' manly preachers.

They use religion as a weapon to beat some
 defenceless fellow with.
 skouth = liberty; wight = fellow; ruth =
 pity; *puir* = poor; *streight* = straight

daurs = dares

He may be imperfect but he knows that
 true religion is worth fighting for.

He will not be put off by the priests
 who have no souls.

He is thankful that Ayr is a centre for
 those who are true teachers of religion,
 and of liberal disposition.

Sir, in that circle you are nam'd;
 Sir, in that circle you are fam'd;
 An, some, by whom your doctrine's blam'd
 (Which gies ye honor),
 Even Sir, by them your heart's esteem'd,
 An' winning manner.

He is pleased to assure McMath that he
 is considered to be one of that group.

Pardon this freedom I have ta'en,
 An' if impertinent I've been,
 Impute it not, good Sir, in ane
 Whase heart ne'er wrang'd ye,
 But to his utmost would befriend
 Ought that belang'd ye.

Finally, an apology in case he has been
 too forward with his comments.

The Holy Fair

The original Holy Fairs were the gathering of several parishes to join in communal worship over a period of several days. However, by the time of Robert Burns they had transformed into an excuse for revelry with the holy part largely disregarded. Burns made good use of this poem to criticise several of the local clergy for whom he had little respect. This is a truly colourful and descriptive piece that brings the Fair vividly to life.

Upon a simmer Sunday morn,
When Nature's face is fair,
I walked forth to view the corn,
An' snuff the caller air,
The rising sun, owre Galston Muirs
Wi' glorious light was glintin';
The hares were hirplin' down the furrs,
The lav'rocks they were chantin'
Fu' sweet that day.

As lightsomely I glowr'd abroad,
To see a scene sae gay,
Three hizzies, early at the road,
Cam skelpin' up the way.
Twa had manteeles o' dolefu' black,
But ane wi' lyart lining;
The third, that gaed a wee a-back,
Was in the fashion shining,
Fu' gay that day.

The twa appear'd like sisters twin,
In feature, form an' claes;
Their visage wither'd, lang an' thin,
An' sour as onie slaes:
The third cam up, hap-step-an-lowp,
As light as onie lambie,
An' wi' a curchie low did stoop,
As soon as e'er she saw me,
Fu' kind that day.

The story opens on a beautiful Sunday morning with the poet out for an early-morning stroll, enjoying the beauties of nature.

simmer = summer; *snuff the caller air* = smell the fresh air; *owre* = over; *hirplin'* = hopping; *furrs* = furrows; *lav'rocks* = larks

As he admired the view, three young women came hurrying up the road. Two were dressed in sombre clothes, but the third was brightly clad in the fashion of the day.

glowr'd = gazed; *hizzies* = girls; *cam skelpin'* = came hurrying; *manteeles o' dolefu' black* = sombre black cloaks; *lyart* = grey; *gaed a wee a-back* = was a little to the rear

Two were like twins with miserable, sour faces. The third one skipped up to him and curtsied.

claes = clothes; *visage* = face; *onie slaes* = any sloes; *hap-step-an-lowp* = hop; skip and jump; *onie lambie* = any lamb; *curchie* = curtsy

Wi' bonnet aff, quoth I, 'Sweet lass,
 I think ye seem to ken me;
 I'm sure I've seen that bonie face,
 But yet I canna name ye.'
 Quo' she, an laughin as she spak,
 An' taks me by the hands,
 'Ye, for my sake, hae gien the feck
 Of a' the Ten Commands
 A screed some day.'

'My name is Fun - your cronie dear,
 The nearest friend ye hae;
 An' this is Superstition here,
 An' that's Hypocrisy.
 I'm gaun to Mauchline Holy Fair,
 To spend an hour in daffin:
 Gin ye'll go there, yon runkl'd pair,
 We will get famous laughin
 At them this day.'

Quoth I, 'Wi' a' my heart I'll do 't;
 I'll get my Sunday's sark on,
 An' meet you on the holy spot;
 Faith, we'se hae fine remarkin!'
 Then I gaed hame at crowdie-time,
 An' soon I made me ready;
 For roads were clad, frae side to side,
 Wi' monie a weary body,
 In droves that day.

Doffing his hat, he apologised to the girl
 for being unable to recall her name. She
 took him by the hand and laughingly told
 him that for her sake he had broken most
 of the Ten Commandments.

ken = know; *gien the feck* = given the
 greater portion; *a screed* = a tearing-up

Her name was Fun. She was his best friend
 and she was on her way to the Holy Fair.
 Her companions, Superstition and
 Hypocrisy were also going to be there, but
 she and the poet would just laugh at them.
gaun = going; *daffin* = having fun; *gin* = if;
rinkl'd = wrinkled

He dashed home to have his porridge and
 put on his best shirt, and was soon back on
 the road, which by now was busy with
 fellow travellers

sark = shirt; *we'se hae* = we'll have;
crowdie-time = breakfast

Here, farmers gash, in ridin graith,
 Gaid hoddin by their cotters;
 There, swankies young, in braw braid-claith,
 Are springing owre the gutters.
 The lasses, skelpin barefit, thrang,
 In silks an' scarlets glitter;
 Wi' sweet-milk cheese, in monie a whang,
 An' farls, bak'd wi' butter,
 Fu' crump that day.

When by the plate we set our nose,
 Weel heaped up wi' ha'pence,
 A greedy glowr black-bonnet throws,
 An' we maun draw our tippence.
 Then in we go to see the show;
 On ev'ry side they're gath'rin,
 Some carry dails, some chairs an' stools,
 An' some are busy bleth'rin
 Right loud that day.

Here, stands a shed to fend the show'rs,
 An' screen our countra gentry;
 There, Racer Jess, an' twa-three whores,
 Are blinkin at the entry.
 Here sits a row of tittlin jads,
 Wi' heavin breasts an' bare neck;
 An' there a batch o' wabster lads,
 Blackguarding frae Kilmarnock,
 For fun this day.

Farmers were riding past the labourers.
 Young men in their Sunday best, and
 bare-footed girls were all making their way,
 taking a huge assortment of food with them.
gash = confident; *ridin' graith* = riding gear;
gaid hoddin = rode slowly; *cotters* = labourers;
swankies = youths; *skelpin barefit* = running
 barefoot; *thrang* = throng; *whang* = large slice;
farls = oatcakes; *crump* = crisp

Walking into the gathering they passed a
 collection plate already heaped up with
 half-pences, but under the stern eye of an
 elder they felt obliged to put in twopence.
greedy glowr black-bonnet throws = a
 church-elder gives a stern stare; *maun* =
 must; *dails* = planks; *tippence* = twopence

The gentry are concealed behind a shelter,
 while a simple lass stands alongside the local
 prostitutes to watch people arriving. There is
 a row of immodestly dressed young women,
 while nearby is a gang of young weavers out
 for a day of fun.
fend the show'rs = protect from rain; *blinkin* =
 smirking; *tittlin jads* = gossiping hussies;
wabster = weaver; *blackguarding* = roistering

Here, some are thinkin on their sins,
 An' some upo' their claes;
 Ane curses feet that fyl'd his shins,
 Anither sighs an' prays:
 On this hand sits a chosen swatch,
 Wi' screw'd-up, grace-proud faces;
 On that, a set o' chaps, at watch,
 Thrang winkin on the lasses
 To chairs that day.

O happy is that man, an' blest!
 Nae wonder that it prides him!
 Whase ane dear lass, that he likes best,
 Comes clinkin' down beside him!
 Wi' arm repos'd on the chair back,
 He sweetly does compose him;
 Which, by degrees, slips round her neck,
 An's loof upon her bosom,
 Unkend that day.

Now a' the congregation o'er,
 Is silent expectation;
 For Moodie speels the holy door,
 Wi' tidings o' damnation:
 Should Hornie, as in ancient days,
 'Mang sons o' God present him,
 The vera sight o' Moodie's face,
 To's ain het hame had sent him
 Wi' fright that day.

Some of the congregation are contemplating their sins while others are more concerned about their attire. The chosen few sit smugly and solemnly while some of the young men are only interested in persuading a girl to sit beside them.
upo' their claes = upon their clothes; *fyl'd* = defiled; *swatch* = sample; *grace-proud* = haughty; *thrang* = busy

Happiest of all is the man whose sweetheart sits beside him. His arm has slipped around her and he uses the opportunity to take previously unknown liberties.
blest = blessed; *clinkin'* = sitting; *an's loof* = and his palm; *unkend* = unknown

The Rev Moodie is the first to preach, and does so with such vigour that the Devil himself would have retreated home, scared by the preacher's facial expressions.
speels = climbs; *Hornie* = the Devil; *'mang* = among; *to's ain het hame* = to his own hot home

Hear how he clears the points o' Faith
 Wi' rattlin an' thumpin!
 Now meekly calm, now wild in wrath,
 He's stampin, an' he's jumpin!
 His lengthen'd chin, his turn'd-up snout,
 His eldritch squeal an' gestures,
 O how they fire the heart devout,
 Like cantharidian plaisters
 On sic a day !

But hark! the tent has chang'd its voice;
 There's peace an' rest nae langer;
 For a' the real judges rise,
 They canna sit for anger,
 Smith opens out his cauld harangues,
 On practice and on morals;
 An' aff the godly pour in thrangs
 To gie the jars an' barrels
 A lift that day.

What signifies his barren shine,
 Of moral powers an' reason?
 His English style, an' gesture fine,
 Are a' clean out o' season.
 Like Socrates or Antonine,
 Or some auld pagan heathen,
 The moral man he does define,
 But ne'er a word o' faith in
 That's right that day.

His wild rantings and his equally wild gesturing are so exciting that they have an aphrodisiac effect of upon the poet.

snout = nose; *eldritch squeals* = unearthly screams; *cantharidian plaisters* = aphrodisiacs

Now it is time for the hierarchy to preach, and Smith's tone is so full of anger and fury at their lack of morals, that most of the congregation decide it is time to depart to where the drink is being served.

cauld = cold; *thrangs* = throngs

The poet considers that Smith is out of touch with modern society and that his sermonising is out of date. What's more, he expresses no Christian sentiment or feelings in his preaching.

In guid time comes an antidote
 Against sic poison'd nostrum;
 For Peebles, frae the water-fit,
 Ascends the holy rostrum:
 See, up he's got the word o' God,
 An' meek an' mim has view'd it,
 While common-sense has ta'en the road
 An' aff, an' up the Cowgate
 Fast, fast that day.

Wee Miller niest, the guard relieves,
 An' Orthodoxy raibles,
 Tho' in his heart he weel believes,
 An' thinks it auld wives fables:
 But faith! the birkie wants a manse,
 So, cannilie he hums them;
 Altho' his carnal wit an' sense
 Like hafflins-wise o'ercomes him
 At times that day.

Now butt an' ben the change-house fills,
 Wi' yill-caup commentators;
 Here's crying out for bakes and gills,
 An' there, the pint-stowp clatters;
 While thick an' thrang, an' loud an' lang,
 Wi' logic, an' wi' Scripture,
 They raise a din, that in the end
 Is like to breed a rupture
 O' wrath that day.

The Rev Peebles apparently was met with approval. He was not of the hell and damnation school, but preached with quiet sincerity and with common sense.

sic poison'd nostrum = such bitter medicine;

frae the water-fit = from the river-mouth;

rostrum = pulpit; *mim* = demure

Next on is the Rev Miller. He secretly regards much of the church's beliefs as no more than old wives tales. However, he is in need of a parish so will go along with it.

niest = next; *raibles* = recites; *birkie* = fellow;

cannilie = wordly; *hafflins-wise* = almost half

The crowd becomes rowdy and drunken. As the cries to be served with food and drink become more raucous, the preachers must yell even louder to make themselves heard, so much so that they are in danger of giving themselves a hernia.

butt an' ben = out and in; *change-house* = ale house; *yill-caup* = beer glass; *bakes and gills* = scones and whisky; *pint-stowp* = beer jug

Leeze me on drink! it gies us mair
 Than either school or college;
 It kindles wit, it waukens lear,
 It pangs us fu' o' knowledge:
 Be't whisky-gill or penny wheep,
 Or onie stronger potion,
 It never fails, on drinkin deep,
 To kittle up our notion,
 By night or day.

The lads and lasses, blythely bent
 To mind baith saul an' body,
 Sit round the table, weel content,
 An' steer about the toddy:
 On this ane's dress, an' that ane's leuk,
 They're makin observations;
 While some are cozie i' the neuk,
 An' forming assignments
 To meet some day.

But now the Lord's ain trumpet touts,
 Till a' the hills are rairin,
 An' echoes back return the shouts;
 Black Russell is na spairin:
 His piercin' words, like Highlan' swords,
 Divide the joints an marrow;
 His talk o' Hell, whare devils dwell,
 Our vera 'sauls does harrow'
 Wi' fright that day!

It would appear that the more one drinks,
 the wittier and more erudite one feels one
 becomes. Indeed, be it whisky or ale, the
 result is always the same.

leeze = blessings; *gies us mair* = gives us
 more; *waukens lear* = wakens learning; *pangs*
 = crams; *penny wheep* = small ale bought
 for a penny; *kittle* = tickle

The young people are happy to sit around
 the table drinking and gossiping. Others
 take the opportunity to arrange meetings at
 some other time.

saul = soul; *steer* = stir; *toddy* = spirits, sugar
 and hot water; *leuk* = appearance;
cozie i' the neuk = cosy in the corner

Now you can hear the Rev Russell's words
 bouncing off the surrounding hills. Here's a
 man whose words cut through you like a
 sword and make you fear for your very soul.
touts = sounds; *rairin* = roaring; *sauls* =
 souls

A vast, unbottom'd, boundless pit,
 Fill'd fou o' lowin brunstane;
 Whase raging flame, an' scorching heat,
 Wad melt the hardest whun-stane!
 The half-asleep start up wi' fear,
 An' think they hear it roarin';
 When presently it does appear,
 'Twas but some neebor snorin'
 Asleep that day.

'Twad be owre lang a tale to tell,
 How monie stories past;
 An' how they crouded to the yill,
 When they were a' dismiss;
 How drink gaed round, in cogs an' caups,
 Amang the forms an' benches;
 An' cheese an' bread, frae women's laps;
 Was dealt about in lunches,
 An' dawds that day.

In comes a gawsie, gash guidwife,
 An' sits down by the fire,
 Syne draws her kebbuck an' her knife;
 The lasses they are shy:
 The auld guidmen, about the grace,
 Fae side to side they bother;
 Till some ane by his bonnet lays,
 An' gies them't, like a tether
 Fu' lang that day.

He rages on about the fires of hell in such furious manner that some of those who had been enjoying a quiet nap woke up in the belief they could hear the roaring of the flames. Fortunately it was only the sound of a neighbour's snoring they were hearing.

lowin brunstane = blazing brimstone;
whun-stane = granite

It would take too long to relate the many stories of the day, and how everyone crowded into the bar at the end of the proceedings to quench their thirsts and appetites.

yill = ale; *a' dismiss* = all dismissed; *cogs an' caups* = wooden dishes and drinking vessels;
dawds = lumps

A very confident woman enters and sits by the fireplace, taking out her cheese and knife. The young girls are much more shy and tend to hang back. As tradition demands some of the older men offer up very long graces until they eventually settle down.

gawsie, gash guidwife = buxom, smart woman;
kebbuck = cheese

Waesucks! for him that gets nae lass,
 Or lasses that hae nothing!
 Sma' need has he to say a grace,
 Or melvie his braw claithing!
 O wives, be mindfu', ance yoursel',
 How bonie lads ye wanted;
 An' dinna, for a kebbuck-heel,
 Let lasses be affronted
 On sic a day!

Now Clinkumbell, wi' rattlin tow,
 Begins to jow an' croon;
 Some swagger hame, the best they dow,
 Some wait the afternoon.
 At slaps the billies halt a blink,
 Till lasses strip their shoon;
 Wi' faith an' hope, an' love an' drink,
 They're a' in famous tune
 For crack that day.

How monie hearts this day converts
 O' sinners and o' lasses!
 Their hearts o' stane, gin night are gane
 As saft as onie flesh is:
 There's some are fou o' love divine;
 There's some are fou o' brandy;
 An' monie jobs that day begin,
 May end in houghmagandie
 Some ither day.

Alas for the lad or lass who ends up alone.
 The lad has little to be thankful for in
 spite of his smart clothes. The poet pleads
 with the mothers to remember how they
 used to feel, so don't embarrass your
 daughters today.
waesucks = alas; *melvie his braw claithing* =
 spill food on his good clothes; *kebbuck-heel*
 = cheese-rind

As the bells tolled, some staggered off,
 others hung around to socialise. Young men
 waited by the stiles while the girls removed
 their little-used shoes from aching feet. All
 are in good mood after the Fair.
Clinkumbell = bellringer; *rattlin tow* = bell
 rope; *jow an' croon* = swing and toll; *dow* =
 can; *slaps* = stiles; *billies* = young men;
shoon = shoes; *crack* = chat

This day has been the cause of many
 romantic meetings. Some have been
 carried away by the spirit of love, others by
 the spirit in the brandy bottle.
gin night = by nightfall; *houghmagandie* =
 love-making

THE TWA DOGS

A TALE OF THOSE WHO HAVE, AND THOSE WHO HAVE NOT,
THE QUESTION IS, WHICH GROUP IS WHICH?

Burns had a dog named Luath that he loved dearly. Sadly, Luath died and the poet resolved to immortalise his old and trusted friend by writing this fine poem. Luath represents the working people of Scotland, while Caesar represents the ruling classes.

'Twas in that place o' Scotland's Isle,
That bears the name o' auld King Coil,
Upon a bonie day in June,
When wearin thro' the afternoon,
Twa dogs, that were na thrang at hame
Forgather'd ance upon a time.

The first I'll name, they ca'd him Caesar,
Was keepit for his Honour's pleasure,
His hair, his size, his mouth, his lugs,
Shew'd he was nane o' Scotland's dogs;
But whalpit some place far abroad,
Whare sailors gang to fish for cod.

His locked, letter'd, braw brass collar,
Shew'd him the gentleman an' scholar;
But tho' he was o' high degree,
The fient a pride, nae pride had he,
But wad hae spent an hour caressin',
Ev'n wi' a tinkler-gipsy's messin';
At kirk or market, mill or smiddie,
Nae tawted tyke, tho' e'er sae duddie,
But he wad stan't, as glad to see him,
An' stroant on stanes an' hillocks wi' him.

One fine day in June, at Kyle in Scotland,
two very dissimilar dogs who had nothing
to do at home, met up with each other.

King Coil = a Pictish monarch; *thro'* =
through; *twa* = two; *na thrang at hame* = not
busy at home; *for'gather'd* = met; *ance* = once

The first was named Caesar, and was purely
a pet for his master. His size and shape
indicated that he was not native to Scotland,
but had probably come from
Newfoundland.

ca'd = called; *keepit* = kept; *lugs* = ears; *shew'd*
= showed; *nane* = none; *whalpit* = born;
whare = where; *gang* = go

Despite his fancy collar and high pedigree,
he was totally without ambition and was
willing to spend his days with any old
mongrel willing to spend time with him.

braw = handsome; *the fient* = a fiend; *wad*
hae = would have; *messin* = mongrel; *kirk*
= church; *smiddy* = blacksmith's; *nae tawted*
tyke = no matted dog; *e'er sae duddie* = ever
so ragged; *wad stan't* = would stand; *stroant*
on stanes = peed on stones

The tither was a ploughman's collie,
 A rhyming, ranting, raving billie,
 Wha for his friend an' comrade had him,
 And in his freaks had Luath ca'd him,
 After some dog in Highlan' sang,
 Was made lang syne –
 Lord knows how lang.

He was a gash an' faithfu' tyke,
 As ever lap a sheugh or dyke,
 His honest, sonsie, baws'nt face
 Ay gat him friends in ilka place;
 His breast was white, his towzie back
 Weel clad wi' coat o' glossy black;
 His gawsie tail, wi' upward curl,
 Hung owre his hurdies wi' a swirl.

Nae doubt but that they were fain o' ither,
 And unco pack an' thick thegither;
 Wi' social noses whyles snuff'd an' snowkit;
 Whyles mice an' muddieworts they howkit;
 Whyles scoured awa; in lang excursion
 An' worry'd ither in diversion;
 'Till tired at last wi' monie a farce,
 They set them down upon their arse,
 An' there began a lang digression
 About the 'lords o' the creation'

The other was a collie named Luath, owned
 by a poetic ploughman.
tither = other; *rantin* = joyous; *billie* =
 comrade; *in his freaks* = in amusement; *lang*
syne = long ago

He was as respectable and faithful a dog as
 had ever leapt over ditches and walls, and
 with his friendly face with its white stripe,
 and his happily wagging tail, he was
 guaranteed a welcome anywhere.
gash = wise; *lap* = leapt; *sheugh* = ditch; *dyke*
 = stone wall; *sonsie* = jolly; *bawsn't* = white
 striped; *gat* = got; *ilka* = every; *towzie* =
 shaggy; *weel* = well; *gawsie* = handsome; *owre*
his hurdies = over his backside

There was no doubt that these two dogs
 enjoyed each other's company as they sniffed
 out mice and moles and went for long walks.
 Eventually, however, they would tire of
 playing and settle down for serious
 discussion about the meaning of life.
fain o' ither = fond of each other; *unco' pack an'*
thick thegither = uncouth and as thick as
 thieves; *whyles* = sometimes; *snuff' an' snowkit*
 = sniffed and snuffled; *muddieworts* = moles;
howkit = dug up; *scour'd* = rushed; *monie a farce*
 = many a laugh

CAESAR

I've often wonder'd, honest Luath,
 What sort o' life poor dogs like you have;
 An' when the gentry's life I saw,
 What way poor bodies liv'd ava.

Our laird gets in his racked rents,
 His coals, his kain, an' his stents;
 He rises when he likes himself;
 His flunkies answer at the bell;
 He ca's his coach; he ca's his horse;
 He draws a bonie, silken purse,
 As lang's my tail, whare thro' the steeks,
 The yellow, letter'd Geordie keeks.

Frae morn to e'en it's nought but toiling,
 At baking, roasting, frying, boiling;
 An' tho' the gentry first are steghan,
 Yet e'en the ha' folk fill their peghan
 Wi' sauce, ragouts, an' sic like trashtrie
 That's little short o' downright wastrie
 Our whipper-in, wee blastit wonner,
 Poor, worthless elf, it eats a dinner,
 Better than onie tenant-man
 His Honour has in a' the lan'
 An' what poor cot-folk pit their painch in,
 I own it's past my comprehension.

Caesar expresses his wonder at the different
 lifestyles of the rich and poor.
ava = at all

Our master gets his money by charging
 exorbitant rents. His fuel, his food and his
 taxes are provided by his tenants. His
 servants rush to get him his coach or his
 horse. One can see the golden guineas
 shining through the stitches of his purse.
racked = exorbitant; *kain* = farm produce
 payed as rent; *stents* = taxes; *flunkies* =
 servants; *ca's* = calls; *steeks* = stitches; *yellow-*
letter'd Geordie = a guinea; *keeks* = peep

Food is prepared all day long. The masters
 are the first to be served, but the servants get
 their share. The miserable little kennelman
 eats better than any of his lordship's tenants.
stechin = completely full; *ha' folk* = house-
 servants; *pechan* = stomach; *sic* = such,
trashtrie = rubbish; *wastrie* = extravagance;
whipper-in = kennelman; *wee blastit wonner* =
 worthless person; *cot-folk* = cottagers; *pit* =
 put; *painch* = stomach

LUATH

Trowth, Caesar, whyles they're fash't eneugh;
 A cotter howkin in a sheugh,
 Wi' dirty stanes biggin' a dyke,
 Barin' a quarry, an' sic like.
 Himsel', a wife he thus sustains,
 A smytrie o' wee duddie weans,
 An' nought but his han'darg to keep
 Them right an' tight in thack an rape.

An' when they meet wi' sair disasters,
 Like loss o' health, or want o' masters,
 Ye maist wad think, a wee touch langer,
 An' they maun starve o' cauld an' hunger;
 But how it comes, I never kend yet,
 They're maistly wonderfu' contented;
 An' buirdly chiels, an' clever hizzies,
 Are bred in sic a way as this is.

Oh, they are worried at times, but they work hard enough to keep a roof over their heads.
trowth = truth; *fash't eneugh* = troubled enough; *cotter* = labourer; *biggin'* = buildin
smytrie o' wee duddie bairns = family of small ragged children; *han'darg* = hands work; *in thack an' rape* = with a roof over their heads

When problems arise like ill-health or unemployment, you would expect them to die of cold and hunger. I don't know how they survive, but they usually appear contented, and they manage to raise sturdy boys and clever girls.
sair = sor; *ye maist wad think* = you would believe; *a wee touch langer* = a little longer; *maun* = must; *cauld* = cold; *kend* = knew; *maistly* = mostly; *buirdly chiels* = sturdy lads; *hizzies* = young women

CAESAR

But then, to see how you're neglectit,
 How huff'd, an' cuff'd, an' disrespeckit!
 Lord man, our gentry care as little
 For delvers, ditchers, an' sic cattle;
 They gang as saucy by poor folk,
 As I wad by a stinking brock.

I've notic'd, on our laird's court-day,
 An' monie a time my heart's been wae,
 Poor tenant-bodies, scant o' cash,
 How they maun thole a factor's snash;
 He'll stamp an' threaten, curse an' swear,
 He'll apprehend them, poind their gear
 While they maun stan', wi' aspect humble,
 An hear it a', an' fear an' tremble!
 I see how folk live that hae riches,
 But surely poor-folk maun be wretches!

But no one respects you or the cottagers.
 The gentry pass you as I would pass a
 stinking old badger.

negleckit = neglected; *huff'd* = bullied; *cuff'd* =
 beaten; *ditchers* = ditch cleaners; *sic cattle* =
 such people; *wad* = would; *brock* = badger

I've been sore-hearted many times on rent-
 days by the way the landlord's agent abuses
 tenants who cannot pay their dues. He
 threatens and curses them and has them
 arrested, and he impounds their few
 possessions while all they can do is stand
 and tremble. I can see how the rich live, but
 being poor must be terrible.

scant o' cash = short of money; *maun thole* =
 must endure; *factor's snash* = agent's abuse;
poind = seize

LUATH

They're no sae wretched's ane wad think;
 Tho' constantly on poortith's brink,
 They're sae accustom'd wi' the sight,
 The view o't gies them little fright.

Then chance and fortune are sae guided,
 They're ay in less or mair provided,
 An' tho' fatigu'd wi' close employment,
 A blink o' rest's a sweet enjoyment

The dearest comfort o' their lives,
 Their grushie weans an' faithfu' wives;
 The prattlin' things are just their pride,
 That sweeten's a' their fireside.

An' whyles twalpennie-worth o' nappy
 Can mak the bodies unco happy;
 They lay aside their private cares,
 To mind the Kirk and State affairs;
 They'll talk o' patronage an' priests,
 Wi' kindlin' fury in their breasts,
 Or tell what new taxation's comin',
 An' ferlie at the folk in Lon'on.

As bleak-fac'd Hallowmass returns,
 They get the jovial, ranting kirns,
 When rural life, of ev'ry station,
 Unite in common recreation;
 Love blinks, Wit slaps, an' social Mirth
 Forgets there's care upo' the earth.

They are so used to being close to poverty
 that they hardly notice it, and it does not
 worry them unduly.
poortith's brink = edge of poverty

They have little control of their own
 destiny, and as they constantly exhausted, a
 little nap is a great treat to them.
blink o' rest = a short nap

Their greatest pleasure is simply to be at
 home with their family.
grushie weans = thriving children; *prattlin'* =
 chattering

While the ale does help them relax, they are
 serious minded people who discuss in depth
 the affairs of Church and State. Talking of
 patronage and priesthood can stir them to
 anger, and they discuss with amazement
 these people in London who burden them
 with yet more taxes.
twalpenney worth o' nappy = small quantity of
 ale; *wi' kindlin' fury* = with burning anger;
ferlie = marvel

When the harvest is in and they are into
 autumn, they have the most wonderful
 parties where you would scarce believe
 they had a care in the world.
rantin' kirns = harvest festivals

That merry day the year begins,
 They bar the door on frosty win's;
 The nappy reeks wi' mantle ream,
 An' sheds a heart-inspiring ream,
 The luntin pipe, an' sneeshin mill,
 Are handed round wi' right guid-will;
 The cantie, auld folks, crackin' crouse,
 The young anes rantin' thro' the house.
 My heart has been sae fain to see them,
 That I for joy hae barkit wi' them.

Still it's owre true that ye hae said,
 Sic game is now owre aften play'd;
 There's monie a creditable stock
 O' decent, honest, fawsont folk,
 Are riven out baith root an' branch,.
 Some rascal's pridefu' greed to quench,
 Wha thinks to knit himsel' the faster
 In favour wi' some gentle master,
 Wha aiblins thrang a parliamentin',
 For Britain's guid his saul indentin—

The arrival of New Year heralds another happy time when the ale flows freely and pipes and snuff are handed around. The elders enjoy a good talk, and the children play so happily that I bark with joy just to be there with them.

win's = winds; *the nappy reeks wi' mantle ream* = the room smells of foaming ale; *luntin'* = smoking; *sneeshin' mill* = snuff box; *cantie auld folks crackin' crouse* = cheerful old people talking merrily; *sae fain* = so glad; *hae barkit* = have barked

Nevertheless, there's a lot of truth in what you say. Many's the family that's been forced out of their home by some unscrupulous agent trying to win favour with his master who is busy with affairs of the state.

fawsont = dignified; *riven* = torn; *gentle* = gentleman; *aiblins thrang a parliamentin'* = perhaps busy in parliament; *his saul indentin* = giving his soul

CAESAR

Haith, lad ye little ken about it;
 Britain's guid ! guid faith! I doubt it.
 Say, rather, gaun as Premiers lead him;
 An' saying aye, or no's they bid him
 At operas an' plays parading,
 Mortgaging, gambling, masquerading;
 Or maybe, in a frolic daft,
 To Hague or Calais taks a waft,
 To mak a tour an' tak a whirl,
 To learn *bon-ton* an' see the worl'.

There, at Vienna or Versailles,
 He rives his father's auld entails;
 Or by Madrid he takes the rout,
 To thrum guitars an' fecht wi' nowt;
 Or down Italian vista startles,
 Whore-hunting amang groves o' myrtles;
 Then bowses drumlie German-water,
 To mak himsel' look fair an' fatter,
 An' clear the consequential sorrows,
 Love-gifts of Carnival signoras,
 For Britain's guid! for her destruction!
 Wi' dissipation, feud an' faction.

Huh, lad, you don't know the half of it.
 Working for Britain's good? No, they simply
 do what their party leaders tell them. Most
 of the time they're going to the opera or to
 plays, or they are gambling or going to fancy-
 dress balls. Or they might decide to go to
 The Hague or Calais, or even further afield
 on the Grand Tour.

ye little ken = you little know; *gaun* = going;
taks a waft = takes a trip

They will spend their father's money in
 Vienna or Versailles, or perhaps in Madrid
 where they can listen to the music and watch
 the bull-fights, or go womanizing in Italy
 before they finish up in some German spa
 where they drink the muddy mineral ware
 in order to improve their appearance and
 hopefully, to clear up the sexual disease
 picked up from some foreign girl. Forget
 about them working for Britain's good! They
 are destroying her with their dissipation and
 self-indulgence!

rives his auld father's entails = wastes his
 inheritance; *thrum* = strum; *fecht wi' nowt* =
 fight bulls; *bowses drumlie German water* =
 drinks muddy German mineral waters;
consequential sorrows = venereal diseases

LUATH

Hech man! dear sirs! is that the gate,
 They waste sae monie a braw estate!
 Are we sae foughten an' harass'd
 For gear to gang that gate at last!

O would they stay aback frae courts,
 An' please themsels wi' countra sports,
 It wad for ev'ry ane be better.
 The laird, the tenant, an' the cotter!
 For thae frank, rantin, ramblin billies,
 Fient haet o' them's ill-hearted fellows;
 Except for breakin' o' their timmer,
 Or speakin' lightly o' their limmer,
 Or shootin' of a hare or moorcock,
 The ne'er a bit they're ill to poor folk.

But will ye tell me, master Caesar,
 Sure great folks' life's a life o' pleasure?
 Nae cauld nor hunger e'er can steer them,
 The vera thought o't need na fear them.

We work hard for them while they waste
 it all away.

gate = way;; *sae monie a braw estate* = many
 a fine inheritance; *foughten* = troubled

Why can't they just stay at home and
 enjoy country pursuits? Everyone would
 be better off. They really are not such bad
 fellows you know, although their manners
 are often poor in the way they discuss
 their affairs with women so openly, or go
 shooting hare or moorhens just for the
 fun of it. They are certainly never nasty to
 us poor folk.

countra = country; *fient haet* = not one of;
timmer = timber; *limmer* = mistress

But surely Caesar, their life is one of pure
 pleasure? No worries at all of cold and
 hunger to upset them.

vera = very

CAESAR

Lord man, were ye but whyles whare I am,
 The gentles ye wad ne'er envy 'em!
 It's true they need na starve or sweat,
 Thro' winter's cauld, or simmer's heat;
 They've nae sair-wark to craze their banes,
 An' fill auld-age wi' grips an' granes:
 But human bodies are sic fools,
 For a' their colleges an' schools,
 That when nae real ills perplex them,
 They mak enow themselves to vex them
 An' aye the less they hae to sturt them,
 In like proportion, less will hurt them.

A countra fellow at the pleugh,
 His acre's till'd, he's right enough;
 A countra girl at her wheel,
 Her dizzen's dune, she's unco weel;
 But gentlemen, an' ladies warst,
 Wi' ev'n down want o' wark they're curst.
 They loiter, lounging, lank an' lazy;
 Tho' deil-haet ails them, yet uneasy
 Their days, insipid, dull an' tasteless;

Their nights, unquiet, lang an' restless.
 An' ev'n their sports, their balls an' races,
 Their galloping thro' public places,
 There's sic parade, sic pomp an' art,
 The joy can scarcely reach the heart.
 The men cast out in party-matches,
 Then sowther a' in deep debauches;
 Ae night they're mad wi' drink an' whoring,
 Niest day their life is past enduring.

If you knew what I knew, you would not envy them. It is true that they neither starve nor sweat, and their bodies are not racked by the pain of toil, but humans are strange creatures and in spite of their education, if they have no real ills to trouble them, they will find something to make them ill for little or no reason.

simmer = summer; *sair work* = sore work;
to craze their banes = to injure their bones;
wi' grips an' granes = with aches and groans;
enow = enough; *sturt* = trouble

When country workers have completed their tasks, they get a feeling of personal satisfaction. But the gentlemen, and even worse, the ladies, have nothing to do but pass the time, lounging around and becoming bored. Their days are long and tedious, and their nights are just as bad.

dizzen's dune = dozen's done; *unco weel* = very well

They find little joy in their sports and balls, or at the race meetings, just making sure that they are seen in all the right places. The men get drunk and throw their money away on prostitutes and gambling, and wake up next day with massive hangovers.

party-matches = groups; *sowther* = make up;
deep debauches = heavy drinking; *niest* = next

The ladies arm-in-arm in clusters.
 As great an' gracious a' as sisters;
 But hear their absent thoughts o' ither,
 They're a' run-deils an' jads thegither.
 Whyles, owre the wee bit cup an' platie,
 They sip the scandal-potion pretty;
 Or lee-lang nights, wi' crabbit leuks
 Pore owre the devil's pictur'd beuks;
 Stake on a chance a farmer's stackyard,
 An' cheat like onie unhang'd blackguard

There's some exceptions, man an' woman;
 But this is Gentry's life in common.

By this time the sun was out o' sight,
 An' darker gloamin brought the night;
 The bum-clock humm'd wi' lazy drone;
 The kye stood rowtin i' the loan;
 When up they gat an' shook their lugs,
 Rejoic'd that they were na *men* but *dogs*,
 An' each took aff his several way,
 Resolv'd to meet some ither day.

The women act so sisterly and gracious
 while they sip their tea and seek the latest
 scandal about their friends. Or they sit,
 scowling, while they play cards, gambling
 with their tenant's livelihood, and cheating
 shamelessly.

jad = ill-tempered woman; *platie* = plate;
crabbit leuks = sour-faced; *devil's pictur'd*
beuks = playing cards; *stackyard* = stockyard

There are a few exceptions, but not many.

By now darkness was falling. Beetles were
 droning in the twilight, and the cattle were
 lowing in the fields. The two dogs arose,
 shook themselves, and considered how
 fortunate they were to be dogs and not
 men. They each went his own way vowing
 to meet again.

gloamin' = twilight; *bum-clock* = drone
 beetle; *kye* = cattle; *lugs* = ears

The Cotter's Saturday Night

INSCRIBED TO R. AIKEN, ESQ.

*Let not ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor grandeur hear; with a disdainful smile,
The short and simple annals of the poor,
———Gray*

Cotters, or cottagers were the labouring classes of the farming community, the people who dug the ditches and cleared the stones from the fields. People to whom life was an ongoing struggle against poverty and starvation, and the people for whom Burns had a burning respect and admiration. Proud, proud people who were both God-fearing and law-abiding citizens, and whose aspirations were seldom greater than to be allowed to feed and house their families. Once again the Bard presents himself as a true champion of the working-classes, again displaying his contempt for the paraphernalia of Church and State. Burns wrote this wonderful poem when he was 26 years old, and dedicated it to Robert Aiken, one of the targets of Holy Willie's venomous tirades, and to whom the poem is addressed in the opening lines.

My lov'd, my honour'd, much respected friend!
No mercenary bard his homage pays;
With honest pride, I scorn each selfish end,
My dearest meed, a friend's esteem and praise;
To you I sing, in simple Scottish lays,
The lowly train in life's sequester'd scene;
The native feelings strong, the guileless ways;
What Aiken in a cottage would have been;
Ah! tho' his worth unkown, far
happier there I ween.

The poem starts with Burns paying his respects to Robert Aiken, explaining to him that had he been born a cottager, then this is how life would have been, and telling him that he may have been a happier man for it.
meed = reward; *lay* = song; *ween* = expect

November chill blaws loud wi' angry sough;
 The short'ning winter-day is near a close;
 The miry beasts retreating frae the pleugh;
 The black'ning trains o' craws to their repose;
 The toil-worn Cotter frae his labor goes,
 This night his weekly moil is at an end,
 Collects his spades, his mattocks and his hoes;
 Hoping the morn in ease and rest to spend,
 And weary o'er the moor, his course does
 hameward bend.

At length his lonely cot appears in view,
 Beneath the shelter of an aged tree;
 Th' expectant wee-things, toddling,
 stacher through
 To meet their dad, with flichterin' noise
 and glee,
 His wee-bit ingle, blinkin' bonilie,
 His dean hearth-stane, his thrifty wifie's smile,
 The lisping infant prattling on his knee,
 Does a' his weary kiaugh and care beguile,
 An' makes him quite forget his labor an' his toil.

Belyve, the elder bairns come drappin' in,
 At service out, amang the farmers roun';
 Some ca' the pleugh, some herd, some tentie rin
 A cannie errand to a neebor town;
 Their eldest hope, their Jenny, woman grown,
 In youthfu' bloom, love sparkling in her e'e,
 Comes hame; perhaps to show a braw
 new gown,
 Or deposit her sair-won penny-fee,
 To help her parents dear, if they in hardship be.

The scene changes to the cotter wearily
 returning homewards on a Saturday evening,
 hoping to spend the following morning
 resting his tired body. The returning horses,
 covered in mud from the ploughing, and the
 masses of crows flying to their nests paints a
 very vivid picture.

blaws = blows; *sough* = sigh; *miry* = muddy;
frae the pleugh = from the plough; *trains o' craws*
 = masses of crows; *moil* = labour *mattock* =
 pickaxe; *hameward* = homeward

As he approaches his cottage, he is met by
 his toddlers who are happy to see their
 father, and as he sits by his fireside, his toils
 and tribulations are forgotten in the comfort
 of his home and his loving wife.

cot = cottage; *wee-things* = small children;
stacher = walk unsteadily; *flichterin'* =
 fluttering; *ingle* = fireside, *hearth-stane* =
 hearth-stone; *wifie* = wife; *kiaugh* =
 trouble

Eventually the older children start arriving
 home. They have been working for local
 farmers, or running errands to a nearby
 town. The eldest daughter, Jenny, is almost a
 grown woman but she understands the need
 to help out with the family budget.

belyve = eventually; *bairns* = children;
drappin' = dropping; *ca' the pleugh* = drive the
 plough; *tentie rin a cannie errand* = carefully
 run a small errand; *neebor* = neighbour; *e'e* =
 eye; *braw* = fine; *sair won penny-fee* = hard
 earned small wage

With joy unfeign'd, brothers and sisters meet,

And each for other's weelfare kindly spiers;
 The social hours, swift-wing'd, unnotic'd fleet;
 Each tells the uncos that he sees or hears.
 The parents, partial, eye their hopeful years;
 Anticipation forward points the view,
 The mother, wi' her needle an' her sheers,
 Gars auld claes look amaist as weel's the new;
 The father mixes a', wi' admonition due.

Their master's and their mistress's commands,
 The youngers a' are warned to obey;
 And mind their labors wi' an eydent hand,
 And ne'er, tho' out o' sight, to jauk or play;
 An' O! be sure to fear the Lord alway!
 And mind your duty, duly, morn and night;
 Lest in temptation's path ye gang astray,
 Implore His counsel an' assisting might;
 'They never sought in vain that sought the
 Lord aright.'

But, hark! a rap comes gently to the door;
 Jenny, wha kens the meaning o' the same,
 Tells how a neebor lad came o'er the moor,
 To do some errands, and convoy her hame.
 The wily mother sees the conscious flame
 Sparkle in Jenny's e'e, and flush her cheek;
 Wi' heart-struck anxious care, enquires
 his name,
 While Jenny, hafflins is afraid to speak;
 Weel-pleas'd the mother hears it's nae wild,
 worthless rake

This is a family of true brotherly and sisterly love and affection, and time flies as each recounts the events of the week, while the parents listen and wonder what life has ahead for their offspring. The mother keeps busy with her sewing and repairing, while the father offers words of wisdom.

weelfare = welfare; *spiers* = asks; *fleet* = fly by; *unco* = unusual; *sheers* = scissors; *gars auld claes look amaist as weel's the new* = makes old clothes seem like new; *a' wi'* = all with

Right and wrong are deeply defined in this family, and the young people are taught not only to obey their employers, but more importantly, also to follow the word of God at all times and never be afraid to ask for His advice.

youngers = youngsters; *eydent* = diligent; *jauk* = fool about; *gang* = go; *aright* = in the right way

A young suitor arrives to court Jenny, the eldest daughter. Jenny's embarrassment, and the mother's relief that he is not a ne'er-do-well illustrate a situation familiar in many families.

rap = knock; *wha kens* = who knows; *cam o'er* = came over; *hafflins* = half; *weel pleas'd* = well pleased; *nae* = no; *rake* = waster

Wi' kindly welcome, Jenny brings him ben;
 A strappin' youth, he tak's the mother's eye;
 Blythe Jenny sees the visit's no ill-ta'en;
 The father cracks o' horses, pleughs, an' kye.
 The youngster's artless heart o'erflows wi' joy,
 But blate an' laithfu', scarce can weel behave;
 The mother, wi' a woman's wiles can spy,
 What makes the youth sae bashfu' an' sae grave;
 Weel pleas'd to think her bairn's respected
 like the lave.

O happy love! where love like this is found;
 O heart-felt raptures! bliss beyond compare!
 I've paced much this weary, mortal round,
 And sage experience bids me this declare—
 'If Heaven a draught of heavenly
 pleasure spare,
 One cordial in this melancholy vale,
 'Tis when a youthful, loving, modest pair
 In other's arms, breathe out the tender tale,
 Beneath the milk-white thorn that scents
 the ev'ning gale.'

Is there, in human form, that bears a heart—
 A wretch! a villain! lost to love and truth!
 That can, wi' studied, sly, ensaring art,
 Betray sweet Jenny's unsuspecting youth?
 Curse on his perjurd arts!
 dissembling, smooth!
 Are honour, virtue, conscience, all exil'd?
 Is there no pity, no relenting ruth,
 Points to the parent fondling o'er their child?
 Then paints the ruin'd maid, and their
 distraction wild?

Jenny is relieved to see no disapproval of the visit. Her mother obviously likes the lad and father is happy to discuss farming matters with him. The lad is bashful and serious, which pleases the mother who recognises that he respects her daughter. *ben* = through; *strappin'* = well-built; *taks* = takes; *no ill-taen* = not ill-taken; *cracks* = talks; *kye* = cattle; *blate an' laithfu'* = sheepish and bashful; *the lave* = the others

At this point, Burns recounts the many times that he himself has experienced the joys of love, and waxes lyrical accordingly.

He goes to ask how anyone could take advantage of an innocent like Jenny, and curses the wrongdoers for the shame they bring to entire families. One wonders if the Bard is wearing a hairshirt at this point, and if these lines are directed at his far from blameless life.

perjurd arts = lies; *dissembling* = masking; *ruth* = remorse

But now the supper crowns their simple board,
The wholesome parritch, chief o' Scotia's food;
The soupe their only hawkie does afford,
That, 'yont the hallan snugly chows her cood;
The dame brings forth in complimentary mood,
To grace the lad, her weel-hain'd kebbuck fell,
An' aft he's prest, an' aft he ca's it guid;
The frugal wife, garrulous, will tell,
How 'twas a towmond auld, sin' lint was i'
the bell.

The cheerfu' supper done, wi' serious face,
They, round the ingle, form a circle wide;
The sire turns o'er, wi' partriachal grace,
Th big ha'-Bible, ance his father's pride.
His bonnet rev'rently is laid aside,
His lyart haffets wearing thin and bare;
Those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide,
He wales a portion with judicious care;
'And let us worship God!' he says with
solemn air.

They chant their artless notes in simple guise,
They tune their hearts, by far the noblest aim;
Perhaps Dundee's wild-warbling measures rise,
Or plaintive Martyrs, worthy o' the name;
Or noble Elgin beets the heavenward flame,
The sweetest far of Scotia's holy lays;
Compar'd with these, Italian trills are tame;
The tick'd ear no heart-felt raptures raise;
Nae unison hae they, with our Creator's praise.

Supper consists of porridge served with milk from their only cow, happily settled behind the partition that separates her from the living quarters, and just to impress a little, the mother produces a cheese that has lain for a year, wrapped in flax.

halesome parritch = wholesome porridge; *yont* = beyond; *hallan* = partition; *chows her cood* = chews the cud; *weel hain'd kebbuck* = cheese she has saved; *aft* = often; *ca's it guid* = calls it good; *towmond auld* = twelve-month old; *sin' lint was i' the bell* = since flax was in flower

With supper finished, the family sit around the fireplace. The father removes his hat, revealing thin, greying hair, then brings out the cherished family Bible. He selects a chapter and solemnly tells the family to prepare to worship God.

round the ingle = round the fireplace; *ha'-Bible* = family-Bible; *ance* = once; *bonnet* = a working man's cap; *lyart haffets* = grey temples; *wales* = selects

The family join together in singing a well-known psalm, possibly to one of the traditional Scottish airs rather than to one of the joyless Italian tunes which many people favoured.

holy-lays = religious music

The priest-like father reads the sacred page,
 How Abram was the friend of God on high;
 Or, Moses bade eternal warfare wage
 With Amalek's ungracious progeny;
 Or, how the royal Bard did groaning lie
 Beneath the stroke of Heaven's avenging ire;
 Or Job's pathetic plaint, and wailing cry;
 Or rapt Isaiah's wild, seraphic fire;
 Or other holy Seers that tune the sacred lyre.

Perhaps the Christian volume is the theme,
 How guiltless blood for guilty men was shed;
 How He, who bore in Heav'n the
 second name,
 Had not on earth whereon to lay his head;
 How His first followers and servants sped;
 The precepts sage they wrote to many a land;
 How He, who lone in Patmos banished,
 Saw in the sun a mighty angel stand,
 And heard great Bab'lons doom
 pronounc'd by Heaven's command.

Then kneeling down to Heaven's
 Eternal King,
 The saint, the father, and the husband prays;
 Hope's springs exulting on triumphant wing,
 That thus they shall all meet in future days:
 There, ever bask in uncreated rays,
 No more to sigh, or shed the bitter tear,
 Together hymning their Creator's praise,
 In such society, yet still more dear;
 While circling Time moves round in an
 eternal sphere.

Now the father reads the Scriptures in a truly
 reverent and ministerial fashion, telling the
 ancient stories from the Bible to his hushed
 family.

plaint = lamentation; *lyre* = harp

Burns now appears to be contemplating the
 wisdom of the Bible as he writes of the life of
 Jesus Christ. His knowledge of the Holy
 Book is impressive as he tells of St John's exile
 in Patmos, and how he saw the Angel
 Michael, and heard the order to destroy
 Babylon, considered by some to be a name
 describing all heretical religions.

The father exults the praises of the Lord and
 prays for the day when the family meet in
 Heaven, where all cares will be forgotten, and
 their days will be spent in praise of the Lord.

Compar'd with this, how poor Religion's pride,
 In all the pomp of method, and of art;
 When men display to congregations wide
 Devotion's ev'ry grace, except the heart!
 The Power, incens'd, the pageant will desert,
 The pompous strain, the sacerdotal stole;
 But, hap'ly, in some cottage far apart,
 May hear, well-pleas'd, the language of the soul;
 And in His Book of Life the inmates
 poor enrol.

Then homeward all take off their sev'ral way,
 The youngling cottagers retire to rest:
 The parent-pair their secret homage pay,
 And proffer up to Heaven the warm request,
 That He who stills the raven's clam'rous nest,
 And decks the lily fair in flow'ry pride,
 Would, in the way His wisdom sees the best,
 For them and for their little ones provide;
 But, chiefly, in their hearts with Grace
 Divine preside.

From scenes like this, old Scotia's
 grandeur springs,
 That makes her lov'd at home, rever'd abroad:
 Princes and lords are but the breath of kings,
 'An honest man's the noblest work of God;'
 And certes, in fair Virtue's heavenly road,
 The cottager leaves the palace far behind;
 What is a lordling's pomp? a cumbrous load,
 Disguising oft the wretch of human kind,
 Studied in arts of Hell, in wickedness refin'd!

Here again the poet declares his contempt for the pomp and ceremony of the Church, and the lack of heartfelt devotion of many of those who profess to be devout. Their beliefs are hollow when stood against those of the cottagers.

sacerdotal = priestly; *haply* = perhaps

As the family gathering breaks up and they set off to their various destinations, the parents pray to God that He will provide for all of them, but more importantly, that they will be blessed with His Holy Grace.

youngling = young

This simplicity of belief is what appears to make Scotland so beloved around the world. Burns does not hesitate to use Alexander Pope's words about there being nothing more noble than an honest man, at the same time pointing out that Lord and Prince are but titles given out by kings. In terms of love and devotion, a cottage is a much worthier place than a palace.

certes = certainly; *cumbrous* = cumbersome

O Scotia! my dear, my native soil!
 For whom thy warmest wish to Heav'n is sent!
 Long may thy hardy sons of rustic toil
 Be blest with health, and peace, and
 sweet content!
 And O! may Heaven their simple
 lives prevent
 From Luxury's contagion, weak and vile!
 Then however crowns and coronets be rent,
 A virtuous populace may rise the while,
 And stand a wall of fire, around their
 much-lov'd isle.

O Thou! who pour'd the patriotic tide,
 That stream'd thro' Wallace's
 undaunted heart,
 Who dar'd to, nobly, stem tyrannic pride,
 Or nobly die, the second glorious part;
 (The patriot's God, peculiarly Thou art,
 His friend, inspirer, guardian, and reward!)
 O never, never Scotia's realm desert;
 But still the patriot, and the patriot-bard
 In bright succession raise, her ornament
 and guard!

Expressing his love for Scotland, the land of his birth, Burns prays that the peace and contentment of its working class will never be ruined by exposure to the luxuries which promote avarice, and that no matter who wears the crown, the population will stand united to protect their beloved country.

Finally, he pleads with God, who filled the veins of great Scots such as William Wallace with patriotic blood which helped fight against the tyrants, that He should never desert the Scots as he is the true God of the patriotic Scottish Nation.
dar'd = dared