

## "To A Mouse: On Turning Her Up in Her Nest with the Plow" by Robert Burns

### Purpose of the poem:

"Written by Burns after he had turned over the nest of a tiny field mouse with his plough. Burns was a farmer and farmers are generally far too busy to be concerned with the health of mice. This poem is another illustration of Robert Burns's tolerance to all creatures and his innate humanity."

[http://www.robertburns.org.uk/Assets/Poems\\_Songs/toamouse.htm](http://www.robertburns.org.uk/Assets/Poems_Songs/toamouse.htm)

"Surely one of the finest poems written by Burns, containing some of the most famous and memorable lines ever written by a poet, yet, to this day not really understood by the mass of English-speaking poetry lovers, for no other reason than that the dialect causes it to be read as though in a foreign language. All readers of Burns know of the 'Wee sleekit cow'rin tim'rous beastie' but not 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?" - George Wilkie

Thanks to George Wilkie for letting us have this explanation of this poem from his book, "Understanding Robert Burns".

<http://www.electricscotland.com/burns/mouse.html>

Robert Burns' "To a Mouse" (1785) is a deeply poetic monologue of a young man who accidentally overturns the soil of a mouse's nest. Emotionally surrendering to the pitiful scene, the narrator of Robert Burns' "To a Mouse" succumbs to the weight of his past failures and fears for the future and expresses himself in a profoundly poignant soliloquy. One of the lines, now a famous quote, "The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men, / gang aft agley" (38-39), is perhaps one of the most profound quotes of Scottish and, indirectly, European and American literature. Robert Burns' poem, "To a Mouse", in its intimate solidarity with all men, touches the reader in ways few poetic works ever really can. To understand what Burns' "To a Mouse" genuinely means to a reader is to know their darkest, innermost secrets and most remorseful memories of regret. It is this intimacy that gives Burns' "To a Mouse" its intensity.

Scottish writer, Robert Burns (1759 – 1796), was an accomplished and very well known Scottish poet whose works went well beyond the borders of Scotland. Often writing in English as well as a light Scot-English dialect, Burns' writing was readily accessible to readerships throughout Europe and North America. "To a Mouse," would be an example of one of Burns' 'Scot-English' works, with its deep, predominantly English verse accented with some Scottish vocabulary and culture-typical idioms. Often, when an English speaker is reading Robert Burns, they must imagine a smooth rhythmic Scottish accent, and try to avoid toiling over any literal meanings of English words spelled in Scottish dialect. Burns must be 'felt'; allowing the words to flow uninterrupted so that the greater theme can more freely reveal itself. In the case of Burns' "To a Mouse," the message is a theme that is absolutely worth the relationship.

The first six stanzas of Burns' "To a Mouse" is a heart felt description and apology to a little 'mousie' who has had her nest destroyed by the narrator who was plowing his field. With all her work destroyed by the blade of the farmer's plow, the little mouse's fate of dying in the harsh December weather is assured. The narrator tries to tell the terrified little mouse that he had meant her no harm and, that though she stole the odd piece of corn, he never actually held any malice towards her for doing so. He goes on to say that in many ways he was glad to share for the sake of the little creature, and felt that man's progress has already broken too many of God's natural bonds. These bonds are the connections that they as fellow mortal beings shared against the suffering and cruel interventions of chance and fate on Earth.

It is here, as Burns' narrator pours his heart out to this pitiful little 'mousie,' that the narrator seems to be undone by what has happened to her. In the lines "The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men, / Gang aft agley, / An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain, / For promis'd joy!" (38-41), he tries to explain that no matter how well thought out or how well intentioned our plans may be, even the best of them can be ruined by a simple turn of luck; the mouse's nest, a careful and diligent construction of a summer's labor, was just as easily destroyed as any house or farm ever built by man. For our labors, our most earnest hopes, Burn's narrator mourns and describes their returns of "grief an' pain, / For promised joy!" (40-41).

It's this turn in the course of the poem's theme after the seventh stanza, Burns' full intentions coming to light, that the narrator reveals why he is talking to this frightful mouse in such a pathetic manner. He sees in the mouse a fellow victim of the hand of fate, and cannot but feel empathy for her loss. The narrator speaks as if he himself has recently lost a dream that he too saw hewn in half by some uncontrollable force of destiny. As he talks to the mouse, it seems fresh in his mind as he describes the past as a stinging recollection of failures; "Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me! / The present only toucheth the: / But Ouch! I backward cast my e'e, / On prospect drear! / An' forward, though' I canna see, / I guess and fear!" (Line 42-47). As many who have suffered failure and loss, Burns' narrator, or perhaps Burns himself, expresses jealousy for the mouse's ability to live perpetually in the present without a past to rush painfully back into her mind whenever she remembers.

Burns' narrator, in this distant forlorn monologue, describes how he can only guess what the future may hold, and fears for its uncertain outcome. It seems that Burns' narrator has been wrestling with this repressed pain and worry for some time, and now, only with the emotional catalyst of the mouse's disaster is he forced face them. He somehow feels obligated to apologize to a little creature that has no understanding of what he's trying to say, and whose death is all but assured thanks to his ignorant action. Yet, in some metaphysical metaphor, Burns manages to turn the mouse into a tiny helpless symbol of ourselves, terrified at a world that could so easily destroy us at any moment, and make us wonder if God feels the same way we do when he stands over disaster.

[http://bestword.ca/Robert\\_Burns\\_To\\_a\\_Mouse\\_Analysis.html](http://bestword.ca/Robert_Burns_To_a_Mouse_Analysis.html)

# “To a Mouse” by Robert Burns

## Burns Original

Wee, sleekit, cowrin, tim'rous beastie,  
O, what a panic's in thy breastie!  
Thou need na start awa sae hasty  
Wi bickering 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 thou may thieve;  
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!  
It's silly wa's the win's are strewin!  
An' naething, now, to big a new ane,  
O' foggage green!  
An' bleak December's win's ensuin,  
Baith snell an' keen!

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,  
Has cost thee monie a weary nibble!  
Now thou's turned 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 are blest, compared 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!

## Standard English Translation

Small, sleek, cowering, timorous beast,  
O, what a panic is in your breast!  
You need not start away so hasty  
With hurrying scamper!  
I would be loath to run and chase you,  
With murdering plough-staff.

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

I doubt not, sometimes, but you may  
steal;  
What then? Poor beast, you must live!  
An odd ear in twenty-four sheaves  
Is a small request;  
I will get a blessing with what is left,  
And never miss it.

Your small house, too, in ruin!  
It's feeble walls the winds are scattering!  
And nothing now, to build a new one,  
Of coarse grass green!  
And bleak December's winds coming,  
Both bitter and keen!

You saw the fields laid bare and wasted,  
And weary winter coming fast,  
And cozy here, beneath the blast,  
You thought to dwell,  
Till crash! the cruel plough past  
Out through your cell.

That small bit heap of leaves and  
stubble,  
Has cost you many a weary nibble!  
Now you are turned out, for all your  
trouble,  
Without house or holding,  
To endure the winter's sleety dribble,  
And hoar-frost cold.

But Mouse, you are not alone,  
In proving foresight may be vain:  
The best laid schemes of mice and men  
Go often askew,  
And leaves us nothing but grief and pain,  
For promised joy!

Still you are blest, compared with me!  
The present only touches you:  
But oh! I backward cast my eye,  
On prospects dreary!  
And forward, though I cannot see,  
I guess and fear!

## Explanation

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

(2) He then goes on to apologize to the mouse for the behavior of mankind using beautiful prose which requires neither translation nor interpretation. Listen to what he is saying, and you will be well on your way to understand what made Burns such a greatly loved man. Note how he equates himself with the mouse in life's great plan.

(3) Here he tells the mouse that he realizes its need to steal the odd ear of corn, and he does not really mind. He'll get by with remainder and never miss it.

(4) Dismay at the enormity of the problems he has brought on 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!

(5) Where the mouse had thought that she was prepared for winter in her comfortable little nest in the ground, now she is faced with trying to survive in a most unfriendly climate, with little or no hope in sight.

(6) 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.

(7) The sadness, the despair, the insight contained within this verse are truly remarkable and deeply moving.

(8) This final verse reveals the absolute despondency that Burns was feeling at this stage in his life. Not at all what one might 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 today can easily relate.

## Themes

### Respect Earth and Its Creatures

In "To a Mouse," Robert Burns develops the theme of respect for nature's creatures, especially the small, the defenseless, the downtrodden (or, in this case, the uprooted). As a wee creature, the mouse represents not only lowly animals but also lowly human beings—common folk who are often tyrannized by the high and the mighty.

### Foolproof Plans Can Go Awry

In the seventh stanza (Lines 27-42), Burns observes that "the best-laid schemes o' mice an' men" often go wrong. This theme can apply not only to the mouse's construction of a nest but also to a human being's construction of a political system or a war plan. Napoleon learned this lesson at Waterloo.

## End Rhyme

In each stanza, the first line rhymes with the second, third, and fifth, and the fourth line rhymes with the sixth. Thus, the rhyme scheme is aaabab. The types of end rhyme used include masculine rhyme, as in *thrive* and *live* (Lines 15 and 17); feminine rhyme, as in *stibble* and *nibble* (Lines 31 and 32); and near rhyme, as in *thieve* and *live* (Lines 13 and 14).

## Meter

The meter varies.

## Use of Diminutives

Notice that Burns uses diminutives such as *beastie* and *Mousie* to suggest smallness and to endear the mouse to the reader. *Webster's New World Dictionary & Thesaurus* (Accent Software International, Macmillan Publishers, Version 2.0, 1998) defines *diminutive* as "a word or name formed from another by the addition of a suffix expressing smallness in size, or sometimes, endearment or condescension, as *ringlet* (ring + -let), *Jackie* (Jack + -ie), *lambkin* (lamb + -kin)."

## Setting

The time is the late eighteenth century. The place is a farm in Scotland. Burns, a farmer, was plowing a field when he uprooted the nest of a mouse. Later, he wrote "To a Mouse" to apologize to the "wee beastie" for evicting it from its home.

## Characters

**The Narrator:** The poet Burns, a farmer, who uproots a mouse's nest while plowing a field.

**The Mouse:** A wee creature that scurries off in fear of the human invader.

## Study Questions and Essay Topics

- Why does this poem remain fresh and relevant for modern readers?
- Discuss schemes of businessmen and politicians that "gang aft agley."
- The subtitle of the poem refers to the mouse as a female. Would the poem have less impact if it were about a male?

## **Connection with John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men***

Steinbeck's choosing of the title *Of Mice and Men* was derived from this poem "To a Mouse" and deliberately misses out the rest of the verse *The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men, gang aft agley, an' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain for promis'd joy!*

This is virtually the whole story - The shattered dream, the grief and pain instead of the promised plan.

In the poem there is no dubiety at all in the meaning and interpretation. Burns is the philosophical farmer with equally little control over his destiny as that of the mouse. Mankind, though superior to the mouse can think things through, can feel regret, remorse, disappointment, etc.

Steinbeck retains this thought process because Lennie (as the mouse) had a lot of his choices made for him and lives only for the present "the present only touches thee" and at the same time Lennie (as the man) was able to have a dream and devoted himself to the fulfilment of this dream. He also (as the man) was more powerful than many and was capable of killing thus overturning and destroying George's dream of owning land.

The great tragedy is that they were within an inch of achieving that aim.

George (as the man) is also able to plan carefully. He has a "social union" with Lennie but pressure from society "man's dominion" breaks the natural bond he has with Lennie. These human feelings he has under this pressure makes him give up on the dream and give up on Lennie. It has broken the natural bond between George, Lennie and the shared dream.

This shattered dream is the same as the turning up of the mouse's nest. "The best laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft agley."

An' cozie here, beneath the blast, thou thought to dwell, till crash! the cruel coulter past out thro' thy cell. George and Lennie thought they would be very cosy in their own ranch but Curley's wife was the coulter that smashed that idea.

Now thou's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble but house or hald - Not for the first time had George and Lennie been turned out for the trouble Lennie had caused. they were constant travellers.

It is also of interest that George and Lennie were also working with grain - loading barley onto the wagons. Steinbeck has very cleverly kept to the theme of the poem. Everything in life is not black and white, sometimes we have no control over our own destiny "An' forward, tho' I canna see, I guess an'fear." With a bit of imagination, Steinbeck has virtually turned an eight verse poem into a novel.

<http://www.robertburns.plus.com/mouse.htm>

Activities AFTER reading both poem and novel:

1. Compare the figurative language in a poem to its thematic use in *Of Mice and Men*.
2. The title of *Of Mice and Men* is taken from a poem by Robert Burns. "To a Mouse" describes how a mouse's home is destroyed by a farmer's plow even though the mouse thinks he has discovered an invulnerable site. Steinbeck borrowed a significant line in the poem to use as his title: "The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry." That is, even the best ideas can fail.

Anyone who has read the novel would agree that Lennie and George's plans go awry (unless you consider shooting your best friend in the back of the head as a desirable result, of course).

**Writing Prompt:** Do you agree with Burn’s comment about plans and dreams? Why do you think we still continue to dream despite that many dreams are never realized and many plans are defeated? Write a well-organized paragraph, following the format below.

- I. **Topic Sentence:** Mention the title of poem, the author of the poem and the theme of the poem. Be sure to address how Burns views dreams in the poem? Example: In *To a Mouse*, Robert Burns views dreams with pessimism.
  - A. **Fact #1:** (transition, lead-in, quote) To lead into the quote, briefly explain what happens to the mouse and then connect it to the quote: “The best laid plans o’ mice and men often go awry.”
    1. **Analysis:** How does the mouse’s difficulty illustrate Burn’s viewpoint on the worthlessness of dreams?
    2. **Analysis:** How does the mouse’s misfortune show the folly of dreams?
  - B. **Fact #2:** Remember to begin with a transition that relates the new fact to the previous sentence. Example: Despite Burns’ pessimistic view of dreams, they are important...
    1. **Analysis:** Are dreams important even if they don’t come true?
    2. **Analysis:** How do dreams improve our lives?
- C. **Concluding Sentence:** Restate the topic sentence in a new way. No facts here.

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 And justifies that ill opinion  
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 At me, thy poor, earth born companion  
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 An odd ear in twenty-four sheaves  
 Is a small request;  
 I will get a blessing with what is left,  
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Your small house, too, in ruin!  
 It's feeble walls the winds are scattering!  
 And nothing now, to build a new one,  
 Of coarse grass green!  
 And bleak December's winds coming,  
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You saw the fields laid bare and wasted,  
 And weary winter coming fast,  
 And cozy here, beneath the blast,  
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That small bit heap of leaves and stubble,  
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Stanza Summary	Literary Element(s)