

Strength and Weakness in Burns' "To A Mouse"

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In his poem "To A Mouse," Robert Burns creates an atmosphere that is both humorous and tragic, underscoring yet undercutting the gravity of the speaker's observations about the "best laid schemes o' mice an' men" (l. 39). The sweet humor of the poem is due largely to Burns' ability to focus the poem on the frantic mouse, whose nest he has overturned with his plough in the field. The rhyme scheme of "To A Mouse" is AAABAB and includes both masculine end rhymes such as "thrive" and "lave" (ll.15, 17); feminine rhyme, as in "stibble" and "nibble" (31-32); and near rhyme, as in "thieve" and "live" (13-14). The first, second, third, and fifth lines of each stanza are in iambic tetrameter that is frequently hypercatalectic. The fourth and sixth lines of each stanza are in iambic dimeter, with catalexis occurring in some lines as well. "To A Mouse" is an unusual poem because it is full of by weak sounds, whether due to feminine rhymes in hypercatalectic lines or short vowels. A close reading of the poem in terms of meter, alliteration, and assonance demonstrate the comparison (and eventually the balancing) of the strong and weak forces at work in the poem, the mice and men.

The most prominent assonant sound is the short 'i' that appears over and over throughout the poem, starting in the first line: "Wee, sleekit, cow'rin tim'rous beastie." The 'i' is often placed next to long vowels, most notably in the first two words of the first line "wee, sleekit." The short 'i' and the long 'e' are both closed vowels. They differ only in their front and back placement, respectively. This pairing of weak and strong vowels illustrates one of the poem's central issues: strength and weakness, brevity and

length. The use of the weak “w” works in much the same way. While it is not the most aggressive consonant, competing with the plosive “p,” “b,” “c,” and “t” in even the first stanza, it is noticeably present, creating, again, a contrast between the weak and strong:

Wee, sleekit, cow'rin, timorous 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' murd'ring pattle!"
(ll.1-6)

The other prominent vowel in the stanza is a flat “a” that will develop, too, over the course of the poem.

The second stanza is marked by strong sounds. The first two lines hold many long vowels and are highly iambic: “I’m truly sorry man’s dominion / Has broken nature’s social union” (7-8). The strength of these two lines illustrates the infringement of “man’s dominion” on “nature’s social union.” In “dominion,” ‘domination’ is implied. Standing in contrast to the diminutives of the first stanza—“beastie” and “breastie”—and to the hypercatalectic, uncertain iambs, the second stanza illustrates that while there is an expansion from the local, microscopic world of the field in which the speaker and the mouse stand to the macroscopic world, there is at the same time a narrowing in the speaker’s field of vision. While Burns pans out from the singular event of disrupting a mouse’s daily life to musings on the unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of life and its dealings, at the same time, he reveals exactly what he has attempted to apologize for:

the intrusive and presumptuous nature of mankind in the natural world, the strong parading their strength before the weak. Though man is empirically stronger than mouse, the expectation that he can colonize, can, like the mouse, build a nest, heightens man's belief that the uncontrollable can be controlled. We are brought down more harshly when we find that we are no more in control of nature than the mouse is of the speaker and his plow. The rhymed words in the second stanza are striking: "dominion, union, opinion, companion" (ll.1-5). In the dimeter lines, the pairing of "startle" and "mortal" is quite telling. In the mouse's startled state one sees the uncertainty that defines mortality.

The third stanza is Burns' first non-hypercatalectic stanza. The speaker does not doubt that the mouse "may thieve" at times (13). In the act of theft, dearth is implied and the theft justifiable since the mouse "maun live" (14). The progression from the optative "may" to the hortatory "maun," (the equivalent of must) is strengthened by the visual proximity of the phrase "thou may thieve" in line 13 and "thou maun live" in line 14. In their parallelism, the two statements are equalized and inextricably linked. The speaker concedes the mouse an "odd ear" of corn among his many. The speaker experiences feelings of benevolence. He wishes to help the mouse and realizes that what is small to him, is quite large and vital to the mouse.

In the fourth stanza, this magnanimity is undermined by the realization that the mouse needs more than food to survive. His home has been wrecked right before winter, a time when it will impossible to rebuild. There is no grass to build a new home and the winter winds of December are sharp. The mouse's careful planning is erased. And yet,

the fact that the mouse's world has been tumbled upside down is tempered with mild humor and kind diminutives: "thy wee bit housie" (1.19). Once again, the assonance of the short 'i' is contrasted with longer vowel sounds: "Thy wee bit housie, too, in ruin! / It's silly wa's the win's are strewin!" (19-20). The short 'i' becomes associated also with "winds" in both lines 20 and 23. The stanza is also quietly dominated by a liquid "w" both in the word initial position of "wa's," "win's" and "winds," and in the word final position in "strewin'," and "new."

Burns continues to expound on the mouse's troubles in the fifth stanza, drawing the reader in. The mouse had been prepared for winter in a nest in the ground but now, with her home destroyed, she must face winter. Her worn-down resolve is predicted by the alliteration of "waste, / An weary winter" (25). The long "a" (phonetically, 'ay') of "laid bare an' waste" is corrosive. The 'a' of "bare" is flat and barren (25). It is interesting to note also that the plosive consonants present in the fifth stanza are quite violent, illustrating the sudden blow the mouse has experienced. The phrase "beneath the blast" is potent both in its alliteration and its iambic certainty. The "k" of "bickering" and "keen" is repeated in "comin" and cozie (26-27). It is, however, in the penultimate line of the stanza that Burns transforms it into a force of nature: "Till crash! The cruel coultter past" (29).

In the sixth stanza, the long 'e' and short 'i' vie again as they did in the first stanza: "That wee bit heap o' leaves an' stibble...the winter's sleety dribble" (31-35). The vivid nature of the speaker's language here marks a movement toward a parallelism between mouse and man. Though, in having destroyed the mouse's home, the speaker is

able to affect the life of another, the language nevertheless begins to relate both to mice and men. While “mony” is clearly a version of the English ‘many,’ the word ‘money’ is also suggested. In “house or hald,” though “hald” ‘means home’ we see “household.

While the frequently (mis)quoted line, “the best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men” is certainly striking, the first line of the seventh stanza is arguably one of the most beautiful, if simply for the phrase “thou art no thy lane” (37). The long vowels lend the line a mournful tone, while the use of the diminutive “Mousie,” hearkening back to “beastie” and “breastie” of the first stanza, serves to undermine a completely tragic reading of the line, embodying the idea that one cannot take one’s plans with the utmost seriousness, since one cannot have complete control. Indeed, “the best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men / Gang aft agley”—there is no fair exchange in life that mouse or man can count on (39-40). we can plan all we want, but ultimately “grief an’ pain” are paid out for one’s work, instead of “promis’d joy” (41-42). The nests we build are illusory in their permanence and security. In terms of assonance, the stanza is quite strong as well. It is dominated by ‘ay’ and the long ‘e’, suggesting a larger force that overpowers both mice and men. ‘e’ becomes connected with “grief,” ‘ay’ inextricably linked to “pain” (41).

In the final stanza of “To A Mouse,” the meter returns one last time to strict tetrameter and dimeter, illustrating the simplicity of the mouse’s life in comparison to the speaker’s: “Still thou art blest, compar’d wi’ me / The present only toucheth thee” (43-44). The sentiment transcends time. While Descartes remarked, “cogito ergo sum,” “I think, therefore I am,” Burns gets to the heart of human existence, uncovering it skin from bone, to observe that the statement “I remember, therefore I am,” may perhaps be

more apt. When we remember, we think of another time in which we existed and thought as well. It is indeed easier to exist simply in the present, since the past cannot touch it, and even the future will eventually be the past. The mouse is free in this respect, while the speaker casts his gaze backwards on "prospects drear." That one can still remember the anticipation one felt of events that one can still refer to them as "prospects" is chilling. "Drear," a shortened form of 'dreary,' conjures up also the word 'dear.' The line break between the last two lines of the poem is evocative as well: "An' forward, tho' I canna see, / I guess an' fear!" The line break at "see" creates a silence, a sense of white space, negative space that makes us as blind to the outcome of the line as the speaker is to the outcome of his or the mouse's future. The weak and strong stand defenseless alike in their inability to prevent events they cannot see. At the same time, in the final stanza Burns introduces a progression of vowel sounds based on 'o,' as well as utilizing the familiar contrast of the short 'i' and the long 'e.' In Burns' complete mobilization of a range of vowel sounds in the last stanza, he neutralizes the notion of strength and weakness: "Still thou art blest, compar'd wi' me / The present only toucheth thee. / But, Och!" (43-45) There is only individuality and humanity.

Burns' "To A Mouse" is unique in its ability to illustrate the way in which the seemingly strong can be undone by recognition of itself in weakness. In admitting that he is like the mouse, the speaker nevertheless strengthens himself by recognizing the uncertainty of life. To be human, to acknowledge uncertainty, takes courage. In admitting his frailty, the speaker is ultimately stronger in self-knowledge, certain in uncertainty.