

Robert Burns Essay Writing Contest for Holy Cross HS, Flushing - 2023

1. Andrew Fazio
2. John Bonativa
3. Kaitlin Farran

Andrew Fazio

Burns was born in 1759 and raised in a Presbyterian household. This was the dominant faith of Scotland. Compared to Roman Catholics, members of this faith were much different. They rejected concepts such as transubstantiation and the papacy, focusing on scripture and one's relationship with God. Since Burns was raised in a rural area, religion likely played a significant role in his community. As Burns became older, however, he distanced himself from organized religion. While some historians call him a deist and others an agnostic, his perspective of faith evolved. One cause for this evolution could be his opposition to slavery. At the time, Christians utilized the Bible to justify slavery. Burns' radical rejection of this belief demonstrates his ambivalence towards scripture.

Burns structures *Holy Willie's Prayer* as an intimate conversation between a skeptical Christian man and God. In the first stanza, the speaker praises God for sending innocent people to hell.

O You that in the Heavens does dwell,
Who, as it pleases best Yourself,
Sends one to Heaven and ten to Hell
All for Your glory,
And not for any good or ill
They have done before You!

This superficial praise mocks the hypocrisy of the Church's doctrine of heaven and hell. The poet finds the Presbyterian theme of predestination absurd. It likely infuriates him that someone with strong faith and good works is still destined for hell. In the third stanza, the speaker's piety begins to crack. He questions God for sending so many people like him to hell simply for existing. Still, he knows it could just as easily happen to him, and that petrifies him.

When from my mither's womb I fell,
Thou might hae plung'd me deep in hell
To gnash my gooms, and weep, and wail
In burning lakes,
Whare damned devils roar and yell

The use of vivid imagery, alliteration (“gnash my gooms”), and assonance (“deep” and “weep”) to describe the Christian concept of hell illustrates the way religion can psychologically manipulate people into loyalty. Religious threats of eternal suffering quickly crush any feelings of doubt or confusion that come from our natural ability to reason. This phenomenon has been used throughout history and occurs in several other religions and institutions.

After the speaker has “battered up” his God with flattery and praise, he confesses his sins. He mentions his issues with lust, having had numerous affairs. The poet argues how the Church has ruined the joys of sex for his country. Rather than symbolizing pleasure and intimacy, sex now symbolizes remorse and scandal. The speaker then admonishes his earthly self for being so corrupt and constantly giving in to the desires of the flesh, admitting that he is only “dust.” By doing so, he attempts to lessen the severity of his offense. Readers observe how powerless folks sometimes become when subordinated to God.

After his confession, the speaker yields to his skepticism and questions why God calls humanity his chosen people if they bring him so much shame and disgust.

For here Thou has a chosen race!
But God confound their stubborn face
An' blast their name,
Wha bring Thy elders to disgrace
An' open shame!

The speaker then begins comparing his sins to those of the minister. He argues that this man sins much more than him and abuses his authority.

Lord, mind Gau'n Hamilton's deserts:
He drinks, an' swears, an' plays at cartes,
Yet has sae monie takin arts
Wi' great and sma',
Frae God's ain Priest the peoples hearts
He steals awa.

Burns explores how strict religions such as these cause their members to turn against each other rather than love one another. Moral purity becomes a brutal competition rather than a shared effort. The speaker begs God to punish that man justly, becoming consumed by yet another sin - wrath. The irony of sinning while communicating with God creates humor but yet again exposes a flaw of the Church. The poet also exposes the corruption of religious leaders. Ministers “stealing away people’s hearts” is a symbol of the potential they have to psychologically manipulate the common people. Why should a wealthy minister be allowed to drink and gamble but not a poor farmer? Rhetorical

questions such as these further develop the intimacy between the speaker and his intended audience (God).

The speaker ends his prayer by reminding God of just how special he truly is.

But, Lord, remember me and mine
Wi' mercies temporal and divine,
That I for grace an' gear may shine
Excell'd by nane;
And a' the glory shall be Thine --
Amen, Amen!

The clash of the ego with religious trauma develops a superiority complex unlike no other. The writer believes this phenomenon is far too common and perilous to society. The lack of logic in the speaker's petitions creates a strong ending that prompts the audience to consider the hypocrisies of their faith.

John Bonavita

Robert Burns had humble origins. He was the child of tenant farmers in Alloway, Scotland in 1759. Living in an era where Scotland was dominated by British lords, Burns fell victim to being a common man in a region where such people were in abundance. But Burns embraced his place, and took pride in where he came from, throughout every one of his poems. One example of this is reflected by his poem, "Address to a Haggis," an ode to the famous Scottish dish called "haggis." To an American, it may just be a humorous ode to some foreign food, but to Burns it was the very essence of being Scottish, and in that being a part of that common society.

The symbolism of the haggis is expressed by Burns in the very first stanza of the poem. This stanza introduces the haggis dish, but a particular set of lines show the symbolic nature of the dish. In this part, he narrates, "Fair fa' your honest, sonsie face, Great chieftain o' the pudding-race!" (lines 2-3). A modern English translation of these lines would summarize them as Burns wishing the haggis well, calling it the "chieftain," or leader, of the many sausage based dishes. So, in essence, he is telling the sausage that it is worthy of a grace for both literal and figurative reasons: because it looks appetizing, and because it is the perfect representation of the Scottish people. Thus, he is observing pride and honor to be a part of Scottish culture. The symbolization is further developed as the poem goes on. Towards the end of the poem, Burns states, "But mark the Rustic, haggis-fed, The trembling earth resounds his tread" (37-38). The haggis is described as being the rustic, and earth shattering dish of Scotland. The hyperbole is used to emphasize that the countrymen enjoy the haggis immeasurably. Such language would

ensure that the haggis would be the principal Scottish meal for centuries.

Burns not only uses these poetic techniques to introduce the haggis to the reader, but he also describes the qualities of the dish that make it so special for him. In the third stanza of the poem, Burns details with vivid imagery the process of slicing the “tasty” haggis. The language used in this part of the poem really allows the reader to imagine the mouth-watering process in cutting the haggis. For Americans it parallels the slicing of cold cuts, the butcher cutting a nice salami or roast beef. However, for Burns, it is very simple the haggis that has such a phenomenal aroma, the haggis that looks so delicious he could even eat it as the slicer cuts it. It is such imagery that conveys how precious the haggis is to Burns, the Scottish meal for centuries.

“His knife see rustic Labour dight,
An' cut you up wi' ready sleight,
Trenching your gushing entrails bright,
Like ony ditch;
And then, O what a glorious sight,
Warm-reekin', rich!”

Nevertheless, Robert Burns didn't just describe the Scottish dish as being delicious. He compared it to other dishes around the “world,” which probably included a little more of Western Europe. His comparison not only ranked the haggis above other dishes, but in a deeper sense was suggesting a sense of Scottish pride. His fifth stanza mentions French ragout, a stew with meat or vegetables, olio, a Spanish stew, and fricassee, another French dish that is a type of chicken stew. How Burns was acquainted with these dishes is somewhat interesting. Being a humble Scot, he may not have been able to travel to France or Spain. The more likely reason he knew about them was because he lived in a world city, Edinburgh. From his knowledge of the dishes, probably from within his own country, Burns created a very powerful statement in this poem. He expresses that the dishes are not even desirable for their own populations, saying that the French and Spanish cuisine makes one bloated without really quenching hunger, while the haggis is loved by the Scottish people, and difficult for others to find fault in. By doing this, Burns is indicating a sort of Scottish pride that comes with the haggis, because he mentions the distasteful dishes from around the world and ensures to the reader that he would much rather have haggis than those dishes anyday. Therefore, he is entrusting the haggis as the very essence of being a Scot, and is indeed proud of it.

“Is there that owre his French ragout
Or olio that wad staw a sow,
Or fricassee wad make her spew
Wi' perfect sconner,
Looks down wi' sneering, scornfu' view
On sic a dinner?”

A humble countryman, Robert Burns wrote about how truly proud he was of being Scottish, but also about how he wanted other Scottish people to follow his example. In the final stanza, Burns speaks about how the haggis is the perfect food for hungry Scotsmen because it is not a wet food that is splashing around in a wooden dish, another ill reference to the other dishes mentioned in the fifth stanza. He concludes with the impactful final line that translates to, very simply, "Give Scotland a haggis." Beyond the literal translation, it can be interpreted that Burns is telling the Scottish audience that they should embrace their culture. Embracing the haggis, is the equivalent of embracing Scotland, and this very simple statement is what allowed the haggis to be the most valuable Scottish dish up and through this day.

"Ye Pow'rs, wha mak mankind your care,
And dish them out their bill o' fare,
Auld Scotland wants nae skinking ware
That jaups in luggies;
But, if ye wish her gratefu' prayer
Gie her a haggis!"

Kaitlin Farran

Often at times when life becomes difficult, people search for an escape. They seek an opportunity to decompress through the things they enjoy most, such as painting or meditating. For Robert Burns, this getaway was nature. Even when his life was filled with stress, heartbreak, and financial burdens, he was always able to find beauty in creation. This is expressed through Burns' poem, "The Banks o' Doon". Here, he explains that even though he was broken inside, the birds still chirped and the flowers still bloomed. Through vivid imagery, he connects his awe of nature with his personal experiences. This allows the reader to picture and feel the ideas he's explaining, as it brings his emotions to life.

The loss of a loved one, especially a parent, can be extremely tolling on an individual. They lose a piece of themselves, and have to learn to live without a key aspect of their life. Burns and his brother had to suffer through this pain in 1784 when their father passed away. Along with this grief, they also had to adjust to the greater workload and financial troubles for years following their father's death. This is because the two boys were required to take over their family farm which greatly struggled. This accounts for the agony he refers to throughout his writing. Burns explains,

"How can ye bloom be fresh and fair?
How can ye chant, ye little birds,
And I sae weary fu' o' care!
Thou'll break my heart, thou warbling bird,
That wantons thro' the flowering thorn:

Thou minds me o' departed joys,
Departed never to return."

Here, Burns incorporates imagery into his writing to help the audience picture the merry chirping birds and fresh blooming flowers. Similarly, he rhetorically questions these cheerful ideas as he wonders how they can be so beautiful while he's filled with sorrow. This reflects the pleasure and peace that nature brought him throughout his problems. Since Burns was young, he was always more interested in the creations around him and poetry than he was farm work. As he grew up, this became especially clear. Interestingly enough, even though the farm which was a part of creation caused him so much grief, he still found beauty and joy in nature. His heart was breaking but he was able to escape his troubles through the outdoors and find inner peace.

Along with his financial and family issues, Burns also struggled with his love life. He is known to have loved being with women, even if it meant not being true to the relationship he was in. Throughout his life, it is believed that he only married one woman, Jean Armour, despite having thirteen children with four different women. Surprisingly, Burns writes about personally dealing with a false lover as opposed to being one. Burns describes,

"Wi' lightsome heart I pu'd a rose,
Fu' sweet upon its thorny tree!
And may fause Luver staw my rose,
But ah! he left the thorn wi' me."

As explained, he utilizes vivid imagery that allows the reader to picture a beautiful rose among a tree full of thorns. They can then imagine the poem as a scene in a film, with a woman stealing her lover's gorgeous flower, leaving him with a thorn stuck in his hand. This demonstrates ideas of betrayal as he connects how his love treated him to nature. In 1786, four years prior to when "The Banks o' Doon" was written, Burns faced serious marital issues with Armour. Even though the two were deeply in love and expecting a child, Armour's father forbade her from marrying Burns. As time passed and Armour's father continued to convince her to follow his orders, she eventually sided with him and agreed to his conditions. This left Burns angry and without love, seeking a new relationship. From these events, the audience can connect the idea of love and one's heart to the symbol of the rose. Armour robbed him of his feelings, and left him alone with the pain, expressed by a thorn.

When poets are trying to help the audience understand their perspective, they often connect their ideas to the topics they're most passionate about. This holds true for Burns, who expressed his pain and suffering through nature. In his writing, he creates a drastic contrast between his dark struggles and the beautiful outdoors. He vividly describes specific aspects of nature that paint various joyful pictures in the reader's

head. As they see the blossoming flowers and hear the fresh blowing wind, they understand that these creations were his escape from his world filled with sorrow