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Robert Burns Essay

Scottish poet Robert Burns died just as the Romantic Era was gaining traction. Hailed as one of the pioneers of the Romantic movement as a whole, cited as an influence by Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley, he is both intrinsic to this vital period of upheaval in English-language poetry and slightly removed from it, as he prospered and passed before many of the iconic poets of the time had even begun to write. And yet despite living only to 37 and dying in 1796, well before the publication of almost all the poems modern scholars have come to see as romantic hallmarks, Burns left his lasting impression on the movement-influencing and shaping the Romantic Era to an unfathomable extent. His poem *To a Mountain Daisy, on Turning One Down with the Plough* was written in 1786, published in his first book of poetry *The Kilmarnock Edition* primarily to fund his passage to Jamaica to find work, contains many of the hallmarks of romantic poetry that would soon become evident among later authors. It was a turning point in the history of literature-with the advent of the printing press, the landscape of poetry was changing; poetry was becoming widely available for consumption by everyone. The increasing impersonality of the publishing process sparked a reaction in many poets of the time. They sought to go back to the roots of pastoral poetry, before the humanist Enlightenment, and found inspiration in nature, removing the difficulties and complications of human action from their work entirely. This, too, is what Robert Burns executed in his poem to a mountain flower-a return to nature, without losing the human emotion therein.

*To a Mountain Daisy*, like many of Burns' poems, is written in traditional Scottish prose. However, it's still comprehensible to those raised reading traditional English. The poem begins "Wee, modest, crimson-tipped flow'r, / Thou's met me in an evil hour" making the subject clear from the very first couplet. Though the image of a 'modest flower' seems innocent, the inclusion of 'crimson'-a color commonly used to describe blood'-and 'evil' both set the tone as somewhat ominous. The 'evil hour' to which Burns refers is in a literal context the time of year, which signifies a need to plow. However, Burns could also be referring to the time period in which he lives as a whole: the advent of printing combined with the recent turmoil of the American and French revolutions as well as political turmoil in England created an 'evil hour' in a recently bloodless period of history, under which Enlightenment art and literature flourished. The poem then continues "To spare thee now is past my pow'r;" while it's likely not physically impossible for the farmer in Burns' poem to spare the flower, the line evokes something slightly more grandiose, as 'past my power' could be a reference to fate. The second stanza continues with the imagery of nature, referencing the "dewy [wet]" and the "purpling east," two signs of birth and youth, as dew and the sunrise both evoke the start of the day. The innocence of the pastoral scene is then interrupted by the entrance of the "bitter-biting north/ Upon thy early, humble birth." A sudden violence is introduced by the wind that is continued later on in the stanza as the flower "glinted forth/ amid the storm." It has become clear that the flower is not simply fighting the farmer anymore. The forces of nature are conspiring to crush it as well. It is here, then, that readers must stop and wonder what exactly the daisy represents. Historically, daisies were symbols of not only innocence but also communication and creativity. The mountain daisy of Burns' poem stands for the creative force of poets of the time: nature has worn at man's creativity for years, throwing obstacles (such as the storm of the poem) in the way, but

literature has survived them all. The plow of Burns' poem is not a natural force, though; it's a man-made machine, and after persevering against the violent nature of history, it seems the creative force will finally meet its end at the hands of something unnatural—a machine, like the printing press.

It's clear that not all creative forces are slated to meet the violent death of Burns' mountain daisy. With the right care, Burns makes it clear that a bud can become a "flaunting flower," but the daisy unfortunately resides "beneath the random field." Once again, the idea of fate and its' indiscrimination between creatures is introduced with the inclusion of 'random,' implying that there is not much the flower—or the poetic force it represents—could have done to protect itself. Creativity requires a nurturing environment, not a war-torn, shifting world like the Europe of the turn of the century. Instead, the daisy "Adorns the histie stibble-field / unseen," a testament to all the poetry and creative work that went unnoticed during the upheaval of the Industrial Revolution. Poets felt that they were losing touch with the personal side of the poetry-creating process, as instead of hand-writing and distributing their poetry, they now sent it off to publishers where identical, impersonal copies were stamped out and bound for sale. There's a bleakness to Burns' language as well; the 'histie stibble-field,' in modern English, would be a dry, barren field filled with stubbly plants. This goes against the old poetic tradition of the pastoral poem, in which nature and the countryside were glorified. There is no glorification here; instead, the description of storms and barren fields feels almost violent. Against this backdrop, Burns begins to humanize the subject of his poem, assigning feminine attributes to the daisy: it is clad in a 'scanty mantle,' with a 'snawie bosom' and an 'unassuming head.' This imagery is more evocative of a young woman than a flower, and makes the final line of the stanza all the more jarring. "The share uptears thy bed"—the moment the plow finally

tears the flower from the earth-is explicitly violent towards the virginal feminine figure Burns has created from the flower. There's a sexual edge, too, to the violence, as 'uptears thy bed' is evocative of rape. Here, the poem turns from being an abstract metaphor to something more sinister; with the humanization of a natural element, the downfall of the human, like the daisy, follows.

Though *On a Mountain Daisy* is not a sonnet, there is still a kind of *volta* that occurs in the fifth stanza. Burns makes his metaphorical connection between the 'tender' and 'unassuming' daisy and an 'artless maid' explicit, bringing the poem from a theoretically natural place to something with a more human narrative. The rape imagery of the previous stanza returns as the maid is betrayed by 'love's simplicity' until she is 'all soil'd.' Burns describes this outcome as her 'fate,' removing any agency from the maid. There seems to be no reason for this tragic end-it's simply the way things had to be. This, too, is a result of Romantic poets' insistent pushback against the influence of Enlightenment writers before them. Academics of the Enlightenment were obsessed with reason and science; for Burns to simply write off such a tragedy as 'fate' takes away that reason and contributes more to the growing randomness of violence presented throughout the poem. Then, in the next, stanza, the bard faces life 'luckless starr'd,' yet another reference to fate. Here, Burns not only discusses a despondent bard, which is essentially a medieval poet, but reinstates the natural imagery of the beginning of the poem while comparing life to an ocean. He begins to tie the reoccurring themes of the poem together: we see fate, a reasonless and random occurrence, wreaking havoc through nature, something that has asserted its violent dominance over humanity and creativity throughout the poem. There is, again, a direct rebellion against humanism and logic. There is no logic in a storm, nor in a 'luckless starr'd' fate; what there is, however, is emotion. Opposite of the classical epic poems

that extolled heroes' virtue, Burns is blatantly and poetically pointing out the shortcomings of his subjects: the maid with 'guileless trust,' the bard who failed to 'note the card/ of prudent lore.' Rather than writing about characters' great feats, Burns instead is concerned with their downfall. The second-to-last stanza only expands on this, listing human weaknesses like pride and cunning with such a bleak attitude that the line can only end one way: 'wrench'd of ev'ry stay but Heav'n / He ruin'd sink." There is no glorious, heroic death in store for any of the poem's subjects; nor, does it seem, Burns wants the reader to carry any such pretensions about finding a heroic death for themselves. The poem's melancholy conclusion forewarns readers not to mourn-they, too, "crush' d beneath the furrow's weight / will meet [their] doom." The metaphor of flower-as-human has come full circle, but instead of the flower representing the human, it seems that human life instead represents the flower-an aspect of nature, caught up in the same cycle everything in nature is of life and death.

There isn't much optimism to be found in *On a Mountain Daisy*. Optimism was not at the forefront of Robert Burns' mind when writing the Kilmarnock Edition, not in a time of such political and technological upheaval. What *was* in the poem, however, was a stark sort of realism-nature is unchangeable; it does not follow the laws of humans or reason. The cycle of life and death is part of nature, and it cannot be changed, either. The sense of melancholy pervading the poem, directly opposite the emotionless and logic-based type of poetry common in the Enlightenment era, came to be a hallmark of many Romantic poets. So, too, did the nature motifs, the focus on natural events, and the clear detachment from typical human reasoning-or from any focus on humans at all. Burns' work came to shape much of the Romantic era of poetry, his work serving as both map and inspiration for future writers. In poems like *On a Mountain Daisy*, he laid out a clear path for his successors to follow, and they took it.