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October 31, 2016

Beauty in Fatality: Robert Burns's "To a Mountain Daisy"

The natural world and expressions of emotion often play an important role in the works of Romantic writers. In Robert Burns's "To a Mountain Daisy, on Turning One Down with the Plough, April 1786," this concern is evident when the destruction of the daisy by the plough prompts the poet to consider the universality and inescapability of mortality. Here, Burns is struck by the realization that everyone and everything is vulnerable to the harsh passage of time. Burns's use of an ambivalent tone, AAABAB rhyme scheme, cacophonous diction, natural imagery, and personification emphasizes how the inevitability of death, a force inescapable and impervious to human intervention, intensifies the beauty of life.

Throughout the poem, Burns takes an ambivalent tone that simultaneously suggests death's certitude and life's loveliness. From the outset, Burns's acceptance of this natural progression from life to death is made clear: "Thou's met me in an evil hour;/ For I maun crush amang the stoure / Thy slender stem:" (2-3). While Burns concedes that there is something "evil" or sinister about this moment of the daisy's destruction, this concession is effectively nullified when he says that he "maun" press the flower into the dust. Yet, in drawing the reader's attention to the daisy's "slender stem," Burns also reveals the flower's natural elegance as a product of its vulnerability; that is to say, it is the flower's very susceptibility to destruction that makes it so beautiful while it is alive.

This sense of ambivalence continues into the next lines as well. Burns writes, "To spare thee now is past my power,/ Thou bonnie gem" (5-6). Again, Burns emphasizes that this is the natural order of things; he is not in any position to save the flower. Still, Burns's resignation to the daisy's fate is not one of complete and utter detachment. Rather, the poet's recognition of the daisy's "bonnie" quality reveals an appreciation of the flower's beauty that is amplified, not diminished, by the realization that it must be destroyed. Burns's awareness of this necessary duality, a certainty of death that magnifies the beauty of life, suggests a kind of optimistic fatalism.

Moreover, the AAABAB rhyme scheme that Burns uses conflates words with unlike meanings in order to demonstrate this fatal but beautiful duality. One of the most striking examples of this technique occurs when Burns describes the flower's vulnerability during a storm: "Amid the storm, / Scarce reared above the parent-earth / Thy tender form" (16-18). "Storm" imparts a sense of chaos while "form" evokes a sense of stability, albeit a delicate one. In rhyming "storm" and "form," Burns juxtaposes this threatening natural event and the daisy's fragile but beautiful structure. Much like Burns's ambivalence does, this juxtaposition highlights how this "scarce reared," or newly born, flower's struggle to survive in an indifferent natural world only adds to the flower's inherent grace.

This conflation of unlike words to expose the beauty in fatality emerges again when Burns discusses the universality of the daisy's plight. In the final stanza, Burns writes, "Full on thy bloom,/ Till crushed beneath the furrow's weight/ Shall be thy doom!" (52-54). "Bloom" evokes a beauty that derives its charm from the very essence of life itself while "doom" connotes stagnation, destruction, and death. By grouping these two oppositional words together through rhyme, Burns yet again demonstrates the way in which death's constant presence sharpens life;

in this case, bloom, the quality that simultaneously embodies life and beauty, draws its strength from the fact that death makes this state transient, and therefore, all the more magnificent.

In addition, Burns's bursts of cacophonous diction illustrate a futility in this struggle for survival that continues to underscore the idea that the coexistence of life and death is a necessary and exquisite fact. Burns uses somewhat jarring language in his description of the menacing wind: "Cauld blew the bitter-biting north/ Upon thy early, humble birth;/ Yet cheerfully thou glinted forth" (13-15). Here, the harsh "r" and repetitive "bit" sounds in the phrase "bitter-biting north" draw the reader's attention to this natural force's inherent danger and suggest a sinister fate for the vulnerable daisy. The subsequent lines about the flower's "humble birth" and "cheerful glinting" magnify the inauspiciousness of the preceding lines; yet again, Burns's pairing of two unlike images, here in the form of the ominous wind and upbeat daisy, reveal a preoccupation with the idea that life, while subject to nature's many cruel whims, is lovely precisely because of this vulnerability.

When Burns describes the moment of the daisy's destruction, another burst of cacophony emphasizes this beauty in mortality. Burns begins by praising the flower's physical beauty before explicating the threat: "In humble guise; / But now the share up-tears thy bed, / And low thou lies!" (29-30). Like before, the grating "r" sounds and phonetic similarity of the words "share" and "up-tears" create a discomfort that forces the reader to acknowledge this moment as one of danger and darkness. Yet again, Burns points out one of the flower's pleasing attributes, this time its "humble guise." However, unlike the previous case, the flower's pleasing physicality is addressed before the sinister moment, and the exclamation at the end of the stanza serves only to underscore the daisy's ultimate fate: death. Still, even with this inversion, Burns achieves a

similar effect; the reader views the lovely daisy and the terrifying plough, its menace amplified by Burns's discordant diction, side by side and recognizes the beauty in this fatal moment.

Of course, Burns also employs natural imagery in order to highlight the inherent beauty in the balance of life and death. Burns describes a potential interaction between the daisy and the lark: "Alas!/ It's no thy neebor sweet,/ The bonnie lark, companion meet,/ Bending thee 'mang the dewy weet," (7-9). In describing the "sweet" and "bonnie" lark as the daisy's "neebor" and "companion," Burns depicts a gentle and elegant scene, one that draws a parallel between these two creatures and continues to emphasize life's intrinsic beauty. Moreover, the lark's "bending" of the daisy stands in stark contrast to the human-driven plough's "uptearing" of it. This juxtaposition between the lively lark and the deadly plough continues to evoke the brilliant duality of a life made beautiful by the fact of death. The knowledge of the daisy's impending destruction makes this delicate, beautiful interaction between the daisy and the lark all the more powerful.

With his description of the doomed bard, Burns continues to use natural imagery in order to emphasize the beauty in mortality. He writes, "Such is the fate of the simple bard... / ... billows rage, and gales blow hard,/ And whelm him o'er!" (37-42). Much like the way he describes the wind that almost destroys the daisy earlier in the poem, here Burns again reveals the wind, a natural force in nature, as something angry and dangerous, capable of unmitigated destruction. Indeed, that capacity for absolute devastation comes to fruition in the next line that confirms the bard's demise. Moreover, the phrasing "whelm him o'er!" portrays ruination at once so natural and forceful that it imbues the entire event with a predetermined quality. Once the wind begins to blow, it seems impossible for this scene to end well for the unlucky bard. As a result, the realization of the bard's fate, his destruction at the hands of the natural world,

becomes more poetic than disturbing. Like the daisy that cultivates its beauty in the face of danger, so the bard's life takes on a kind of poetic beauty at the moment of his death.

As previously suggested, all life, plant as well as human, reaches its full potential for beauty only because the certainty of death ensures its transience; Burns's personification of the daisy reveals this universality. Burns attributes human characteristics to the daisy in the moments before its destruction: "There, in thy scanty mantle clad,/ Thy snawie bosom sun-ward spread,/ Thou lifts thy unassuming head" (24-26). In saying that the flower is "clad" in a "scanty mantle," detailing its "snawie bosom," and describing its "unassuming head," Burns equates the flower's life with that of a human being. Furthermore, Burns describes the flower's actions in very human terms. The flower's "sun-ward spread" petals bring to mind a person turning him or herself towards the light, and the flower "lifts" its head much like someone would turn toward the sun to feel the warmth of its rays on his or her face. While these lines do not include an explicit reference to death, the flower orients itself toward the sun, a crucial source of life, and reminds the reader that life can be sustained only in the most perfect of circumstances. Moreover, this perfection, vulnerable to disruption at any time, necessarily imparts a sense of wonder and beauty so long as it prevails.

Thus, Burns's ambivalent tone, AAABAB rhyme scheme, cacophonous diction, natural imagery, and personification show the inextricability of life's beauty and death's inevitability. The reader need look no further than the multiple stanzas that begin with variations of "Such is the fate" to realize that Burns, rather than expressing fear or regret at this potentially disconcerting fact, views mortality's universality as nothing more than a necessary part of life. By the poem's end, this link between beauty and fatality emerges fully and reminds the reader that he or she will perish just as the daisy perishes.

Works Cited

Burns, Robert. "To a Mountain Daisy, on Turning One Down with the Plough, April 1786." *The Penguin Book of Romantic Poetry*. Ed. Jonathan and Jessica Wordsworth. London: Penguin, 2005. 5-6. Print.