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Romantic Era Poetry

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O Were My Love Yon Lilac Fair by Robert Burns

My junior year of college I took on an eccentric British lover who lived on my floor. Among his many tactics for wooing me, perhaps the most effective were his recitations of Robert Burns' poetry in a Scottish accent. Specifically, he used to strum the guitar and sing *O Were My Love Yon Lilac Fair*, which was very fitting considering that many of Burns poems doubled as songs set to music. Hearing Burns' words aloud, instead of merely reading them, allows their cadence and rhyme scheme to emerge more clearly.

Burns begins by comparing his lover to a lilac flower and himself to a "wearied" bird who seeks shelter among its blooms. Immediately, the trope of blooming flowers in spring imbues the poem with a sense of hope and renewal from its very first lines. Burns, taking on the role of the tired bird, views his lover as a refuge that will also renew his own strength. But soon, "Autumn wild and Winter rude" destroy the lilac, leaving the bird in mourning. The contrast between the creation and hopefulness of the first lines and the immediate destruction that follows reminds the audience of the transience of love. Just as the seasons inevitably arrive year after year, even the most promising new loves can quickly grow cold. Even the lilac, a much hardier flower than a delicate peony, for example, could not survive the arrival of Autumn and Winter. And yet, Burns' recovers quickly when his love, the lilac, returns next spring. In this manner, the poem ends on the same note it began, one of renewal and birth. The cyclical nature of the poem reflects the cyclical nature of the seasons, which likewise bring periods of birth, decay, hibernation, and rebirth.

Within the stanza, Burns uses various formal techniques to reinforce these themes of birth, destruction, and renewal. The ABABCDBD rhyme scheme, for example deviates from the more predictable rhyme scheme of the second stanza. The reader would expect a word to rhyme with “torn” (C) and instead Burns creates a sense of surprise by reintroducing the word “wing,” which was part of the ABAB rhyming early in the stanza. This unexpected return of the B rhyme mirrors the return of the seemingly destroyed lilac when May arrives. Burns also makes a statement through rhyme in his choice of pairing “rude” with “renew'd.” Once again, this connects the harsh, “rude” Winter with the eventual renewal that will follow in the spring.

While the first stanza focused love through the cycling of the seasons, the second takes a more micro approach by examining a single day. In this case, Burns is a drop of dew and his lover a red rose growing on the wall of a castle. This image of the bright rose sprouting in the concrete of the fortress calls to mind a resistance to traditional institutions that was typical of the Romantic Era. Specifically, Burns rebelled against prevailing notions of religion, morality, and labor at the time. He detested having a regular job and mocked orthodox religion (Daiches). Despite the barren stone wall, a less-than-hospitable environment, the rose bloomed still. Similarly, Burns’ love and creativity blossomed in an era that he nevertheless viewed as orthodox and limiting. The image of the industrious tired bird seeking shelter seems to mirror a similar idea. In an era when labor was increasing in regularity and intensity, Burns counters this trend by emphasizing the rest of the wearied bird instead. The red rose, besides being a symbol of this rebellion against society, is clearly a much more sensual flower than the purple lilac of the first stanza, and the rest of the poem reflects this difference. The dew drop, Burns, slips into the breast of the rose, his lover, and spends the night there, feasting on her beauty. Unlike the

innocent love Burns describes in the first stanza—one more focused on rest—this encounter is clearly more sexual in nature.

One feature that links the two stanzas, however, is Burns' metaphoric treatment of himself and his lover. As mentioned previously, his lover is equated to a lilac and then a rose. Burns, to a bird and then a drop of dew. In both cases, the lovers are objectified into natural objects, often ones that are fragile, even ephemeral in nature. The lilac is destroyed by the elements, the rose pales in contrast to the solid walls of the castle, and the dew drop evaporates with the arrival of the sun. Even the bird of the first stanza is described as tired on its “little wing.” In contrast, Burns personifies many elements of nature, bringing them alive from their inanimate states. Autumn and Winter are characterized as “wild” and “rude” as they tear the lilac, and the month of May appears “youthful.” The sun also takes on the form of Phoebus Apollo, who chases away the morning dew. These descriptors make the seasons take on life-like personalities, making them much more human than Burns and his objectified lover. Burns blurs the lines between the human and the natural world, blending the two through his personification of the seasons. In contrast to the seasons with their ability to destroy and then renew, the lilac, the bird, the rose, and the dew drop seem even more powerless, insignificant, and ephemeral. Through these comparisons, Burns explores the relationship between man and nature, with nature seemingly emerging as the victor.

The connection between Burns and his lover is both times interrupted by the machinations of life, of nature. In the first stanza, it is Burns' lover in the form of a lilac who is destroyed by the Autumn and Winter. In the second stanza it is Burns himself, in the form of a dew drop that vanishes with the arrival of morning after an amorous night. But in both cases, there is the chance of return. The lilac returns with the coming of spring and perhaps the dew

drop will return as night falls and humidity condenses once more upon the castle walls. In both cases, Burns creates a sense of hope even amongst this loss of love. Perhaps their love can be renewed in the next year, the next day, or the next lifetime. Even with the religious, moral, and societal constraints of Burn's day, *O Were My Love Yon Lilac Fair* demonstrates that love is nevertheless relentless and eternal.

Lastly, I wanted to draw attention to a final contrast between the two stanzas, in the manner in which they treat expression. The bird/Burns of the first stanza, for example, is much more effusive in his expressions. He mourns deeply when the lilac is torn then proceeds to sing joyously when it returns that May. This once again recalls the fact that many of Burns poems were set to music. With the bucolic setting of the first stanza, Burns could easily become a bard traveling through the country or shepherd singing in the hills. Although Burns, of course, recorded his works in written form, he does not discount the oral tradition and highlights the birds' song to show this. In the next stanza, however, the dew drop, so overcome by adoration for his "silk-soft" rose, cannot describe his good fortune, and "feasts" on her beauty instead. The more sophisticated song of the bird has been replaced by the most primal act of eating. The dew drop, Burns, is "beyond expression". So what is more powerful in the end—speech and song, or silence? Words and songs of love can of course be deeply moving, but perhaps it is even more powerful when words fail us. I already admitted to the effectiveness of hearing my college lover recite Burns poetry, but have now begun to wonder whether it would have been *more* effective had he not spoken at all.

In all, *O Were My Love Yon Lilac Fair* might, at first read, blend in with any other simple love poem. But in reality it weaves in important questions regarding the relationship between man and nature, the resilience of love, and the role of language versus silence. These themes

linger through the centuries, far more eternal than a drop of dew chased away by the morning sun.

Works Cited

Daiches, David. "Robert Burns". Encyclopedia Britannica, 21 Jan. 2021,
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Burns>. Accessed 14 February 2021.