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The Romantic Era

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### An Examination of *To a Mouse*

Robert Burns's poem *To a Mouse* (1785) holds a startling significance to our modern worldly woes, over two-hundred years after its publication. Aside from inspiring John Steinbeck's title for his novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *To a Mouse* asserts itself as an eerie warning, indicating the death and destruction forced upon flora and fauna by capitalism, and the inevitable treachery and doom that prevails when man disregards his natural surroundings for growth, greed, and profits.

Burns, a self-proclaimed "freedom fighter" throughout his life and 'till his demise at the age of thirty-seven, was notoriously radical in his critiques of government, religious hypocrisy, sexual politics, and other ills seen in the latter half of the 18th century. *To a Mouse* may masquerade as a tale of a farm worker uprooting a nimble creature's den, but like the sickle he wields come harvest, this image merely scrapes the topsoil. From the first stanza, Burns writes *I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee, / Wi' murd'ring pattle!*, proclaiming he, unlike the farmer who views the land as his and only his, has no intention to purposely harm the squeamish field mouse. He understands the fear of the mouse, its natural *cowran* in response to the apex predator wrecking his home with a plow staff, and continues on with an apology, breaking the Scottish dialect and weaving into English in the following stanza with *I'm truly sorry Man's dominion / Has broken Nature's social union*. The newfound sovereign authority of man, enabled by capitalistic endeavors, has decimated the once integrated landscape, pillaging the animal

kingdom in what is a financially fruitful, but morally and generally fruitless pursuit in its unavoidable, eventual despair, dependent on the ruthless exploitation of the little man and murder of the little mouse. Burns, witnessing the agricultural revolution of Scotland, is aware that this introduction of new farming techniques, requiring less men to work the land, is beneficial in its aim to tackle famine, but has catastrophic consequences for the *poor beastie* and humankind alike, as the farmer must flee his (likely generational) occupation for a life of factory labor in denser, city areas, requiring the adoption of a repetitive work with little growth or creation seen by his own wee eyes. The 18th century common man is much like the mouse here, wrought with fear of the fat cat above him, dictating his every move, wrecking his shelter, forcing him into a life riddled with uncertainty, attached to the capitalist's teet for a thimble of milk, without a crumb of cookie.

Lines thirteen through eighteen pose the classic ethical dilemma of stealing in order to survive; though the mouse does not live by the laws of man, Burns understands that he too would steal a loaf of bread or ear of corn to feed himself and his family. *Thou maun live!* and *I'll get a blessin wi' the lave, / An' never miss't!* show Burn's Christian and radical values, as he feels that allowing the mouse to thieve a bit blesses him with the knowledge of the mouse's continuation of life and frees him of the responsibility of wielding a ho to decapitate the furry being. Though the mouse is destroying some of the crop, Burns as a farmer does not feel that he has the authority to kill a creature for merely nibbling; he would rather lose some of his yield than kill one of God's creations. The sentiment echoed earlier in stanza two continues here, and presupposes the American Transcendentalists notion of divinity in nature; we are not above our worldly brethren, and to think we are dismisses the Judeo-Christian idea that nature is the wrathful yet ever benevolent child of God. For most of our earthly inhabitance, we have worked

the land in cooperation with nature, only raising and slaughtering what we needed to survive, but with the endless growth capitalism demands, we began treating nature by ensnaring her in a noose that keeps her dangling just enough to lose consciousness before dropping her back on her feet for a few breaths to be reaped again and again. We have collectively forgotten our interdependence on the health of the natural world; if Burns were alive today, we would not receive a mousy metaphor or poem on a country's love of haggis, but rather a scathing review of the scorched earth we have fostered out of our perverted adoration of wealth, and negligence, nay, purposeful abuse of our surroundings.

*But Mousie*, Burns writes in stanza seven as though the mouse is his equal, his friend, *The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men, / Gang aft a'gley, / An' leave us nought but grief an' pain, / For promised joy!* This expresses that the systems and ways of being, concocted by men in the era of The Industrial Revolution, result in nothing but sorrow for humans and animals alike. Though he places the mouse in the same context and position as he, and wishes to continue viewing his fuzzy acquaintance as a common brother in an egalitarian light, Burns has begun to weave out of this sentiment with the emotional experiences of *grief*, *pain*, and *promis'd joy*. Yes, the mouse is personified, made akin to man throughout, but this shift leads the reader to the human condition Burns speaks of in his final, and arguably, most impactful stanza.

*Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!  
The present only toucheth thee:  
But Och! I backward cast my e'e,  
On prospects drear!  
An' forward tho' I canna see,  
I guess an' fear!*

Blessed is the being who is unaware of the bustling chaos the fool has crafted; ignorance is blissful; unconsciousness sleeps with serenity. The mouse may face havoc in it's surrounding

and endure threats of man, but still, blessed is the mouse in it's lack of awareness and inability to suffer like we with our interiority. *The present only toucheth* the beings we have deemed below us; they do not have to confront oppressive systems, unjust rulers, and men who assert hierarchy over other men. Though nature feels the hardship we have brought upon ourselves and our landscapes, the animal is defenseless, unable to speak or lead an army of like-minded mice to overthrow the gluttons that harm them. The mouse lacks ability to organize, and though we struggle, is the mouse not the one we should endlessly sympathize with? The barn owl who starves due to our slaughter of her food supply? The garden snake without bugs and grub from our spraying of pesticides? Man has the capacity to change, destroy, and create beyond reproduction; we must take accountability for ourselves and the society we've bred. If we do not, we are as feeble as the pitied mouse. Looking to Burn's fist raised for freedom, would he not agree that we must grab agency by the throat, pressing on the poisoned jugular like an enraged, steroid-junkie wrestler and shake our systems 'till they bleed? 'Till they work for us, as individuals and as a collective? Yes, Burns, we suffer, but we must ascend this self-loathing and act as though we, like the mouse, are stomped on, turned into sacks of flesh containing miniscule fragments of broken bones and burst capillaries, flung out of our dwellings like pieces of corporeal rubbish. Burns knows of the assault on nature, the child labor in factories, the aches we perpetuate as both bully and by-stander, but fails to act beyond the written word. There is fear in the future; the capitalist machine has raged on, jumping from Burn's sweet fields of farro to the global sphere, and no singular man can derail this train parading the falsity of limitless growth.

Though we have enacted legislation in Western nations to prohibit the evils of mentioned child labor, tiny hands craft our iPhones and tiny lungs inhale carcinogenic dust, and before those iPhone parts come to them, even greater cruelty is seen in the Democratic Republic of

Congo through the harvesting of conflict minerals like tungsten and tantalum, again, often mined for by tiny hands, directed by men with guns, encouraged by our endless consumption, our endless materialism, our endless greed. As for the ecological destruction we've delivered, we now wonder if climate change is possible to halt and reverse with the damage inflicted to our Earth; nature and man have never been more apart, and our future, without human action and interference, is beyond bleak. It is dead, yet so many of us choose to take an ice-pick to our orbital sockets, lobotomizing and blinding ourselves, humming *someone else will care, but not I, not I, the kids will catch the rotten ball, but not I, not I* to the tune of "I Wish I Was in Dixie." We have played God for far too long, and must repent, make amends for our actions, our feasting, and for the men who lived before us who have crafted and contributed to this failure and blatant disregard of *nature's social union*. If we do not, there will be no tiny hands to inherit this planet; no tiny lungs to breathe this once pristine air.