

Robert “Rabbie” Burns was a celebrated poet and lyricist who lived during the 18th century. He is perhaps best known for his poems “Auld Lang Syne”, “To a Mouse”, and “Tam O’ Shanter”. Robert Burns’ poetry had a profound impact on his readers, his native country of Scotland, and literature entirely. One facet of literature where his influence is clear is American literature. By exploring the intricate web of American literature, we can further see Burns’ specific role in weaving it. Furthermore, by understanding his effect on American Literature, we can learn more about Burns himself and his motivations. While Burns’ influence on American literature is clear, particularly in the novels “Of Mice and Men”, by John Steinbeck, and “The Catcher in the Rye”, by J.D. Salinger, how specifically he influenced is less so. After dissecting these novels, exploring Robert Burns’ past, and his comrades in the literature scene, I believe Robert Burns instilled a sense of blind pride in American literature, which gave critical novels like “Of Mice and Men” and “The Catcher in the Rye” a notion to refute.

Of Mice and Men, by John Steinbeck tells the story of two workers, George and Lennie, and how their friendship persists through the hardships they face. While telling a tale of friendship, the novel simultaneously criticizes America’s handling of the Great Depression, migrant workers, and systemic racism and sexism. The title of “Of Mice and Men” derives from the Burns poem “To a Mouse”, which contains the line “The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men / Gang aft agley.” The title advocates sympathy for the main characters, as no matter what they do, their flawed society will always get the best of them. This illustrates the sense of blind pride that Burns instilled in early American literature because Steinbeck uses a quote of Burns’ to critique a country Burns admired. The theme of “blind pride” has a direct connection to the facade of the American dream, which the workers foolishly believe is attainable. It also highlights Burns’ direct influence on Steinbeck and wider American literature. Since the novel was considered to be a “protest novel”, it supports the notion that Steinbeck was perhaps refuting Burns’ admiration for America. This links to the two styles of writing the authors practiced. Robert Burns was one of the faces of romanticism, a literary movement defined by its excessive optimism, belief in the common man, reverence for nature, and idealization of women. As a reaction to the optimism of romanticism, realism was adopted as a literary movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, seeking to depict the world in a brutally honest light. Steinbeck was arguably the most prominent realist writer, highlighting their clash in beliefs. However, without this clash in belief, one has good reason to believe “Of Mice and Men” wouldn’t hold the same value as it does today, or even that it wouldn’t have been written at all.

Another piece of American literary realism that Robert Burns influenced is J.D. Salinger's, "A Catcher in the Rye". The novel follows Holden Caulfield, a sixteen-year-old boy who has been expelled from his preparatory school, and his terrifying journey into the adult world. His time in the "phony" world around him leaves him disillusioned and exhausted. This title derives from Burns' poem as well, "Coming Thro' the Rye", which was written to embrace sexual encounters and defy the principles of the Puritan world in which he lived. Holden describes wanting to be the "catcher in the rye" to protect kids from falling off of the cliff of childhood and into adulthood. However, this is not at all what the poem regards. The true question the poem asks is if casual sex is justifiable, which to Burns, it was. Here, Holden and Burns clash as Holden believes sex is degrading, so he never actually loses his virginity. It seems Holden would have been better set in a restrictive Puritan era, where sex was never casual, while Burns' values align more with modern-day belief. Thus, we see Burns and Salinger clash on the principle of freedom in a different way, which "Of Mice and Men" advocates that American freedom is shallow, "Catcher in the Rye" argues it may be directly harmful. Holden believed the world around him is a fraud, so some of that feeling must extend to where the book is set: New York, the quintessential "American" city. There must be some element then of dislike for his country, further illustrating realism's refutation to Robert Burns.

Robert Burns had a reverence for America and its principles of freedom. He once gave a toast to George Washington where he recited a poem he composed for him, calling him a "much better man" than the king of England. These principles of freedom, however, are contested in both "Of Mice and Men" and "The Catcher in the Rye". "Of Mice and Men" argues that the freedom to obtain the American Dream is shallow and non-existent. The lack of freedom for the workers is the issue. "The Catcher in the Rye", argues that freedom itself is the issue and that it is corrupting. Now that Burns' influence is clear, the way he provided the two authors with a notion to refute becomes much more interesting.

Robert Burns had an even greater influence on early American literature. Writers and poets such as John Smith, John Greenleaf Whittier, and even Abraham Lincoln all had a direct influence on the early American literature scene, and all credit Burns as their main source of inspiration. This laid the foundation for early American literature to adopt romanticism and nationalism, which provided realist authors like Steinbeck and Salinger a notion to refute.

One writer during the Colonial Period (1500-1776) who admired Robert Burns was John Smith. He “took much of his flare and mannerisms from Burns”, because “he was certainly a man he respected”. Burns’ admiration for the colonies certainly came off in Smith’s writing. His most famous book, “A Description of New England”, describes the place as “a paradise, a voluptuous land of easy riches” and a place “that would reward those showing the Protestant virtues of enterprise and willingness to work hard”. In the novel, he refers to himself in the third person as a hero conquering the land. Not only is his belief in freedom extremely clear, but also takes after Burns in showing great pride in America, and himself as well. John Smith was one of the most influential writers of the period and led others to write travel literature about the budding colonies in a similar style.

During the Early Republic phase of American literature, John Greenleaf Whittier rose to prominence as a poet and abolitionist. Even as an abolitionist, he maintained a reverence for freedom and America, which he perhaps took after Burns, whom he deeply admired. Whittier “was especially influenced by the Scot Robert Burns, whose lyrical treatment of everyday rural life reinforced his own inclination to be a writer”. In an evolving era of literature, he maintained the same romanticism prose with regards to nature, frequently writing vivid descriptions of the lush hills of New England. He was arguably the most influential poet of his era and popularized an idealization of American Landscapes.

Finally, Abraham Lincoln was a massive fan of Robert Burns. While he wasn’t as heavily involved in the literature scene as the others mentioned, he was still an orator, debater, writer, president, and one of the most influential men in American history. It was said that “he could very nearly quote all of Burns’ poems from memory” and that “he had acquired the Scottish accent and could render Burns perfectly”. Interestingly enough, the person who made that testimony about Lincoln was also the one who reported him saying, “America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.”. This further shows Lincoln’s pride in his country, and his emphasis on freedoms, some of which he may have derived from Burns.

Burns made romanticism - the antithesis of the style Steinbeck and Salinger wrote in - the default style of early American literature. He inspired the most influential writers of the time, and they shared his beliefs on freedom and America. I believe he supplied the writing scene with an ample amount of pride, enough perhaps to mask some of the problems that plagued the nation, as historian J.E. Lueberic describes “the earliest American literature” - “as American propaganda”. By providing the initial American

literature writers with pride and an overly-optimistic style of writing, Salinger and Steinbeck, the faces of current American literature, became the pioneers of realism, a style of writing meant to refute Burns' principles.

Understanding why Burns loved America allows us to understand more about himself. Burns' perhaps excessive admiration of America stems from the difficulties he faced growing up. Burns grew up a farm boy in poverty and hardship, unable to change his social class due to Scotland's rigid social structure. The difficulty of his labor was crippling and is a large reason why he died prematurely. Ongoing troubles with landlords and their agents fueled the rebellion that Burns felt against authority and his craving for freedom. He couldn't marry Jean Armour, who gave birth to twins as a result of an affair, because of the restrictive laws of Puritanism. All of this anger towards his society led him to revere America, a place championing its freedom, democracy, and its citizens' ability to succeed with hard work.

However, the harsh reality is America is a place full of problems. Even the things that distinguish it from other countries, the freedom, opportunity, and democracy do not apply to everybody. To escape the pain of his own reality, Burns wrote with admiration of a fantasy country he never actually lived in. This blind pride extended to the early writers of American literature, with whom pioneers such as Steinbeck and Salinger clashed. The reason we admire "Of Mice and Men" and "The Catcher in the Rye" is that they are boldly pessimistic, and without the stark contrast of previous writers (many of whom practiced romanticism), it wouldn't be as effective.

Just by looking at the title of "Of Mice and Men" and "The Catcher in the Rye", Burns' influence is immediately clear. By dissecting both books, it's clear both authors disagreed with Burns. While we have already established that Burns did, in fact, influence American literature, I am more interested in how specifically he did. By admiring America, he influenced the writers of early American literature like John Greenleaf Whittier. He influenced these writers to the extent to where they shared some of his overly optimistic beliefs on the country. This allowed for the birth of realism, the most appreciated period of American literature, with notable books such as "Tom Sawyer", "The Great Gatsby", "The Catcher in the Rye", and "The Grapes of Wrath". I find this answer for how Robert Burns influenced American literature most compelling.