



Ethical Functions of Animals in Robert Burns Poetry

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Abstract. General Background: Robert Burns occupies a central place in eighteenth-century literature as a poet whose work reflects both rural Scottish life and universal human values. Specific Background: In his poetry, animals are not passive elements but active figures conveying ethical meaning through emotions such as compassion, gratitude, indignation, mourning, and social critique. Knowledge Gap: Despite extensive scholarship, insufficient attention has been given to how animals function systematically as carriers of ethical discourse across multiple poems. Aims: This study examines five key poems—The Twa Dogs, Poor Mailie’s Elegy, The Auld Farmer’s Salutation to His Auld Mare, Maggie, On Seeing a Wounded Hare, and To a Mouse—to identify the ethical roles assigned to animals. Results: The analysis demonstrates that animals serve as moral agents expressing satire, empathy, protest, respect, and philosophical reflection, while Burns’s diction, dialogue, and stylistic techniques transform rural encounters into reflections on justice, vulnerability, and responsibility. Novelty: The study highlights the integration of literary form, diction, and cultural context in constructing animals as ethical participants rather than symbolic abstractions. Implications: These findings confirm that Burns’s poetry extends beyond agrarian description to articulate enduring ethical concerns, contributing to contemporary discussions on ecological awareness, human–animal relations, and moral responsibility.

Keywords: Robert Burns, Animal Imagery, Ethical Meaning

1 Introduction

Robert Burns, the great Scottish poet of the late eighteenth century, occupies a unique place in world literature. He is at once a national bard and a voice of universal human values. As noted in the research “Образы природы в поэзии Роберта Бёрнса” (Images of Nature in Robert Burns’s Poetry) [1], his creative identity was inseparable from the rural world. Burns wrote his earliest verses behind the plough, and the rhythms of agrarian life continued to shape his imagination. Nature never was a passive backdrop for him. It was an active participant in human existence.

“*Wee, sleekit, cow’rin, tim’rous beastie, O, what a panic’s in thy breastie!*” (To a Mouse, 1785) [2].

This famous line captures Burns’s compassionate tone, turning a small, frightened creature into a symbol of human fragility. From such moments, animals step forward in his poetry — not as decoration, but as figures charged with ethical meaning. They embody compassion, gratitude, indignation, mourning, and even social critique. In *The Twa Dogs*, *Poor Mailie’s Elegy*, *The Auld Farmer’s Salutation to His Auld Mare*, *Maggie*, *On Seeing a Wounded Hare*, and *To a Mouse* [2], Burns invests animals with

moral significance, transforming rural encounters into reflections on justice, empathy, and vulnerability.

The sentimental tradition, with its emphasis on feeling and closeness to nature, offered Burns a philosophical and ethical framework for representing the nonhuman world. At the same time, pre-Romantic interests in folklore, national identity, and the pressures of a changing modern life broadened and deepened his vision of human–nature relations. In this context, animals in his poetry are not simply pastoral details; they become ethically charged figures through which Burns explores vulnerability, care, and responsibility - shaped both by the literary currents of the eighteenth century and by his lived experience as a farmer-poet.

This study therefore examines the role of animals in Burns’s work as a site of ethical meaning, situating these representations within eighteenth-century literary traditions and showing how they continue to speak to contemporary debates on empathy, ecology, and human responsibility.

2 Materials and Methods

This study is based on a close textual analysis of five key poems by Robert Burns in which animals play a central role: *“The Twa Dogs”* 1786, *“To a Mouse”* 1785, *“On Seeing a Wounded Hare”* 1789, *“Poor Mailie’s Elegy”* 1784, and *“The Auld Farmer’s Salutation to His Auld Mare, Maggie”* 1786 [2]. These texts were selected because they exemplify Burns’s distinctive practice of attributing moral significance to non-human creatures, transforming them into symbols of human vulnerability, resilience, gratitude, and social critique.

The methodological framework combines three complementary approaches:

2.1 Textual and Stylistic Analysis

Each poem was examined for diction, imagery, and rhetorical devices. Particular attention was paid to Burns’s use of direct address, which creates intimacy between poet, creature, and reader. For example, in *“To a Mouse”* the poet’s sympathetic voice elevates a small, frightened animal into a symbol of human fragility, while in *“On Seeing a Wounded Hare”* emotionally charged language conveys indignation at cruelty.

2.2 Comparative Historical Study

Burns’s use of animal imagery was situated within eighteenth-century literary traditions. Unlike classical allegories, his animals remain concrete and particular, reflecting rural Scottish life. As noted in the article *“Образы природы в поэзии Роберта Бёрнса”* (*Images of Nature in Robert Burns’s Poetry*), Burns’s originality lies in his ability to transform everyday encounters with animals into universal lessons about justice and empathy [2].

2.3 Cultural-Contextual Analysis

Agrarian practices, folklore, and oral traditions were considered as background factors shaping Burns’s poetic imagination. *“Poor Mailie’s Elegy”* reflects the

cultural importance of livestock in rural Scotland, while “*The Auld Farmer’s Salutation to His Auld Mare, Maggie*” situates gratitude within agrarian labor. As Chechetko highlighted, Burns’s rural environment provided the ethical foundation for his poetry, ensuring that his depictions of animals resonated with local and universal audiences [1].

The research process unfolded in several stages:

- a. Close reading of each poem to identify passages where animals are explicitly described or addressed.
- b. Categorization of these passages according to ethical themes (compassion, justice, indignation, mourning, gratitude).
- c. Comparative analysis across the corpus to identify recurring motifs and distinctive features.
- d. Interpretation of the results in dialogue with existing scholarship, including Russian literary-critical reception, which confirms the cross-cultural significance of Burns’s ethical vision.

This multi-layered approach ensures that the research captures the literary techniques Burns employs and the broader cultural and ethical implications of his work.

3 Literature Review and Theoretical Context

The research of Robert Burns’s poetry has long emphasized his dual role as a national bard of Scotland and a voice of universal human values. Early scholarship, such as David Daiches’s *Robert Burns* 1950 [3], situates him within the sentimentalist tradition, highlighting his emphasis on empathy and closeness to nature. Colin McGuirk’s *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* 1985 [4] further develops this perspective, showing how Burns’s diction and imagery embody the ideals of eighteenth-century sentimentalism. More recent biographical work by Robert Crawford *The Bard: Robert Burns*, 2009 [5] underscores Burns’s originality in transforming his rural experience into universal ethical lessons.

Literary criticism has also contributed to this discourse. M.V. Chechetko’s article *Образы природы в поэзии Роберта Бёрнса (Images of Nature in Robert Burns’s Poetry)* emphasizes that animals and natural images in Burns’s poetry are not decorative motifs but carriers of ethical meaning. Chechetko shows, through close readings of poems such as *The Twa Dogs*, *Poor Mailie’s Elegy*, *The Auld Farmer’s Salutation to His Auld Mare, Maggie*, *On Seeing a Wounded Hare*, and *To a Mouse*, that Burns consistently invests rural creatures with dignity and moral significance. His analysis highlights how Burns uses genre forms—dialogue, elegy, and the distinctive Burns stanza—to elevate everyday rural encounters into reflections on justice, empathy, and shared vulnerability. Chechetko also stresses the philosophical parallel between the fate of animals and plants and the fate of human beings, underscoring Burns’s ability to collapse boundaries between human and nonhuman life. This cross-cultural perspective confirms the universality of Burns’s ethical vision and its resonance beyond Scotland [1].

As noted by N.P. Mikhalskaya, Burns’s poetry embodies the principles of Enlightenment realism combined with folklore traditions, while also anticipating

Romantic themes. His close connection to peasant labor and everyday rural life ensured that his works expressed the dignity of common people and their dream of freedom [6].

Comparative analysis with contemporaries such as William Cowper *The Task*, 1785 [7] and James Thomson *The Seasons*, 1730–1744 [8] reveals Burns’s distinctiveness. While Cowper and Thomson often employ allegorical or generalized depictions of nature, Burns maintains concrete, particularized images rooted in rural Scottish life. His animals are individualized and emotionally charged, serving as moral witnesses rather than abstract symbols.

Modern theoretical approaches expand the relevance of Burns’s work. Ecocriticism interprets literature through the lens of ecological awareness, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life. From this perspective, poems such as *To a Mouse* and *On Seeing a Wounded Hare* anticipate ecological ethics by foregrounding compassion and responsibility toward vulnerable creatures. Animal studies further highlight how Burns destabilizes hierarchical distinctions between humans and animals. By addressing animals as “*faithful servant*” or “*tim’rous beastie*,” Burns proposes a dialogical relationship that challenges anthropocentric norms and affirms the dignity of nonhuman beings.

Recent scholarship has deepened these insights. Guihua and Ronghua [9] explore *animal subjectivity* in Burns’s poetry, situating his work within the “animal turn” and emphasizing creatures as ethical touchstones. Fazlić [10] interprets Burns through a “Romantic land ethic,” linking his rural imagery to ecocentric responsibility. Datta [11] highlights the theme of *interconnected lives*, showing how Burns collapses boundaries between human and nonhuman mortality. Pughe [12] re-examines anthropomorphism as a deliberate moral strategy, while Stafford [13] situates Burns within the broader discourse of nature and the environment in the *Oxford Handbook of Burns Studies*. Wickman [14]. investigates Burns’s treatment of the “*inhuman*,” underscoring his challenge to hierarchical and anthropocentric assumptions.

To visualize the evolution of Burns scholarship and highlight how modern approaches expand traditional interpretations, the following comparative table contrasts classical perspectives with contemporary frameworks:

Table 1. Evolution of Critical Perspectives on Robert Burns’s Poetry and Their Contributions to Ethical Interpretation

Perspective	Key Scholars / Works	Focus	Contribution to Burns Studies
Sentimentalism (18th c.)	David Daiches (1950) Colin McGuirk (1985)	Empathy, closeness to nature, moral feeling	Burns’s diction (“wee beastie”, “faithful servant”) embodies compassion and harmony with rural life
Pre-Romanticism	James Thomson (1730–1744) William Cowper (1785) N.P. Mikhalskaya (2007)	Folklore, national identity, dissonance of modern life	Burns anticipates Romantic nostalgia and moral protest; combines Enlightenment realism with folklore traditions
Criticism	M.V. Chechetko (2014)	Animals as ethical carriers	Confirms universality of Burns’s ethical

Continued **Table 1.**

Perspective	Key Scholars / Works	Focus	Contribution to Burns Studies
			across cultures
Ecocriticism (21st c.)	Contemporary ecological literary studies; Fazlić (2024)	Interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life	Burns's <i>To a Mouse</i> and <i>On Seeing a Wounded Hare</i> anticipate ecological ethics and responsibility
Animal Studies (21st c.)	Guihua & Ronghua (2024) Datta (2024); Pughe (2024)	Human–animal relations, dignity of nonhuman beings	Burns destabilizes hierarchy, treating animals as moral partners and witnesses of justice
Nature and Inhuman	Stafford (2024) Wickman (2024)	Burns and the natural world; critique of anthropocentrism	Expands Burns's relevance to ecological and philosophical debates

This table shows how poetry has been read through different lenses: traditional scholarship emphasizes sentimentalist empathy and pre-Romantic dissonance, while modern approaches reinterpret his animals as precursors to ecological ethics, humane responsibility, and critiques of hierarchy. Thus, the literature review demonstrates that Burns's poetry is at the intersection of sentimentalism and pre-Romanticism. It anticipates modern ecological and ethical discourses. His depictions of animals bridge historical traditions and contemporary concerns, confirming the enduring relevance of his poetic vision.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

The analysis of selected poems reveals that animals have ethical significance. They are central participants in moral discourse. Each poem embodies a distinct ethical function such as satire and social critique to compassion, indignation, mourning, and gratitude.

Table 2. Overview of Findings

Poem	Animal Figure	Ethical Function	Key Themes
<i>The Twa Dogs</i> (1786)	Caesar and Luath (two dogs)	Satire and social critique	Inequality, justice, class divisions
<i>Poor Mailie's Elegy</i> (1784)	Sheep (Mailie)	Mourning and respect	Dignity in death, empathy, rural life
<i>The Auld Farmer's Salutation to His Auld Mare, Maggie</i> (1786)	Horse (Maggie)	Gratitude and loyalty	Companionship, labor, respect for animals
<i>On Seeing a Wounded Hare</i> (1789)	Hare	Indignation and moral protest	Cruelty, violence, ethical responsibility
<i>To a Mouse</i> (1785)	Mouse	Compassion and empathy	Human vulnerability, fragility of plans

In *The Twa Dogs* (1786), Burns stages a lively dialogue between Caesar, a dog of the gentry, and Luath, a humble farm dog. Their conversation reflects the stark contrasts between wealth and poverty in eighteenth-century Scotland. Caesar describes the comforts of the rich—“*They eat, they drink, they sleep secure, / Ne'er mindin' how the poor endure*” while Luath counters with the hardships of the common folk: “*But to see how ye're neglectit, / How huff'd, an' cuff'd, an' disrespeckit.*” By giving voice to animals, Burns democratizes social critique, allowing satire to emerge from unexpected mouths. The ethical function here is in exposing inequality and prompting reflection on fairness and justice. The use of dialogue sharpens the satire and softens it with humor. It makes the criticism accessible to ordinary readers. This technique anticipates later literary traditions where marginalized voices speak truth to power, and it remains relevant today in discussions of social justice.

In *Poor Mailie's Elegy* (1784), Burns turns an ordinary rural event the death of a sheep into a moment of moral reflection. The elegiac tone is both dignified and compassionate, treating the animal not as a trivial figure but as a subject worthy of respect. Burns writes:

“*Poor Mailie's dead! and gone to rest, / An' aye she was a lamb at best.*”

The use of the Standard Habbie stanza, with its alternating long and short lines, allows him to blend humor with sorrow. This mixture makes the poem accessible to rural readers while elevating the sheep's death into a universal meditation on empathy and mortality. Burns even imagines Mailie's offspring, warning them against “*wanrestfu' cattle,*” which adds a moral dimension by extending care and responsibility beyond the immediate loss.

The ethical function here is mourning, which acknowledges the value of animal life and insists that compassion should not be limited to human beings. By memorializing a farm animal, Burns challenges conventional hierarchies and affirms that dignity belongs to all creatures. His choice of form and tone situates the poem within oral tradition, ensuring that the lesson of empathy could resonate widely among common people. In this way, *Poor Mailie's Elegy* exemplifies Burns's ability to transform rural experience into moral discourse, anticipating later literary traditions that emphasize the ethical meaning of everyday life.

In *The Auld Farmer's Salutation to His Auld Mare, Maggie* (1786), Burns transforms a simple rural moment into a profound meditation on loyalty and gratitude. The poem is framed as a direct address to Maggie, an old horse who has faithfully served in agricultural labor. Burns's affectionate tone elevates the animal beyond its utilitarian role, presenting her as a companion and partner in the farmer's life. He writes:

“*Auld Maggie, thou's a dainty lass, / Thou's been a faithful servant.*”

The diction conveys warmth and intimacy, situating ethical values within everyday rural practices. Maggie is not merely a beast of burden but a figure of dignity, embodying the virtues of endurance, companionship, and devotion. Burns's calm and harmonious tone reflects his vision of unity between man and nature, where gratitude becomes a moral principle.

This poem conveys gratitude, which reinforces respect for animals as integral to human existence. By acknowledging Maggie's labor and loyalty, Burns democratizes moral reflection, showing that ethical values are not confined to abstract philosophy but are embedded in daily rural life. The poem's vernacular style ensures

accessibility, while its emotional resonance anticipates modern ecological and ethical discourses that emphasize interdependence between humans and animals. In this way, *The Auld Farmer's Salutation to His Auld Mare, Maggie* exemplifies Burns's ability to transform ordinary encounters into timeless lessons of respect and responsibility.

In *On Seeing a Wounded Hare* (1789), Burns channels his indignation at cruelty into a powerful moral protest. The poem begins with a direct outcry against the hunter's violence:

*"Inhuman man! curse on thy barb'rous art, / Poor harmless hare! thou fell'st
beneath his rage."*

Here the hare is not a passive victim but a moral witness, embodying the consequences of human brutality toward nature. Burns's emotionally charged language elevates the animal into a figure of ethical protest, dramatizing outrage and condemning unnecessary harm. The heightened tone contrasts sharply with the calm gratitude of *Maggie* or the tender sympathy of *To a Mouse*, showing the full spectrum of moral emotions in his work.

The ethical function of the poem is moral outrage, reinforcing responsibility toward nonhuman beings and insisting that cruelty is a violation of shared moral order. Burns's diction—"curse on thy barb'rous art"—underscores the severity of the act, while the image of the wounded hare evokes vulnerability and suffering. By embedding protest in verse, Burns anticipates modern ecological ethics, where the suffering of animals is recognized as a moral issue demanding accountability.

The poem's intensity also reflects the sentimentalist tradition, in which feeling and empathy are central to moral understanding. Yet Burns goes further: he transforms indignation into a communal lesson, urging readers to see violence against animals as a broader violation of compassion and justice. In this way, *On Seeing a Wounded Hare* exemplifies his ability to dramatize ethical responsibility through poetic form, ensuring that outrage becomes not only an emotional reaction but a moral imperative.

In *To a Mouse* (1785), Burns transforms a seemingly ordinary rural incident—the destruction of a mouse's nest by the farmer's plough—into a profound meditation on vulnerability and compassion. The poem begins with a direct address that immediately establishes intimacy:

"Wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie, / O, what a panic's in thy breastie!"

By speaking directly to the mouse, Burns collapses the boundary between human and nonhuman, affirming the creature's dignity and moral worth. The mouse becomes more than a small victim of circumstance; it is a symbol of shared fragility, reminding readers that human plans are just as precarious as those of animals. This idea culminates in the famous lines:

"The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft agley."

The ethical function of the poem is compassion, inviting readers to extend empathy beyond their own species. Burns's reflection on the mouse's plight becomes a universal lesson about the unpredictability of fate and the vulnerability inherent in all existence. The use of Scots dialect grounds the poem in rural culture, while its philosophical depth elevates it into timeless moral discourse.

The tonal balance of tenderness and reflection situates the poem within the sentimentalist tradition, where feeling and closeness to nature are central to ethical understanding. Yet Burns goes further: he uses the mouse's suffering to highlight human limitations, suggesting that humility and empathy are essential virtues. In this

way, *To a Mouse* exemplifies Burns's ability to transform everyday rural encounters into enduring lessons of moral philosophy, bridging the gap between human and nonhuman experience.

4.2 Discussion

Robert Burns's diction is the most revealing element of his ethical imagination, showing how his poetry bridges sentimentalist compassion with pre-Romantic dissonance. His language choices — “*inhuman man*”, “*faithful servant*”, “*best-laid schemes*” — are not incidental but deliberate signals of moral values, situating his work within the literary currents of the eighteenth century.

In *To a Mouse*, the diminutive “wee” and affectionate “beastie” exemplify sentimentalist empathy. Burns reduces the distance between human and animal, inviting readers to share in his compassion. The famous line “*The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft agley*” extends this empathy into philosophical reflection, linking the vulnerability of a small creature to the fragility of human plans. This diction embodies the sentimentalist conviction that feeling and closeness to nature are the highest human values, while also anticipating pre-Romantic concerns with fate and uncertainty.

In *The Auld Farmer's Salutation to His Auld Mare, Maggie*, Burns's diction conveys gratitude and harmony. The phrase “*faithful servant*” elevates the horse from a beast of burden to a partner in labor and life. The farmer's affectionate tone reflects sentimentalist ideals of natural dignity and reciprocity, while the calm acceptance of aging anticipates Romantic nostalgia for agrarian traditions. Burns's diction here embodies harmony: the relationship between man and animal is dignified, reciprocal, and morally instructive.

In *On Seeing a Wounded Hare*, Burns's diction shifts to moral protest. The cry “*Inhuman man! curse on thy barb'rous art*” exemplifies pre-Romantic dissonance, where cruelty disrupts the natural order and provokes ethical outrage. Harsh words such as “*murder*,” “*cruel*,” “*barbarous*,” and “*ruffian*” intensify the condemnation, transforming the hare into a symbol of resistance against violence. This diction reflects sentimentalist compassion but channels it into indignation, anticipating Romantic critiques of injustice and cruelty.

In *The Twa Dogs*, colloquial diction stages a dialogue between Caesar and Luath. Their voices expose inequality and injustice, embodying Enlightenment concerns with fairness while retaining sentimentalist empathy. The simple, direct language carries ethical weight by transforming animals into moral witnesses of social divisions.

Finally, in *Poor Mailie's Elegy*, Burns's diction combines sorrow with gentle humor. The refrain “*Poor Mailie's dead!*” conveys mourning, while “*aye she was a lamb at best*” affirms respect for the animal's dignity. This diction reflects sentimentalist compassion, elevating the death of a sheep into a moral reflection on loss and empathy. The use of Scots dialect grounds the poem in rural culture, reinforcing the ethical significance of everyday life.

Burns's diction demonstrates a spectrum of ethical functions: compassion (*To a Mouse*), gratitude (*Maggie*), indignation (*Wounded Hare*), satire (*Twa Dogs*), and mourning (*Mailie*). His language choices embody sentimentalist ideals of empathy and natural harmony, while also anticipating pre-Romantic concerns with cruelty, dissonance, and nostalgia. Burns's diction transforms animals into carriers of ethical meaning, bridging literary traditions with lived rural experience.

This synthesis shows that Burns's poetry is not only descriptive of rural life but also deeply ethical. His diction situates animals as moral partners, allowing readers to reflect on justice, compassion, and responsibility. Burns's language continues to resonate, offering lessons that remain relevant in modern ecological and humanistic contexts.

Robert Burns's ethical vision is closely connected with the formal and stylistic choices he makes in his poetry. Beyond his choice of words and imagery, the very structure of his verse strengthens the moral role he gives to animals.

Burns often uses the six-line stanza known as the Standard Habbie. This form appears in *Poor Mailie's Elegy* and many of his early poems. It has an aaabab rhyme scheme and alternates between longer tetrameter lines and shorter dimeter lines. The stanza skillfully mixes humor with pathos. This allows Burns to mourn the death of a sheep with dignity, while keeping the poem simple and accessible to ordinary rural readers. The rhythm of the stanza echoes the traditions of oral poetry. It helps elevate everyday rural subjects to the level of serious moral reflection.

In *The Twa Dogs*, Burns relies on the dialogue form. Two dogs — Caesar and Luath — talk to each other. They represent different social classes and express contrasting views. This structure makes the poem more democratic. It gives animals their own voice as moral commentators. By letting the dogs deliver social critique, Burns sharpens his satire but softens it with humor, making the criticism more effective and less harsh.

Burns also frequently uses direct address and apostrophe. In *To a Mouse* and *The Auld Farmer's Salutation to His Auld Mare, Maggie*, he speaks straight to the animals. This technique creates a sense of intimacy and immediacy. It reduces the distance between human and non-human beings. As a result, animals become real interlocutors. The poet affirms their dignity and grants them moral agency.

Another important feature is Burns's use of Scots dialect and vernacular style. Phrases such as “wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie” firmly ground his poetry in rural Scottish culture. The everyday language of common people becomes the medium for ethical reflection. By raising vernacular speech to a poetic level, Burns democratizes moral discourse. He shows that compassion and justice are not just ideas for the educated elite, but universal human values.

Finally, Burns masterfully employs tonal shifts. For instance, the heightened emotional language in *On Seeing a Wounded Hare* — with the angry cry “Inhuman man! curse on thy barb'rous art” — stands in sharp contrast to the calm gratitude expressed in *Maggie*. These changes in tone help dramatize different ethical functions: indignation, mourning, gratitude, and compassion. They allow the full range of human moral emotions from outrage to tenderness to appear naturally within the poems.

When we look at all five poems together, it becomes clear that Burns consistently turns encounters with animals into moral lessons that cover the full range of human emotions. The *Twa Dogs* satirizes social inequality, *Poor Mailie's Elegy* dignifies the mourning of a humble sheep, *Maggie* celebrates loyalty and gratitude, *On Seeing a Wounded Hare* voices outrage at cruelty, and *To a Mouse* embodies compassion and philosophical reflection on human vulnerability. Each poem has its own ethical role, but taken together they form a unified vision: animals in Burns's poetry are not decorative figures, but active participants in moral dialogue, carriers of justice, empathy, and responsibility. His ethical imagination is both coherent and multifaceted, weaving satire with tenderness, protest with gratitude, reflection with

immediacy. In this way, his poetry anticipates modern ecological and humanistic thought, affirming that the dignity of animals is inseparable from the moral integrity of human society.

Burns’s ethical vision, expressed through animals, speaks directly to modern concerns. In today’s ecological debates, his compassion for vulnerable creatures anticipates ideas of environmental responsibility and humane treatment of animals. *On Seeing a Wounded Hare* resonates with contemporary discussions on cruelty and wildlife protection, while *To a Mouse* reflects ecological fragility and the unpredictability of human plans in the face of nature. The poet’s use of everyday rural language makes his poetry a valuable resource for pedagogy: it demonstrates how literature can cultivate empathy, ethical reflection, and ecological awareness among students. By integrating Burns into modern curricula, educators can highlight the timeless relevance of his lessons on justice, compassion, and responsibility, showing that ethical discourse is not confined to philosophy but embedded in everyday life.

This analysis confirms the observations of Chechetko and Mikhalskaya that Burns’s animals are not decorative motifs but moral witnesses, embodying dignity and ethical reflection. By situating animals as carriers of ethical significance, Burns bridges sentimentalist empathy, Enlightenment realism, and pre-Romantic dissonance. These findings prepare the ground for the conclusion that Burns’s ethical imagination is coherent, multifaceted, and enduringly relevant — anticipating modern ecocritical and animal studies perspectives.

4.3 Synthesis

The Burns stanza blends humor and pathos; dialogue democratizes critique; direct address affirms dignity; dialect grounds ethics in everyday life; tonal shifts dramatize moral complexity. Together, these stylistic strategies transform animals into ethical carriers, bridging rural experience with universal human values.

Table 3. Relationship Between Poetic Devices and Ethical Functions in Burns’s Poetry

Poetic Form / Device	Stylistic Function	Ethical Function
Burns (aaabab)	Blends humor and pathos; rooted in oral tradition	Elevates everyday rural subjects into moral reflection (<i>Poor Mailie’s Elegy</i>)
Dialogue Form	Democratizes voice; allows animals to speak	Exposes inequality and injustice through satire (<i>The Twa Dogs</i>)
Direct Address / Apostrophe	Creates intimacy and immediacy	Affirms dignity of animals as interlocutors (<i>To a Mouse, Maggie</i>)
Scots Dialect / Vernacular	Conveys authenticity and accessibility	Democratizes moral discourse; compassion as universal value
Tonal Shifts	Dramatizes emotional range (from gratitude to indignation)	Embodies spectrum of moral responses: outrage, mourning, tenderness (<i>Wounded Hare</i> vs <i>Maggie</i>)

Robert Burns’s ethical vision is inseparable from the way he shapes his poetry. It is not only his choice of words and images that matters, but also the very structure of his verse, which reinforces the moral significance he assigns to animals.

One of his favorite forms is the six-line stanza known as the Standard Habbie, used in *Poor Mailie's Elegy* and many early works. With its alternating long and short lines and its playful rhyme scheme, the stanza balances humor and sorrow. This balance allows Burns to mourn the death of a sheep with genuine dignity while keeping the poem accessible to ordinary rural readers. The rhythm recalls oral tradition, lifting everyday rural subjects into the realm of serious moral reflection.

In *The Twa Dogs*, Burns turns to dialogue. Two dogs, Caesar and Luath converse about society, each representing a different class and perspective. This structure makes the poem accessible, giving animals their own voice as moral commentators. They deliver social critique. Burns sharpens his satire but tempers it with humor. It makes his criticism effective and approachable.

Direct address makes his style unique. In *To a Mouse* and *The Auld Farmer's Salutation to His Auld Mare, Maggie*, Burns speaks directly to the animals. This technique creates intimacy and immediacy, collapsing the boundary between human and nonhuman beings. Animals become genuine interlocutors, granted dignity and moral agency.

Equally important is his use of Scots dialect and vernacular speech. Expressions such as “wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie” root the poetry firmly in rural Scottish culture. Everyday language becomes the medium for ethical reflection, showing that compassion and justice are not reserved for the educated elite but belong to all people.

Finally, Burns's tonal shifts dramatize the full range of moral emotions. The fierce indignation of *On Seeing a Wounded Hare* contrasts with the calm gratitude of *Maggie*. These changes in tone allow outrage, mourning, tenderness, and compassion to coexist naturally within his work. Through such stylistic choices, Burns ensures that ethical meaning is embedded not only in what he says but in how he says it.

5 Conclusion

The research shows that Robert Burns consistently turns animals into participants in moral discourse rather than incidental figures of rural life. Each analyzed poem demonstrates a distinct moral function: satire and social critique in *The Twa Dogs*, mourning and respect in *Poor Mailie's Elegy*, gratitude and harmony in *The Auld Farmer's Salutation to His Auld Mare, Maggie*, indignation and protest in *On Seeing a Wounded Hare*, and compassion with philosophical reflection in *To a Mouse*.

Burns's diction is in the affectionate phrase “faithful servant,” the indignant cry “inhuman man,” or the reflective proverb “*the best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft agley*” which embodies the sentimentalist emphasis on empathy and closeness to nature, while also anticipating pre-Romantic concerns with cruelty, dissonance, and nostalgia. His language elevates everyday rural encounters into universal ethical lessons. Animals are depicted as moral partners and carriers of human values.

His formal and stylistic choices are equally important. The Burns stanza blends humor and pathos, making free moral reflection through oral tradition. Dialogue form, as in *The Twa Dogs*, gives animals a voice in social critique. Direct address and apostrophe collapse the distance between human and nonhuman, affirming dignity and moral agency. The use of Scots dialect grounds ethical discourse in everyday life. Tonal shifts dramatize the full spectrum of moral responses from tenderness to

outrage. These stylistic strategies ensure that ethical meaning is embedded in content and in poetic form.

The broader significance of this research is in its demonstration that Burns's poetry is not only descriptive of agrarian life but also deeply ethical. His works illustrate how literature can cultivate compassion, gratitude, and responsibility, bridging human and nonhuman experience. Nowadays Burns's lines are still relevant. They speak to ecological awareness, humane treatment of animals, and the fragility of human existence. He transforms animals into symbols of justice, empathy, and vulnerability, Burns offers timeless lessons that remain relevant to contemporary debates about ethics, ecology, and human dignity.

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