

Robert Burns and A Red Red Rose

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Abstract. Robert Burns is a well-known Scottish poet and his poem A Red Red Rose prevails all over the world. This essay will first make a brief introduction of Robert Burns and make an analysis of A Red Red Rose in the aspects of language, imagery and rhetoric.

Keywords: Robert Burns; A Red Red Rose; language; imagery; rhetoric.

1. Robert Burns' Life Experience

Robert Burns (25 January 1759 – 21 July 1796) is a Scottish poet and lyricist. He is one of the most famous poets of Scotland and is widely regarded as a Scottish national poet. Being considered as a pioneer of the Romantic Movement, Robert Burns became a great source of inspiration to the founders of both liberalism and socialism after his death. Most of his world-renowned works are written in a Scots dialect. And in the meantime, he produced a lot of poems in English.

He was born in a peasant's clay-built cottage, south of Ayr, in Alloway, South Ayrshire, Scotland in 1759. His father, William Burnes (1721–1784), is a self-educated tenant farmer from Dunnottar in the Mearns, and his mother, Agnes Broun (1732–1820), is the daughter of a Kirkoswald tenant farmer.

Despite the poor soil and a heavy rent, his father still devoted his whole life to plough the land to support the whole family's livelihood. As the eldest son in this seven-child family, Burns tried his best to help his father in youth. The severe manual labor of the farm harmed his health and constitution. Under this condition, his father still attached great importance to education, hiring a teacher for him and teaching his children himself. Burns had acquired theological knowledge and grammar with little regular schooling. Besides, he read a lot on foreign literature.

He was also taught by John Murdoch (1747–1824), who had an "adventure school" in Alloway in 1763 and taught Latin, French, and mathematics to him from 1765 to 1768. Then years later, Burns went to Dalrymple Parish School in mid-1772. Then after a full-time farm laboring at harvest time at 1773, he was sent to lodge with Murdoch for three weeks to study French and Latin.

During the harvest of 1774, he was assisted by Nelly Kilpatrick (1759–1820), who inspired his first attempt at poetry, "O, Once I Lov'd A Bonnie Lass". In 1775, he was sent to finish his education with a tutor at Kirkoswald, where he met Peggy Thompson (born 1762), to whom he wrote two songs, "Now Westlin' Winds" and "I Dream'd I Lay". He has written his poems in his notebook and added comments on his poems. At the same time, he was greatly interested in sectarian politics, supporting liberalism and opposing orthodox Calvinism.

In 1777, Burnes led his family moved again to Lochlea, near Tarbolton but they were still in poor condition. After William Burnes's death in 1784, his family became integrated into the community of Tarbolton. At that time, Robert joined a country dancing school in 1779 and formed the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club later with his brother Gilbert. There he met Alison Begbie (b. 1762) and written four songs for her.

Burns fell in love with a woman named Jean Armour and then she became pregnant with twins in March 1786. Burns signed a paper attesting his marriage to Jean, but her parents forbade it. Still they were eventually married in 1788. Armour bore him nine children, only three survived infancy.

Due to financial difficulties, Burns took up an offer of work in Jamaica to be a "book keeper" (assistant overseer of slaves). Six years later he wrote "The Slave's Lament" which demonstrated his egalitarian views.

At about the same time, Burns fell in love with Mary Campbell (1763–1786). He dedicated the poems "The Highland Lassie O", "Highland Mary", and "To Mary in Heaven" to her. His song "Will ye go to the Indies, my Mary, and leave auld Scotia's shore?" suggests that they planned to emigrate

to Jamaica together. It has been suggested that on 14 May 1786 they exchanged Bibles and plighted their troth over the Water of Fail in a traditional form of marriage. But soon afterwards Mary left her work in Ayrshire and sailed home in Campbeltown. In October 1786, Mary and her father went to visit her brother in Greenock who fell ill with typhus. While nursing him, Mary caught it, too. She died of typhus on October 1786 and was buried in Greenock.

On 31 July 1786 Robert Burns published his volume of works *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish dialect*. Known as the Kilmarnock volume, it contained much of his best writing, including "The Twa Dogs", "Address to the Deil", "Halloween", "The Cotter's Saturday Night", "To a Mouse", "Epitaph for James Smith", and "To a Mountain Daisy". These works were so successful and soon he was known across the country.

On 4 September Burns received a letter from Thomas Blacklock who expressed his admiration for the poetry in the Kilmarnock volume, and was suggested an enlarged second edition in Edinburgh. Over there, his first Edinburgh edition of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish dialect* was published on 17 April 1787. He was warmly welcomed and made the acquaintance of many famous people, one of which was James Johnson, a struggling music engraver and music seller. Burns contributed many songs to his volume *The Scots Musical Museum*.

Burns had alienated many of his friends by freely expressing sympathy with the French and American Revolutions and the advocates of reform and votes for all men. Burns joined the Royal Dumfries Volunteers in March 1795 in an attempt to prove his loyalty to the Crown. Many early biographers who studied Burns believed that excessive drinking and debauchery led to his early death. Near the age of 40, Burns suffered from rheumatic fever then it worsened to a serious and fatal heart disease. He was buried in Dunfries Cemetery after his death in 1796. His friends helped support his family by subscribing to his published collection of poems.

2. Robert Burns' Literary Achievements

Burns was a pioneer of Romanticism in the 18th century. He is a prolific writer who has created more than 600 poems in his life, many of which are expressed in the form of singing, mainly exalting the simple feelings of the common people and expressing his deep sympathy for the suffering of the people at the other end of the society.

Burns' poetry was deeply influenced by the Classical, Biblical, and English literature. He was not only good at writing in the Scots language but also in the Scottish English dialect of the English language. Some of his works, such as "Love and Liberty" (also known as "The Jolly Beggars"), are written in both Scots and English for various effects.

His works are mostly lyric poems, such as "A Red Red Rose" praising people's love, "Scots, Wha Hae" expressing patriotism and so on. He also wrote many satirical poems, such as "Holy Willie's Prayer", and narrative poems, "The Two Dogs" and "The Jolly Beggars". His world-famous poem "Auld Lang Syne" is written in Scots language and now is used to bid farewell to the old year at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve.

Burns also claims to freely pursue wine, women, poetry and songs. His creation has many styles, but mainly is marked by spontaneity, directness, and sincerity. This essay mainly talks about his view and feelings on love from the poem *A Red Red Rose*.

3. A Red Red Rose

3.1 Introduction

Poetry is a bright pearl in the sea of literature. In the history of human literature, all the most classical poems express the simplest feelings with the most concise language, the richest imagination and the most ingenious imagery. The great English peasant poet Robert Burns' *A Red Red Rose* is such a well-known and classic love poem. With the unique artistic expression, the poem makes it stand out from so many love poems and become a wonderful one in the history of world literature.

A Red Red Rose is the representative of Burns' Lyric poems. Based on the ancient Scottish folk songs, it shows the features and charms of folk songs. In this poem, the poet fully demonstrated the sincerity, simplicity and freshness of Scottish folk songs, which is a hard-won works in that time. Compared to the folk songs, however, Burns' poetry was richer in content, more profound in artistic conception, and far beyond them in artistic taste. Full of strong romantic color, his poems set an outstanding example for the English lyric poetry in the same period. The main manifestations are concise and musical language, vivid and far-reaching imagery, flexible and rich rhetoric techniques in A Red Red Rose.

3.2 The Beauty of Language

Language is the first element of literature, and A Red Red Rose is successful in its concise and musical language. There are four stanzas and sixteen sentences in the poem. The purity and beauty of the girl and the faithfulness of the poet are perfectly reflected in the concise language of it. The first stanza, "O, my luve's like a red, red rose, that's newly sprung in June; O, my luve's like the melodie, that's sweetly played in tune" is the sincere praise of the poet for his lover's appearance and temperament in a vivid, delightful and soulful tone. The second and third stanzas, "as fair art thou, my bonnie lass, so deep in luve am I; and I will luve thee still, my dear, till a' the seas gang dry. Till a'the seas gang dry, my dear, and the rocks melt wi' the sun; I will luve thee still, my dear, while the sands o' life shall run." are the essence of the whole poem. The language here is strong and powerful, therefore its emotion is deep and high, especially in the words "Till a'the seas gang dry" and "the rocks melt wi' the sun". The eternity, faithfulness and firmness of love, have all melted into Burns' lines, expressing his true love for his lover. His language is simple but elegant, romantic and sincere. After the passionate outburst of these two stanzas, the whole poem turns into a more deep tone. "And fare thee still, my only luve! And fare thee weel awhile! And I will come again, my luve, though it were ten thousand mile." Despite the fact that they are going to leave each other, the poet firmly believed that their departure was temporary and they will meet again. This is not only an expectation but also a promise.

The poem is written in the form of ballads, i.e. each quatrain has four lines and its odd rows are in iambic tetrameter, even ones are in iambic trimeter. The rhyme feet in the first two stanzas are abcb, and the rhyme feet in the next two are abab. Such a rhyme arrangement emphasizes the change of the poet's feelings. If the first two sections are the expression of love, then the last two are the pledge of faithful love. In the form of interlaced rhyme, it's better to express poet's determination to be faithful in love.

Besides the end rhyme and the whole rhyme scheme, alliteration and assonance also play an important part in strengthening the rhythm of the poem. In addition, the repetition of sounds and symmetry in structure and wording also produce an effect of music.

3.3 The Beauty of Imagery

Imagery is the objective things that the creators adopt to entrust their subjective feelings, emotions and thoughts. It is the organic integration of the creators and the objects. Poets tend to blend their thoughts with some vivid symbolic things in life to create an artistic conception suitable for the language environment and express a special feeling based on their own requirements. With the concise and simple words, poetry can leave infinite imagination space for readers.

The first imagery of A Red Red Rose is a rose that's newly sprung in June. The poet compares his be-loved to a rose, which can best represent her youth, beauty, vigour and even fragrance. Then, his sweetheart is also compared to the "melodie that's sweetly played in tune", which indicates that not only does his lover have a pretty appearance, but an elegant temperament and a kind heart. Then, the imagery is enlarged into a broader conception: seas, rocks and sun. All these objects are used to show poet's love which is as deep as sea, as staunch as rocks and as passionate as sun.

3.4 The Beauty of Rhetoric

Poetry originates from life but is higher than life. Poets often use various rhetorical devices to make their poetry radiates with lasting artistic beauty. Therefore, the comprehensive interpretation and appreciation of poetry could be realized by analysis of rhetorical devices.

In the first section, the poet compares his lover to a red rose, and then to a sweet song with the rhetorical device of simile: "O, my luve's like a red, red rose, that's newly sprung in June; O, my luve's like the melody, that's sweetly played in tune". Simple and direct, this short quatrain presents the image of a lovely girl both in appearance and heart.

Metaphor is also adopted in this poem. In the line "while the sands o' life shall run", poet's life is just like the sand that is easily gone but love is not temporary. An oath of eternal love is implicitly taken to show his faithfulness. In addition, repetition and alliteration are also applied by the poet. The word "luve" is used for 7 times in this short poem, "till a' the seas gang dry" for two times and "my dear" for two times to pledge his infinite deep love. And words "luve" "like" and "red" "red" "rose" also strengthen the musical effect of the poem with repetition of their first consonantal sounds.

Hyperbole is another rhetorical device applied in this poem. "Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear, and the rocks melt wi' the sun; I will luve thee still, my dear, while the sands o' life shall run", the impossible thing is depicted here to manifest his faithful and deep love.

4. Conclusion

A Red Red Rose is a precious cultural heritage and spiritual wealth that Burns left to the world. The language of poetry is simple but vivid. It is short but full of deep feelings, emotions and affection. The poem moves millions of people with its smooth and melodious tones, simple words but warm and sincere feelings, making this poem an enduring classic after its publication. Whole poems are natural and beautiful in image, structure, rhetoric and sentence-making. Fresh and simple folk song poetry style doubles its sense of music.

Apart from its natural and sincere imagery, structure, rhetoric and sentence-making, another factor that makes the poem so attractive is the sincere and passionate emotions in it.

This poem is straightforward in language, sincere in feelings, and free from affectation. The poet's feelings, like a clear lake, give the readers a precise glance. Such passionate and fierce expression of love impressed every reader in their heart. In addition, this poem has no utilitarian appeal for love. In today's society, it also has a function of cleansing our soul. In the countryside Burns sings the beauty of love, simple and vivid. Compared with the didactic heroic couplets and melancholy style of sentimentalists in the literary trend of 18th century's neoclassicism, Burns' poems are full of distinctive national and local characteristics, giving readers a fresh impression. This poem is just like a fresh flower in the dull flowerbed of 18th century's poetry, simple, fragrant and thought-provoking.

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