

Robert Burns and Auld Lang Syne

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Abstract

Robert Burns is a well-known Scottish poet and his work *Auld Lang Syne* prevails all over the world. This essay will first make a brief introduction of Rober Burns and analyse Auld Lang Syne and its meanings and function.

Keywords

Robert Burns; Auld Lang Syne; meanings and functions.

1. 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 Dumfries Cemetery after his death in 1796. His friends helped support his family by subscribing to his published collection of poems.

2. 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.

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 friendships from the poem Auld Lang Syne.

3. Auld Lang Syne

Robert Burns sent a copy of the original song to the Scots Musical Museum with the remark, "The following song, an old song, of the olden times, and which has never been in print, nor even in manuscript until I took it down from an old man." Some of the lyrics were indeed "collected" rather than composed by the poet; the ballad "Old Long Syne" printed in 1711 by James Watson shows considerable similarity in the first verse and the chorus to Burns' later poem, and is almost certainly derived from the same "old song". However, at any rate, Burns' great contribution and re-creation should be widely recognized.

The song begins by posing a rhetorical question: Is it right that old times be forgotten? The answer is generally interpreted as a call to remember long-standing friendships yet the poet didn't give it directly but let readers to think about it. Then the song "we'll take a cup of kindness yet, for auld lang syne calls on friends to propose a toast to remember and value their friendships. Later, friends begin to recall their old time: "run about the braes, and pou'd the gowans fine", which is not only a memory but also a symbol of friendships. They talk about their own rough time as well: "But we've wandered man ya weary foot since auld lang syne. At the last stanza of the poem, friends again lift their cups to drink together to days gone by and their lasting friendships. The whole poem is in a clean and simple style, but its repetition is soul-stirring enough to express sincere feelings.

As we all know, this poem has had a musical score and becomes a widespread song. By now, Auld Lang Syne is traditionally sung at the conclusion of New Year gatherings in Scotland and other English-speaking countries. Besides that, it is very widely used to symbolize other "endings/new beginnings" – including farewells, funerals, graduations, the end of a (non-New Year) party or a Scout gathering and so on. In Scotland and other parts of Britain, in particular, it is associated with celebrations and memorials of Robert Burns.

Additionally, with the huge success of the movie "Waterloo Bridge", the English version of Auld Lang Syne as the theme song of the film has now been accepted by the global people. On top of that, a large number of films and television series' episodes have also used it for background due to its obvious associations of the song and its soothing melody. As a standard in music, Auld Lang Syne has been recorded many times, in every conceivable style, by many artists, both well-known and obscure. In a word, Auld Lang Syne could be sung when old friends get together, new friends drink a cup or say goodbye to their family and friends.

4. Conclusion

As a well-known Scottish national poet, Robert Burns' works are full of Scottish flavor. Readers can easily have a touch of the real life of Scottish farmers in his poems. They are the demonstrations and reflection of his inner voice and feelings. As a farmer, Burns does not need to look for writing material on purpose, because he himself is the source of this theme. Therefore, when he was writing poems with similar themes, he was like a fish in water, which was also the key to his success. His life experience also makes his creation natural, simple and clean, showing the traditional features of Scottish songs such as concise, bright, humorous, straightforward and optimistic. Sometimes, he would choose the choruses of some old songs or one section to improve it. That makes his poems rhythmical and musical.

As a masterpiece of Burns, Auld Lang Syne fully embodies his writing style and thoughts and feelings. It is like a fresh breeze in summer, bringing infinite pleasure to people. And this classic poem will be remembered forever.

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