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Addressing the Bard:

twelve contemporary poets respond to Robert Burns

Learning ideas - Liz Niven and Maureen Farrell



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Introduction

The Scottish Poetry Library has published a new, provocative and exciting anthology of Burns poems, launched in the Year of Homecoming and of Burns's 250th anniversary.

What makes this anthology different is that twelve contemporary poets have been asked to select one of Burns's poems and to respond to it.

The result is an eclectic collection with some unexpected choices and responses that enlighten, challenge and amuse us. All of the response poems provide insight into Burns's original work and some may have a more direct resonance with modern readers.

In addition to the book itself, these supporting resources are being provided on the Learning and Teaching Scotland website. The material has been developed by Liz Niven, poet, writer, and Scots-language educator, and Maureen Farrell, an English teacher and now teacher educator from the University of Glasgow.

It should be noted that the tasks and ideas that follow are by no means an exhaustive list. What has been provided are some starting points – tasks which might prove interesting and challenging or which might spark off other ideas more suited to the context in individual classrooms and schools or for individual pupils. Usually we have addressed the pupils directly when formulating the tasks.

These suggestions are not comprehensive; they are what we might call in Scots, a lowpin-aff point. If anyone is interested in

requesting CPD, they should contact the CPD office in the Faculty of Education at Glasgow University in the first instance.

Do get in touch to let us know what you think, ask questions, make suggestions. This book is intended to stimulate way beyond the 25th of January – Burns is not just for supper!

Liz Niven and Maureen Farrell, 2009



Reading

General:

Ways to use the book

There are several ways to approach *Addressing the Bard*.

You can read the poems in the sequence given and in order, then read the commentaries before you respond to them yourself. Alternatively, you can read the poems without reading the commentary and respond to them before you know what other people have said about them. You might choose to start with the original Burns poem and then look at the modern poet's response. Or you could even read the original Burns poem, then have a go at writing your own poem in response and *then* look at the modern poet's response. Or, if you wish, you could look at the modern poems in the sequence before you look at the original Burns poem and try to determine what the modern poet was responding to.

There is no right or wrong way to interpret a poem. Poets *expect* their readers to respond personally and remember, the poems were not originally written to be part of an exam!

Writers choose to use poetic form because they believe these are the best forms to express what they want to say. Sometimes what they want to say is very clear and obvious. At other times, poets seem to expect their readers to use the poems as starting points and for readers to interpret the poems according to their individual experience or knowledge. Sometimes they may just want you to read the poem and simply enjoy it! You may find that

you are drawn back to certain poems– maybe not immediately, but later in life when you encounter the poem again. Suddenly you may want to peel back the layers to try to get into the poet’s mind to see, experience, and feel what they were seeing, feeling or experiencing.

No matter how you use the book, the important thing is to remember that writers want you to respond personally – even if that response is negative. But they want you to react.

If you have never encountered any of Burns’s poems before or if you have only learned to recite them for a competition, this book provides an unusual and interesting introduction to Burns’s poetry. He is a writer who produces very strong reactions in readers, and the fact that his work has lasted till the present day suggests that the things he chose to write about have a resonance with modern life and are still relevant.

Douglas Gifford's Introduction:

Discussion ideas

Prof. Gifford's introduction raises some interesting issues about the relevance of Burns for modern readers, asking the following questions:

'What has a young farmer, haunted by poverty, anger at the world's injustice, in love with the natural world and the beauty of women, and caught up in the complex and ferocious religious divisions of his time, to offer to teenagers at home with city life and the rich diversities of popular music, television and multi-media?'

- Are all these issues still relevant in the 21st century? Does Burns have anything to offer teenagers nowadays?
- Do we still have world poverty? Does it exist only in the so-called third world or is it present here in the West too? What do you consider to be a state of poverty?
- 'world's injustice': Can you give any current examples of Injustice?
- Do we still have a 'love of the natural world'? How do we show this? In what way does society demonstrate that it still cares about the natural world?

- 'In love with the ...beauty of women': is society still in love with the beauty of women (and men)? In your opinion is this a good thing? How does it make people behave?
- 'Religious divisions of his time': do we still have religious divisions? Consider world faiths such as Muslim, Christian, Judaism or even divisions within faiths e.g. Catholic and Protestant.
- 'Teenagers at home with city life' - do you think teenagers are 'at home with city life'? How many Scots live in rural areas and how many in cities? What is distinctive about city/small town/rural life – positives and negatives? Burns sampled all three: Edinburgh, Dumfries, Ayrshire. Is his poetry mainly relevant to rural readers?
- 'Diversities of music, tv, multi-media' - how do these media present issues such as love, war, revenge, hatred, prejudice? Can you suggest how these issues are presented and discussed in contemporary society?

Poetic forms

Below is a list of some of the terms you will encounter in this poetry book. Some of them relate to the **form** of the poems and some fall into the category of what might be called the 'technical terms' or -- if you are feeling particularly brilliant -- the meta-language, for discussing poetry.

We all know that poets use language to create particular effects – to let us hear the sounds of guns firing or bells ringing for example, so they might use **onomatopoeia** or **alliteration**. But sometimes they want to be more subtle about the way they create the effects. The author's purpose is not to give your English teachers something for you to do, but to make you, the reader (and your brains) do a bit of work to understand *how* they make you see, hear, smell, taste or feel something using only words. If we understand that, then we need a language to let us discuss these effects in class or to write about them in critical evaluations. This is called **figurative** language, **technical** language or **meta-language**. See if you can work out what that last one means by exploring the meaning of the prefix *meta*.

List of terms:

sonnet, dramatic monologue; elegy, mock-elegy; parody; epistle; ballad; satire; epic; allegory; beast fable; irony; Standard Habbie; the Cherry and the Slae; intertextuality; end-stopped; pun; reductive idiom; bard; dialect; slang; vernacular; rhyme; rhythm; register; monologue; orthography; accent; narrative; hyperbole; simile; metaphor; tone; onomatopoeia; alliteration; stanza

Some of you may choose to look up all of these terms at the start and create a glossary of terms to which you can refer. Others may prefer to look first at the poems themselves, analyse the effects you think the writer wants you to experience, and only then try to give them a formal label. Because this poetry is largely Scottish, some of the terms are particular to Scottish poetry and so could be considered as quite specialist.

Who's who and what's what?

Some of Burns's poems are about or mention real people. It will help you understand them if you know who they were. See what you can find out about the following:

p.23 'Epistle to Davie, a Brother Poet': Davie Sillar (hint – start by looking at the notes section at the back of the book)

p.33 'Epistle to a Young Friend': Andrew Aiken

p.46 'Scots wha hae': William Wallace and Robert the Bruce

p.49 'Holy Willie's Prayer': William Fisher; Gavin Hamilton and Robert Aiken are also important here

p.58 'Address of Beelzebub': John, Earl of Breadalbane; also mentioned: McKenzie of Applecross, McDonald of Glengarry, John Hancock, Benjamin Franklin, Lord North, Lord Sackville, Sir William Howe, Sir Henry Clinton (research around 1786. Hint – you'll need to look at both British and American history). Also in

this poem, Herod, Polycrates, Diego D'Almagro and Francisco Pizarro.

The modern poems also make reference to real people and events. In order to 'future-proof' them, readers will need to know who the people are and what the events were that are mentioned. Here are some:

p.9 'From a Mouse': Daphne Broon, also Thomas Gray and Alexander Pope

p.15 'To a Louse': Isaac Rosenberg, Arthur Rimbaud and George Orwell

p.28 'Epistle': Dr Christopher Grieve and Hugh MacDiarmid

p.47 'Aw Jock Tamson's': who was Jock Tamson?

p.52 'Holy Gordon's Prayer': Gordon Brown, David Cameron, George Osborne, David Blunkett, Tom Clarke, David Miliband, Tony Blair, Peter Mandelson, Cherie Blair, George Bush, Cliff Richard, Silvio Berlusconi, Auld John, Bernard Madoff, Geoffrey Robinson, war (which one?), Stark's Park, pensions scheme, Irn Bru . This poem also has biblical references all the way through and, as Wilson says in his commentary, the exact quotations cited have been carefully chosen and 'applied' to the poem.

Close reading of Burns's Poems

There is plenty of material from a range of sources that can lead you through a close reading of Burns's poems. For the purposes of this material we will focus on three: 'Epistle to Davie' (p.23), 'Holy Willie's Prayer'(p.49) and 'Address of Beelzebub' (p.58), and even here this provides only *some* questions on the poem, though these will encompass understanding, analysis and evaluation. We also provide some close reading questions as well as extended activities on 'Tam O'Shanter' (p.64).

'Epistle to Davie'

1. Burns uses the 'Cherrie and the Slae' format for this poem. This is a much more complex form than the Standard Habbie. Why do you think he uses this form for the poem?
2. How would you characterise the tone of this poem? Justify your answer using quotations.
3. What would you say were the themes of this poem? Are these typical of Burns's work? You may wish to refer to other Burns poems to back up your answer.
4. The mood of the lines, 'To lye in kilns and barns at e'en,/When banes are craz'd, and bluid is thin, / Is, doubtless, great distress!' has been described as especially savage. Do you agree? What point is the poet making?
5. Contrast the lines above in stanza 3 with the lines starting, 'Yet *Nature's* charms...' in stanza 4. How is the

social agony of poverty and illness contrasted with the pastoral idyll which is fantasy?

6. What do we learn about how Burns feels about composing poetry in the lines: 'On braes when we please then,/ We'll sit and sowth a tune;/ Syne rhyme till't, we'll time till't/ And sing't when we hae done.'
7. 'The heart ay's the part ay, / That makes us right or wrang.'
Do you think that sentiment is overly simplistic? Give reasons for your answer.
8. Why does Burns change the style of the poem from stanza 9 onwards?
9. The last stanza of the poem really comes to life and Burns strikes his best style. His emotional response is translated into physical descriptions. What exactly is he describing?
10. How does he use classical mythology in the last stanza?

'Holy Willie's Prayer'

This poem is one of Burns's religious satires; others include: 'Epistle to John Goldie in Kilmarnock', 'The Twa Herds' (also called 'The Holy Tulzie'), The Postscript to the 'Epistle to William Simson', 'The Ordination' and 'The Holy Fair'.

Burns took on the religious establishment of Scotland and its excesses. In doing so he took on a worthy adversary which allowed him to develop his own 'creed' and intellectual ideas on the subject. At the time he wrote these poems – he wrote no more of these after 1789 – he was what might be described as a 'low-

flier' in religion, sympathetic to the 18th century's civilising and Commonsense school of philosophy, whereby religion was seen as encouraging people's more liberal social urges. Burns was himself moderate in religion. What he was most opposed to were the more extreme Calvinist positions.

In his religious satires he attacks two of the values he holds most dear in his social poetry: powerful and excessive feeling or enthusiasm in religious matters, and democratic expression, especially with regard to the Patronage Controversy. (You should research this. Look for the Patronage Act which was passed in the early part of the 18th century.) It's interesting to note that Burns's position in this matter **did not** support the Common Man. As he saw it, he was supporting religious tolerance and intellectual freedom. See if you agree with his stance after completing your research on the topic.

Among the things that Burns attacked were:

- the doctrine of original sin
- the idea of total eternal damnation
- the idea of a very real physical Hell
- the central notion of Predestination
- the doctrine of the Elect
- the justification by faith instead of by good works.

Understanding of many of these issues gives major insights in the further study of Scottish Literature as well as in Burns's poetry, so it is worth taking the time to really understand these topics.

1. In the poem *Holy Willie's Prayer*, Burns is concerned with attacking the Calvinistic view of predestination and salvation by predestined grace regardless of good works. He makes the attack by putting it into the mouth of a

strict Calvinist convinced of his predestination to salvation by God's grace. Why is this method so successful?

2. This is a dramatic monologue. Dramatic monologues have been described as 'that cunning kind of poetry in which the burden of interpretation is placed upon the reader'. Do you agree? Why do you think Burns opted for this genre
3. The topic of this poem is mean and sanctimonious, yet it is very funny. How is the humour created and why is that such a clever strategy?
4. In creating Holy Willie, Burns has, with acute perception and economic skill, distilled the qualities of a very dangerous kind of personality into a very brief compass. Why is Willie so dangerous?
5. It is possible to break the poem into 4 'movements'. The first movement consists of the first 5 verses. Describe what Burns is doing in these verses and explain why this section might be called 'Willie's self-adulation'?
6. The next 5 verses, or second movement in the poem, have a different purpose and could be entitled 'Willie's Confession'. What sins has Willie committed and how does he manage to convince himself he's not guilty in these matters?
7. These verses have been described as the most effectively satiric passages of the poem. Do you agree? Justify your answer.
8. Verses 11-15, the third movement, could be sub-titled 'Willie's Curse'. Who is Willie asking God to confound, blast and curse? Does he believe this request is righteous? Why?
9. What is Willie *really* afraid of though? How does Burns cleverly show this? (Look at the association of Willie with basic bodily functions at the end of this section.)

10. The last two sections, or the fourth movement, are the final invocation of the curse. If you were an actor, how would you read the penultimate verse? Why? Would the last verse be read in the same way? Why?
11. What does Willie's reminder to God that He should remember him for 'grace and gear' tell us about Willie's character, underneath his apparently 'elect' status?
12. Finally, comment on the pace, control of tone, and use of language throughout the poem.

6. This poem has been described as one of Burns's most effective satires where he shows himself to be the master of sophisticated ideas. Do you agree? Justify your answer.

'Address of Beelzebub'

1. This poem is also a dramatic monologue but very different from 'Holy Willie's Prayer'. This is a very serious, satirical attack on John, Earl of Breadalbane. What, exactly, is Burns attacking?
2. Comment on the use of block capitals in the poem.
3. Like the previous poem, Burns adopts a persona espousing views dramatically opposite to his own. Why do you think he does this? Do you find it an effective strategy?
4. In this poem Burns does not use the vernacular form but a kind of 'Scottish Augustan' couplet. Find out what this means and comment on its use in the poem.
5. What do we learn in this poem about Burns's knowledge of British politics, British economics and topical British references? How does this sit with the commonly held view of Burns as the 'heaven-taught plowman'?

'Tam o'Shanter'

1. On one level this is a narrative poem based on folk legend associated with Alloway Kirk. There are obvious secular ironies and meanings in this poem. List some of these.
2. Find out what is meant by the term sub-text. Could this poem be read with a sub-text? If so what might that be?
3. In the commentary on page 70, Douglas Gifford highlights the two 'black arches' in the poem, The first is introduced just at the point where Tam has to ride home: 'That hour, o' night's black arch the key-stane', the second 'And win the key-stane of the brig'; Gifford argues that the events that occur between these lines could have an alternative more serious reading than is usually given. Using the title 'The Presbyterian's Nightmare', try to outline the alternative reading of what happens. (To help you, look carefully at the frequent points in the poem where Burns points out the tricks that drink can play on the mind.)
4. What is the purpose of these black arches in the poem?
5. What is the moral at the end of the poem?

We are now going to move from close reading of the texts to something called Directed Activities Related to Texts or DARTs.

Good readers use what they know about language and the world to interact with what they are reading. This helps them to make the words on the page meaningful. Classroom activities that encourage interaction with the text helps improve reading comprehension and makes critical readers. DARTs activities can be done individually or in groups. There are two kinds of DARTs activities: **reconstruction activities**, where readers are asked to reconstruct a text or diagram (using modified texts) and **analysis activities**, where readers are asked to find and categorise information by marking or labelling a text or diagram or by ‘manipulating’ a text, for example turning a poem into a drama script.

Reconstruction activities include: text completion (cloze procedure); diagram completion; table completion; sequencing activities; classifying segments of a passage according to previously agreed categories; prediction exercises.

Analysis activities include: (using the original text) underlining; labelling; segmenting; diagrammatic representation; tabular representation; modifying the original text.

DARTS (Directed Activities Related to Texts) activities for ‘Tam o’Shanter’

- a) This poem really lends itself to either a graphic novel or comic version. In groups, divide up the poem and generate a storyboard for either a graphic novel or a comic version. Before you do this you will need to research the features of a graphic novel or comic. As a starting point you should look at

www.ltscotland.org.uk/literacy/findresources/graphicnovels/section/intro.asp

and

www.ltscotland.org.uk/literacy/findresources/graphicnovels/section/readingcomics.asp

You will need to decide which medium suits the poem best and then you will need to decide what to include and how. Will you include speech bubbles or will you use captions below the pictures? (A)

- b) The last six lines of the poem might suggest *why* Burns wrote the poem. He seems to be warning of the dangers of drink and women. Could this be used in a health and wellbeing advertising campaign in the present day? Would this be the 18th century version of ‘Dinnae drink an’ drive’? Design the advertising campaign linked to this poem. (A)
- c) Convert the poem into a drama script. (A)
- d) Write an alternative ending for the poem from line 189 ‘Weel done, Cutty-sark!’ You can do this either individually or as a collaborative writing project. You should also consider whether you want to do this in verse, in Scots verse or in prose – either Scots or English. (R)

Other imaginative tasks based on *Tam o'Shanter*

- Write the conversation Tam had with Kate (his wife) before he went out.
- Why is Alloway's kirk described as haunted? Write the ghost story that might explain this.
- Line 49 of the poem refers to the tales Souter Johnnie told. Either write one of these stories or prepare the story and tell it orally to your group or class. (You could also record it and create a storyboard for the tale and use your recording for a voice-over.)
- Some of you may be familiar with Charles Schultz's *Peanuts* cartoon in which Charlie Brown always started his imaginative essays with 'It was a dark and stormy night.' This really was the opening phrase of a novel called *Paul Clifford* (1830) by the Victorian novelist Edward George Earl Bulwer-Lytton. Although best known for *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), which has been made into a movie three times, and for coining the expression 'the pen is mightier than the sword' as well as 'the great unwashed' and 'the almighty dollar', Bulwer-Lytton opened *Paul Clifford* with the immortal words that Snoopy plagiarized for years, 'It was a dark and stormy night'. This phrase has generated an international literary parody contest, honouring the memory (if not the reputation) of Bulwer-Lytton. The goal of the contest is simple: entrants are challenged to submit bad opening sentences to imaginary novels.. If you go on to the website you can read some of the winning entries: www.bulwer-lytton.com/ See whether you can write a memorably bad opening sentence for a novel or poem of your own.
- How important do you think the setting is to the success of 'Tam O'Shanter'? Would the poem work if it was **not** a dark and stormy night?
- In line 84 we are told that Tam was 'crooning o'er some auld Scots sonnet'. What poem (or song) do you think he was crooning? Can you write one for him?
- Once he crosses the ford, Tam finds himself in a creepy area where there are lots of rumours of 'murder'd bairns' and we are told 'Mungo's mither hange'd hersel'. Why do you think Burns uses such a setting? Why doesn't he tell the full story? Imagine you come across a collection of short ghost stories linked to the region. Write the account of one of these stories.
- Burns slips between beautiful Standard English at lines 59-66 for example, and Scots in the poem. Do you think this is a deliberate choice? If so why? What point is he trying to make to the reader?

- Write either Tam's storybook or Tam's diary; or write Tam's version of the story to his wife.
- Other writers, including Matthew Fitt, have written poems called *Kate O'Shanter's Tale*. You may wish to try and track these down or you may wish to try writing your own version. In the poem you could show what Kate's life was like with Tam. You could also give the account of Tam's adventures as Kate saw and experienced it. Would their perspectives be the same? Would Kate's poem be as funny or engaging? Before you start, it might be a good idea to do some research on the role of women in Scotland in the 18th century. Compare it with the role of women in the 21st century. How far have we come?

See the Scottish Poetry Library website for more suggestions.



Language

The Scots language

- 7th century: a northern form of Scots is established in the south of Scotland
- Gaelic had arrived from Ireland and was spoken in Scotland.
- 11th century: the King of Scots ruled over most of mainland Scotland with Gaelic as the main language.
- From 11th century Inglis was spreading into the east and south west of the country especially for trade in the new burghs.
- Scots made up of Anglo-Saxon and loan words from French, Dutch and Scandinavian.
- Early 16th century: Scots becoming the main national language in Scotland while English was developing in England as the main national language.
- Gaelic by now mainly confined to western and northern areas and the Western Isles.
- Scots language and Scotland were European, seen as different from English and England.

Why did Scots not remain the state language of Scotland?

- The Geneva Bible was translated from Latin into English and not into Scots.
- 1603: King James VI of Scotland became King James I of Britain. The King took his court to London after this Union of the Crowns and thus much of the literary life transferred too.
- 1707: the Union of the Parliaments of Scotland and England led to English, not Scots, becoming the language of government and of formal society. But most ordinary Scottish people continued to speak Scots.
- 18th century: a standardised written form of English developed
- 19th century: Standard English fully formed. Scots was written less and less, and many people wanted to speak and write in English, especially in business and public events.

Dialects of Scots

- The Scots language has many dialects. <http://www.scots-online.org/grammar/pronunci.htm>
- The Islands of Shetland and Orkney in the far north, have been very influenced by Norse language.
- Mainland Scotland can be divided into three main dialect areas: Northern, Central and Southern.
- The Scottish Language Dictionaries divides these divisions into further areas: Central divides into East Central which is north and south of the Forth; West Central is Glasgow and its surrounding area; and South-West is mostly Dumfries and Galloway. Southern is the label for the Borders area.
- A dialect of Scots is also spoken in Northern Ireland. There it's often called Ulster Scots and it arrived there because many Scots settled in Ireland, especially in the 17th century.

Discussion Point: Do you think Scots as well as English should be used in business? Should it be spoken at the Scottish Parliament? Should it be studied more at school? What dae you think about the idea o sittin yer exams in Scots?

Neologisms

Scots language also continues to grow and new words are added. Where do new words come from?

- Visitors to a country.
- Invaders of a country.
- Television & other media.
- Royal marriages.
- New inventions.

Can you list any new words you have heard recently? In what areas has Scots added new vocabulary?

Scots and slang

Sometimes people are confused about the difference between Scots and slang. Most Scots words have been used for hundreds of years but many slang words are very recent, time-limited and often used in the English of other countries such as Australia or America.

- What slang words do you know?
- Make a list of words you think might be slang.
- Check them in a Scots dictionary and find out if they are actually Scots words.

Scots does have slang words too. And rhyming slang. If somebody is 'corn beef', what does it mean? Can you list any Scots slang words or phrases?

Like all living languages, Scots loses words from its vocabulary. Which Scots words do you know that you use less often than say, your grannies or grampas. Or even your parents?

Literature in Scots

For centuries, Scottish writers have written some of their best novels and plays and poems in Scots. Every so often, a renaissance in Scots writing occurs. Here are just a few examples.

- 14th century: Barbour's *Bruce*.
- 15th century: Robert Henryson, William Dunbar and Gavin Douglas
- 18th century: Allan Ramsay, Robert Fergusson, Robert Burns
- 20th century: Hugh MacDiarmid, Robert Garioch, Sydney Goodsir Smith, Violet Jacob, Marion Angus, Jessie Kesson

Burns's use of Scots

Burns poems are written in 18th-century Lowland Scots. His childhood was spent in Ayrshire in a predominantly rural world and his adulthood in Dumfries was amongst a farming community.

Although free to think, speak and sing in Scots, his written work often contained English, particularly for so-called 'loftier' thoughts. Even a short section of 'Tam o' Shanter' shifts into standard English with one of his best kent quotes, 'pleasures are like poppies spread,/You seize the flower, its bloom is shed'. His publishers wanted him to write in English. Then the books would have a much bigger market because more customers would buy English books.

Often, Burns combines Scots and English words in the same poem. Sometimes, he spells a word in English but means it to be pronounced in Scots. We know this because of the end rhymes in some poems.

- 'To a Louse': 'O Jenny dinna toss your head/An set your beauties a abroad/Ye little ken what cursed speed.'
- 'Poor Mailie's Elegy': 'she ran wi speed... than Maillie dead'
- 'Mary Morrison': 'wha for thy sake wad gladly die!...whase only faute is loving thee!'

Robert Burns preferred writing in Scots and knew his work was better in his own first language.

In a letter to George Thomson, his publisher, he complained, 'These English songs gravel me to death'.

He was also aware of the connection between his ideas and his Scots language: 'I have not that command of the language that I have of my native tongue. In fact, I think my ideas are more barren in English than in Scottish.'

Much of Burns's vocabulary was connected to the land: the weather, farming, flowers and fauna. Mibbe, for city dwellers, such vocabulary isnae relevant and isnae kent – thir's nae kye in Sauchiehaugh Street. And, increasingly, Scots vocabulary has lost many of its land-related words as people shift to cities and towns and occupations unconnected with the land. Even the vocabulary of the farming community has changed alongside changes in technology.

For all these reasons, and more, Burns's 18th century Scots can seem unfamiliar to 21st century readers. However, the music and rhythms of Burns's Scots is still the sound of modern Scots speech.

Scrivein or writin in Scots

As Douglas Gifford's states in his introduction, *there is no single standard of Scots in the modern poems.*

- Most of us are not taught to write in Scots at school, so many teachers and pupils are not confident about writing in Scots.
- The nearest Scotland came to a standard form was in the 16th century when many writers, royalty and politicians wrote in Scots.
- There are many excellent Scots dictionaries and Thesaurus which reflect the speech of various parts of the country. The dictionaries supply the main spelling variations.
- There is no standard form as yet. There are many dialect variations.
- Decide upon your spelling and keep it consistent.
- Start by asking yourself, 'What Scots do I have?' You'll be surprised how much! Use this language and grammar to start with.
- Make up your own word bank or glossary. Reading poetry, prose, novels and drama will help to build up your word bank.
- Look at the choices of Scots in *Addressing the Bard*.
- Translate some of the Scot poems in *Addressing the Bard*. Discuss whether the poem is as effective. Which do you prefer?

Don't worry about writing every single word in Scots. Because Scots and English are both Germanic, they are very similar and

often share words in 20th-century Scots. A piece of writing might be mainly in English with some Scots words scattered through it. Words like *wee*, *feart*, *weans* etc can sit comfortably in an otherwise English text but give the writing a Scottish accent.

- Many opportunities arise for writing in Scots in the exam curriculum.
- Where will our next Rabbin Burns come fae if we dinna learn tae write in Scots?

The Gaelic language

There is one poem in *Addressing the Bard* which is written in Gaelic. Meg Bateman has written her response to 'Poor Maillie's Elegy' in Scots Gaelic.

Scots Gaelic arrived in Scotland around the 4/5th century. It came from Ireland and was spoken across the Highlands and Islands. It was also spoken in some parts of Galloway until the 16th century, because Galloway was under the leadership of the Lords of the Isles. Gaelic was banned in Scotland after the Jacobite Rebellion in 1745.

Irish Gaelic and Scots Gaelic are related languages but they have developed differently. There are approximately 60,000 Gaelic speakers in Scotland and many of them are learners. That is, they were not brought up to speak Gaelic at home.

- Look at the **Language Tree**
- Notice the branch which leads to Gaelic.
- Which other languages are on the Celtic branch?

A language tree



Writing

Discursive essays

As well as lending themselves to critical evaluations, the poems in this anthology also provide very interesting contexts for discursive essays, either in some of the commentaries provided by the poets or in the subject matter of the poems themselves.

Here are a few suggestions.

- a) In 'From a Mouse' Liz Lochhead provides a response, from the mouse, to Burns's poem 'To a Mouse'. In verse 3 the mouse comments that it's adored -- on paper -- and notes that until Lochhead [or anyone reading the poem] encountered Burns's poetry, she had thought 'poetry was mince'. Using the title 'Poetry was/is mince', write an essay exploring the ideas suggested by that phrase. This can be an imaginative, personal or discursive essay -- according to your own interpretation.
- b) Meg Bateman's commentary for her poem 'Dobhran Marbh/Dead Otter' moves from discussion about Burns's poem 'Poor Mailie's Elegy' and how she responded to it in her poem, to a much broader discussion about the commonality Burns felt for all forms of life. She notes that, "this commonality... is increasingly borne out by modern science, which shows we are more, not less, like other forms of life". She introduces the idea of speech no longer being a uniquely human attribute, and lists how much genetic material humans have in common with a range of animals. She concludes by commenting that we

know that all forms of life are interrelated. Using her last sentence: 'The shared genome of life is vastly poetic', write an essay exploring some of the concepts introduced by Bateman.

- c) In several of the poems the authors make comment about the place of Scots language. For example, in stanza 7 of W. N. Herbert's poem 'Epistle' he comments, 'Thi anely time that Scots gets read / is when thi year lukes nearly dead - / it seems tae need extremes', and in his commentary he says that 'for the rest of the year/decade Scots is consigned to its kennel of outmoded incomprehensibility'.

Seamus Heaney's poem 'A Birl for Burns' also comments on the language, stating in stanza 6 that Burns's language is 'going, gone'.

Do you agree with these sentiments? How does this make you feel about Scots language? Write an essay about the place of Scots language in your (or other Scots') lives currently.

- d) In the poem 'Epistle' W. N. Herbert writes, 'Burns claims he disnae ken whit's prose and whit's poetry'. Do you? Write an essay answering the question, What is a poem? (Before you do this, read Robert Crawford's commentary on p. 36. He finishes with the sentence, 'A poem is an open secret.' Do you agree with his definition?)
- e) In his commentary on page 32, W. N. Herbert remarks that he finds it hard to understand why people don't understand Burns's poetry. Then he says, 'And then I

remember we don't all own or choose to wear our poetry socks.' Write an essay explaining what 'wearing your poetry socks' would do for you. (You might also want to consider whether Herbert's intention in using this expression was to play on the slang expression 'poetry sucks'.)

- f) Carol Ann Duffy describes her poem 'Sung' as a 'fractured sonnet' which is an 'elegy for dead lovers' and in the poem describes 'those who would gladly die for love lang deid'. Write an essay considering who or what you might be willing to die for.
- g) One of the poems included in the collection is 'Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn'. This is a famous 'martial' poem. It is a poem designed to encourage those fighting to show bravery and reach a point where they are willing to die for their country or for a cause, or at least for something they believe in. Read Janet Paisley's commentary on her poem 'Aw Jock Tamson's' on p. 48. She says that her poem 'borrows from the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath, when Bruce was king. It's inspiring. Freedom, it says, is more valuable than life, and so it's worth dying for.' She goes on to say that she's had an experience like that; though she didn't have to fight an army, it required all her courage.

Do you think there are major causes that we need to fight for in Scotland in the present day? Write an essay on one or more.

Creative Writing

Writing Poetry:

You can use poems in the book as models for writing your own poems. You might be inspired by a poem's **content** or by the **form** it's written in.

Themes

- Friendship: 'Fiere', 'Epistle to Davie'
- Love: 'A Red Red Rose', 'Mary Morrison', 'John Anderson'
- Loss/death of a pet: 'Poor Mailie's Elegy'
- Politics: 'Holy Willie's Prayer', 'Holy Gordon's Prayer'
- Supernatural: 'Tam o' Shanter'
- Poverty: 'Aw Jock Tamson's'
- Environmental issues: 'Beelzebub Resurfaces'

Love poem

Think of someone you care about a great deal.

- For how **long** will you love? What's the most unlikely thing you can think of?
- This could be serious or humorous, e.g. 'A wull luve ye till Dumbarton win the World Cup', or 'A wull luve ye till A grow anither neb'.
- What's yer luve like? A June melodie? Or a heaped plate o steamin spaghetti bolognese? What can ye compare it to?

- Mibbe ye want tae write fae the opposite perspective. Are you the wan who's been loved? Bit ye dinna fancy the person back?
- Write the opposite o a luve poem, e.g. ' A widna fancy you even if ye wir loadit wi a thoosan kilo o bling'. Or, 'yer heid's mince if ye think A'd luik at you. Awa an wise up, man, get real'.

Forms

Most of the contemporary poets refer, in their commentary, to their choice of form and the reason for selecting it or rejecting that of Burns.

Meg Bateman states that she 'didn't want to risk parodying Burns by mimicking his metre or wit' and that she 'needed a much quieter place'.

Liz Lothead writes her 'wee parody' in 'a very imperfect version of Burns Stanza...my lines tend to be two syllables, or an extra stress, too long'.

Forms to try:

- Monologue
- Standard Habbie, Robert Burns' most popular choice
- Free verse
- Ballad form
- End-rhyming
- Syllabic

Standard Habbie

As Robyn Marsack describes this form, it 'lets the line out on a long lead then pulls it back in to make a point, heightened by rhyme or near-rhyme', while Seamus Heaney describes it as 'tight and trig'.

Models in *Addressing the Bard* are 'Holy Willie's Prayer', 'Holy Gordon's Prayer', 'A Birl for Burns', 'Poor Mailie's Elegy', 'To a Louse', 'To a Mouse'.

Write a poem in Standard Habbie form.

- Choose a subject or character or theme which lends itself to plenty of description, perhaps a narrative of some sort.
- Was there a famous person living locally or an incident you could recount about your local town? Mibbe ye'd like tae change the facts a wee bit? A whit-if poem?
- Set up the real facts or/and descriptions in the first three or four Habbie stanzas then imagine what might have been in another three or four stanzas.
- Wi yer imaginarie scenario, ye micht write in Scots, an mak the maist o usin a when o vigorous an onomatopoeiac vocabulary.

Standard Habbie tips

- every stanza has 6 lines
- four lines have 8 syllables
- lines 4 and 6 are always shorter - 4 or 5 syllables.

- rhyme scheme always aaabab
- However, as you can see from *Addressing the Bard's* contemporary poets, you, as a poet, can bend the rules, make up new ones and explore the form in your own way. James Roberston decides to use another famous Scottish poetic form - the ballad.

Voice

Write your poem in a voice. You might decide to write in the voice of a character's response to one of the poems.

- 'To a Louse' - Fae a Louse. What would the Louse have tae say tae Burns or tae Tim Turnbull who asks the Louse, *Are you surprised?* The Louse might reply, *Me surprist? Naw, it's jist whit A expectit.*
- 'Epistle to Davie' - Davie's reply.
- 'Address of Beelzebub' - reply tae the devil. *Are ye fair delichtit at the stooshie ye've caused?*

Scots sound poems

Tim Turnbull describes the Scots of Burns as *cacophonous - squattle, sprattle, grozet, droddum.*

- Make a list poem of Scots words to describe something or somebody
- Use a Scots Thesaurus for good word banks
- Consider alliteration, onomatopoeia, syllabic counts, rhymes and rhythms

Writing monologues

Write an all-class series of monologues. These could be in verse or prose.

- Decide on a location and situation where there are several people. Somewhere with braw potential for a stooshie or incident.
- A stramash occurs and is witnessed by everyone present.
- For example, everyone is at a wedding ceilidh. Suddenly, the music is interrupted by the police arriving to arrest the fiddler.
- Each character recounts events from their point of view. *Weel, ye'll niver guess whit happent.*
- Another example might be a conflict of some sort and everyone has an opinion on how it should be resolved. An incident in a street, or a shop, or at a Tourist Information Office.
- Choose characters. For example, imagine all the guests who might be at a wedding ceilidh. Some might be related to, or a friend of, or even a partner in crime of the fiddler!

Discuss all the possible characters, make them as varied as possible, put the names in a bunnet, enough for everyone in the class, and draw out your character.

Now write your monologue.

When the finished pieces are read out, there will be a coherence to the series. Individual pupils might want to continue a linked series of their own.

Some monologue tips

- choose your voice carefully. Can you hear this person speak?
- imagine an audience. Who are you talking to? The police? A courtroom?
- In monologues, people often use hesitation, interruption, pauses, repetitions,
- reveal something about your character through the poem. Are you biased in favour of the accused? Have you a deep secret of your own? Are you prejudiced against someone? Is it all too much for you, a wee grannie mindin yer ain business?

Writing an epistle

W.N.Herbert states in *Addressing the Bard*, p. 32., 'No one writes letters anymore'. Is this true? Do you write letters?

'Epistle to a Young Friend', 'Epistle to Davie' and Herbert's own 'Epistle', are written to praise or criticize particular people.

Choose somebody to whom you'd like to write an Epistle. It might be written from genuine affection for someone or something, or, as Herbert does, to condemn or criticize an attitude or a particular person.

Choose a different sort of letter

Nowadays people are more likely to communicate by:

- Text messages
- email
- twitter
- Facebook
- YouTube
- MySpace
- Gmail

What would Burns have to say about all these methods of communicating? Which of them might he use?

- look through *Addressing the Bard* and choose a poem
- pick a form of communication from the above list
- express the viewpoint, paint the picture, say what Burns was saying in this contemporary form.

Some examples

- YouTube for 'Tam o' Shanter': draw images and write wee captions in Scots for each stanza.
- Or, if you go to the following link on the Learning and Teaching Scotland website, you will find 'Tam o' Shanter' material based on *Kar2ouche* Immersive Education's platform for computer-based learning programmes that support the teaching of literacy, creative writing, history, ICT and PSD. This will help you with this task and even give you the tools to animate the poem if you want to.

<http://www.immersiveeducation.com/pdf/tsp/tamoshanter.pdf>

- Twitter: in 140 characters retell the story, in Scots, of 'To a Louse'.
- Gmail: write a series of messages between Burns and a friend, telling how poor Mailie's deid.

Friends Reunited

Burns is back, looking for his pals, poet-colleagues. Choose one of the contemporary poets from *Addressing the Bard* and imagine their conversation.

Debates:

Traditional parliamentary debate

The Motion: *That Robert Burns poetry is relevant to contemporary teenagers.* Establish people in the class who will speak against the Motion, i.e. *that Robert Burns is no longer relevant to contemporary teenagers.*

Organise your speeches and conduct a debate. At the end of the discussion take a vote to see if the Motion is carried, i.e. *is it agreed by the majority that Burns poetry is still relevant?*

Balloon debate

Your class might prefer to conduct a balloon debate. The object of this sort of debate is to allow characters to justify their existence, and if they fail to do so, they are dropped one by one from the balloon until a winner emerges.

You could select some characters from Burns's poems and give them a voice to debate. Select some characters who could justify their relevance to modern society. Would Mary Morrison be able to speak? She was loved so well by Burns. Would the endangered mouse be a strong candidate to remain relevant? A symbol of environmental chaos? Perhaps Holy Willie still has a place in our world? Tam o' Shanter? He's well-loved across the globe after all.

Resource: *Turnstones Book 1: an English Course for Scotland.* This book has examples of various sorts of debates and how to conduct them.



Resources

Listening

There are marvellous resources available via the internet to help with the study of Burns. In particular you can hear Burns poetry being read or sung at a number of places. Here are some to get you started:

The 250th Anniversary Burns site

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/robertburns>

BBC Radio Scotland Burns archive

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/robertburns/works/list/readers>

The Bard of Caledonia <http://www.robertburns.plus.com>

The Songs of Robert Burns <http://andymstewart.com/burns.htm>

The Auld Lang Syne Concert Celtic Connections

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/music/celticconnections/
2009/auld_lang_syne](http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/music/celticconnections/2009/auld_lang_syne)

You Tube and Burns Songs

[http://www.youtube.com/results?search_type=search_pl
aylists&search_query=Burns+songs&uni=1](http://www.youtube.com/results?search_type=search_playlist&search_query=Burns+songs&uni=1)

The Poetry Archive for contemporary poets

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/home.do>

Poetry

Writing Scotland

http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/arts/writingscotland/writers/robert_burns/

The National Library of Scotland

<http://www.nls.uk/burns/>

Learning and Teaching Scotland

<http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/scotlandsculture/robertburns>

BBC Series *Writing Scotland* by Carl MacDougal

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/arts/writingscotland>

The Scottish Poetry Library: for information about contemporary poets

http://www.spl.org.uk/poets_a-z/

for education resources

<http://www.spl.org.uk/education>

Language

The SCOTS online resource <http://www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk>

The Scottish Language Dictionaries

<http://www.scotsdictionaries.org.uk>

Scots language resource centre

<http://www.scotslanguage.com>

Itchy Coo Publishers

www.itchy-coo.com

Channel 4 Education: Haud Yer Tongue & Teacher Notes

<http://www.4learning.co.uk/support/programmenotes/netnotes/sersec/sersecid171.htm>

The Kist/A Chist

http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/aboutlts/resources/publications/pri mary/thekist_a_chistanthology.asp

Association for Scottish Literary Studies

<http://www.asls.gla.ac.uk>

The Bottle Imp e-zine

<http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/SWE/TBI/>

Gaelic organisations

<http://www.bord-na-gaidhlig.org.uk/about-gaelic>

Directory of Gaelic sites

<http://www.rampantscotland.com/gaelic.htm>

Education in Scots

In the 1990's the National Guidelines for Education supported the inclusion of Scottish language in the English and Environmental Studies 5-14 documents.

Curriculum for Excellence states:

- The languages of Scotland will include the languages which children and young people bring to the classroom.
- Scotland has a rich diversity of languages, including Scots...

I develop and extend my literacy skills when I have opportunities to:

- communicate, collaborate and build relationships
- reflect on and explain my literacy and thinking skills, using feedback to help me improve and sensitively provide useful feedback for others
- engage with and create a wide range of texts **1** in different media, taking advantage of the opportunities offered by ICT
- develop my understanding of what is special, vibrant and valuable about my own and other cultures and their languages
- explore the richness and diversity of language **2**, how it can affect me, and the wide range of ways in which I and others can be creative

- extend and enrich my vocabulary through listening, talking, watching and reading.

In developing my English language skills:

- I engage with a wide range of texts and am developing an appreciation of the richness and breadth of Scotland's literary and linguistic heritage
- I enjoy exploring and discussing word patterns and text structures.

- (1) Texts are defined in the principles and practice paper. They will include texts which are relevant to all areas of learning, and examples of writing by Scottish authors which relate to the history, heritage and culture of Scotland. They may also include writing in Scots, and Gaelic in translation.
- (2) The languages of Scotland will include the languages which children and young people bring to the classroom and other settings.

What about Scots and Scottish texts?

- The languages, dialects and literature of Scotland provide a rich resource for children and young people to learn about Scotland's culture, identity and language. Through engaging with a wide range of texts they will develop an appreciation of Scotland's vibrant literary and linguistic heritage and its indigenous languages and dialects. This principle suffuses the experiences and outcomes and it is expected that practitioners will build upon the diversity of

language represented within the communities of Scotland, valuing the languages which children and young people bring to school.

Literacy and English, Principles and Practice
<http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/curriculumforexcellence>

Advanced Higher Language

This exam paper includes optional questions about Scottish and English language. You might find it interesting to read through the past papers and find out about ways in which Scots can be studied and explored.

Some examples of the Topics offered are: The use of Scots in contemporary literature, the Historical development of English or Scots, Varieties of English or Scots.

In this paper students are asked to discuss the history of Scots, how it has developed over the years and dialect variations. Contemporary texts are provided for linguistic analysis and questions focus on issues of spelling, vocabulary, grammar and idiomatic speech.

Scots Teaching And Research Network:

<http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/www/english/comet/starn.htm>

Scots language in education in Scotland: www.mercator-education.org

Scottish Education: beyond devolution edited by T.G.K. Bryce & W.M. Hume (Edinburgh: EUP, 2008)

Scots Language: its place in education edited by Liz Niven & Robin Jackson (Dundee: Northern College, 1998)

Some useful books:

Robert Burns

A night out with Robert Burns : the greatest poems arranged by Andrew O'Hagan.
(Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008)

The Best Laid Schemes – selected poetry & prose of Robert Burns edited by Robert Crawford & Christopher MacLachlan
(Edinburgh: Polygon, 2009)

Alan Bold, *The Burns Companion* (London: Macmillan, 1991)

Robert Crawford, *The Bard – Robert Burns, a biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009)

Thomas Crawford, *Burns : a study of the poems and songs*
(Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994)

Donald Smith, *God, the Poet & the Devil – Robert Burns and religion* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2008)

Scottish poetry anthologies

An Tuil an anthology of 20th-century Scottish Gaelic verse edited by Ronald Black (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1999) – dual language

100 Favourite Scottish Poems edited by Stewart Conn
(Edinburgh: Luath/SPL, 2006)

Scotlands – poets and the nation edited by Douglas Gifford & Alan Riach (Manchester/Edinburgh: Carcanet/SPL, 2004)

100 Favourite Scottish Poems to Read Aloud edited by Gordon Jarvie (Edinburgh: Luath, 2007)

The Thing that Mattered Most – Scottish poems for children
edited by Julie Johnstone (Edinburgh: SPL/Black & White, 2006)

Scottish literature

The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature (3 vols) edited by Ian Brown, Thomas Clancy, Susan Manning & Murray Pittock
(Edinburgh: EUP, 2007)

Robert Crawford, *Scotland's Books* (London: Penguin, 2007)

Scottish Literature in English and Scots edited by Douglas Gifford, Sarah Dunnigan & Alan MacGillivray (Edinburgh: EUP, 2002)

A History of Scottish Women's Writing edited by Douglas Gifford & Dorothy MacMillan (Edinburgh: EUP, 1997)

Carl MacDougall, *Writing Scotland* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004)