



**READING 3** Evaluate the changes in sound and form in poetry across literary time periods.  
**RC-12(A)** Reflect on understanding to monitor comprehension.

# To a Mouse To a Louse

Poetry by Robert Burns

### Meet the Author

## Robert Burns 1759–1796

A handsome and charismatic figure, Robert Burns achieved considerable fame during his lifetime. After his death, he was elevated to the status of national hero. His unparalleled ability to speak for his people, along with the simple beauty of his verse, helped make him Scotland's "favorite son."

**Childhood Hardship** Born in the village of Alloway to an unsuccessful tenant farmer, Burns endured extreme poverty and hard labor as a child. This experience left him in poor health and fueled his hatred of Scotland's rigid class system. Though poor, Burns's father managed to provide his son with something of an education. Burns showed an early flair and passion for literature. One of the works that especially fired his imagination was the 15th-century Scottish poem "Wallace." The poem, Burns later wrote, "poured a Scottish prejudice into my veins, which will boil along there till the floodgates of life shut in natural rest."

His discovery of this and other works written in a Scottish vernacular inspired Burns to use the Scots dialect, spoken primarily by the country's peasant class.

**Charming Rebel** After his father's death in 1784, Burns, along with his

brother, struggled to farm independently. Burns became involved with a servant girl at the farm, the first of several liaisons that resulted in illegitimate offspring. In 1786, he fell in love with Jean Armour, but her father, disturbed by Burns's radical ideas and personal behavior, sent Armour away. Hurt and incensed, Burns resolved to emigrate to Jamaica. To raise the necessary money, he published *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786), a collection that showed his love for Scottish peasant life. Its immense success induced Burns to move to Edinburgh, where he captivated the city's literary society with his keen wit, rough-hewn charm, and controversial views on class and religion.

**Scotland's Greatest Songwriter** In Edinburgh, Burns began to compile several volumes of Scottish folk songs. Collecting, adapting, and writing songs engaged him for the rest of his life. In his later years, Burns finally married Jean Armour and began working as a tax collector while still maintaining a farm. The arduous farm work undermined Burns's already weak constitution. At age 37, Burns contracted rheumatic fever and died soon after.

### Author Online

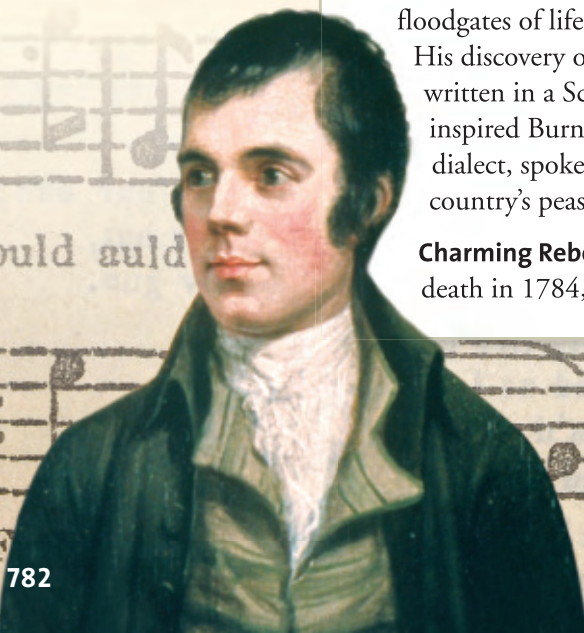
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### DID YOU KNOW?

Robert Burns...

- composed "Auld Lang Syne" to an old Scottish melody.
- alienated many by supporting the French Revolution.



## LITERARY ANALYSIS: DIALECT

**Dialect** is the distinct form of a language spoken in one geographic area or by a particular group. Writers use dialect for specific reasons, such as establishing setting or providing local flavor. In reaction to many in Scottish society and letters who were beginning to favor standard, or British, English, Burns chose to write in Scots, a northern dialect of English spoken primarily by Scottish peasants. The following lines in the Scots dialect contain a few words foreign to most readers' ears, yet you can still discern Burns's general meaning:

*I doubt na, whyles, but thou may thieve;  
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!*

Inspired by earlier Scottish poets, Burns found that using dialect enabled him to convey both the speech and the spirit of those who made up much of Scotland's working class. This dedication to natural speech is one reason why Burns inspired later romantic poets such as William Wordsworth.

## READING STRATEGY: CLARIFY MEANING

When reading a poem written in dialect, it is important to **clarify meaning** as you read. The following strategies can help you understand difficult passages in Burns's poems:

- Some words are completely unique to a dialect; use the **side notes** to learn their definitions.
- Use **context clues** to help you understand what the poet is saying or describing.
- Burns uses apostrophes to indicate the rhythm of spoken Scots; **reading the poem aloud** can help you better understand what Burns means.

Apply these strategies as you read the dialect in Burns's poems. Use a chart like the one shown to try to **paraphrase**, or restate in your own words, any difficult passages you encounter.

"To a Mouse"	
Excerpt	Paraphrase
"Thou need na start awa sae hasty, / Wi' bickering brattle!"	You don't need to run away with such a hurried scamper!



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

## When do LITTLE THINGS mean a lot?

Too often we are so caught up in the bustle of our lives that we lose sight of what's important. The sensational and extraordinary can always grab our attention, but what about the more mundane things that make up most of our lives? In the poems that follow, Burns conveys the valuable insights he gained from examining the commonplace.

**QUICKWRITE** Think of an instance when you gained a new perspective on something or someone you encounter every day. Why did this ordinary subject appear different to you? What did you think at the time? Write a paragraph or two in which you describe this experience.



# TO A MOUSE *On Turning Her up in Her Nest with the Plough, November, 1785*

**Robert Burns**

Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous beastie,  
O, what panic's in thy breastie!  
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,  
Wi' bickering brattle!  
5 I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee,  
Wi' murd'ring pattle! **A**

I'm truly sorry Man's dominion  
Has broken Nature's social union,  
An' justifies that ill opinion,  
10 Which makes thee startle,  
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,  
An' fellow-mortal!

I doubt na, whyles, but thou mayst thieve;  
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!  
15 A daimen-icker in a thrave  
'S a sma' request:  
I'll get a blessin wi' the lave,  
An' never miss 't!

Thy wee-bit housie, too, in ruin!  
20 It's silly wa's the win's are strewin!  
An' naething, now, to big a new ane,  
O' foggage green!  
An' bleak December's winds ensuin,  
Baith snell an' keen!

**1 sleeket:** sleek; **cowran:** cowering.

**4 bickering brattle:** hurried scamper.

**5 laith:** loath; reluctant.

**6 pattle:** paddle-shaped staff used to scrape a plow.

## **A DIALECT**

Reread lines 1–6. What does the dialect in this stanza help to characterize about the speaker?

**13 whyles:** sometimes.

**14 maun:** must.

**15 daimen-icker in a thrave:** random ear in a bundle of corn.

**17 lave:** rest.

**20 silly wa's:** flimsy walls; **win's:** winds.

**21 big:** build; **ane:** one.

**22 foggage:** moss or coarse grass.

**24 Baith:** both; **snell:** bitter.







25 Thou saw the fields laid bare an' waste,  
 An' weary Winter comin fast,  
 An' cozie here, beneath the blast,  
     Thou thought to dwell,  
 Till crash! the cruel coulter past  
 30     Out thro' thy cell.

That wee-bit heap o' leaves an' stibble,  
 Has cost thee monie a weary nibble!  
 Now thou 's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble,  
     But house or hald,  
 35 To thole the Winter's sleety dribble,  
     An' cranreuch cauld!

But Mousie, thou are no thy-lane,  
 In proving foresight may be vain:  
 The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men,  
 40     Gang aft agley,  
 An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,  
     For promis'd joy!

Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!  
 The present only toucheth thee:  
 45 But Och! I backward cast my e'e,  
     On prospects drear!  
 An' forward, tho' I canna see,  
     I guess an' fear!

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**29 coulter** (kōl'tər): plow blade.

**31 stibble:** stubble.

**32 monie:** many.

**34 But:** without; **hald:** hold; property held.

**35 thole:** endure.

**36 cranreuch** (krôn'rōōkH): frost.

**37 no thy-lane:** not alone.

**40 Gang aft agley** (gông ôft ə-glē'): often go awry.

**45 e'e:** eye.

### Language Coach

**Multiple Meanings** The word *prospects* can mean (1) apparent chances for success (2) broad views, or (3) searches for mineral deposits. Which meaning best fits in line 46? Explain.



# TO A LOUSE *On Seeing One on a Lady's Bonnet at Church*

**Robert Burns**

Ha! whare ye gaun, ye crowlan ferlie!  
Your impudence protects you sairly:  
I canna say but ye strunt rarely,  
Owre gawze and lace;  
5 Tho' faith, I fear ye dine but sparely,  
On sic a place.

Ye ugly, creepan, blastet wonner,  
Detested, shunn'd, by saunt an' sinner,  
How daur ye set your fit upon her,  
10 Sae fine a Lady!  
Gae somewhere else and seek your dinner,  
On some poor body.

Swith, in some beggar's haffet squattle;  
There ye may creep, and sprawl, and sprattle,  
15 Wi' ither kindred, jumping cattle,  
In shoals and nations;  
Whare horn nor bane ne'er daur unsettle,  
Your thick plantations.

1 **crowlan ferlie**: crawling wonder.

2 **sairly**: sorely; greatly.

3 **strunt**: strut.

4 **Owre**: over.

6 **sic**: such.

7 **blastet**: blasted; darned; **wonner**: wonder.

9 **fit**: foot.

11 **Gae**: go.

13 **Swith**: swift; **haffet**: locks of hair; **squattle**: squat; settle.

14 **sprattle**: struggle.

15 **cattle**: vermin.

16 **shoals**: large groups; crowds.

17 **bane**: bone (used to make combs).

Now haud you there, ye're out o' sight,  
 20 Below the fatt'rels, snug and tight,  
 Na faith ye yet! ye'll no be right,  
     Till ye've got on it,  
 The vera tapmost, towrin height  
     O' Miss's bonnet.

25 My sooth! right bauld ye set your nose out,  
 As plump an' grey as onie grozet:  
 O for some rank, mercurial rozet,  
     Or fell, red smeddum,  
 I'd gie you sic a hearty dose o't,  
 30 Wad dress your droddum!

I wad na been surpriz'd to spy  
 You on an auld wife's flainen toy,  
 Or aiblins some bit duddie boy,  
     On 's wylecoat;  
 35 But Miss's fine Lunardi, fye!  
     How daur ye do 't?

O Jenny dinna toss your head,  
 An' set your beauties a' abroad!  
 Ye little ken what cursed speed  
 40 The blastie's makin!  
 Thae winks and finger-ends, I dread,  
     Are notice takin!

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us  
 To see oursels as others see us!  
 45 It wad frae monie a blunder free us  
     An' foolish notion:  
 What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,  
     And ev'n Devotion! **B**

19 **haud**: hold.

20 **fatt'rels**: folderols—ribbon ends used as hair ornaments.

21 **Na faith ye yet!**: Confound you! Darn you!

25 **My sooth!**: indeed; **bauld**: bold.

26 **onie grozet**: any gooseberry.

27 **rank . . . rozet**: strong-smelling rosin used to get rid of lice.

28 **fell**: sharp; **smeddum**: powder.

29 **gie**: give; **o't**: of it.

30 **dress your droddum**: clean your bottom.

32 **flainen toy**: flannel cap.

33 **aiblins**: perhaps; **duddie**: ragged.

34 **wylecoat**: undershirt.

35 **Lunardi**: stylish balloon-shaped bonnet named after 1780s balloonist Vincenzo Lunardi.

37 **dinna**: do not.

38 **a' abroad**: all abroad; in circulation.

39 **ken**: know.

40 **blastie's**: creature's.

41 **Thae**: those.

45 **frae**: from; **monie**: many.

**B CLARIFY MEANING**  
 Reread lines 43–48 aloud.  
 Use context clues and the  
 side notes to **paraphrase**  
 this stanza.

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## Comprehension

1. **Recall** Why does the speaker in “To a Mouse” apologize to the mouse?
2. **Summarize** What does the speaker in “To a Mouse” conclude in lines 43–48?
3. **Summarize** In lines 13–18 of “To a Louse,” where does the speaker suggest the louse go?
4. **Clarify** Why is the speaker surprised to see a louse on the lady’s bonnet?



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## Literary Analysis

5. **Clarify Meaning** Review the passages you **paraphrased** as you read the poems. Which passages did you find especially challenging? Give reasons for your choices.
6. **Identify Theme** Reread lines 37–42 of “To a Mouse.” What observation about life does Burns convey in this stanza?
7. **Interpret Satire** “To a Louse” is a **satire**, a literary work in which people’s behaviors or society’s institutions are ridiculed for the purpose of bringing about reform. What is Burns satirizing about Scottish society in this poem? Provide support from the poem for your answer.
8. **Compare Speakers** The speakers in both poems have very different attitudes toward the creatures they encounter. How would you characterize the speakers’ attitudes in “To a Mouse” and “To a Louse”?
9. **Draw Conclusions** In many of his poems, including “To a Mouse” and “To a Louse,” Burns makes use of commonplace subjects to express larger statements about life. In your opinion, why might he have chosen to use commonplace subjects in his poems?
10. **Analyze Dialect** The Scots dialect Burns uses can be difficult to read at times, but he chose to employ it for specific effect. In what way does Burns’s use of dialect contribute to the poems’ setting, theme, and tone?

## Literary Criticism

11. **Biographical Context** When Robert Burns became famous after publishing his first volume of poetry, he did not object to those who considered him a “Heaven-taught plowman” who wrote spontaneously about his feelings for his native land. Yet Burns was an ambitious, well-read poet with radical political views for his time. Why might Burns have encouraged the public to think of him as a simple farmer instead of a sophisticated poet?

*When do **LITTLE THINGS** mean a lot?*

It is easy to take unremarkable everyday objects and events for granted. What can you gain from appreciating them rather than overlooking them?