To a Mouse

POEM TEXT

On Turning up in Her Nest with the Plough, November, 1785

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

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

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

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
    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,
To thole the Winter's sleety dribble,
    An' cranreuch cauld!

But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men
    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:
But Och! I backward cast my e'e,
    On prospects drear!
An' forward tho' I canna see,
    I guess an' fear!

SUMMARY

It is November of 1785, and the speaker has just accidentally destroyed a mouse's nest with his plough.

The speaker addresses the mouse as a small, sleek, huddled, frightened little animal and notices how scared she is. He tells her that she doesn't need to try and scurry away in such a rush—he has no desire to chase and attack her with a deadly plough-scraper.

He also tells her that he is sorry that humankind has come to dominate the earth and its creatures and has ruined the harmony that naturally ought to exist between people and animals. This domination makes it understandable that the mouse would be frightened of the speaker, even though he is a needy, vulnerable creature just as the mouse is.

The speaker knows that the mouse sometimes steals food from his stores, but asks whether that should matter—the poor mouse has to stay alive after all! The occasional ear of corn from a large bundle is a small thing to ask. The speaker counts himself lucky to have what is left over and will never suffer because of what the mouse takes.

Then the speaker turns his attention to the mouse's little nest, which is destroyed; its weak walls are being blown around by the wind. Unfortunately, there is no more grass left for the mouse to use to build a new nest, for the biting, bitter December winds are already starting to blow, meaning that winter is coming.

The mouse, the speaker sees, realized that the fields were empty and that the dangerous season of winter was approaching, and had hoped to live comfortably in its nest, sheltered from the winds—until the destructive plough crashed right through its home.

The speaker reflects that the tiny dwelling made of leaves and shorn plants took a great deal of exhausting effort for the mouse to build. Now, after all that work, the mouse is left without any home to shelter it through the winter's sleet, rain, and frost.

But the mouse is not the only creature to realize that planning for the future can sometimes prove to be useless. Even the most carefully made plans, created by animals or by humans alike, often go wrong. When that happens, the planner experiences sorrow and distress instead of the happiness he expected.

The mouse is lucky, however, compared to the speaker. The mouse is affected only by the present moment. But, the speaker exclaims, he can look back into the past at painful memories. He can also look forward into the future and, although he cannot know for certain it will bring, he can anticipate and be afraid of what might happen.

THEMES

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEOPLE AND ANIMALS

After the poem's speaker accidentally destroys a mouse's nest with a plough, he considers the relationship between human beings and animals. The two are connected, the speaker argues, in that they are both parts of the natural world and are ultimately vulnerable to forces beyond their control. *All* creatures are subject to the whims of a harsh and unpredictable world, and, as such, the poem implies that human beings would do well to show compassion to their fellow creatures—even those as small as mice. At the same time, however, the speaker upholds one major difference between people and animals: unlike other creatures, human beings are uniquely—and painfully—*aware* of their present and future suffering, while other animals live only, ignorantly, in the moment.

Referring to "Nature's social union," the speaker implies that humans and animals are both part of nature and that this creates a special bond between them. More specifically, humans and animals are both "poor" and "mortal." That is, they have physical needs they cannot always meet, and they are vulnerable to injury and death. This is why the speaker calls himself the mouse's "fellow-mortal."

On a similar note, both animals and human beings can suffer from homelessness and hunger. The speaker, after accidentally destroying the mouse's nest, reflects on the pain the mouse will have to endure now that her nest has been destroyed: the "winter's sleety dribble, / An' cranreuch cauld," the winter's cold sleet and frost. But note how he refers to the mouse's plight in *human* terms. He calls the mouse's nest a "cell," a "house," and a "hald"—words used for human habitations. It is as if the speaker is imagining homeless humans suffering in the cold as well as the homeless mouse.

Ultimately, then, the mouse's plight leads the speaker to consider how all creatures, humans and animals—"mice an' men" alike—suffer "grief an' pain" in an unpredictable world where their plans and "schemes" often fail. In describing this pain, he even refers to "us"—as though humans and animals are members of a single group, united by their vulnerability.

The speaker's perception of this common bond of suffering thus leads him to show sympathy and compassion for the mouse and, by implication, for all living creatures. The mouse may "thieve," but this doesn't anger the speaker because the mouse "maun live." Essentially, the mouse has to eat to survive, just like every other creature, and the speaker respects the mouse's right to survive. Rather than killing the mouse with "murd'ring prattle," he's willing to grant the mouse its "sma' request" of food. He even believes he'd be "bless[ed]" if he shared his food with the mouse—implying that God intended humans to show compassion towards animals.

To that end, the speaker also regrets "man's dominion," the way humans wield power over animals and, in doing so, violate "Nature's social union." This union connects not just the speaker and the mouse but *everything* in nature. The speaker, feeling "truly sorry" at this violation, implies that humans should extend sympathy to all living things.

Of course, all that said, the speaker does note that humans can experience mental and emotional pain that animals cannot. In the last stanza, the speaker says that animals are affected by the "present only." They are mostly absorbed in their immediate physical experiences. Human beings, by contrast, can look "backward" into the past and be troubled by "prospects drear," or painful memories. They can also "guess" at the future and suffer "fear" about what may come. Thanks to their memories and imaginations, humans experience mental and emotional suffering that animals do not.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 7-12
- Lines 13-18
- Lines 33-36
- Lines 37-48

THE UNPREDICTABILITY OF LIFE

The most famous line of "To a Mouse" is this: "The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft agley." In other words, the most carefully arranged plans of both people and animals often go wrong. And, the poem suggests, because it is impossible to know what the future will bring, it is impossible to *control* it; however well creatures may plan, they will always encounter some sorrow and pain. The best a person can do in coping with this unpredictability, the poem implies, is to focus on the present moment and extend compassion to others. But the tragic truth the poem insists upon is that life is often tragically unpredictable.

The destruction of the mouse's nest reveals "that foresight may be vain." The mouse had tried to plan ahead for her future needs, but now her plan has proven futile. She had "thought to dwell" in its nest "cozie … beneath the blast" of the winter winds, but, now that her nest is ruined, she will have to suffer the sleet and frost of "winter's sleety dribble / An' cranreuch cauld." The mouse's situation illustrates the general way that life's unpredictability ruins the "promis'd joy" that creatures hope and plan for and often leaves them with nothing but "grief an' pain."

The speaker's actions and attitudes hint at ways of *coping* with this tragic fact of life, but he still implies that tragedy, in an unpredictable world, is pretty much inescapable. As such, the speaker adds that the mouse is "blest" in one way: it is affected by the "present only." The mouse has a limited ability to imagine what pain the future will bring. She can suffer physical pain in the immediate moment, but cannot suffer the mental pain of anticipation and fear.

Human beings, on the other hand, struggle to live in the present. When the speaker looks "backward" at the past, he finds painful memories and "prospects drear." And when he looks "forward" into the future, he says, "tho' I canna see, / I guess an' fear!" In other words, part of the speaker's anxiety comes from the fact that he cannot see or know what is going to happen. It can then be helpful, the reader might infer, to avoid guessing at the future too much in order to avoid the "fear" that comes with awareness of life's unpredictability.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 25-30
- Lines 33-36
- Lines 37-48

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1, LINES 1-6

On Turning up in Her Nest with the Plough, November,
1785
Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous beastie,
O, what a panic's in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,
Wi' bickerin brattle!
I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee
Wi' murd'ring pattle!

The first stanza establishes the poem's scenario and the attitude of the speaker towards the mouse. As the poem's subtitle indicates, the speaker has just destroyed the mouse's nest with his plough. The speaker addresses the mouse in humorous, good-natured terms, as a "Wee" ("little") "sleeket, cowran, tim'rous beastie." The use of the affectionate "wee" as well as the diminutive terms "beastie" and "breastie" suggest that the speaker might be laughing a bit at the mouse. So does his exclamation "O" in line 2, as if he is treating the tiny animal with mock seriousness. But the reader quickly sees that the laughter is kind rather than malicious.

The speaker exclaims at the mouse's "panic" but quickly reassures her that she need not "start awa sae hasty," or run away so quickly, for he has no wish to "chase [her] / Wi' murd'ring pattle!" The speaker destroyed the mouse's nest only by accident, not on purpose. He has no wish to harm her. He is laughing at her because her panic is unnecessary, not because he finds any cruel pleasure in the animal's fright or his power over her.

The fact that the speaker is addressing his words *to* the mouse establish the poem's anthropomorphism. The speaker speaks to the mouse as though she can understand him. He also imagines the thoughts and feelings she is having, thoughts and feelings similar to those a human being would have. These actions imply that the speaker sees the mouse, in some sense, as being similar to a person or even on par with one in terms of how he ought to treat her. This implication will be further developed as one of the most important themes of the poem.

The colloquial language, vowel sounds, and rhymes add to the tone of gentle good humor in this first stanza. The lines are dominated by Scottish dialect, including archaic speech forms (thy, thou), variants on standard English words ("awa" for "away," "sae" for "so"), and Scottish words ("bickerin brattle"). The dialect shows the speaker addressing the mouse in casual, familiar terms.

The opening also lines repeat the long /ee/ sound (assonance) in "Wee," "sleeket," "beastie," "breastie," "need," "hasty," and "thee." Rhyming words and sounds can (though do not necessarily) add a comic sense to verse, especially when the rhymes are very frequent. Similarly, feminine line endings (that is, final, unstressed beats) can add a sense of humor or lightness, by avoiding the sense of seriousness and gravity that comes with ending the line on a stressed syllable. Lines 1-4 scan like this:

Wee, slee- | ket, cow- | ran, tim'- | rous beastie,
O, what | a pan- | ic's in | thy breastie!
Thou need | na start | awa | sae hasty,
Wi' bick- | erin brattle!

Altogether, the speaker's attitude toward the mouse and the sound of his words begin the poem on a gentle, humorous note.

The opening lines also introduces the poem's stanza form, meter, and rhyme scheme. The poem is written in six-line stanzas (sestets) that rhyme AAABAB. The A lines are written in iambic tetrameter (meaning they have four iambs—feet with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern—per line), while the B lines are written in iambic dimeter (meaning they have two iambs her line). This form is known as the habbie stanza or the Burns stanza (for more on this, see "Form").

There are variations on the iambic meter throughout the poem. Lines that, like lines 1-6, have feminine endings have an extra unstressed syllable at the end of the line. Some lines also begin with a stressed syllable. In line 1, the unusual stress on the first syllable calls extra attention to the word "wee," emphasizing the mouse's small size and the speaker's kindly attitude towards the small, helpless animal. The speaker's sympathy for the mouse will continue throughout the poem, but the tone will shift from the lightness and humor here to something more serious in the next stanza.

LINES 7-12

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

In the second stanza, there is a shift in the speaker's diction and tone. Rather than the colloquial Scottish dialect of the first stanza, this stanza features Latinate words, such as "dominion," "union," "opinion," and "companion." These words feature soft repeated consonant sounds like /n/, /y/, and /m/ (consonance) and deep, long /o/ sounds (assonance), creating a gentle, solemn effect. This contrasts with the harsh /k/ sounds ("sleeket," "cowran") of the previous stanza. The gentler sound and more formal words suit the more somber tone of these lines.

This stanza, like the first, has an extra unstressed syllable at the ends of the lines:

I'm tru- | ly sor- | ry Man's | dominion
Has bro- | ken Na- | ture's so- | cial union

Here, however, the feminine endings—which again close the lines with soft, unstressed consonants—sound subdued rather than comic. The speaker has gone from gently laughing at the mouse's panic to more seriously considering the larger truth that her situation reflects. He realizes that he, as the landowner reshaping the earth with his plough and disturbing the animals who share the land, could symbolize all of humankind and the way they senselessly dominate the earth and its creatures.

This realization has religious implications. In the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament), God creates the earth, the animals, and humankind, and tells the first humans, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28).

By using the word "dominion," the speaker makes this connection to the Genesis story. He sees that humans have carried out God's command and that they *have* taken over the earth. But he also believes that human being's dominion was never supposed to mean simply dominating other animals and mistreating them at will. Rather, humans were meant to share the land and show some care for the animals. This care was "Nature's social union," which perhaps once existed but which human dominance has destroyed. The speaker regrets not just the harm he has done to this one particular animal, but the breakdown of this larger relationship between all animals and human beings—which he sees as a violation of the true intention behind God's command.

Focusing on this larger relationship seems to bring the speaker to a new realization about himself. In the first stanza, his tone was more condescending. He didn't wish the mouse any harm, but his gently mocking tone suggested that he did see the mouse as something lower than himself. Now, his attitude shifts. He realizes that there is a profound connection between himself and the mouse. If the mouse is helpless and vulnerable, so is he. In fact, so are *all* the living creatures who are born on the earth and must, eventually, die on it. They are all "earth-born" and they are all "mortal." Seeing this connection makes the speaker call the mouse his "companion" and "fellow-mortal." They are both needy, vulnerable creatures, who could suffer sudden tragedy at any moment.

The structure of the stanza helps show the speaker coming to this realization. In the habbie stanza, the first three lines all rhyme. Having three of anything often creates a sense of finality or completion. The reader might initially hear the first three lines as one complete unit with a final short line tacked on, and think the stanza has ended. The last two lines can sometimes sound almost like a surprise or an afterthought, and so they can show the speaker in the process of further developing his thoughts or suddenly having a new idea.

In this stanza, the sentence that starts in line 7 could sound as if it ends in line 10. Ending with "makes thee startle" would create a complete sentence. There is also a comma after "startle," which creates a pause as though the thought truly were completed. But the speaker continues the sentence

unexpectedly in line 11 with "At me." Line 10 is technically end-stopped, but line 11 reveals that the thought *does* continue into the following lines as if line 10 were enjambed.

Overall, the structure creates the sense that the speaker's words in lines 11-12 were a new thought that struck him as he was speaking. It suddenly dawned on him just how close a connection he has to the mouse. Framing this connection as a sudden discovery adds more drama to the stanza and makes the reader wonder how the speaker will go on addressing the mouse now that he has made this connection.

LINES 13-18

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

Referring fondly to the mouse again as "beastie," the speaker now affirms the mouse's right to live off of his harvest in terms drawn from the Bible. The speaker begins by saying that he is well aware that the mouse "may thieve." The reader might expect that a farmer would be determined to keep small pests like mice away from his crops, but the speaker says instead, "What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!" He accepts the mouse's taking his food. The caesura after "What then?" forces the reader to pause and realize how surprising it is that the farmer is so unconcerned about mice getting into his stores, saying essentially, "What does it matter?" But the reader quickly learns why the farmer adopts this attitude.

"Thieve" is rhymed (in the speaker's accent) with "live." The rhyme connects the two words and emphasizes that, to the speaker, the mouse's thievery isn't really stealing at all, because the mouse, like all "earth-born" creatures, needs this food to survive. This idea was already suggested in line 11 when the speaker called the mouse his "companion." "Companion" comes from the Latin words for *together* and *bread*. A companion is literally someone who eats bread with you. If she is the speaker's companion, the mouse has a right to share the speaker's grain.

The speaker suggests another reason why the mouse has a right to his harvest. He says a "daimen-icker in a thrave"—an occasional ear of corn taken from twenty-four bundles—is only a "sma' request." This small amount of corn would be what someone would obtain by *gleaning*. Gleaning is the practice of gathering the leftovers in a field that have been dropped or overlooked after the harvest has been taken in. Gleaning was a protected legal right in parts of England and Scotland for centuries (though it came under attack in Burns's time—see "Context") in part because it was commanded in the Bible. In the book of Deuteronomy, God says, "When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands" (Deut. 24:19).

The speaker deliberately invokes this biblical verse when he says he will "get a blessin wi' the lave." He will be blessed in the rest of his harvest just as God promised if he allows gleaning by those that God especially wishes to protect. That includes, apparently, the mouse. Besides affirming that God intended a "social union" among all creatures, the speaker suggests that God wishes vulnerable animals, as well as vulnerable human beings, to receive consideration and charity. The speaker, saying cheerfully that he will "never miss" what the mouse takes, willingly embraces this task of showing compassion to animals.

LINES 19-24

Thy wee-bit housie, too, in ruin!
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!

In this stanza, the speaker continues his affectionate, gently mocking tone towards the mouse. But while the previous stanza represented the relationship between the speaker and the mouse optimistically, with promises of blessings for them both, the fourth stanza is more pessimistic about the future.

The speaker begins in a joking tone, using the diminutive "wee-bit" and "housie" just like he used in the first stanza. There, the terms "wee" and "beastie" showed his affection for the mouse. Here, the terms still convey kindliness, but they also make light of the mouse's situation. If it's only a little house that the mouse lost, perhaps it isn't such a big deal. It would also not be a big deal for the mouse to lose her nest if the speaker could provide her with a new one as easily as he could provide her with a "daimen-icker" of corn. In stanza three, the speaker's perception of the mouse's need for food led directly to his cheerful willingness to meet that need.

In this stanza, however, the opposite happens. The speaker sees that the mouse is now homeless, her little house "in ruin." But this realization only leads to the further realization that there is nothing she, nor he, can do to meet this need. The mouse has "naething ... to big [build] a new ane."

The reader might expect the speaker to use the stanza's last two lines to offer the mouse some shelter. In the previous three stanzas, the speaker uses the last two lines to establish and build the relationship between himself and the mouse: he will not chase her, he is her companion, he will be blessed by sharing with her. But in this stanza, the speaker is absent from the last two lines. He comments instead that "bleak December's winds [are] ensuin, / Baith snell an' keen [bitter and sharp]!"

Instead of focusing on the hospitality he can extend to the mouse, the speaker focuses on the inhospitably cold winter that is approaching. The rhyme of "keen," to describe the biting winter winds, with "green," referring to the coarse grass the mouse had used to build her nest, further emphasizes how the mouse's home has been replaced by a frigid outdoor environment. The assonance of the repeated /ee/ sound functions similarly. At first it is used to communicate the speaker's affectionate tone, in "wee" and "housie." But then this same sound is used to mark the harsh conditions awaiting the mouse: "bleak" December and "keen" winds."

This stanza, then, marks a definite turn towards bleakness and pessimism in the poem's outlook. This bleakness is conveyed especially through the imagery of the natural world. The speaker does not merely say that the walls of the mouse's nest have come down. He says that "the win's are strewin" the walls. If readers visualize the scene, they will realize that strong winds are sweeping over the landscape. Things are worse for the mouse than they'd thought—not only is the mouse homeless, but the outdoor world where she must survive is particularly harsh. The speaker reinforces this sense of a harsh world when he notes that it is "December's winds" that are blowing, both "snell and keen," bitter and biting.

These descriptions of the wind appeal to the senses of sight, hearing, and touch, enabling the reader to imagine more vividly how the mouse feels—and to realize how vividly the speaker imagines it. The speaker cannot shield every creature from the hardships of a harsh world, however charitable he may be. But he can at least have empathy with the mouse's plight, which he demonstrates by his striking descriptions of it.

LINES 25-30

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
Out thro' thy cell.

In this stanza, the speaker goes further in his vivid description of the mouse's plight. He enters imaginatively into the mouse's point of view, envisioning the mouse's thoughts and feelings, continuing the poem's pronounced anthropomorphism. He imagines the mouse noticing that the fields had grown "bare an' waste" and concluding that "weary Winter [was] comin fast." The mouse built her nest and "thought," or planned, to live "cozie ... beneath the blast" in its shelter.

On the speaker's account, then, the mouse has the very human emotions of fear and hope, as well as the human abilities of reasoning and planning. These emotions and abilities, whether real or imagined, establish a further common bond in the speaker's mind between himself and the mouse. After all, he is also planning ahead by ploughing his field in preparation for the next season's planting, hoping that he'll have a good harvest. Presumably the speaker and even the reader would also hope to remain "cozie" through the cold winter—and so can sympathize with any creature whose hopes for a safe, comfortable winter are dashed.

The mouse's plans are ruined by unexpected disaster. The speaker captures the suddenness and surprise of that disaster by delaying it until the fifth line of this stanza. As noted, the structure of the habbie stanza can lead the reader to hear the first four lines (AAAB) as one complete unit and to hear the last two lines as unexpected or surprising. The speaker uses this "surprising" quality of the last two lines to capture the feeling of surprise the mouse experienced when the "cruel coulter" crashed through her nest.

The speaker also reinforces that sense of suddenness and abruptness through caesura—the abrupt halt after "crash!"—and with the emphatic spondee of "cruel coulter." Breaking the iambic meter with these two stressed syllables in a row reflects the unexpected brokenness that the line is describing.

The hard /k/ sound of "crash," followed by "cruel coulter" (alliteration), adds a harsh, striking quality to the lines that also reinforces the sense of shock and destruction. There is further alliteration in "weary Winter" and "beneath the blast." The alliterated phrases stand out to the reader's ear and create a slightly more dramatic sound to the stanza, underlining how deeply the speaker is imagining or even feeling what the mouse feels.

The stanza also creates a sense of the mouse's experience through antithesis. Lines 26 and 27 have parallel structure in both starting with "An' (adjective)." This parallel structure reinforces the opposition between the two adjectives "weary" and "cozie." "Weary" describes the winter the mouse hoped to avoid, "cozie" describes the winter she hoped to have—but now cannot. Contrasting these two adjectives and experiences helps the reader better appreciate what the mouse has lost.

LINES 31-36

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,
To thole the Winter's sleety dribble,
An' cranreuch cauld!

This stanza reinforces even further the connection between the speaker and the mouse, and between the animal and the human world. The speaker refers in line 31 to "[t]hat wee-bit heap o' leaves an' stibble." If another human were to walk by and see the mouse's ruined nest, that is all that person would see: a tiny pile of leaves and broken plants. But the speaker then describes what that "wee-bit heap" means to the mouse. The human passerby cannot see the hours of exhausting work

that the mouse put into building that nest. But the speaker shows that he is aware of all those "weary nibble[s]" the mouse invested in her home. He is still entering into the mouse's viewpoint.

In lines 33-34, however, the speaker is no longer focused simply on the mouse. His diction indicates that he is now also seeing how her condition could represent or symbolize the condition faced by many humans. Previously, the speaker referred to the mouse's nest as a "wee-bit housie" or a "wee-bit heap o' leaves." Now, he says the mouse has no "house or hald." "House," instead of the teasing "housie," refers more directly to the habitation a human would build. A "hald" is a piece of land that a person either rents or owns. When the poem was composed many farmers were indeed being "turn'd out" from their homes, villages, and the pieces of land where their families had farmed for generations (see "Context"). These two terms, which refer more directly to human activities, suggest that the speaker is thinking also of these farmers.

The speaker has thus drawn a connection between the mouse's plight and the plight of many human beings. The last two lines of the stanza, with their vivid description of winter weather, suggest that the speaker's empathy has likewise extended from the mouse to all creatures who have to endure the "cranreuch cauld," or the cold frost of winter.

Sound is used to make this description even more vivid. The alliteration of "house or hald" and "cranreuch cauld," like "weary Winter" in the previous stanza, also calls extra attention to these key phrases. The meter does something similar. After hearing three tetrameter lines in a row (lines 31 to 3#), the reader is prepared to hear another line of tetrameter. So when the dimeter line arrives in line 34 and stops after only two beats instead of four, it jars the reader's expectations. The line becomes more striking and noticeable because it breaks the metrical pattern. The dimeter line is also much shorter than most lines of English verse, which gives it still more prominence.

> Now thou's | turn'd out, | for a' | thy trouble,
> But house | or hald,
> To thole | the Win- | ter's sleet- | y dribble,
> An' cran- | reuch cauld!

In this stanza, also note how the two dimeter lines describe the harsh conditions that the mouse (and displaced farmers) must face: homelessness—"But house or hald"—and winter's frost: "cranreuch cauld." The speaker makes these phrases all the harsher and more emphatic by setting them off in short, abrupt, jarring two-beat lines.

The short phrases are also more emphatic because the four tetrameter lines end with an extra, unstressed syllable. The two dimeter lines, by contrast, end with a stressed syllable (see scansion above). Coming after a series of unstressed endings (feminine endings), the stressed syllables of "hald" and "cauld" sound even harsher by contrast, further emphasizing the mouse's harsh fate.

LINES 37-42

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

In this stanza the speaker summarizes the truths he has realized by reflecting on the mouse's plight and its connection to the plight of all living creatures. This general truth creates a new kind of connection among those creatures, but also emphasizes that the world they share is a tragic one.

In line 37, the speaker addresses the mouse more directly than he has done so far, calling her "Mousie" almost as if this were her name. This makes the mouse seem almost like an equal of the speaker, implying that they are on the same level. And they are on the same level, to the extent that the mouse is "no thy-lane," not alone, in her condition; it is a condition that the speaker and, in fact, *all* creatures share. This is the general truth that the speaker summarizes in lines 39-40: "The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men / Gang aft agley."

From his life experience, and now from this encounter with the mouse, the speaker has learned that even the most carefully made plans, of animals or of humans, often go wrong. Life is unpredictable. When we make plans, we are predicting how the future will go. But our predictions can always be wrong, and when they are, our plans are ruined and our future happiness is threatened. This is a tragic sense of the world as a place where tragedy is inescapable. The speaker captures this idea in the final lines of the stanza, saying that ruined plans "lea'e us nought but grief an' pain, / For promis'd joy!" Where we expected joy, we often find nothing but suffering.

Lines 39-40, pithily summarizing a general truth about life, form an aphorism. The aphorism is more striking and memorable thanks to its poetic form. Line 40 is end-stopped, creating a sense of completion after the two lines. The lines also feature alliteration and consonance with the /m/ sound in "Mice" and "Men," the /a/ that begins "aft" and "agley," and the hard /g/ sound in "Gang" and "agley." These repeated sounds tie the lines together to make the lines sound more harmonious and authoritative and also to make them more memorable as a saying.

The only consolation present in this stanza is the one suggested by the word "us" in line 41. In stanza two, the speaker affirmed that there should be a respectful, caring relationship between humans and animals. In stanza six, the speaker used the mouse as an allegory for human troubles and seemed to show compassion towards his fellow humans. But in this stanza, the

distinction between humans and animals briefly disappears.

The speaker begins by saying that the mouse is "no thy-lane" in her distress. She belongs to the group "o' Mice an' Men," of humans and animals, who also suffer unexpected trouble. In line 41, the speaker refers to that group as "us." Here, there is no separation between humans and animals. *All* living creatures belong to a single group, joined by their common vulnerability. Suffering can unite people more closely with other creatures and provide a basis for mutual compassion. Of course, this may only be a small consolation for the suffering itself.

The speaker uses antithesis to highlight this idea. The last four lines of this stanza (lines 39 to 42) form two tetrameter-dimeter pairs. Each pair maps a contrast of ideas onto the contrast in meter. In line 39, the speaker refers to hopefulness and the expectation of happiness in the phrase "best laid plans." In the next line, he speaks to the disappointment of those hopes with the words "Gang aft agley." Similarly, the tetrameter line 41 contrasts "grief an' pain" with the "promis'd joy" in the dimeter line 42. At the heart of the speaker's aphorism is a strong sense of contrast between the future that was hoped for and the future that actually comes. The speaker heightens this sense with two pairs of lines that contrast in their content and in their meter.

The sense of an unpredictable future is even heightened by the rhyme scheme. The AABABB rhyme scheme of the poem leads the reader to expect that line 42 will form a perfect rhyme with line 40. Instead, there is only an imperfect slant rhyme between "agley" and "joy." By thwarting the reader's expectations about how the stanza will go, the speaker creates a small sense of the mouse's own thwarted expectations about how her future will go.

LINES 43-48

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

Like the last two lines of the habbie stanza itself, this last stanza of the poem comes as something of a surprise. Stanza seven was the climax of the poem, summarizing its lesson in a memorable aphorism. The reader could easily have thought the poem would end there. Instead, it continues on in this final stanza, which adds a final bleak twist to that lesson.

In stanza seven, the one consolation for living in a tragic, unpredictable world was that tragedy could create bonds among suffering creatures. In this stanza, even that consolation is slightly reduced as the speaker introduces a new distinction between himself and the mouse. He says the mouse is "blest, compar'd wi' [him]" because he can suffer in ways the mouse cannot. The "present only toucheth" the mouse. She only suffers from pain in the moment. The speaker, by contrast, can suffer pain from both the past and the future. When he looks "backward" at the past, he suffers painful memories of "prospects drear."

The word "prospects" is significant. Although he is referring to time that has past, "prospect" literally refers to "looking forward." If the past sets a pattern that the future may follow, the speaker has "drear[y]" events in his future as well as in his past. And sure enough, when he looks "forward" to the future, he feels anxiety and "fear." As he noted in stanza seven, he "canna see" the future in the sense of being able to predict it and shape it as he would like. But he can "guess," based on the past, that it will contain more worries and dangers.

Unfortunately, "Nature's social union" cannot provide the speaker any comfort as he faces these fears. The pronouns "thou," "me," "thee," and "I" in almost every line of the stanza break up the unified "us" of stanza seven. Now the speaker no longer frames the mouse as belonging to the same group as himself.

The reader might wonder if the speaker has gotten his framing wrong—if the mouse "thought to dwell" cozily in her nest through the winter, then she must be able to "guess" at the future and "fear" being left out in the cold just as the speaker can. She is not affected by "[t]he present only." Still, the speaker makes this distinction between himself and the mouse, and in this last stanza, he turns the focus of his attention from the mouse's troubles to his own. The speaker seems to think the mouse cannot suffer the same kind of mental and emotional pain that human memory and imagination can cause. If so, this would be a further tragic dimension to an already tragic world, if suffering brings about, not unity, but isolation.

The structure of line 45 does suggest one final small connection between the speaker and the mouse, however. There is a caesura after the second syllable following the exclamation mark, just as there is in line 29: "But Och!" In line 29, that caesura marked the "crash" that abruptly ruined all the mouse's plans. The speaker's exclamation "Och!" as he looks back into his past suggests that he may be remembering a similar moment when sudden tragedy struck. Ending the poem on the word "fear" emphasizes how, in this unpredictable world, both "Mice an' Men" must always live with some fear of the uncontrollable future will unfold. This suffering can form the basis for solidarity and empathy, or it can cause, as it seems to here, a sense of isolation.

SYMBOLS

THE MOUSE

The speaker meditates extensively on the plight of the mouse, who is homeless now that her nest has

been destroyed. The speaker ultimately takes the mouse's plight to represent the condition of *all* creatures—"Mice an' men"—living in a world where tragedy can strike suddenly and unpredictably. The mouse, then, symbolizes for the speaker not just her own condition but the condition of human beings, too.

In Burns's day, many poorer farmers were being "turn'd out" from their houses or lands as wealthy landowners enclosed public land and changed their farming practices (see "Context"). The words the speaker uses to describe the mouse's home shift from "nest," "housie," and "wee-bit heap o' leaves an' stibble" to "house" and "hald." These terms are more usually used to describe *human* habitations, which suggests that the speaker is thinking about the mouse and human beings at the same time. The mouse comes to symbolize all humans who suffer homelessness and suffer tragedy more generally in an unpredictable world.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 31-42:** "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, / To thole the Winter's sleety dribble, / An' cranreuch cauld! / But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane, / In proving foresight may be vain: / The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men / Gang aft agley, / An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain, / For promis'd joy!"

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE NEST

The starting point for the poem is the speaker's "[t]urning up" in the mouse's nest with his plough and accidentally destroying it. This event starts off as a simple encounter between one creature and another, but the speaker soon reveals that he sees this encounter as symbolic of something much larger. He tells the mouse, "I'm truly sorry Man's dominion / Has broken Nature's social union."

The word "dominion" suggests that the speaker is referring to God's commandment in the biblical book of Genesis (see "Poetic Devices: Allusions") giving humans dominion over all the earth's creatures. According to Christian tradition, humans originally lived in peaceful harmony with their fellow creatures. Once humans committed sin, however, their sinfulness led them to abuse their power over the animals and dominate over them more cruelly.

The speaker didn't mean to destroy the mouse's nest and he certainly isn't cruel to the creature. But he still sees the destruction of the nest as symbolic of the broken relationship between "Man" and "Nature," between all humans and all animals. The mouse is aware that most humans treat animals cruelly, and that is why her "ill opinion" of the speaker is "justifie[d]" even though he himself is not cruel. The nest's destruction is one more event in this troubled history of human-animal relations, and it symbolizes that whole history.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

POETIC DEVICES

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The whole poem is built around the device of anthropomorphism. The poem is an address, as the title states, *to* a mouse, as if she can understand the speaker's words to her. The speaker also attributes human traits to the mouse. First of all, the mouse is said to feel emotions like fear and "panic," "grief an' pain."

Secondly, the mouse has thoughts. The mouse doesn't just fear the speaker, she has an "ill opinion" of him. She saw the bare fields and drew the conclusion that "Winter [was] comin fast." In building her nest, she "thought to dwell" in it through the winter. The speaker claims that the mouse is affected by the "present only," while he, as a human, can look "backward" and "forward" to the past and the future. But the mouse's "foresight" in building her nest shows that she, too, shares some of this human ability to think about the future.

The speaker also takes the biblical commandment to permit gleaning, which originally applied only to humans, and extends it to the mouse. He allows the mouse her "daimen-icker in a thrave," her odd ear of corn, and says he'll find a "blessin wi' the lave," just as God promised to bless those farmers who permitted fellow humans to glean.

The speaker's anthropomorphism serves several purposes. It makes the poem more dramatic, since it turns what would otherwise be one person's solitary reflection into a scene with two characters interacting. The speaker notices that the mouse is reacting to him with fear; he must persuade her to trust him. This scene has higher stakes, too, because the speaker humanizes the mouse. If she can understand his words, then it is all the more important that he find the right words to express his sympathy.

Even more significantly, the anthropomorphism supports the speaker's claim that humans and animals share a "social union." If the mouse can think and feel in the way the speaker describes, then she has important qualities in common with human beings. These common qualities create a common bond. If humans share this common bond with animals, then they should, as the speaker implies, extend compassion towards them. Merely describing "Nature's social union" to the mouse as if she can understand the words helps show that this social union exists.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 15-18
- Line 19
- Lines 25-30
- Lines 31-34
- Lines 37-42
- Lines 43-44

ALLUSION

The poem alludes several times to the Bible. These allusions help the speaker communicate what he sees as his relationship with the mouse and add moral and spiritual significance to his encounter with her.

In the biblical book of Genesis, after God creates the earth, the animals, and humankind, God tells the first humans: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). God gives humankind dominion over the animals, but he gives this commandment while humans are still sinless, in harmony with God and all the earth. After the humans disobey God and fall into sin, that harmony is broken.

When the speaker tells the mouse, "I'm truly sorry Man's dominion / Has broken Nature's social union," he is alluding to this whole story of creation and the fall. The way that humans currently dominate other creatures—for example, destroying their homes—comes from human sinfulness. It is not the way that God originally meant for humans to act.

The allusion to the book of Genesis helps the speaker convey how humans should *not* treat animals. An allusion to the book of Deuteronomy helps convey how humans *should* treat animals. In this book, God sets out laws for his followers. One law is this: "When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands" (Deut. 24:19). This law gives poor, vulnerable people—strangers, orphans, widows—the right to glean, or collect leftover scraps of food from the fields after a harvest. Farmers are commanded to permit gleaning and are promised God's blessing in return.

The speaker alludes to this law when he permits the mouse to take a "daimen-icker in a thrave"—an odd ear of corn, such as you would glean from a field—and says that he'll "get a blessin wi' the lave." He believes that humans should treat animals, as least in some cases, as they would treat other humans in need, with charity and compassion.

These allusions take a brief encounter between a farmer and a mouse and give it profound spiritual and moral meaning. The speaker's destroying the mouse's nest with his plough isn't just a simple accident. It symbolizes the whole way that human sinfulness has put them at odds with the rest of creation. And by saying that God himself will bless the speaker for showing charity to the mouse, the speaker adds powerful religious weight to his claims about how, morally, humans should treat their fellow creatures.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "I'm truly sorry Man's dominion / Has broken Nature's social union,"
- **Lines 15-18:** "A daimen-icker in a thrave / 'S a sma' request: / I'll get a blessin wi' the lave, / An' never miss 't!"

IMAGERY

The poem features striking imagery in its descriptions of the natural world. This imagery helps convey the speaker's empathy for the mouse—his ability to imagine how she feels and, to some extent, to feel those same emotions himself. The imagery, with its appeal to multiple senses, even helps the *reader* feels those emotions.

Imagery appears most prominently in stanzas four, five, and six, in which the speaker describes the mouse's ruined nest and the outdoor environment around her. For example, in line 20, the speaker describes the nest, not simply by saying that it is in pieces, but by saying its "silly wa's the win's are strewin!" In trying to picture this scene, the reader must imagine not only the pieces of the walls flying around, but the brisk winds that are making the pieces fly around and the outdoor scene where the wind is blowing. From there, the reader can also imagine how harsh and cold the mouse must feel as those same winds strike her. The imagery of the wind, continued in lines 23-24 with their description of "December's winds ... Baith snell an' keen," leads the reader to construct a more developed picture of the scene. It also appeals to the senses of sight, hearing, and touch, helping the reader to imagine the scene and these sensory experiences in a more lifelike way.

Stanzas five and six further develop this harsh outdoor imagery. Stanza five provides a visual description of the scene with its "fields laid bare an' waste." This vast expanse contrasts with the "wee-bit heap o' leaves an' stibble" in line 31, helping the reader picture just how small and vulnerable the mouse is in this large, exposed environment. The poem continues to evoke the sounds and feel of winter with the description of "sleety dribble" and "cranreuch cold" in lines 35-36. With this imagery, the speaker shows his awareness of what the mouse sees, hears, and feels. This awareness, in turn, shows his ability to empathize with the mouse, to see things from her point of view. He is aware of the suffering he has caused her and feels sorry for it.

The imagery also helps the speaker engage the reader's compassion. It is not just the speaker but "Man" in general that has broken "Nature's social union." With these striking descriptions of the harsh environment where the mouse must struggle for survival, the speaker can possibly help more of his fellow humans feel empathy for animals and get closer to the original "social union."

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 20-24:** "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!"
- **Lines 25-27:** "Thou saw the fields laid bare an' waste, / An' weary Winter comin fast, / An' cozie here, beneath the blast,"
- **Lines 31-36:** "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, / To thole the Winter's sleety dribble, / An' cranreuch cauld!"

ANTITHESIS

Antithesis is an important device for conveying one of the main messages of the poem. The speaker sums up this message in lines 39-40:

> The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men
> Gang aft agley,

That is, the most carefully made plans can often go wrong. In other words, there is often a stark contrast between what people *hope and plan for* and what *actually happens*. The speaker highlights this contrast by using antithesis, contrasting those "best laid schemes" and "Gang aft agley." We plan well; events go badly.

The speaker further reinforces his message with a parallel form of antithesis in lines 41-42:

> An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
> For promis'd joy!

"Grief an' pain" contrasts with "promis'd joy," just as "agley" contrasts with "best" in the prior example. Both capture the opposition between the bleak future that arrives and the brighter future that was hoped for.

Similarly, stanza five captures the pain of living with this opposition with further antithesis, as it describes the mouse's situation. Line 26 begins with "An' weary" to describe the winter; line 27 begins with "An' cozie" to describe the mouse's nest. The parallel structure of "An' ____" and the parallel /ee/ sounds (assonance) of "weary" and "cozie" create a clear contrast between how the mouse *hoped* to spend the winter and how it will now *actually* spend the winter. Lines 27-28 also form a contrasting pair with line 29-30. Lines 27-28 describe the mouse's own "best laid plan," how she "thought to dwell" cozily "beneath the blast" in her nest. Lines 29-30 capture how the plan went "agley" when the "cruel coulter" destroyed her nest.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 26-30:** "An' weary Winter comin fast, / An' cozie here, beneath the blast, / Thou thought to dwell, / Till crash! the cruel coulter past / Out thro' thy cell."
- **Lines 39-42:** "The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men / Gang aft agley, / An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain, / For promis'd joy!"

ALLITERATION

The speaker uses alliteration to link together key phrases in the poem, making them more emphatic, memorable, and convincing. In stanza five, for example, the speaker refers to "weary Winter" and the "cruel coulter," alliterating the /w/ and hard /c/ sounds. These phrases refer to some of the most significant aspects of the poem—the plough blade that destroys the mouse's nest and the cold weather she must now endure—and the alliteration makes the phrases stand out to the reader's ear. "[C]ruel coulter" also alliterates with "crash," linking the blade to the sound it makes. This hard /c/, repeated three times, also conveys the sense of the hard, sharp blade slicing through the nest.

Stanza six, similarly, uses alliteration to draw attention to key phrases referring to the loss of the nest and the harsh winter. The speaker says the mouse is without, not just a house, but "house or hald," without home or land. The two terms, with their repeated /h/ sound, further emphasize the mouse's plight. "[C]ranreuch cauld" with another hard /c/ sound, calls attention again to the harsh, biting frost of winter.

The speaker also uses alliteration in the aphorism that sums up a key message of the poem: "The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men / Gang aft agley." The alliteration of /m/ in "Mice an' Men" and /a/ in "aft agley" links the sounds of the lines together, which makes them more memorable. Liking together the sounds of words also has the effect, often, of making their ideas more convincing. If the words harmonize in how they *sound*, the reader more easily imagines that they harmonize in what they *say*.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "b"
- **Line 2:** "b"
- **Line 4:** "b," "b"
- **Line 20:** "w," "w"

- **Line 21:** “n,” “n,” “n”
- **Line 23:** “w”
- **Line 25:** “w”
- **Line 26:** “w,” “W,” “c”
- **Line 27:** “c,” “b,” “ b”
- **Line 28:** “ Th,” “th”
- **Line 29:** “c,” “c,” “c”
- **Line 34:** “h,” “h”
- **Line 36:** “c,” “c”
- **Line 39:** “M,” “M”
- **Line 40:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 41:** “p”
- **Line 42:** “p”

ASSONANCE

The speaker first uses assonance to establish his attitude and tone towards the mouse. The first stanza features assonance with the repeated long /ee/ sound. This sound is frequently used to create diminutives—a variation on a word or name that suggests a smaller version of the original or is used as an informal, affectionate nickname (like the term "Mousie" for "mouse" in line 37). "Beastie" and "breastie" in lines 1 and 2 are diminutives for "beast" and "breast." The repeated /ee/ in these words, and in "[w]ee" and "sleeket," creates an informal, affectionate tone. There is a similar effect in stanzas three and four with the diminutives "beastie" (line 14) and "housie" (line 19), which have assonance with "thieve," "live," and "wee."

But in later stanzas, the /ee/ sound is repeated not only in terms of affection but also in those terms that capture the mouse's sad situation. In stanza four, the /ee/ sound is repeated in "bleak" and "keen," referring to the winds of winter, and then in "weary" (line 26) and "sleety" (line 35). Now the assonance serves to highlight contrasting ideas and make the mouse's situation more emotionally poignant. The parallel /ee/ sound highlights the contrast between the mouse's "wee-bit housie" and the "keen" winds that the mouse will endure now that she has lost her house; the same contrast is found between her "wee-bit heap o' leaves" (line 31) and the "sleety dribble" (line 35). "[C]ozie" (line 27) is similarly contrasted with "weary" (line 26) as the winter the mouse hoped to have and the winter she will now face.

An example of assonance with a different vowel sound is found in stanza two. In this stanza, the speaker is less teasing, less informal, and so instead of the diminutive /ee/ sound, his words repeat the long /o/ sound: "dominion," "broken," "social," "opinion," "mortal." This rounder, more ponderous vowel sound creates a more formal, serious tone as the speaker starts to consider the more serious implications of his encounter with the mouse.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “ee,” “ee,” “ea,” “ie”
- **Line 2:** “ea,” “ie”
- **Line 3:** “ee,” “a,” “y”
- **Line 5:** “ai,” “a,” “ee”
- **Line 7:** “y,” “o,” “y,” “o,” “i,” “io”
- **Line 8:** “o,” “o,” “io”
- **Line 9:** “i,” “i,” “o,” “i,” “io”
- **Line 11:** “oo,” “o,” “io”
- **Line 12:** “o”
- **Line 13:** “ou,” “ou,” “ie”
- **Line 14:** “ea,” “ie,” “i”
- **Line 15:** “ai,” “a”
- **Line 17:** “a”
- **Line 19:** “ee,” “ie,” “oo,” “i,” “u,” “i”
- **Line 20:** “I,” “i,” “i,” “e,” “i”
- **Line 21:** “e,” “a”
- **Line 22:** “ee”
- **Line 23:** “ea,” “ui”
- **Line 24:** “ee”
- **Line 25:** “ai,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 26:** “ea,” “y,” “a”
- **Line 27:** “ie,” “e,” “e,” “ea,” “a”
- **Line 29:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 31:** “ee,” “ea,” “ea,” “i”
- **Line 32:** “ee,” “ie,” “ea,” “y,” “i”
- **Line 33:** “o,” “ou,” “ou”
- **Line 34:** “ou,” “a”
- **Line 35:** “ee,” “y”
- **Line 36:** “au”
- **Line 37:** “ou,” “ou,” “a”
- **Line 38:** “ai”
- **Line 39:** “ai”
- **Line 41:** “ai”
- **Line 43:** “e”
- **Line 44:** “thee”
- **Line 45:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 46:** “ea”
- **Line 47:** “ee”
- **Line 48:** “a”

CONSONANCE

The speaker uses consonance to establish his tone towards the mouse. In the first stanza, the speaker has just caused a commotion by driving his plough through the mouse's nest, and the mouse is startled and trying to run. The speaker captures the moment's raucous quality with hard, cacophonous consonant sounds like /k/ and /t/. These sounds are repeated throughout the stanza ("sleeket, cowran, tim'rous," "panic's," "start," "bickerin") and feature in the emphasized words at the ends of the lines ("beastie," "breastie," "hasty," "brattle," "pattle").

The next stanza changes tone as the speaker stops playfully teasing the mouse and addresses more seriously the

relationship between them. Softer consonant sounds like /m/ and /n/ feature in the stanza's most prominent words and phrases: "Man's dominion," "Nature's ... union," "opinion," "earth-born companion." These softer, gentler sounds reflect the speaker's heartfelt sympathy for the mouse, his desire not to frighten her and his apology for humankind's mistreatment of other animals.

The speaker also uses consonance to create a unified sound. He sums up an essential message of the poem in lines 39-40, "The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men / Gang aft agley." The repeated /m/, /s/, and /g/ sounds tie these lines together to make them more harmonious and more memorable.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "W," "s," "k," "t," "c," "w," "t," "b," "s," "t"
- **Line 2:** "t," "c," "s," "b," "s," "t"
- **Line 3:** "n," "n," "s," "t," "t," "s," "s," "t"
- **Line 4:** "b," "k," "b," "tt"
- **Line 5:** "n," "n"
- **Line 6:** "tt"
- **Line 7:** "m," "r," "rr," "M," "n," "m," "n," "n"
- **Line 8:** "n," "N," "n," "n"
- **Line 9:** "p," "n," "n"
- **Line 10:** "m"
- **Line 11:** "m," "p," "r," "r," "r," "n," "m," "p," "n," "n"
- **Line 12:** "m"
- **Line 13:** "th," "th," "v"
- **Line 14:** "th," "th," "v"
- **Line 15:** "th," "v"
- **Line 16:** "S," "s," "s"
- **Line 17:** "ll," "l," "ss," "l," "v"
- **Line 18:** "v," "ss"
- **Line 19:** "n," "n"
- **Line 20:** "w," "w," "n," "w," "n"
- **Line 21:** "n," "n," "n," "w," "g," "n," "w," "n"
- **Line 22:** "gg," "g," "g"
- **Line 23:** "w," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 24:** "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 25:** "ld," "l," "d," "w"
- **Line 26:** "w," "W," "c"
- **Line 27:** "c," "b," "b"
- **Line 28:** "Th," "th"
- **Line 29:** "cr," "cr," "l," "c," "l," "r"
- **Line 31:** "b," "l," "bbl"
- **Line 32:** "bbl"
- **Line 33:** "bl"
- **Line 34:** "B," "h," "h," "ld"
- **Line 35:** "l," "l," "d," "bbl"
- **Line 36:** "c," "ch," "c," "ld"
- **Line 38:** "v," "v"
- **Line 39:** "s," "m," "M," "c," "M"
- **Line 40:** "G," "g"
- **Line 41:** "p"
- **Line 42:** "F"
- **Line 45:** "B," "ch," "b," "ck," "c," "st"
- **Line 46:** "s," "cts"
- **Line 47:** "f," "c"
- **Line 48:** "f"

APHORISM

The speaker uses an aphorism in lines 39 and 40 to create a short, memorable message for the reader. The starting point for the poem is the speaker's "[t]urning up" in the mouse's nest with his plough. The mouse had worked with "monie a weary nibble" to build up this nest where she "thought to dwell," or planned to live, through the "weary Winter" months. Now her nest has been unexpectedly destroyed and her plans ruined. The speaker saw in his destruction of the nest a symbol of the whole broken relationship between "Man" and "Nature." Similarly, he sees in the mouse's ruined plans a symbol for the experience of all creatures. At some point, everyone suffers what the mouse has just suffered. The speaker captures this universal truth in an aphorism in lines 39-40:

> The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men
> Gang aft agley,

These lines form an effective aphorism for several reasons. They are short and self-contained, with line 40 being end-stopped. They use consonance and alliteration to create a unified sound, which makes the lines more memorable and more convincing; when the sounds of words go together, the reader is more easily convinced that their ideas make sense together.

The speaker also uses the line's iambic meter to lay stress on key words, including "Mice" and "Men." These are terms that serve as an effective shorthand or synecdoche for larger ideas. The speaker uses the phrase "o' Mice an' Men" to represent *all* living creatures, animals and humans. This phrase carries particular impact for the reader partly because it refers to the two specific characters—a mouse and a man—that the reader has been following. But it also works well as a representation of all creatures because a mouse is so small and so humble next to humans and their "dominion." Putting mice and men together in the lines captures the truth that no matter who you are, no matter how large or small, how humble or powerful you may be, you cannot know the future and you cannot escape life's unpredictable tragedies. The striking, memorable quality of this aphorism is made clear by the number of times other writers have referenced it (see "Context").

Where Aphorism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 39-40:** "The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men /
  Gang aft agley,"

CAESURA

The speaker uses caesura to force the reader to pause and absorb the significance of a question, an event, or an emotion. In line 14, for example, there is a pause after the speaker asks, "What then?" The pause allows the reader to realize how surprising this question is. The speaker has just pointed out that the mouse likely "thieve[s]" from him. Farmers generally hate having pests touch their crops, because they eat some and can spoil the rest. And yet, the speaker, who appears to be a farmer, asks "What does it matter if a mouse touches my crops?" The question is surprising because it reveals a completely different value system than the one the reader would expect the speaker to have—one based on sympathy and charity rather than efficiency and profit. The unexpected pause in the middle of the line emphasizes this unexpected reaction from the speaker.

In line 29, the unexpected pause corresponds to an unexpected event. The speaker has just described how the mouse "thought to dwell" in her cozy nest through the winter. She expected to have this nest for shelter—"Till crash! the cruel coulter past" through the nest. The exclamation mark after "crash" creates a caesura, surprising the reader with the unusual pause as the mouse is surprised by the plough.

An exclamation mark creates another caesura in line 45. The speaker has just remarked that the mouse is bothered only by troubles in the present. He is about to reflect on how he is also distressed by memories of troubles in the past. The exclamation "But Och!"—the pause, the sudden strong emotion that makes the speaker lose words for a moment—suggests that the speaker may be remembering an unexpected tragedy from his past, something as distressing to him as the nest's destruction was to the mouse. The parallel caesuras create a link between the events, further reinforcing the idea that all creatures, "Mice an' Men," suffer from life's unpredictable tragedies.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ",", ",", ","
- **Line 2:** ","
- **Line 11:** ","
- **Line 13:** ","
- **Line 14:** "?"
- **Line 19:** ",", ","
- **Line 21:** ",", ","
- **Line 27:** ","
- **Line 29:** "!"
- **Line 33:** ","
- **Line 37:** ","
- **Line 43:** ",", ","
- **Line 45:** "!"

VOCABULARY

Wee (Line 1) - Small.

Sleekit (Line 1) - Sleek, glossy. Also can mean sneaky.

Cowran (Line 1) - Cowering, crouching.

Tim'rous (Line 1) - Timorous, fearful.

Beastie (Line 1) - Beast, small animal.

Thy (Line 2, Line 11, Line 19, Line 30, Line 33, Line 37) - Your.

Breastie (Line 2) - Breast, chest (the mouse's heart is beating rapidly).

Thou (Line 3) - You.

Na (Line 3) - Not.

Start (Line 3) - Run.

Awa (Line 3) - Away.

Sae (Line 3) - So.

Wi' (Line 4, Line 6, Line 17, Line 43) - With.

Bickerin brattle (Line 4) - Headlong scamper; a noisy run.

Wad (Line 5) - Would.

Laith (Line 5) - Loath, reluctant.

Rin (Line 5) - Run.

An' (Line 5, Line 9, Line 12, Line 18, Line 21, Line 23, Line 24, Line 26, Line 27, Line 31, Line 36, Line 39, Line 41, Line 48) - And.

Thee (Line 5, Line 10, Line 32, Line 44) - You.

Murd'ring (Line 6) - Murdering, murderous.

Pattle (Line 6) - Plough-staff or a small spade-like tool used to clean a plough.

Dominion (Line 7) - Dominance, power, control.

Justifies (Line 9) - Proves correct.

Whyles (Line 13) - Sometimes.

Thieve (Line 13) - Steal.

Maun (Line 14) - Must.

Daimen-icker (Line 15) - Occasional ear of corn.

Thrave (Line 15) - Bundle of twenty-four sheaves of corn.

'S (Line 16) - Is.

Sma' (Line 16) - Small.

Blessin (Line 17) - Blessing.

Lave (Line 17) - Remainder, what is left over.

'T (Line 18) - It.

Wee-bit (Line 19, Line 31) - Tiny.

Housie (Line 19) - House (nest).

Silly wa's (Line 20) - Frail walls.

Win's (Line 20) - Winds.

Strewin' (Line 20) - Strewing, scattering.

Naething (Line 21) - Nothing.

Big (Line 21) - Build.

Ane (Line 21) - One.

O' (Line 22) - Of.

Foggage green (Line 22) - Coarse grass.

Ensuin (Line 23) - Ensuing, starting up.

Baith (Line 24) - Both.

Snell (Line 24) - Bitter, cold.

Keen (Line 24) - Fierce, sharp.

Waste (Line 25) - Bare, barren.

Cozie (Line 27) - Cozy.

Coulter (Line 29) - The sharp iron blade at the front of a plough that cuts vertically through the soil.

Past (Line 29) - Passed, cut through.

Thro' (Line 30) - Through.

Cell (Line 30) - A small, humble living space, sometimes used to describe an animal's den.

Stibble (Line 31) - Stubble, the stumps of grain stalks left in the field after harvest.

Monie (Line 32) - Many.

Thou's (Line 33) - You are.

But (Line 34) - Without.

Hald (Line 34) - Hold, a piece of land; a dwelling.

Thole (Line 35) - Endure.

Cranreuch cauld (Line 36) - Cold frost.

Art (Line 37) - Are.

Thy-lane (Line 37) - Alone.

Foresight (Line 38) - Ability to anticipate what will happen in the future.

Vain (Line 38) - Unsuccessful, useless.

Best Laid Schemes (Line 39) - Most well-made plans.

Gang Aft Agley (Line 40) - Often go wrong.

Lea'e (Line 41) - Leave.

Nought (Line 41) - Nothing.

Blest (Line 43) - Blessed, fortunate.

Compar'd (Line 43) - Compared.

Toucheth (Line 44) - Affects.

Backward Cast My E'e (Line 45) - Cast my eye backwards, look at the past.

Prospects (Line 46) - Sights (in this case, remembered sights).

Drear (Line 46) - Dreary, depressing, unfortunate.

Tho' (Line 47) - Although.

Canna (Line 47) - Cannot.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is written in what is called the "habbie stanza" or the "Burns stanza." This stanza form is six lines long (sestet) and rhymes AAABAB. The A lines are tetrameter and the B lines are dimeter (more on this in "Meter"). The stanza form was first named for the Scottish bagpipe player Habbie Simpson, but is sometimes called the Burns stanza because Robert Burns used it extensively (in 50 or so of his poems), as did other Scottish poets in the eighteenth century.

The poem is divided into eight of these stanzas:

Stanza 1: lines 1-6
Stanza 2: 7-12
Stanza 3: 18-18
Stanza 4: 19-24
Stanza 5: 25-30
Stanza 6: 31-36
Stanza 7: 37-42
Stanza 8: 43-48

An important feature of the habbie stanza for this poem is the fact that the last two lines can seem unexpected. The first four lines, with their three rhyming tetrameter lines and the concluding dimeter line, can sound to the reader like a complete unit, as if the stanza could end right there. The last two lines, then, may come as a surprise. The speaker sometimes uses this "surprising" quality of the stanza's final two lines to convey surprising or unexpected ideas.

For example, in stanza two, the speaker uses the final two lines to affirm a profound connection between himself and the mouse—a connection that seems unexpected after the reference to "Man's dominion." Similarly, the speaker uses the final two lines of stanza five, which come as a surprise to the reader, to describe the plough blade crashing through the nest, which came as a surprise to the mouse.

The habbie stanza is also notable for its unusual dimeter lines. These lines can be used to emphasize key phrases, since the shortness of the line makes the phrase stand out. The speaker uses the dimeter line in this way to call attention to the suffering that he and the mouse must endure—the "cranreuch cauld," for example, or "prospects drear."

Another important aspect of the poem's form is the fact that it is a dramatic monologue. It is spoken by a particular character in a particular context, as if the poem's speaker were a character in a play. The context is that the speaker has just "turn[ed] up" in the mouse's nest, as the poem's subtitle says. The speaker himself is a farmer and he addresses the poem to the mouse as one character addresses another onstage. Poets like Robert Browning ("My Last Duchess") and Alfred Lord Tennyson ("Ulysses") were especially well known for their dramatic monologues, but Robert Burns is an early and skilled user of this form.

METER

The poem is written with the habbie stanza, or Burns stanza, which has four lines of iambic tetrameter, one line of iambic dimeter, one line of iambic tetrameter, and finally one line of iambic dimeter. An iamb is a poetic foot with a da DUM beat pattern; tetrameter means there are four of these iambs per line, while dimeter means there are just two. Take a look at lines 37-42:

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

The poem's meter is largely regular. Some exceptions to the pattern include lines that stress the first syllable and lines that have feminine (unstressed) endings, adding an extra unstressed syllable at the end of the line. Lines 1-2, for example, scan:

> Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous beastie,
> O, what a panic's in thy breastie!

In these lines, the unusual stress on the first syllable gives extra emphasis to "wee" and "O"—the mouse's small size and the speaker's mock gravity as he exclaims over her fright. These terms help establish the speaker's affectionate, joking tone.

Throughout the rest of the poem, the highly regular meter, together with the fact that most lines are end-stopped, allows the speaker to highlight important words by placing them at the end of the line. There, they receive emphasis both from the iambic stress on the line's final syllable and the pause at the end of the line. In lines 13-14, for example, "thieve" and "live" are stressed at the end of the line. These terms emphasize the way that mice are normally viewed under "Man's dominion," as thieves and pests, and the way the speaker is choosing to view the mouse differently, as a creature entitled by "Nature's social union" to "live."

The speaker also highlights important phrases by placing them in the unusual dimeter (two foot) lines. There, the shortness of the line makes the phrase stand out with even more significance. The speaker ends stanza six, for example, with the dimeter line "An' cranreuch cauld!" This reference to the winter's harsh frost becomes even starker when the phrase is set off by itself, alone—emphasizing that there is nothing for the mouse in this environment except the frost. The final line of the poem—"I guess an' fear!"—has a similarly stark quality by virtue of being so much more abrupt than the other lines. This makes sense, given that the speaker sees nothing but fearful prospects when he looks ahead to the future.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of the poem, following the pattern of the habbie stanza (see "Form") is:

AAABAB

Every stanza of the poem uses that same rhyme scheme. The poem uses rhymes to join together key words, either words that have parallel meanings or words that have opposing or antithetical meanings. The similarity in sound helps the reader to pair those words and pay closer attention to their relationship—either a relationship of similarity or contrast. For instance, in lines 19, 20, and 23, "ruin," "strewin," and "ensuin," are rhymed. These words all emphasize the way that the mouse's nest will only be further destroyed by the winds, and the rhyme helps the reader see this connection between the words.

In lines 13-14, on the other hand, the speaker rhymes words with opposing meanings: "thieve" and "live." The first word suggests that the mouse has no right to take the farmer's food, since this would make her a thief; the second word suggests that the mouse has every right to take the farmer's food, since she has to survive. The speaker emphasizes the sharp contrast between these viewpoints by rhyming the two opposing words. (Note that the rhyme sound would be closer in the poet's dialect.) The rhyme also calls extra attention to the fact that the speaker adopts the second viewpoint, supporting the mouse's right to take food. This is a surprising perspective for a farmer, but he believes she has a right to "thieve" *because* she needs the food to "live." The rhyme helps the reader see both the contrast and the connection between the two words.

The poem frequently uses imperfect rhyme or slant rhyme. Slant rhyme is disruptive, breaking up the perfectly regular sound patterns. This disruption is especially effective in stanza seven when it reflects the disruption the speaker is describing. The main message of the stanza is that the future doesn't always unfold the way readers expect. When readers hear "agley" at the end of line 40, they expect a long /a/ sound at the end of line 42 but hear "joy" instead. By violating the reader's expectations, the rhyme scheme reinforces the meaning of the stanza.

In general, the slant rhyme prevents the poem from becoming

too monotonous or sing-song, which could happen in a poem with only perfect rhymes, and continues to pull in the readers' attention by startling them with unexpected sounds. These broken rhymes work especially well in more somber moments of the poem, as when the speaker regrets making the mouse "startle" and gravely recognizes her as his "fellow-mortal."

SPEAKER

This poem is narrated from the speaker's first-person point of view. The speaker is a farmer, likely an adult male, given the close resemblance of the speaker to Robert Burns himself. Burns had a great deal of sympathy for animals and consistently objected to shooting them. In a 1789 letter, Burns described the shooting of a hare as "a deep crime against the morality of the heart. We are equally creatures of some Great Creator"—a view that mirrors the speaker's belief in "Nature's social union." A man who worked on Burns's farm as a boy even told a story about how the poem came about. He was chasing a mouse with a "pattle" one day when Burns, who was ploughing nearby, saw and shouted at him to leave the poor animal alone. In the poem, the speaker is the one who upsets the mouse, but his sympathy for the creature reflects Burns's own sentiments.

The speaker's use of a plough also connects him to Burns. Burns, a farmer himself, was praised as the "Heaven-taught ploughman," for his skillful use of Scottish dialect and moving images of rural life. Burns's brother even claimed that Burns wrote "To a Mouse" with his hand actually on a plough.

The speaker begins with a relatively relaxed attitude and addresses the mouse in a good humored, gently mocking tone as a "wee … beastie." He shows affection toward the mouse but does not seem to take her plight very seriously at first. Rather quickly, though, the speaker's light-hearted attitude shifts to a more serious consideration of the larger problem that the mouse represents: the breaking of "Nature's social union." He also takes the mouse's distressed state more seriously as he reflects on how it represents his own state and the state of all creatures. He is the mouse's "poor … companion" and "fellow-mortal." The mouse's plight is just one example of how all creatures suffer "grief an' pain." While endearing terms like "Mousie" still show some light-hearted affection, the speaker becomes more and more somber as the poem goes on, as he dwells more deeply on the inescapable tragedies of life.

SETTING

The poem is set on a farm, where the speaker has been ploughing and where mice eat corn from the fields and build nests from coarse grass. The farm is most likely in rural Scotland, given that the speaker uses a Scottish dialect (with distinctive words like "wee" and "snell," and variants on standard English words like "na" for not and "laith" for "loath). The year is 1785 and the month is November, as the subtitle says. It is likely late in the month, as the speaker says that "December's winds" are already starting to blow.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Burns won fame and popularity for the distinctive language of his poems, a blend of formal English and Scottish dialect. This blend is visible in "To a Mouse," in phrases like "Man's dominion" and "bickerin brattle." Burns's vernacular style, along with his origins as a farmer, made him known as the "heaven-taught ploughman." But his poems didn't come simply from natural genius. Burns had little formal education, but he was widely read, and "To a Mouse" shows how he found inspiration in other poets.

Anna Barbauld, for example, was a contemporary poet Burns admired. Barbauld wrote a popular poem called "The Mouse's Petition to Dr Priestly Found in the Trap where he had been Confined all Night." The poem's speaker is a mouse who pleads with Dr. Priestly, a celebrated scientist, to spare its life instead of using it for scientific experiments. Barbauld shows sympathy for the mouse's plight, much like Burns's poem.

Burns also draws on the famous 18th-century poet Alexander Pope. Burns knew Pope's work well, and "To A Mouse" alludes to Pope's poem "An Essay on Man." Pope refers to "forms of social union," which prevailed in the "state of nature," the "reign of God." In this state, Pope wrote, "Man walked with beast, joint tenant of the shade … No murder clothed him, and no murder fed." Humans did not kill animals but shared their food with them. According to Christian belief, humans and animals enjoyed this kind of peace in the Garden of Eden. Sadly, this "social union" was broken when humans sinned, were expelled from the Garden, and began killing animals for food and clothing. By using these lines from Pope, Burns makes his poem a comment on something much larger than a single encounter between a farmer and a mouse. The poem calls to mind all broken relationships that come from human sin, and also shows the speaker trying, in a small way, to recover the original peaceful harmony between humans and animals.

Burns also alludes more indirectly to William Shakespeare, an author he loved. Burns's poem "A Winter Night" has an epigraph from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and "To a Mouse" seems inspired particularly by *Lear*. In this play, the elderly Lear is turned out of his home into a stormy night and reflects that "unaccommodated man," man without shelter or clothing, "is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal." He also expresses pity for other homeless persons caught in the storm: "How shall your houseless heads … defend you / From seasons such as these?" Faced with loss of home and comfort, King Lear finds

the commonalities between humans and animals and feels greater compassion for all humans. Burns's speaker comes to similar realizations after accidentally forcing the mouse out of her home.

Altogether, "To a Mouse" reveals that Robert Burns was not simply a farmer with a natural knack for verse. He was also a perceptive reader of poetry, and he used and transformed a variety of poetic sources to create his work. This poem, in turn, has become a source for other writers. Several novels and poems have taken their titles from lines from this poem. The most famous is John Steinbeck's classic 1937 novel, *Of Mice and Men*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In "To A Mouse," the speaker destroys the mouse's nest with a plough and the mouse is rendered homeless. These two aspects of the poem mirror two aspects of social change in Burns's day. The Scottish Agricultural Revolution, a transformation and modernization of farming practices, was unfolding in the late 18th century. In past centuries, individuals without their own land could graze their animals for free on common land. This system changed in the 1700s. Scottish landowners used advances in agricultural science and technology—including the English plough—to make farming more efficient. They enclosed, or took over, common land so that poorer individuals could no longer use this land to make a living.

Landowners also raised rents for tenant farmers (farmers who lived and worked on their land) and tore down villages. In this process, known as the Lowland Clearances, thousands of farmers were forced to leave their homes. The poem's speaker, with his plough, represents the advancements of the Scottish Agricultural Revolution. The mouse, turned out of her home by the plough, represents those who lost their homes and livelihoods at the same time.

The mouse also represents those poorer, landless citizens who survived by gleaning. Gleaning is gathering the crops that remain in the field after the harvest. In the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament), laws require farmers to leave behind whatever food they dropped or overlooked for the poor to glean. The mouse's request of a "daimen-icker in a thrave," a stray ear of corn from a large bundle, would be what someone would glean from a field.

In many parts of Christian Europe, the poor were given the right to glean by law. However, in the late 18th century, the practice of gleaning came under attack. Some viewed gleaning as stealing. An important case ended the legal right to glean in England in 1788, three years after the poem was written. Several cases in Scotland also took away gleaning rights. In saying the mouse "thieve[s]," the speaker reminds the reader of those people who wished to glean but were turned away as thieves. The speaker, however, does allow the mouse her "sma' request" and says it will bring him a "blessin'"—just as God, in the Bible, promises to bless the farmers who allowed the poor to glean.

Burns's father was a tenant farmer, and Burns farmed alongside him. Around the time when he wrote "To A Mouse," Burns thought he might have to leave Scotland and take work on a plantation in Jamaica due to his failed harvests and growing debts. Burns, who had strongly democratic sympathies, would have had many reasons to feel compassion for the hungry poor and for farmers displaced from their homes. This compassion comes through in his speaker's attitude towards the hungry, displaced mouse.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Robert Burns Encyclopedia — Find information here on Robert Burns's life, poems, and the people and places he knew. (http://www.robertburns.org/encyclopedia/)
- Robert Burns Night — Learn about Robert Burns Night, an annual event celebrating Burns's life and works, and find digital resources like a Robert Burns app and podcast. (https://www.scotland.org/events/burns-night)
- Robert Burns Biography — Learn about Robert Burns's life in this detailed biography, which focuses on his growth as a poet. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-burns)
- Recitation of "To a Mouse" — Listen to "To a Mouse" recited by the actor Christopher Tait, an actor who performs at Burns Nights and other Scottish events around the world. (https://youtu.be/DgHbhfUkpyI)
- "To a Mouse" Original Printing — View a digitized copy of the "Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect" (sometimes called the Kilmarnock Edition), in which "To a Mouse" was first published in 1785. (https://digital.nls.uk/poems-chiefly-in-the-scottish-dialect/archive/74571116#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=144&xywh=-921%2C-1%2C)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BURNS POEMS

- Ae Fond Kiss
- A Red, Red Rose

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