Of Mouse and Man

YOUR FAVORITE POETRY IS HERE, UNZIPPED, FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING. THIS MONTH, ROBERT BURNS GIVES IT TO YOU FROM THE MOUSE’S POINT OF VIEW.

To unzip poetry:

>>TO REVEAL THE TRUTH OF A POEM

>>TO ANALYZE A POEM’S MEANING

>>TO CLARIFY THE FORM BEHIND THE WORDS

To A Mouse, On Turning Up Her Nest With The Plough

By Robert Burns

Wee, sleekit, cow’rin, tim’rous beastie, O, what a panic’s in thy breastie! Thou need na start awa sae hasty, Wi’ bickering 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, whiles, 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!

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 mony 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 drea! An’ forward, tho’ I canna see, I guess an’ fear!

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!
Robert Burns’s “To A Mouse” is a poignant poem filled with charm and vigor. The use of odd, elliptic language, combined with a colloquial tone, draws the reader into the protagonist’s earthly plight. The poem is written in loose meter and is littered with slant rhymes and assonance, such as “opinion/union/companion” or “startle/mortal,” which create a musical rhythm. Most striking, perhaps, is the sense that the poem is meant to be spoken or read aloud.

The poem’s technical genius goes hand in hand with its compelling message, creating truly effective verse. In the poem, the narrator describes how he has uprooted a “tim’rous” mousie’s nest with his plow. He then apologizes for validating the age-old assumption that man dominates nature, and suggests that he and the mouse are, in fact, partners in the pursuit of life. The narrator calls the mouse his “poor, earth-born companion/An’ fellow-mortal!” In this way he binds together mice and men in the fellowship of the mortality and secularity that they share. (John Steinbeck borrowed the line “o’ mice an’ men” for the title of one of his most famous novels, and adopted its message in the plot.)

ABOUT ROBERT BURNS
BORN
January 25, 1759
Alloway, Scotland
DIED
July 21, 1796
Dumfries, Scotland
EDUCATION
Self-educated
while he worked on his father’s farm.
REBEL POET
Burns was a celebrity in his time. He had tons of female fans, and every farm that he passed would invite him in for a meal.
MOST FAMOUS MOMENT
Burns wrote over 400 songs, including “Auld Lang Syne,” the song we sing on New Year’s Eve.

Unzipped: Your Turn

>>IN THE FIRST STANZA OF THE POEM, THE SPEAKER ADDRESSES THE MOUSE WHOSE NEST HE HAS UPTURNED WITH HIS PLOW. WHAT IS HIS TONE?

>>HOW DO YOU INTERPRET THE LINES “I’M TRULY SORRY MAN’S DOMINION, HAS BROKEN NATURE’S SOCIAL UNION”?

>>WHAT PHRASES IN THE POEM SHOW THE SPEAKER’S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE MOUSE?

>>AT THE END OF THE POEM, THE SPEAKER SAYS “STILL THOU ART BLEST, COMPAR’D WI’ ME.” WHY DOES HE SAY THIS? DO YOU AGREE?

>>SEND US the title and author of your favorite poem, and tell us why you love it. What is it about the poem that speaks to you? What’s your favorite image? How does it relate to you and your life? Send your response to LC@Scholastic.com.