University of Glasgow

Scottish Literature in the Classroom

Scottish Poetry Collection for Higher English:

Robert Burns, ‘Composed in August’

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Using the Teaching Materials

The Scottish Literature in the Classroom project aims to support teachers of secondary English by providing resources on the new Scottish Set Texts at National 5 and Higher. This teaching guide is part of a series focused on the Scottish Poetry Collection for Higher. Each guide provides contextual information on the poem and author and a detailed reading of the given text, as well as discussion prompts and practice exam questions. Other online resources that may be helpful to teachers and students are also listed here.

Teachers are encouraged to utilise and adapt materials to best suit their own classrooms, combining with their own activities on, for example, poetic techniques and literary analysis.

'Composed in August' was written by Robert Burns. Teaching resource written by Ronnie Young. Thanks also to Rhona Brown, Jennifer Farrar, Maureen Farrell, Corey Gibson, Kirsteen McCue, Pip Osmond-Williams, and teacher colleagues across Scotland for their guidance and support.

Context

Poem overview

'Composed in August' is one of Robert Burns's early love songs and was inspired by one of his early infatuations. The title of the song not only tells us about its date of composition, it also provides the setting for the verse. The speaker is out walking on a pleasant August evening and begins to reflect on love and the beauties of nature, reflections which form the main body of 'Composed in August'.

August here is presented as a transitional point of the year as summer moves to autumn, with 'westlin winds' ushering in the change of seasons and fields of crops turning from green to yellow. As a farmer, the rhythm of Burns's life would be dictated by weather and the changing of the seasons.

But August is also a key time of year in the hunting season. Grouse shooting, for example, traditionally begins on the 12th August, or 'Glorious Twelfth', and the 'moorcock' mentioned in the poem is another name for red grouse. The references to the 'slaughtering guns' of sportsmen and the wounded bird shows that the speaker's idyllic walk is interrupted by the shooting of birds for sport. Like farming, 'field sports' are another aspect of rural life, yet hunting in Burns's day was an activity largely reserved to social elites.

Image: Grouse Shooting (1822) by James Pollard. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Throughout the poem Burns explores the relationship between humans and nature. The speaker introduces the destructive aspects of that relationship. However, he also shows a

positive side. The beauty and diversity of nature is on display, inspiring the speaker to thoughts of love. The birds in the poem each have a natural habitat which they 'love', just as the speaker finds his own pleasure at Peggy's side.

'Composed in August' shares themes and concerns expressed in other works by Burns. It is part of a vast body of song lyrics produced by the poet, and deals with themes expressed in other songs like 'A Red Red Rose': for example, both songs set up a relationship between the human emotions at the heart of the poem and the natural world more broadly. Burns's concern about the human impact on nature is also evident here. The line 'Tyrannic man's dominion' echoes the sentiments expressed 'To a Mouse' (another early poem written after 'Composed in August'), showing the young Burns's concern about the destructiveness of human beings when they assert mastery over nature.

Author background

Robert Burns (1759 –1796) was born on the 25 January 1759 in a small cottage built by his father William Burnes in Alloway, Ayrshire, which still stands today. He came from a humble farming background which informs the subject matter of much of his poetry and song.

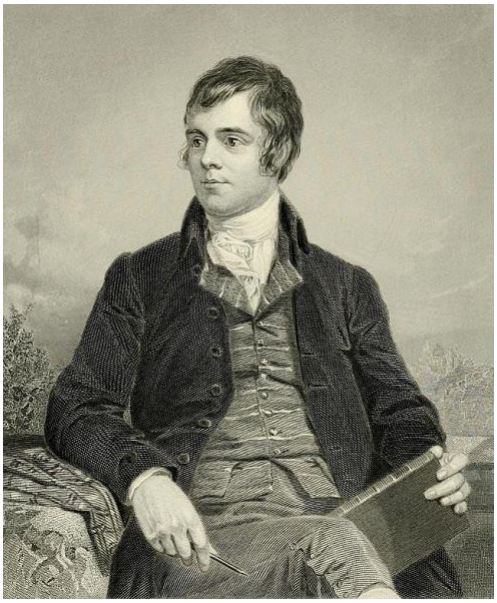

Image: Robert Burns. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Burns's first collection *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* was published in the town of Kilmarnock 1786. As its title suggests, Burns wrote much of his poetry in the Scots language, and indeed he is considered one of the leading figures of the eighteenth-century 'Vernacular Revival' of Scots-language poetry alongside poets Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson. The collection was a remarkable success, and Burns was celebrated as a 'heaven-taught ploughman' by the literati of Edinburgh, where he went to prepare an expanded second edition of his poems.

Throughout his early life, Burns had resided in Ayrshire, but in 1789 he moved to the Scottish borders to Ellisland farm with wife Jean Armour and family and also supplemented his income by working as an Excise officer. Despite the laborious nature of such work,

Burns continued to write celebrated poetry, including his narrative tour de force 'Tam o' Shanter'. He also devoted considerable time to collecting and reworking the lyrics for Scottish songs, which he published with editors James Johnson and George Thomson in Edinburgh. From Ellisland, Burns moved to the nearby the nearby town of Dumfries and it was here on the 21 July 1796 that Burns died at the young age of 37, having composed hundreds of poems and songs in the ten years since his initial rise to fame.

The celebrity Burns achieved in his own lifetime only grew after his death, and a 'cult' of Burns blossomed throughout the nineteenth century. Only a few years after his death, friends gathered in his birthplace cottage in Alloway to commemorate his life and work in an event which was to mark the first 'Burns Supper'. Burns Suppers still take place internationally each year on or around 'Burns Night', which takes place on 25 January, the anniversary of the poet's birth. Throughout the nineteenth century, Burns Clubs also began to be formed in Scotland and in Scots diaspora communities across the world. Today, Burns is celebrated as Scotland's 'national bard' and is one of Scotland's most instantly recognisable literary and historical figures. His work helped create modern symbols of Scottish national identity such as the national dish celebrated in his 'Address to a Haggis'. Burns is also very much an international figure: statues of him have appeared all over the world, his work has been translated into numerous languages, and his song 'Auld Lang Syne' is performed globally at New Year.

Publication details

'Composed in August' was first published in the 'Kilmarnock edition', *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* in 1786, although it had been composed earlier when the Burns became reacquainted with an early flame, Margaret Thomson of Kirkoswald, the 'Peggy' mentioned in the song. 'Composed in August' appeared in the same collection as 'To a Mouse' and 'To a Mountain Daisy', which express similar themes about the human impact on the natural world, and the song 'Corn Rigs', which similarly deals with youthful romance in a pastoral agricultural setting.

In the Kilmarnock edition, Burns set 'Composed in August' to the traditional tune 'I had a horse, I had nae mair', though he later sent it to James Johnson for publication with another tune in mind ('Port Gordon'). The song appeared in print in Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum* with a different tune altogether, called 'Come kiss me, come clap me', which is a very difficult tune to sing. The tune that is now most often performed with the song, made famous by folk singer Dick Gaughan, is a new tune entirely and has become

very popular.

Online resources

Performances

Numerous artists have recorded version of 'Composed in August' (or 'Westlin Winds', as it is sometimes known). Examples on YouTube include:

- Dick Gaughan: https://youtu.be/vZ7oYCx6tBw
- Karine Polwart: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmlNmuEl310&t=1227s

More info on performances and recordings of 'Composed in August' is available at https://mainlynorfolk.info/folk/songs/nowwestlinwinds.html.

General

The BBC webpages at https://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/robertburns/ feature all of Burns's poems and songs, as well as a biography of the poet.

The Scottish Poetry Library has selected verse by Burns and a biography of the poet. https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poet/robert-burns/

Dictionaries of the Scots Language (DSL: https://dsl.ac.uk/) is a useful online resource for looking up the meanings of unfamiliar Scots words.

Likenesses

Alexander Nasmyth's portrait of Robert Burns at the National Galleries of Scotland: https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/features/painting-robert-burns-alexander-nasmyth-and-scotlands-national-bard

Other resources

A 'Scotnote' on Burns for schools is available via the Association for Scottish Literature: https://asls.org.uk/publications/books/scotnotes/sn9/

The version of 'Composed in August' printed here and published on the SQA website is the one that will be used in exams, valid from session 2025–26 onwards.

'Composed in August'

by Robert Burns

Now westlin winds and slaught'ring guns		*[westerly]*	(A)
Bring Autumn's pleasant weather;			(B)
The moorcock springs on whirring wings		*[grouse]*	(A)
Amang the blooming heather:	4	*[Among]*	(B)
Now waving grain, wide o'er the plain,			(C)
Delights the weary farmer;			(D)
And the moon shines bright, as I rove by night,			(E)
To muse upon my charmer.	8		(D)
The paitrick loves the fruitful fells,		*[partridge]*	
The plover loves the mountains;			
The woodcock haunts the lonely dells,			
The soaring hern the fountains:	12	*[heron]*	
Thro' lofty groves the cushat roves,		*[wood pigeon]*	
The path of man to shun it;			
The hazel bush o'erhangs the thrush,			
The spreading thorn the linnet.	16		
Thus ev'ry kind their pleasure find,			
The savage and the tender;			
Some social join, and leagues combine,			
Some solitary wander:	20		
Avaunt, away, the cruel sway!		*[Begone]*	
Tyrannic man's dominion;			
The sportsman's joy, the murd'ring cry,			
The flutt'ring, gory pinion!	24	*[wing]*	
But, Peggy dear, the ev'ning's clear,			
Thick flies the skimming swallow,			

The sky is blue, the fields in view,
All fading – green and yellow:
Come let us stray our gladsome way,
And view the charms of Nature;
The rustling corn, the fruited thorn,
And ilka happy creature. *[every]*

We'll gently walk, and sweetly talk,
While the silent moon shine clearly;
I'll grasp thy waist, and, fondly prest, *[pressed]*
Swear how I lo'e thee dearly: *[love]*
Not vernal show'rs to budding flow'rs, *[spring]*
Not Autumn to the farmer,
So dear can be as thou to me,
My fair, my lovely charmer!

Nature and Environment

Burns wrote at the end of the 18th century at a transition point between two major periods of literary and cultural history, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the Romantic period of the early nineteenth century. In general terms, the Enlightenment tended to stress humankind's mastery over nature, as reflected in the agricultural improvement of the age. But even though Burns as a farmer was involved in agricultural improvement, he often expresses concern for the natural world, as in 'To a Mouse' and 'To a Mountain Daisy', from the same collection as 'Composed in August'. In these poems, Burns expresses sympathy for the small aspects of nature crushed by agriculture. In what ways might 'Composed in August' similarly exercise our sympathy for nature?

Eighteenth-century 'neoclassical' poetry still looked to the poetry of Greece and Rome for inspiration and often imitated Classical modes to represent rural life: 'pastoral', for instance, presents an idealised vision of rural living, while 'georgic' poetry addresses themes such as agriculture, the seasons, and the human relationships with nature. We see vestiges of such traditions in 'Composed in August' and its imagining of an idyllic countryside scene. But we might also consider Burns's song as showing the hallmarks of early Romanticism. In this period, poets began to write about nature in ways that set up a distinct relationship between the natural world and the poet, whereby nature inspires the poet's thought processes and their *perception* of nature becomes the central focus of the poem – something which occurs in 'Composed in August'.

To illustrate this shift, consider how Burns's poem alludes to earlier pastoral works by the early 18th-century neo-classical poet Alexander Pope (1688–1744). Compare Burns's song with the following lines from Pope's *Windsor Forest*:

> See! from the brake the whirring Pheasant springs,
> And mounts exulting on triumphant wings.
> Short is his joy; he feels the fiery wound,
> Flutters in blood, and panting beats the ground.
> Ah! what avail his glossy, varying dyes,
> His purple crest, and scarlet-circled eyes,
> The vivid green his shining plumes unfold,
> His painted wings, and breast that flames with gold?
> Nor yet, when moist Arcturus clouds the sky,
> The woods and fields their pleasing toils deny.
> To plains with well-breath'd beagles we repair,
> And trace the mazes of the circling hare.

(Beasts, taught by us, their fellow beasts pursue,
And learn of man each other to undo.)
With slaught'ring guns th' unweary'd fowler roves,
When frosts have whiten'd all the naked groves;
Where doves in flocks the leafless trees o'ershade,
And lonely woodcocks haunt the wat'ry glade.
He lifts the tube, and levels with his eye;
Strait a short thunder breaks the frozen sky.

As you can see there are a number of parallels between Burns's song and Pope's verse, from overall theme even down to individual phrases such as 'slaught'ring guns'. But Burns isn't merely imitating Pope; there are significant differences between the two works. Where Pope's poem gives a heightened poetic description of the socially elite royal hunting grounds of Windsor Forest, Burns's verse focuses on *ordinary life* – a key characteristic of Romantic poetry. The speaker and Peggy are not landowners involved in hunting; they're just ordinary people from an ordinary rural background.

In 'Composed in August', we also see the 'Romantic' device of placing the poet in nature, where nature becomes the inspiration for psychological reflection. It is the speaker's confrontation with the nature around him while out walking – the 'westlin winds'; 'blooming heather'; the moon shining bright – that leads him to 'muse upon my charmer'. These scenes of natural beauty lead him to the wider reflections which form the main part of the poem.

Thinking about nature today, we might even say that Burns's song is ecologically minded. Ecology is the study of the relationship between living creatures and their environment. Burns's song displays 'ecological' awareness of local flora and fauna, specifically the second verse representing birds within their natural habitat. Might we even go as far as to say that the song addresses broadly 'environmental' concerns? For example, in what ways does it criticise the destruction of nature by human beings? In 'On Seeing a Wounded Hare', Burns later cursed 'Inhuman man' for the 'barb'rous art' of hunting and the 'cruel heart' that would attempt to murder a poor defenceless creature. Here, in 'Composed in August', he similarly reacts against the cruelty of shooting birds for sport:

Avaunt, away, the cruel sway!
Tyrannic man's dominion;
The sportsman's joy, the murd'ring cry,
The flutt'ring, gory pinion! (lines 21–24)

Full analysis

Form and structure

'Composed in August' is a song composed of 5 verses of 8 lines each, rhyming ABABCDED. The verses have a regular metre and rhythm with 4 strong stressed syllables in each line, or '4-beat' verse, which is particularly suited to musical accompaniment.

Song lyrics often include repetitions (think, for example, about the parts repeated in the lyrics to a pop song), and here there is a refrain in the first stanza (line 8) and last stanza (line 40) where the speaker turns to thoughts of 'my charmer'. This refrain frames the wider reflections on nature within his own thoughts about his love.

Another form of repetition common to song is structural 'parallelism', such as the use of 'internal rhyme' where a word within a line rhymes with the end of the line. The effects of this device are largely rhythmic. Internal rhymes are used throughout 'Composed in Autumn': for example, 'And the moon shines bright, as I rove by night' (line 7) or 'Thro' lofty groves the cushat roves' (line 13). What other examples can you find?

The overall structure of the song might be broken down as follows:

- Setting the scene
- Description of local environment
- Reflection on nature in general
- Turn to the beauties of nature
- Proposition

The first verse establishes the speech situation of the poem. The speaker is 'roving' on an August night and enjoying the weather and rural scene, and this leads him to think about his sweetheart. The next verse moves from this particular scene to a wider view of native birds in their natural habitat, while verse three broadens out even further to reflect on the natural order of things and man's relationship with nature more generally. In the fourth stanza, the poem then turns from the negative aspects of that relationship towards a more positive view of the speaker and his sweetheart enjoying the charms of nature. This builds up to an imagined future in which the speaker and his lover enjoy nature together.

Lines 1–2

Now westlin winds and slaught'ring guns
Bring Autumn's pleasant weather;

The first verse fills out the setting of the poem: a rural scene on an August evening. As a common literary and cultural motif, wind is frequently seen as symbolising change, and the 'westlin winds' of the first line show how we are at a transitional point of the year, as summer ends and we move into 'Autumn's pleasant weather' (line 2). However, despite the pleasant weather there is a stark contrast between the 'westerly winds' and the 'slaught'ring guns' in line 1. In the most basic terms, wind is natural while guns are man-made. In what ways might this contrast set up an antagonistic relationship between humans and nature developed later in the poem? The phrase 'slaught'ring guns' is metonymic and refers, of course, to the people with whom the guns are associated, namely hunters who shoot birds for sport.

Lines 3–4

The moorcock springs on whirring wings
Amang the blooming heather:

We then move to an image of a 'moorcock' flying out of heather bushes. The bird is described in terms of action and sound. It 'springs' suddenly from the heather. Onomatopoeia is used in the phrase 'whirring wings' to approximate the sound made by its wings flapping. We might note that the specific type of bird described here is a game bird: the moorcock is another name for red grouse, and the grouse shooting season traditionally begins in August. From this, we might conclude that it is the shooters' guns mentioned in line 1 that have disturbed the bird.

Image: Red Grouse. Photograph by Caroline Legg, licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0

Lines 4–6

Now waving grain, wide o'er the plain,
Delights the weary farmer;

The remainder of the first verse continues to set an idyllic rural scene. The image it presents are of extensive fields of wheat moving gently, 'or waving' in the westerly wind. The farmer is also presented in idyllic terms: his weariness does not detract from the delight he takes at a successful crop. As a farmer himself, Burns was well aware of the difficult life tenant farmers had; but here the vision of agriculture presented here is idealised rather than realistic.

Lines 6–8

And the moon shines bright, as I rove by night,
To muse upon my charmer.

At this point, the speaker inserts themself into the poem. They are roving about this rural scene by moonlight, and the romantic scenery has led them to think about the person they love. To 'muse' here means to reflect, but traditionally a 'muse' is also a person – conventionally a female figure – who inspires poetry.

Lines 9–16

The paitrick loves the fruitful fells,
The plover loves the mountains;
The woodcock haunts the lonely dells,
The soaring hern the fountains:
Thro' lofty groves the cushat roves,
The path of man to shun it;
The hazel bush o'erhangs the thrush,
The spreading thorn the linnet.

Nearly every line in the second verse is dedicated to a different kind of bird: the partridge; the plover; the woodcock; the heron; the wood pigeon; the thrush; and the linnet (a type of small finch). But the verse is more than a simple list of birds. These birds are also native to

the region of Scotland in which the poem is set, and the speaker further outlines the specific habitat in which they live.

Image: Grey heron. Photograph by Tim Green, licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0

Herons, for example, are water birds, and here their favourite 'haunt' is 'fountains' (line 12). The poem also says that the 'woodcock haunts the lonely dells' (line 11), which might seem an effective description of their habits (look, for example, at what the Wildlife Trust today says about the woodcock: https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife-explorer/birds/wading-birds/woodcock). The cushat 'roves' around in 'lofty groves' of trees (line 13), which might seem an appropriate way to describe wood pigeons. Note that the speaker also uses Scots names for certain birds: 'paitrick' for partridge; and 'cushat' for wood pigeon. The speaker thus displays a considerable amount of local ecological knowledge: he is familiar with the birds of that region, their local names and their local environment.

Note, however, that Burns is not conducting an ecological survey; he is writing poetic verse. The descriptions of birds and their habitat may be accurate, yet they are also poetic. For example, the alliteration of 'fruitful fells' (line 9), the description of the 'soaring hern' in flight (line 12), or the 'spreading thorn' (line 16), all use a heightened poetic language to describe nature.

Lines 17–20

Thus ev'ry kind their pleasure find,
The savage and the tender;
Some social join, and leagues combine,
Some solitary wander:

Burns's poetry often moves between the 'local' and the 'universal', and in the third verse of 'Composed in August' he moves from specific description of local birds to a more general or 'universal' reflection on the natural order of things. Every creature has their own pleasures (line 17) and their own nature: some creatures are social, while some prefer solitude (lines 19–20). Might the reference to creatures who 'solitary wander' also refer to the speaker himself? He is after all out roving alone at night. The birds of verse 2 have

found their own pleasure, happy in their preferred habitats. What might the speaker's own pleasure be in relation to Peggy?

Lines 21–24

Avaunt, away, the cruel sway!
Tyrannic man's dominion;

It's not all idyllic though: in line 18, the 'savage' is said to coexist with the 'tender', and the remaining lines of the verse turn to what could be considered a form of human savagery. The speaker tries to wish away the cruel actions of the sportsmen which intrude on his otherwise idyllic walk.

'Tyrannic man's dominion' introduces a theme that Burns later explores in 'To a Mouse' when he apologises for turning the mouse out of its nest: 'I'm truly sorry man's dominion, / Has broken Nature's social union'. In this later poem, 'man's dominion' is figured as a kind of broken social contract whereby man's mastery over nature should come with the responsibility to care for other living beings. In 'Composed in August', Burns describes 'man's dominion' over animals as a form of 'tyranny', or oppressive power. At the time Burns wrote, tyranny was seen as the exercise of absolute power to the detriment of life, liberty and other natural rights.

Furthermore, the idea of man's dominion has religious roots. Burns (who had a deeply religious upbringing) was familiar with scripture, and this line specifically recalls Genesis and the 'dominion' over nature that God gives to man in the first book of the Bible:

> 'And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.' (Genesis 1:26 KJV)

In Genesis 1:28, God further commands man to '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'. However, rather than exercising a custodial dominion which replenishes the earth, we could say that the action of humans in this song diminishes the earth by killing animals purely for sport. These lines, broadly speaking, offer a critique of man's mastery over nature.

Lines 23–24

The sportsman's joy, the murd'ring cry,
The flutt'ring, gory pinion!

If 'ev'ry kind their pleasure find' (line 17), the specific pleasure found by some humans is particularly savage: the 'sportsman's joy' is to shoot birds. Note how the term 'murdering' is used rather than 'killing'. What does this connote? 'Murder' might suggest a capital crime from a legal perspective, or from a religious perspective a mortal sin. In the context of this poem, what might this specific word suggest about its attitude towards hunting? The figurative language used in lines 23 and 24 is 'synecdoche', where a part of something is used to represent the whole thing. The 'murd'ring cry' represents the sportsman through the cheer that he shouts out on hitting his mark, while the image of a bloody wing – the 'flutt'ring gory pinion' (line 24) – is used to signify the bird. What are the effects of focusing in on this image to represent a bird wounded for sport?

Lines 25–32

But, Peggy dear, the ev'ning's clear,
Thick flies the skimming swallow,
The sky is blue, the fields in view,
All fading – green and yellow:
Come let us stray our gladsome way,
And view the charms of Nature;
The rustling corn, the fruited thorn,
And ilka happy creature.

In the previous verse, the speaker attempted to wish 'away, the cruel sway' (line 20) of human activities such as shooting for sport. In this verse, he effectively does that, turning instead to the 'charms of Nature' (line 29). He turns to address his love, Peggy, to point out such charms. It is a clear cloudless evening in which 'Thick flies the skimming swallow': swallows are migratory birds who gather at the start of each Autumn to begin their group migration from the UK to warmer Southern climes, hence the poem's image of a 'thick' cloud of swallows 'skimming', or moving swiftly, through the air. At this time of year, the crops in the fields are also turning colour as they ripen 'fading' from 'green to yellow'. The plants in line 31 are described in terms of their properties – 'rustling corn' and 'fruited thorn' – to fill out the scene suggesting nature's plenty. Finally 'ilka', or every, creature is

said to be happy – a stark contrast to the image of the bird in the closing line of the previous verse.

Lines 33–36

We'll gently walk, and sweetly talk,
While the silent moon shine clearly;
I'll grasp thy waist, and, fondly prest,
Swear how I lo'e thee dearly:

The final verse turns from the present towards future prospects. This shift is signalled by use of the future tense: 'we'll gently walk'; 'I'll grasp thy waist'. In other words, the speaker is imagining a future with Peggy in which he and she walk together and share intimacy together. The image of the moon shining clearly also recalls line 7 of the first verse.

Lines 36–40

Not vernal show'rs to budding flow'rs,
Not Autumn to the farmer,
So dear can be as thou to me,
My fair, my lovely charmer!

The song then ends with a declaration of love. The mode here is 'poetic apostrophe' where a speaker in a poem addresses someone or something not actually present (a device conventionally signalled by the formal second person pronoun 'thou', as in line 29). The final lines also contain a rather lofty sentiment, where the speaker is stating that his sweetheart Peggy is dearer and more important to him than spring showers are to flowers coming into bud (line 36) or harvest season is to farmers (line 37). Note how the speaker uses the phrase 'vernal show'rs' instead of straightforwardly referring to spring rain. What is the effect of the heightened poetic diction here? Does it, for example, suggest something about the intensity of the speaker's feelings? What other effects might it have?

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- Are there any unfamiliar words? Can you find out what they mean?
- Find out more about the specific birds mentioned in the song. Compare what you have found with the way the poem describes birds and their habitat.
- Listen to a singer performing the song. What kind of mood does the music set? What's the difference between listening to the song and reading it on the page as poetry?
- Imagine yourself on an evening walk being inspired by your surroundings. What would you write about?
- There are some strong emotions on display in this song. Which emotions can you identify?

Techniques

- Even when reading this verse on page, what formal features suggest that it is a song?
- In what ways does the song establish a clear setting?
- In what ways does the verse move between the 'local' (things specific to particular lives and locations) and the 'universal' (things that seem to be true everywhere, always)?
- What techniques does the song use to present distinct images of the natural world? Find examples.
- What tense is the poem written in and what effect does this have?
- Think about the structural effect of opening and closing the song with the same image (the moon shining). In what ways does it bring the song together?

Themes

- Rather than telling a story, lyric poetry often represents a specific experience. What kind of experiences are on display in this song?
- Why might themes explored in the song such as the relationship between humans and the natural world be important today? Are there any other themes that might still seem relevant to today?
- What other kinds of relationship does the poem explore?

- Are humans depicted as all bad in the poem? Which human activities are depicted as negative, and which positive?
- What does young love have to do with the environment? And vice-versa?

Practice Questions

Look at lines 1–8.

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the poet's use of language describes a a specific scene. (4 marks)

Look at lines 17-24.

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the poet's use of language conveys the relationship between human beings and the natural world. (4 marks)

Look at lines 33–40.

Analyse how the poet's use of language conveys a heightened emotion. (2 marks)

By referring to this poem and to at least one other poem from the Higher Scottish Poetry Collection, discuss how the poets explore use individual experience to explore general ideas. (10 marks)

By referring to this poem and to at least one other poem from the Higher Scottish Poetry Collection, discuss how the poets explore the relationship between human beings and their environment. (10 marks)

NB. Poems that ‘Composed in August’ might be compared with for the 10-mark question are:

- ‘Thomas the Rhymer’ (traditional ballad)
- ‘Summit of Corrie Etchachan’ by Nan Shepherd
- ‘The Bonnie Broukit Bairn’ by Hugh MacDiarmid
- ‘Da Clearance’ by Rhoda Bulter
- ‘33’ by MacGillivray

Connections / Comparisons

The visual below highlights connecting themes that may be useful to consider for the 8- or 10-mark exam question. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list – you may wish to explore beyond these categories and consider how different themes might overlap or contradict one another within and between texts.