



University  
of Glasgow

## Scottish Literature in the Classroom

Scottish Poetry Collection for National 5 English:

Robert Burns, 'A Red, Red Rose'



## Table of Contents

Using the Teaching Materials.....	3
Context .....	4
Poem overview .....	4
Author background.....	4
Publication details .....	5
Online resources .....	5
Other resources.....	6
‘A Red, Red Rose’ .....	7
Burns and Song.....	8
Rose symbolism .....	9
Full analysis.....	10
Discussion Prompts .....	14
Introductory.....	14
Techniques.....	14
Themes .....	14
Practice Questions.....	15
Connections / Comparisons .....	17

## 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 National 5. 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.

*‘A Red, Red Rose’ was written by Robert Burns. Teaching resource written by Ronnie Young and Pip Osmond-Williams. Thanks also to Rhona Brown, Jennifer Farrar, Maureen Farrell, Corey Gibson, to Kirsteen McCue, and to teacher colleagues across Scotland for their guidance and support.*

*Except where otherwise noted, materials in this resource are distributed under a Creative Commons Non-Commercial Share-Alike License ([CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)).*

*This resource was not developed with generative artificial intelligence (AI). Any use of this resource to “train” such AI technologies or to generate text is expressly prohibited.*

## Context

### Poem overview

‘A Red, Red Rose’ is one of Robert Burns’s most well-known love songs. Over the course of four verses, the speaker expresses their feelings through a series of natural images which suggest the undying nature of their love.

### Author background

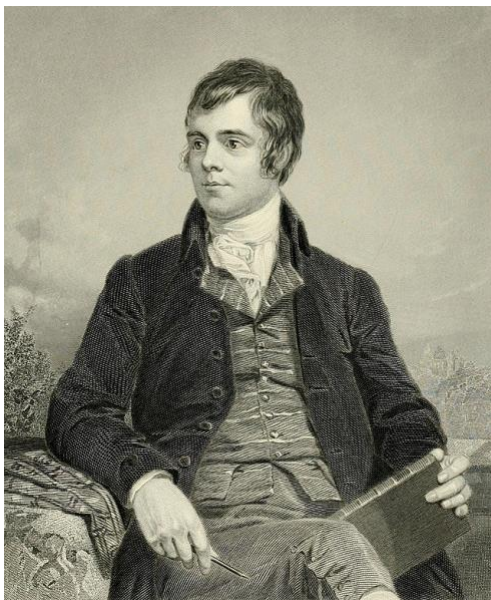


Image: Robert Burns. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

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.

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 18th-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 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 19th 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 19th 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

‘A Red, Red Rose’ was first published in 1794 in Pietro Urbani’s *Selection of Scots Songs* before appearing in James Johnson’s *Scots Musical Museum* (1796) and George Thomson’s *Select Collection of Scottish Airs* (1799). These editors published it alongside different tunes, but the tune most associated with Burns’s song today is ‘Low Down in the Broom’.

## Online resources

### Performances

- Robyn Stapleton: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1t2OY\\_9DIQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1t2OY_9DIQ)
- Rachel Sermanni: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1-PF2kt2jg>
- Bill Adair: <https://burnsc21.glasgow.ac.uk/a-red-red-rose/>

### General

BBC Bitesize has resources (aimed at Higher level) on ‘A Red, Red Rose’:  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zjd2vk7/revision/1>

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/>

### *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 'A Red, Red Rose' printed here and published on the [Scottish Poetry Library website](#) is the one that will be used in exams, valid from session 2025–26 onwards.

## 'A Red, Red Rose'

by Robert Burns

O my Luve's like a red, red rose,	(A)
That's newly sprung in June;	(B)
O my Luve's like the melodie	(C)
That's sweetly play'd in tune.	(B)

4

As fair are thou, my bonie lass,  
So deep in luve am I;  
And I will luve thee still, my Dear,  
Till a' the seas gang dry.

8

Till a' the seas gang dry, my Dear,	<i>[all the seas go]</i>
And the rocks melt wi' the sun:	<i>[with]</i>
I will luve thee still, my dear,	
While the sands o' life shall run.	

12

And fare thee weel, my only Luve!	<i>[well]</i>
And fare thee weel, a while!	
And I will come again, my Luve,	
Tho' it were ten thousand mile!	

16

## Burns and Song

Robert Burns wrote many celebrated love songs, including 'Ae Fond Kiss' and 'Composed in August'. 'A Red, Red Rose' is certainly one of Burns's most famous love songs. But is it original?

Burns wrote this song in the late 18th century, which was an important time for collecting Scottish song. Scots songs were published in numerous song collections throughout the period, including two major multi-volume collections to which Burns made an important contribution: James Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum* and George Thomson's *Select Collection of Scottish Airs*. However, 'collecting' here, didn't mean simply writing down an existing song. Where nowadays we might think of a song as having 'fixed' music and lyrics, things were a little more fluid in the 18th century before the advent of recorded music. Sometimes, Burns's lyrics were published alongside different tunes. James Johnson published 'A Red, Red Rose' to the Scottish air 'Major Graham's Strathspey', as instructed by Burns, yet he also printed an alternate 'Old Set' to a different tune ('Mary Queen of Scots Lament'), while, a little later, George Thomson set 'A Red, Red Rose' to yet another tune called 'Wishaw's favourite'. It was not until 1821, that 'A Red, Red Rose' was published with the tune with which it is associated today, 'Low Down in the Broom'. You can listen to examples of these different tunes at <https://burnsc21.glasgow.ac.uk/list-of-songs/>.

Burns also creatively reworked existing verses to produce 'A Red, Red Rose' (something he often did when collecting songs). For 'A Red, Red Rose', Burns was clearly reworking a number of songs from the period, as shown by the following examples:

Her cheeks are like the Roses  
That blossom fresh in June  
O, she's like a new-strung instrument  
That's newly put in tune

*(The Wanton Wife of Castle Gate)*

Altho' I go a thousand miles  
I vow thy face to see,  
Altho' I go ten thousand miles  
I'll come again to thee, dear Love,  
I'll come again to thee.  
The Day shall turn to Night, dear Love,



And the Rocks melt with the Sun,  
Before that I prove false to thee

(From *The Hornfair Garland*)

Fare you well, my own true love,  
And fare you well for a while,  
And I will be sure to return back again,  
If I go ten thousand mile

(*The True Lover's Farewell*)

In some senses, then, 'A Red, Red Rose' could hardly be called an original song, and the images it uses to express deep and eternal love were not new. But does it matter? Love songs are often derivative, and 'A Red, Red Rose' certainly shows Burns's craft in taking bits from existing 'folk' culture and turning them into a powerful and well-crafted love song.

## Rose symbolism

The rose as a symbol of love and beauty has deep cultural roots, stretching back thousands of years across various civilisations. For example, in Ancient Greece and Rome, the rose was sacred to Aphrodite and Venus, goddesses of love and beauty. In classical Persian literature, the rose (the beloved, who is often divine) is frequently paired with the nightingale (the lover) whose passionate singing reflects the lover's longing. In Medieval courtly poetry, the rose primarily represents romantic love and the idealised beloved (a typically unattainable noble lady), whose virtues mirror the rarity and perfection of the rose. By comparing the speaker's beloved to a 'red, red rose', Burns draws on centuries of symbolic meaning linked to passionate and often idealised love.



Image: *Venus Verticordia* (1864–68) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti.  
Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

## Full analysis

### *Form and structure*

‘A Red, Red Rose’ is a song in 4 verses. The rhyme scheme is ABCB, which is the same rhyme scheme as the **ballad stanza**, a conventional form for song. As song lyrics, the verse here has a regular ‘4-beat’ rhythm. The first and third lines of each verse are iambic tetrameter, with 4 stressed syllables (/). These lines alternating with lines featuring three strong stresses followed by a caesura (/ /), or missed beat:

- / - / - / - /  
And fare thee weel, my only Luve!  
- / - / - / //  
And fare thee weel, a while!

This regular rhythm makes it suited to musical accompaniment.

Other aspects of the song form include repetitions and refrains. There are repeated phrases throughout the song, most notably ‘my Luve’ and ‘my Dear’, which emphasise the male speaker’s feelings for the woman he is addressing.

At the end of the second and fourth verses, there are examples of the kind of incremental repetition often found in songs:

#### **Verse 2**

And I will luve thee still, my Dear,  
Till a’ the seas gang dry.

#### **Verse 4**

And I will come again, my Luve,  
Tho’ it were ten thousand mile!

When listening to a recording of the song, notice how the melody also changes for the second and fourth verses.

### *Lines 1–4*

O my Luve’s like a red, red rose,  
That’s newly sprung in June;

O my Luve's like the melodie  
That's sweetly play'd in tune.

In the first stanza, the speaker uses **simile** to compare their love to two different things: the red rose (line 1) and a melody (line 3). What do these images suggest? And why compare one's love to a rose or to a melody?

Lines 2 and 4 perhaps fill out the grounds for the comparisons used here. The rose is said to be 'newly sprung in June', which conjures up images of fresh beauty, intensified by the repetition of 'red'. The rose (and therefore the beloved) is in her prime and just beginning to bloom, presenting an idealised vision of a woman who appears to the speaker as a symbol of natural beauty. The melody is 'sweetly played in tune', i.e. it sounds pleasing. Here, the lover is compared to something harmonious, emphasising not just her physical charm but her inner grace.

#### *Lines 5–8*

As fair are thou, my bonie lass,  
So deep in luve am I;  
And I will luve thee still, my Dear,  
Till a' the seas gang dry.

Lines 5–8 act as a chorus to the song. 'Fair' and 'bonie lass' reaffirm the lover's beauty but also set the emotional tone for what follows in line 6. Here, the speaker moves from description to feeling to convey the inward depth of his love that mirrors the lover's outward beauty, creating a sense of balance and harmony between the physical and the emotional. This reinforces the sincerity of the speaker, whose love is, as line 6 suggests, profound and consuming.

Lines 7–8 in particular offer an expression of eternal love. 'Still' implies constancy, a love that will persist through time. This is given added weight by the speaker's apocalyptic imagery – the seas drying up – to emphasise that their love will last until the end of the Earth. This could be considered an example of 'impossibilia': it would be impossible for someone to live long enough to witness the end of the Earth, but the image makes sense in the context of the poem. It basically tells us that their love will last forever.

This image is just one of the points in the song where the speaker compares his love to something natural. In line 1, the speaker used the image of the rose. Here he compares his feeling to natural processes: the speaker uses a geological image which points to the Earth changing over a long period of time. However, there is a contrast between this natural image and that of the rose: roses have a short time in bloom and appreciation of their beauty is fleeting, but here the speaker uses an image to suggest that love will endure.

#### *Lines 9–12*

Till a' the seas gang dry, my Dear,  
And the rocks melt wi' the sun:  
I will luve thee still, my dear,  
While the sands o' life shall run.

Line 9 is a linking line which repeats the geological image used in line 8. Line 10 adds another image which refers to natural geological process: 'an' rocks melt wi' the sun'. In a sense, these 'impossible' images of loving someone until the seas dry up or rocks melt are an elaborate poetic way of saying 'I will love you forever'. But by expressing that the speaker's love will endure even past the point when nature itself unravels, the lines also emphasise the passage of **time**, which is the key theme here.

When this song was written, early scientists such as the Scottish geologist James Hutton (1726–1797) wrote about the vast amount of time it takes for geological processes to occur (it might take thousands of years for rocks to erode, for example). Burns is doing something similar with poetry in the sense that he uses geological images to suggest a long passage of time.

Lines 11–12 pick up on this theme of time with the speaker's statement 'I will luve thee still, my dear, / While the sands o' life shall run'. This may simply mean something like 'I will love you all my life', moving from cosmic impossibilities to ground the love in human experience. However, the final line is metaphorical and specifically conjures up the image of an hourglass, an old-fashioned device which measures time using sand inside a glass vial.

The repetition of line 11 (also found in stanza 2) serves as an emotional anchor, underscoring the steadfastness and continuity of the speaker's love in the face of the cycles of time and nature.

*Lines 13–16*

And fare thee weel, my only Luve!  
And fare thee weel, a while!  
And I will come again, my Luve,  
Tho' it were ten thousand mile!

The final verse offers a fond farewell and conveys the bittersweet moment of separation – tender, sorrowful, and full of devotion. Line 14 softens the finality of the previous line – ‘a while’ implies the parting is only temporary, offering a note of hope and reassurance.

Look at the final two lines – they might mean something like ‘I promise to return’ but consider the specific image line 16 uses of someone overcoming impossible odds to be reunited with their lover. To walk ten thousand miles would be impossible without crossing oceans or retracing one's footsteps, but we are not to take the speaker's promise literally. Instead it might work figuratively to suggest the strength of their feelings – that they would do anything to be reunited with their love, no matter how challenging. This declaration means the poem ends not on despair but romantic pledge, completing the arc from passion to enduring commitment and faithful return.

## Discussion Prompts

### Introductory

- Listen to a recording of 'A Red, Red Rose'. How does it make you feel? What effect does the sound or rhythm have when you hear it spoken or sung?
- Burns's song was based on existing lyrics and set to existing tunes. Does it matter that it isn't entirely original?
- What does the poem suggest about the nature of love? Do you agree or disagree with the way the speaker describes it?
- Can you think of an example of another song which makes exaggerated statements about love?
- Compare 'A Red, Red Rose' with the following lines from a modern song. In what ways do they express similar feelings?

But I would walk five hundred miles  
And I would walk five hundred more  
Just to be the man who walked a thousand miles  
To fall down at your door.  
(The Proclaimers, 'I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles)')

### Techniques

- What images does the poem use to suggest eternal love?
- Why does the poem compare the speaker's love to a red rose?
- How is time used in the song?
- What role does hyperbole play in expressing the speaker's feelings?
- What is the impact of repeating phrases like 'I will luve thee still' and 'fare thee well'?

### Themes

- What kind of relationship does 'A Red, Red Rose' outline?
- What kinds of strong emotions are on display in 'A Red, Red Rose'?
- Burns compares love to nature (a rose, seas, sun, sand). What do these elements suggest about love?

- How does Burns express the idea of timeless or eternal love?
- How might Burns's presentation of love compare to real-life experiences or modern portrayals of love?

## Practice Questions

Look at lines 1–4.

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the poet presents their beloved as beautiful. (4 marks)

Look at lines 5–8.

By referring to **one** example of language, explain how the poet shows the intensity of the speaker's feelings. (4 marks)

Look at lines 9–12.

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the poet conveys the idea of love lasting forever. (4 marks)

Look at lines 13–16.

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the poet creates a powerful ending. (2 marks)

By referring to this poem and to at least one other poem from the National 5 Scottish Poetry Collection, show how the environment is an important feature. (8 marks)

NB. Poems that 'A Red, Red Rose' might be compared with for the 8-mark question are:

- 'The Twa Corbies' (traditional ballad)
- 'The Bonnie Earl o' Moray' (traditional ballad)
- 'Lochinvar' (Walter Scott)
- 'Auntie' (Nadine Aisha Jassat)
- 'Little Girls' (Len Pennie)



## 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.

