

## IF YOU ONLY DO ONE THING...

### To A Mouse

On turning up her nest with the plough,  
November 1785

NOTE: This poem is many pupils first introduction to Burns and it is well worth spending some time on to make sure that the children understand what they are reading or reciting. It has all the wonderful hallmarks of Burns – his fondness of nature, his social understanding, a little politics and his humanity. While he is often referred to as ‘the ploughman poet’, Burns’ wide reading and (largely self) education is displayed in the form and rhythm of the lines and the universality of his theme: we, like mice, may make plans, but life and circumstance do not always work out to let them bear fruit.

#### ACTIVITY 1 (LEVELS 2 AND 3)

READING AND WRITING LEVEL 2 AND 3 READING- UNDERSTANDING, ANALYSING, EVALUATING LIT 216A/316A, ENG 319A

Explain to the class that much of Burns' poetry was written in Scottish dialect.

A dialect is a form of a language which has most of the characteristics of the parent language but which differs in some ways.

So, Burns' Scottish dialect looks quite similar to English (the parent language) but some grammar and words are different.

Ask the class if they know any Scottish dialect. E.g. wee (little), ay (yes).

Distribute copies of this Burns' poem to the class. Don't tell them that the title of the poem is "To a Mouse." Read out the first verse to the class:

*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 murdering pattle!*

Ask the pupils to write down what they think these words mean:

- wee
- sleekit
- cow'rin
- tim'rous
- beastie

Ask pupils:

- What type of animal do you think Burns is describing? Mouse. The title of the poem is "To a Mouse."
- What words or lines make you think this?
- What is the mouse doing? Trying to run away.

The mouse is scared of the "murdering pattle." What do you think this might be? Plough-scraper which is a small, long-handled spade for removing clay from the ploughshare.

Read out the rest of the poem to the class.

Divide the class into seven groups and give each of them a verse from 2-8. Ask them to work out what is happening in their verse. They may need to refer to a glossary.

Some groups may find it easier to draw a picture, especially those working on verses 4, 5 and 6.

One member of each group reads out their verse and another member explains what they think is happening.

The poem is about a mouse which carefully builds a winter nest in a wheat field, only for it to be destroyed by a ploughman.

NOTE: In *To a Mouse*, Burns uses empathy to describe how the mouse must be feeling at that moment. Discuss with pupils how Burns manages to combine fantasy with reality, creating a balance between the two. Discuss together the idea contained in the last verse. Ask pupils to remember a time when a plan they or their family had made went 'aglay'. They could write this up as a personal/reflective piece. What was the outcome of the change of plan – did the cloud have a silver lining or did it cause real problems? Does it depend on the way you look at life?

## To a Mouse/From a Mouse

*From a Mouse* by Liz Lochhead featured in a work of poetry and responses called *Addressing the Bard* (SPL, 2009) as a celebration of Burns' 250th anniversary. It parodies the Burns poem and provides a lovely, light-hearted imitation of the original with the mouse doing the talking! In an interview for *The Guardian*, Liz Lochhead spoke of Burns 'writing down the voice of each of his poems... [that] all his voices were sincere but none were necessarily the whole of Burns'. In Liz Lochhead's poem, *From a Mouse*, look out for the voice not only of the mouse, but of the women who hate mice, yet claim to love the Burns 'moose'. The gentle fun poked at the cult of Burns that persists today seems to suggest that we should always pay more attention to the poetry than simply to the man himself!

### ACTIVITY 2 – LITERARY STUDY LEVEL 4

READING LIT 304A, 419A, 417A LISTENING/TALKING 402A

Pupils at this level should be able to see the parody and humour in Liz Lochhead's verse.

Stanzas 1-3: Ask pupils to point up the contrast between the treatment of the mouse in the poem and the reaction of women to mice in real life. Which lines or phrases add a sense of comedy to the poem?

Stanza 4-6 – Liz Lochhead uses italics on several key words. Write them down and try to explain why each is emphasised at this point in the poem.

Lochhead says a wean might cry 'greet' over the 'plough torn nest' but not see the gap between the 'fause' world of Poetry/an baited trap'. What does she mean by a trap and why is this an effective image to choose?

Stanzas 7-10 seem to have a different tone? What is it and how does the word-choice make it clear that the mood (and voice) have changed? Write down any words to show this. What is the mouse's view of Burns attitude to the 'lassies'?

How does the poet bring in twenty first century language to mock our cult of Burns? Write down any phrases or words which seem to be slang/colloquial?

Stanza 11 – suggests this poem has a 'green' message – perhaps ahead of its time? What can you see that might be true to this idea in the original poem?

Although this activity could lead to a piece of critical writing on the poem, it is worthwhile reading it to enjoy discussing Burns as a figure of our culture; our attitudes to him and to one of his most enduring poems for the pleasure of reflecting on it nce again