

## Standards Focus: Analyzing Poetry

### Chapter Two

While some students may think that the title *Of Mice and Men* comes from the fact that Lennie likes to pet mice and other soft things, the title is really taken from the poem "To a Mouse" by Robert Burns. Robert Burns (1759 - 1796) is probably the most famous of all the Scottish poets. After accidentally turning up a mouse's nest while he was plowing in 1785, he wrote an ode to this mouse, expressing his sympathy for the mouse and his home.

For the average English speaker, Burn's poetry can be quite archaic and complex. On the left is the original poem by Burns. On the right is a translation of the words into modern English.

Wee, sleekit, cowran, tim'rous beastie,  
O, what 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, 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' wast,  
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!

Small, sleek, cowardly, nervous little beast,  
Oh, what a panic is in your breast!  
You need not run away so hastily,  
With a quick scurry  
I would hate to run and chase you,  
With a murdering shovel!

I am truly sorry that Man's power  
Has broken Nature's union between man and beast  
And justifies that sad opinion  
Which makes you startle,  
At me, your poor, earth-born friend,  
And fellow mortal!

I do not doubt that sometimes you may steal;  
But so what? Poor beast, you must also live!  
A corn stalk in a field is a small request:  
I will be blessed with more,  
And will never miss it!

Your tiny little house, now, is ruined!  
Its impractical walls the winds are blowing!  
And nothing now, to build a new one,  
Of green foliage!  
And bleak December's wind beginning,  
Both severe and sharp!

You saw the fields bare and vast,  
And the tired Winter coming fast,  
And cozy here, beneath the hearth,  
You thought to make your home,  
Until crash! the cruel plow passed  
And destroyed your home.

That tiny, little heap of leaves and sticks,  
Has cost you many a tired nibble!  
Now you are homeless for all of your trouble,  
Without house or home.  
To live in the Winter's sleety dribble,  
And harsh cold!

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But Mousie, thou are 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!

But Mousie, you are not alone,  
Your planning may be in vain:  
**The best plans of Mice and of Men,  
Often go awry,**  
And leave us nothing but grief and pain,  
For the joy we expected!

Still, you are blessed, compared with me!  
The present moment only affects you:  
But Ouch! I think back  
On sad moments!  
And although I cannot see my life ahead  
I guess what may be, and I am afraid!

*Directions: After reading the original poem and the translation, answer the following questions.*

1. The author's attitude toward the mouse is best described as:
  - a. sympathetic
  - b. skeptical
  - c. apathetic
  - d. unattached
2. Which statement best describes the theme of this poem?
  - a. Men are superior to mice and other small creatures.
  - b. Life is made up of the simpler moments.
  - c. Nature may not always be around, so we should appreciate it while we can.
  - d. Even the most well-constructed plans can fail.

3. Why do you think Burns wrote this poem? What do you think is the purpose of the poem?

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4. Many of us look back on our lives and, although we may have had the best intentions or plans, things did not work out the way we wanted them to, for one reason or another. Think about a time that you had planned for something to turn out one way, and it ended up another. What was your reaction? How did you adapt to the situation? How are you dealing with the situation now? Would you have done anything differently, knowing what you now know?

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