

From Afton's Bank to Leaves and Lilacs:
Burns, Scotland's Rustic Bard's Influence
On Whitman, America's Tribal Prophet.

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Introduction: Poetry as an Aspect of Culture

Culture is frequently presented through a series of symbols. The arts, by their very structure are symbolic, therefore, it is essential to remember that artistic works are created in a particular setting. Poetry for example, is written to be read in a specific historical epoch and to be interpreted with a specific social or metaphysical mind set – a recurring aspect of the symbolic arts. Certain elements, however, are common to all societies and times. They represent the human condition, and so are universal. The anthropologist Levi-Strauss (Bartlett, p. 19) defines the concept of a cultural universal as “anything . . . that exists where every group has habituated.” While there are difference across cultures, the universals serve them all as reflections of values or modes of behavior.

The anthropologist Murdock (Murdock, p. 103) divides universals into two categories, “folk culture” and “deep culture.” Poetry is categorized under folk culture and is considered a fine art. Poetry reflects culture in two ways. First, it uses language that is structurally common everywhere. All languages are translatable, use antonyms and synonyms, and express emotion. Second, as an aspect of language poetry circumscribes time and distance and captures social rituals. Therefore, poetry may be used to analyze culture.

Poetry as a Cultural Mirror

The purpose of this analysis is to assess two cultures across a century.

The first culture examined is that of Scotland, which experienced a Pre-romantic period (focusing on mortality) from the mid-18th century until the dawn of the 19th. This transitioned into the Romantic period (focusing on emotion, individualism, and nature). Romanticism emanated from several interconnected occurrences including the industrial- and political revolutions of the period.

The Industrial Revolution directed focus toward the common people. The transition from a communal to an associational organization made it possible for fine arts practitioners of the era to identify and celebrate the values of the individual and to provide warnings that industrialization could damage the core of the culture.

The second culture examined is that of post-revolutionary America. The revolutions of the period emphasized the importance of personal values. Both the American (1776-1783) and the

French (1789-1803) revolutions, for example, weakened the aristocratic culture of Europe generally, and that of England especially. Consequently, literature and poetry began to celebrate common tasks and the beauty of nature, which were accessible to all regardless of class.

The nationalism that characterized the emergence of America as an independent nation after the War of 1812 along with the westward movement of the 1820s produced a new generation of literary figures. These individuals focused on a transcendence that embraced nature and spirituality.

Both the pre-romantic and romantic epochs produced many non-traditional practitioners of the fine arts. Of the arts, poetry was the first among equals in both Scotland and America. And given their common roots, the pre-romantic and romantic poets strongly influenced each other.

Two poets stood out, one in each nation. These were Robert Burns in Scotland, and Walt Whitman in America. Burns was known as the Scottish Rustic Bard, and Whitman as America's Tribal Prophet. Two facets of their poetry will serve as a lens through which to view the impact of the former on the latter – death and nature.

Death in a Cultural Context

All cultures develop a process for dealing with individuals as they depart the world. Symbolically, poetry has the potential to capture the nuance of the experience and transfer it to an individual conceptual framework. What is significant is the human reaction to the experience in the larger societal context. Our way to engage the response is by assessing several poems prepared by each of the authors being analyzed.

Burns on Death

Robert Burns led an eclectic life. He began as a farmer then obtained a tax collector position. Yet throughout his life, he wrote poetry. Burns was a student of the emotional side of tragedy. For example, he made part of his living by writings epitaphs. Also, he was drawn to the human side of war.

Two poems and one epitaph, in particular, reflect his blend of realism and romanticism. First, in *A Mother's Lament for the Death of Her Son*, (Burns. p. 87) he envisions a mother's grief over a lost future. He draws upon nature, comparing the son to a sapling dropped in its' prime. And then, in *The Song of Death*, (Burns. p. 94), Burns links a soldier's death to the ending of the day and the loss of human honor. Here again, he uses nature to capture the complexity of human emotion. In essence, Burns' romanticism is a link to the seasonal changes in nature.

Finally, in *Epitaph for Robert Aiken, Esq.* (Burns. p. 113) Burns provides an interesting mixture of nature via temperature and the humanism of his subject. Thus, when writing on the tragedy of death, Burns cannot escape his perspective on nature's role.

Whitman on Death

Whitman's concern with death emerges from his involvement in the American civil war. He served as a journalist during the heated pro- and anti-slavery debates of the 1850s. After the war broke out, he served as a lay medical aide to wounded soldiers in the D.C area and continued to write about the horrors of the conflict. His poetry, as with Burns, reflects a naturalistic construct surrounding conflict and death.

Whitman's engagement with war is captured in three of his best-known poems culminating in his memorialization of the death of President Abraham Lincoln. In *Beat! Beat! Drums!* (Whitman. p.87), Whitman captures the all-encompassing nature of loss. His stentorian repetition of the drum dirge is contrasted with the everyday activities of humanity. Voices are drowned out, commerce overcome and "mothers' entreaties" disregarded as the "dead . . . lay awaiting the hearses."

Whitman's most wrenching verse, *O Captain! My Captain* (Whitman. p. 98) compares the death of Lincoln with the end of a devastating ocean voyage. The ship (of state) has suffered every challenge and "bested" them. Yet, the captain lies "fallen cold and dead." Use of the romantic artifices, joyous and sorrowful sound, temperature, and contrasted emotion – happiness and sorrow reinforce a universal reaction to death.

Whitman's longest and most comprehensive inquiry into death's impact on culture, "*When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard bloom'd*" (Whitman. p. 125), is a comprehensive, personal reaction to the breadth and depth of the event. Romantic technique – everyday activities, seasonal change and the lasting awareness of death's universal impact – are recurring themes that permeate all twenty stanzas of the poem.

Death was a common theme in both the poetry and fiction of the Romantic period in western culture. However, the period is not always bleak and dreary. An interesting contrast is a continuing awareness of the beauty of nature as it impacts and motivates the human condition. Both Burns and Whitman are primary practitioners of its application. Thus, we turn from sadness to joy.

The Romantic Wave in Poetry

The second link that joins Burns and Whitman is the literary period known as Romanticism. There are various dates assigned to its' beginning and end. The former is the 1780s, the latter is the 1870s. As stated earlier, two major forces are held responsible for the emergence of the movement. The first is revolution and the second is industrialization. In England, (and Scotland) the impact of the two wars with America and the French Revolution followed by conflict with France contributed to the new literary force, especially in poetry. The emphases were humanism, individuality and the link that both had with nature.

In America, the westward movement after the War of 1812 interacting with what Miller (Miller. p. 216) called the "cult of nature" engendered a new poetic trend. The seemingly unlimited natural resources possessed by the nation led American literary figures to believe that they could avoid the deterioration of society caused by urbanization. The threat could be ameliorated by a renewed emphasis on humanity supported by nature. The similarity of the two

poets is even greater in the romantic venue involving nature than that observable in their writings on death.

Burns on Nature

Of his many poems, three of Burns' works stand out because of their concise blending of nature and human experience. First, in "*Sweet Afton*", (Burns. p.146) he links the beauty of the flowing river to the elements of romantic love. The river should not disturb the rest of his "fair Mary." He captures many dimensions of nature's beauty while linking all of it to Mary.

The second poem, "*My Heart's In The Highlands*" (Burns. p.157) is a simple but powerful link between natural phenomena and their impact on his personal reality: *My heart's in the Highlands wherever I go*. In this brief line, he captures the human trend to carry what we consider to be "home" with us wherever we go.

Finally, "*A Red, Red Rose*" (Burns. p. 164) is a love ballad using nature as a metaphor for the facets of love. Burns description of his "love" relies on flowers, sweet melody, the sea and a long journey. He ends with a naturalistic metaphor promising to return to her "*tho' it were ten thousand mile.*" His impactful use of poetic structure serves as a foundation for the English and American poets who followed him.

Whitman on Nature

Whitman used a universal perspective for his romantic poems. In *The Voice of the Rain* (p. 136) he presents rain as an essential force of nature. He converses with rain while reflecting on its' importance in his life. His concluding line "*reck'd or unreck'd, duly with love returns.*" captures the relation that it bears to another natural force – love.

In "*The Prairie-Grass Dividing*" (Whitman. p.144), Whitman reinforces the power nature has over humans. Prairie grass does much to maintain life on the prairie, then he captures the limitations of human power when he reminds us that "*Those who look carelessly in the faces Presidents and Governors, as to say, Who are you?*" states the limitations of human achievement.

In this last example, *NOW Finale to the Shore!* (Whitman. p.193) Whitman uses the sea as a powerful symbol for life. Each line links elements of life to actions on a ship. The final line clarifies the relationship. "*Depart upon thy endless cruise, old Sailor.*"

Both poets are comfortable with a variety of the emotional elements that comprise human existence. Their effective use of a variety of them creates the final connection between them.

Conclusion: Poetry as the essence of cultural universality

The preceding comparative analysis reveals clearly the similarity of human culture wherever it exists. Further, it underscores the importance of how all humans wrestle with life's common issues. Beyond these elements, what does poetry have to offer residents of the 21st century?

There are five commonly agreed upon components which help clarify cross-cultural reality and reinforce its' symbolic interaction foundation:

First poetry underscores the prominence of human emotion. The symbolism, imagery and metaphoric focus allow the affective as well as the cognitive aspects of humanity to emerge.

Second, poetry provides a powerful tool for engaging inter group dialog. Miller reminds us that through poetry we understand "the dynamics of inequality that are prevalent in all societies." (Miller. p. 211).

Third, poets bring focus to what C. Wright Mills called "the sociological imagination." (Crossman. p.11) Poetic content, structure, and emotion energize insight and allow humans to envision what is possible. The process activates the essence of Mills' insight regarding the "marriage of history and biography." (Crossman. p. 12)

Fourth, poetry is a source of the nurturance so essential if humans are to resist the increasing alienation emerging in 21st century society. Miller (p. 207) suggests that carefully selected poems provide "comfort, encouragement, and more, . . . a source of insight and power in our shared concern over the state of . . . society. (Crossman. p.211)

Finally, Bartlett suggests the use of poetry as a guide to societal development. It points toward our "social inspirations, perhaps even the sort of people we seek to become" (Bartlett. p. 101)

The utility of poetry as a meta-narrative which bridges cultures and generations is synthesized by Bartlett (Bartlett. p.102) in the following manner. ". . . poetry contributes in at least three ways to the engagement of societal change:

- by assisting individuals in remembering the nature of humanity;
- by providing the courage necessary to apply societal values;
- by inspiring readers to engage in the collective action essential to define and adopt essential elements of social change. (Bartlett. p. 56).

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Burns – Whitman comparison comes from an essay that Whitman wrote in 1886 regarding the importance of Burns' poetry to the Romantic Movement:

" . . . there are many things in Burns' poems and character that

specially endear him to America. He was essentially a Republican: would have been at home in the Western United States, and probably became eminent there. He was an average sample of the good-nature warm-blooded, proud spirited, amative, alimentive, convivial, young and early-middle-aged man of the decent-born middle classes everywhere and any how, without the race of which he is a distinct specimen, (and perhaps his poems) America and her powerful Democracy could not exist to-day – could not project with unparalleled sway in the future. (Soon. p. 230).

It isn't often that a protégé is so precisely accurate about the value of his mentor.

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