

Multifarious Perspectives of Robert Burns' Poetry

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Abstract – Robert Burns occupies a significant place in the History of English Poetry. He has been studied from different perspectives, but no detailed study of his social philosophy has been made so far. He has a tendency to weave his personal moods and experiences into the texture of his poems so that they become a mirror of the bundle of contradictory traits in his complex personality. He is regarded as an 'untutored peasant' on the one hand and venerated as a 'social and literary rebel' on the other. This paper explores the various aspects of Burns' ideas and art in their comprehensiveness rather than in isolation. Some of the major aspects of his poetry chosen for the purpose are his sensibility, radicalism and realism, frustration and disappointment and his bucolic humour as a challenge to the opposing forces. The present paper attempts to fill up a gap in the criticism of Burns poetry by highlighting certain important aspects of his poetry. An attempt has been made to present a deeper insight into the creative process of Burns.

Keywords: Social Philosophy, Disillusionment, Spontaneity, Peasants, Harmony.

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INTRODUCTION

Robert Burns was unmistakably the first poetic genius of the 18th century. In his poetry we find a relationship between the poet and the audience. His poems are imbued with the spirit of romantic lyricism in their untutored spontaneity, humour, pathos, sympathy with the nature and her lovely creatures including the sons of the soil. The best work of Burns is entirely lyrical in motive; his poetry comes from the heart and goes to the heart. His love for the elemental simplicities of life and his sympathy and tenderness are hardly equaled even in the best of the Romantics. Burns can be regarded as an early *Romantic* poet. This has got nothing to do with his notorious adventures with the ladies and more to with the major themes in his work and his influence on later poets like John Keats. Burns' work concerns itself with a number of main themes but principally he deals with social equality and justice. Unlike the Romantics, who saw in every flower, leaf and cloud a chance to magnify their suffering, Burns found a way to connect the universal through the commonplace, a way to distil profound human truths from seemingly insignificant events.

BURNS AS A TRANSITIONAL POET

Burns was a poet of transition, standing between two ages, classical and romantic. But Burns was more romantic than a classist. Though he lived in an age dominated by classical tradition and by Johnson, who has been called, the bull-dog of classicism, Burns with his romantic temperament, instinctively rebelled against the prevailing classicism of the day. But he could not completely get rid of the influence of his age for there are a few traces of classicism in his poetry. According to Hans Hecht:

"Preface (pp.iii-vi), like the greater part of Burns' prose suffers from the affections of the 18th century. Its style, with its carefully rounded periods, its studied literary phraseology, and the free use of circumlocution and personification, seems rather artificial and insincere."

We find this note of classicism in many of his 'Seriously reflective or deductive poems' such as lament, 'Man Was Made to Mourn'. Here it should be kept in mind that Burns' classicism was not strictly the classicism of the school of Pope. He took deep inspiration from Allan Ramsay and

Fergusson. The moralistic tone of the following lines is more or less classical.

"A few seem favourites of fate,
In pleasures' lap carest
Yet think not all the rich and great
Are likewise truly blest".

Similarly the idea of 'With Cares and Sorrows Worn' has a classical tint and is on the pattern of Gray's 'Ode on Eton College' Gray says:

"Poverty... and slow consuming age".

Burns says:

"But see him on the edge of life,
With cares and sorrows worn,
Than age want, oh! Ill match'd pair!
So man was made to mourn".

Much of the situation and sentiment of this poem was suggested by Shenstone's 'Seventh Elegy'. Shenstone personifies wealth and power and asks:

"Does wealth or power the weary step constrain".

Burns also personifies 'wealth' and says almost the same thing:

"Does thirst of wealth thy step constrain or youthful pleasure's rage?"

Burns' idea:

"Man's in humanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn!"

is based on Young's 'Night Thought'.

"Man hard of heart to man-
Man is to man the sorest, sorest ill." Or
"Inhumanity is caught from man;

The tone of both the poets is didactic which is one of the chief characteristics of the neo-classical school of poetry.

Besides 'Wealth' and 'Youthful pleasures', Burns also personifies 'Death' and addresses it as the dearest friend of the poor:

"O Death, the poor man's dearest friend,
The kindest and the best!"

Burns' 'Epistle to a Young friend' is also didactic. The poet assumes a moralistic tone based on his experience and advises his young friend Robert Andrew. The prevailing tone of the whole poem is clearly discernible. The poet gives a general estimate of mankind that men are generally un-cooperative and unsympathetic.

"You will try the world soon, my lad,
And, Andrew dear, believe,
You will find mankind an unco-squad,
And muckle they may grieve ye".

The entire poem is starting of many pieces of good advice in which the poet suggests that the life of this world is full of cares and worries and human labour does not always bear fruit. In another stanza the poet advises not to disclose everything to every-one but we should keep ourselves reserve from disclosing our innermost secrets.

"Aye free, of ham', your story tell,
When with a bosom crony;
But still keep something to your self
Ye scarcely tell to any,"

Burns has written some more satirical and didactic poems such as 'The lament', 'Despondancy an Ode', 'To Ruin', but the greatness of Burns does not lie on these poems. These poems are devoid of passions and imagination. Therefore they do not touch the heart of the readers. The main purpose of mentioning these poems here is to show that in spite of his freshness and radicalism Burns could not prevent his mind from assuming didactic and moralistic tone as it was the fashion of the day.

BURNS AS A PRECURSOR OF THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

The real greatness of Burns rests upon those poems which express his love of nature, physical beauty, passions and imagination. The importance of Burns poetry depends on those poems which link him with the romantic movement of the coming age. Hans Hecht writes about Burns' sensibility:

“...so in selecting his poems he never lost sight of the question of the responsiveness or sensibility of whatever readers he might have to expect.”

Burns like all other poets belonging to the school of sensibility had an awareness and exquisite sensitiveness to all that was beautiful and good. He was keenly alive to the beauty of nature. R. Heron writes about Burns' love of nature in his *'Memoir of the life of the late Robert Burns'*.

“On nature, he soon began to gaze with new discernments and with new enthusiasm. His mind's eye opened to perceive affecting beauty and sublimity, where, by the mere gross peasant, there was thought to be seen, but water, earth, and sky, but animals, plants and soil: even as the eyes of the servant of Elisha were suddenly enlightened to behold his master and himself guarded from the Syrian bands, by horses and chariots of fire, to all but themselves, invisible”.

Burns takes us away from the town and brings us into direct contact with nature, as in the 'highland Mary' where he portrays landscape in a simple, direct fashion. He gives a beautiful description of every object of nature.

streams around
“Ye banks and braes and
The castle O' Montgomery,
Green be your woods, and
fair your flowers,
Your waters never drumlie!”

In 'My Hearts in the highland', the poet bids a farewell to all the beautiful objects of nature such as mountains, valleys, forests and woods and associates his feelings with these objects of nature by saying that his heart is in the different objects of nature:

“Farewell to the mountains, high covered with snow;
Farewell to the straths and green valleys below;
Farewell to the forests and wild hanging woods;
Farewell to torrents and loud-pouring floods;
My heart's in the Highland, my heart is not here”.

Burns was a lover of nature, and his genuine feeling for nature expresses itself in his poetry. His pictures of the outward appearance of nature are based upon his direct observation; but they are much more than mere descriptions. He does not give a mere catalogue of the different objects of the nature, as

Thomson does in 'Season'. His nature poetry is presented with sentiment or feeling. One of finest piece of Burns' natural description is his 'Ye Banks and Braes'. Here the whole atmosphere is charged with the natural melancholy of the poet. The different aspects of nature appealed to Burns because they flooded his mind with old memories. Here we find that correspondence between the mood of the poet and the mood of the nature, which we find in the nature poetry of the Romantics:

“Ye banks and braes O' bonnie Doon,
How can ye blooms fresh and fair?
How can ye chant, ye little birds,
And I see weary fu'o' care?
Thou'lt break my heart, thou warbling bird,
That wantons thro' the flowering thorn:
Thou minds me o' departed joys,
Departed never to return,”

He requests “Afton water” to flow gently because his;

“Mary's asleep by thy murmuring stream”.

He again makes an appeal to the different objects of nature not to disturb his “slumbering fair”. Then the poet becomes sentimental and remembers the old days when he along with his Mary moved in the midst of the hills and streams.

*“How lofty, sweet afton, thy neighbouring hills
Far marked with the courses of clear winding rills;
There daily I wander as noon rises high,
My flocks and my Mary's sweet cot in my eye”.*

Like Shelley, the poet also wants to share the beauty of nature with someone who is dear to him:

*“Now nature cleeds the flowery lea,
And a' is young and sweet like thee;
O wilt thou share its joys wi' me,
And say thou'lt be my dearie O?”*

In 'Young Highland Rover' Burns gives a different description of nature and human emotion. In most of the poems we find that it is the lover who remembers his beloved and wants to share his

emotions in the peace and solitude of nature but in 'Young Highland Rover', it is the beloved who remembers her lover and says that the sad looking objects of nature will appear to be quite different when her lover will be with her.

*"The trees, now naked groaning,
Shall soon wi' leaves be hinging,
The birds, dowie moaning,
Shall all be blithely singing;
And every flower be springing;
Sea w'll rejoice the lea, long day,
When, by his mighty warden,
My youth's returned to fair strathspey
And bonnie castle-Gordon."*

Apart from trees, flowers, forests, valleys, streams, hills and birds Burns has also given a beautiful picture of the sea shore. Here again the poet has mingled human passions with the outward description of the sea:

*"Along the solitary shore,
While flitting sea-fowls round me cry
Across the rolling dashing roar,
I'll west-ward turn my wistful eye:
Happy, thou Indian grove; I'll say
Where now my Nancy's path may be!
While thro' thy sweets she loves to stray,
O tell me, does she muse on me?"*

'A Vision' is another beautiful poem of Burns. The poem expresses the sad mood of the poet. In the following stanza the poet describes the scene of the night in a beautiful manner:

*"The winds were laid, the air was still,
The stars, they shot along the sky;
The fox was howling on the hill,
And the distant-echoing glens reply.*

Burns was a peasant. He passed a number of years on his farm in country side. He knew every aspect of

nature. Therefore he wrote a number of poems describing various aspects of nature and it is not possible to mention all these poems here. In brief we can sum up his nature's poems in different group. First there are poems in which Burns merely describes the outward beauty of the different aspects of nature. Secondly, there are poems in which Burns associates human passions and emotion along with the description of nature. Thirdly there are poems where the poet makes a comparison between his sad fate and the sad aspects of nature. (These poems will be discussed in Chapter IV) But all the poems are very beautiful and show that Burns was really alive to the beauty of nature and he was really a precursor of the Romantic Movement.

Burns appreciation of nature was of the most national sort. He was not unlike Shelley the lover of nature, but he was rarely moved by sights, and never roused to verse by scenes, whose strong effect may well be felt but cannot be expressed:

*"To mingle with the
universe and feel,
What I can never express
yet cannot all conceal."*

"Storms did awe Burns as they have inspired and awed most poets but no other form of scenic romance or sublimity made any impact on his muse. Burns view of nature was in fact that of a farmer. He looked downwards at a mouse, at a daisy, and prattling rivers and at his faithful farm beasts. Thus he does not turn towards sea or sky for inspiration but to much more gentle manifestation of nature".

Lindsay's view that Burns does not turn towards sea and sky does not seem to be right. We find the description of sea and sky in many of his poems and like all other objects of nature the sea and sky also fill his mind with feelings and emotions and he begins to remember his happy and everlasting past. The poet says:

*"On the seas and far away,
On stormy seas and far away;
Nightly dreams and thoughts by day
Are aye with him that's far away"
Or
At the starless midnight hour,
When winter rules with boundless power;*

All these examples of Burns' poems show that he was equally aware and sensitive to all the phenomenon of nature.

The poetry of the time of Burns also reveals an increasing humanitarianism, and sympathy for the lovely creatures of nature. In Burns poetry the rural scot and the humble animals of familiar experience are described with extraordinary and wining sympathy. This humanitarianism was but the expression of a growing sense of social responsibility and of democratic tendency which deeply affected thought and ultimately the political structure of the 18th century.

Robert Burns was intensely conscious of the animal world and humble creatures of nature such as a mouse and a louse find full expression in his poetry. Burns is sorry that man's dominion has broken nature's social union, and he expresses his sympathy for the poor mouse. He regards him as his companion and fellow mortal:

*"I am truly sorry man's dominion
Has broken Nature's Social Union.
And justifies that ill opinion
Which makes thee startle
At me, thy poor earth-born companion,
And fellow-mortal!"*

The poet is sad that he has disturbed the life of the mouse. Burns was also a poor tenant. He knew the miseries of the homeless people. Hence his heart is filled with pity when he thinks that he destroyed the life of the humble mouse. He expresses those ideas which the mouse would have been imagining.

*"Thou saw the fields laid bare and waste,
And weary winter coming fast,
And cozie here, beneath the blast,
Thou thought to dwell,
Till crush! The cruel couter past
Out-thro thy cell."*

The same idea is expressed in 'To A Mountain Daisy'. The poet turns down a mountain daisy during the course of ploughing his fields but he becomes sentimental and expresses his sympathy:

"Wee modest crimson tipped flower,

Thou's met me in an evil hour;

For I moan crush among the store

Thy tender stream;

To spare thee is past my power,

Thou bonnie gem."

The poet has expressed the same feeling for a Louse. Besides a mouse and a Louse the poet has written a long poem named 'Two Dogs'. In this poem the poet describes the lives of two dogs. Caeser is a rich man's dog and Luath is a poor man's dog. Both the dogs tell each other about their own lives and about the lives of the class to which their masters belong. Thus we see that Burns does not forget even the humble and neglected animals and insects and he is full of sympathy for them.

LOVE FOR THE POOR AND ILLITERATE

During the period of Pope and neo classical school of poetry the cultivated or educated were preoccupied with elegance and decorum. The poorer sections of the nation were regarded as lacking in cultivation and the expression of their way of life was discarded. The educated people around 1800 had a challenge nearer at home in the poorer sections of their own nation.

The appeal of Burns was given a welcome, which flowed as a direct contact with the poor and illiterate. He wrote not out of pity but for the life that was in them. It was with the view to extend the range of cultivated interest of the experience of people in the lower social strata that became evident in his writings. Burns gives full importance to the poor, the illiterates and socially discarded people.

In the 'Jolly Beggars' Burns assembles a group of social out-casts and pots into their mouth roaring songs of social defiance and swaggering independence. All institutions, all conventions, anything that limits the freely chosen association of friends and lovers with one another, are here abandoned in roaring professions of anti-social independence. In this poem there are six characters; a poet, a lawyer, a soldier, a courtier, a gut-scraper (or fiddler) and a fanatical preacher; all of them, of course in reduced circumstances. This group of social out-casts prefer the life of pleasure to title, treasure and reputation.

"What is title? What is treasure?

What is reputations care?

If we lead a life of pleasure,
'Tis no matter how or where!

This gay and joyous poetry was in contrast of the sophisticated and artificial poetry of the Popean School. The Jolly Beggars do not care of manners and characters. They just want to enjoy their life as it comes to them.

"Life is all a variorm,
We regarded not how it goes,
Let them cant about decorum
Who have characters to lose."

Thus this group of 'Jolly Beggars' pass their days and nights in laughing, jumping and thumping. They are far from the cares and worries of the world.

"We quaffing and laughing,
They ranted and they sang;
We jumping and thumping
The very girdle rang."

As Hans Hecht rightly points out, "Never since Shakespeare's 'Autolycus' have vagabond figures been created in English Literature with such frank and convincing sincerity."

With greater or equal confidence other critics have pronounced 'Jolly Beggars' to be the master piece of Burns. Certainly Burns has elevated the lowest details and what is mean and humble by the art of his genius. Carlyle says, "The form of the piece is mere cantata, the theme, the half drunken snatches of a joyous band of vagabond while the gray leaves are floating of on the gusts of wind in the autumn of the year. But the whole is compacted, refined and purred forth in one flood of liquid harmony..... . Every face is a portrait and the whole of the group is clear photography."

The other poem which shows Burns love for the poor and illiterate people of the society is '*The Cotters Saturday Night*'. In this poem the poet describes how the poor peasants pass their Saturday night in the midst of their friends and relatives. The poet gives a vivid description of the activities of the farmers on the Saturday night. He says that the life of the poor peasants among their children and wives is the life of perfect bliss and it is hard to find such a love and happiness anywhere else in the world. The poet gives full expression to the passions and emotions of the peasants.

"O happy love! Where love like is found;

O heart-felt raptures! Bliss beyond compare!

I have paced much this weary mortal round

And sage experience bids me this declare

If heaven a drought of heavenly pleasure spare,

One cordial in this melancholy vale,

'Tis when a youthful, loving modest pair

In others arms breathe out the tender tale

Beneath the milk white-thorn that scents the evening gale".

In '*The Holy Fair*' the poet presents a noisy bustling many coloured scene with rival preachers thundering to indifferent or drunken audience and drinking, roistering, love making and other profane activities going all around. The poem emphasizes the human weaknesses, follies, passions and appetite that indulge themselves at the 'Holy Fair'

"Here some are thinkin' on their sins,

And some upon their claes;

And curses feet that fly'd his shins,

And their sighs and prays;

On this hand sits a chosen swatch,

Wi'screw'd up, grace-proud faces;

On that a set O' chaps, at watch,

Throng winking on the lasses

To chairs that day"

CONCLUSION

His poems are imbued with the spirit of romantic lyricism in their untutored spontaneity, humour, pathos, sympathy with the nature and her lovely creatures including the sons of the soil. The best work of Burns is entirely lyrical in motive; his poetry comes from the heart and goes to the heart. His love for the elemental simplicities of life and his sympathy and tenderness are hardly equaled even in the best of the Romantics.

Burns' work concerns itself with a number of main themes but principally he deals with social equality and justice. Unlike the Romantics, who saw in every flower, leaf and cloud a chance to magnify their suffering, Burns found a way to connect the universal through the commonplace, a way to distil

profound human truths from seemingly insignificant events. Burns was a poet of transition, standing between two ages, classical and romantic. But Burns was more romantic than a classist.

Thus the importance of Burns poetry depends on those poems which link him with the romantic movement of the coming age. Burns like all other poets belonging to the school of sensibility had an awareness and exquisite sensitiveness to all that was beautiful and good. He was keenly alive to the beauty of nature. The poetry of Robert Burns throws significant light on his love and sympathy for the poor and illiterate people of the society

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