Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



To a Mouse

by Robert Burns

Grades 9–12 · Common Core RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.6

Burns, a Scottish farmer and poet, wrote the poem in November 1785, after turning up a mouse's nest while ploughing. It appeared in his first book, Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect (1786). It is written in Scots, in the six-line "Burns stanza." John Steinbeck took the title of his novel Of Mice and Men from this poem.

THE POEM

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' 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, whiles, 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' waste,
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 mony 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!

But, Mousie, thou art 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!

VOCABULARY

sleekit — sleek, smooth-coated

tim'rous — timid, fearful

brattle — a scamper, a hurried rush

pattle — a small spade for cleaning a plough

dominion — rule, control

maun — must

big — build

snell — bitter, biting (of wind)

coulter — the blade at the front of a plough

thole — endure, put up with

cranreuch — hoarfrost

agley — off course, wrong

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the speaker try to calm the mouse in stanza 1?

2. What does the speaker apologize for in stanza 2? Why does he call the mouse his “fellow-mortal”?

3. Why does the loss of the nest matter so much at this time of year?

4. Explain “The best-laid schemes o’ mice an ‘men / Gang aft agley” in your own words.

5. In the last stanza, why does the speaker say the mouse is luckier than he is?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a short poem addressed to a small animal you have seen, in which you notice something you share with it.

To a Mouse — Answer Key

1. He tells it “Thou need na start awa sae hasty” and says he would hate to chase it with a “murd’ring pattle.”
2. That “man’s dominion, / Has broken nature’s social union”: humans have broken the bond between people and nature. He sees that they are equal, both “earth-born” and both mortal.
3. “bleak December’s winds” and “weary winter” are coming; the mouse is “turn’d out” with no house, to face “the winter’s sleety dribble, / An’ cranreuch cauld!”
4. The most careful plans of mice and humans often go wrong, leaving “nought but grief an’ pain” instead of the joy we expected.
5. “The present only toucheth thee”: the mouse lives only in the present, but he looks back at “prospects drear” and forward with fear.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/to-a-mouse-robert-burns/