

Photocopiable Resources

Forty Favourite Poems

Series Two



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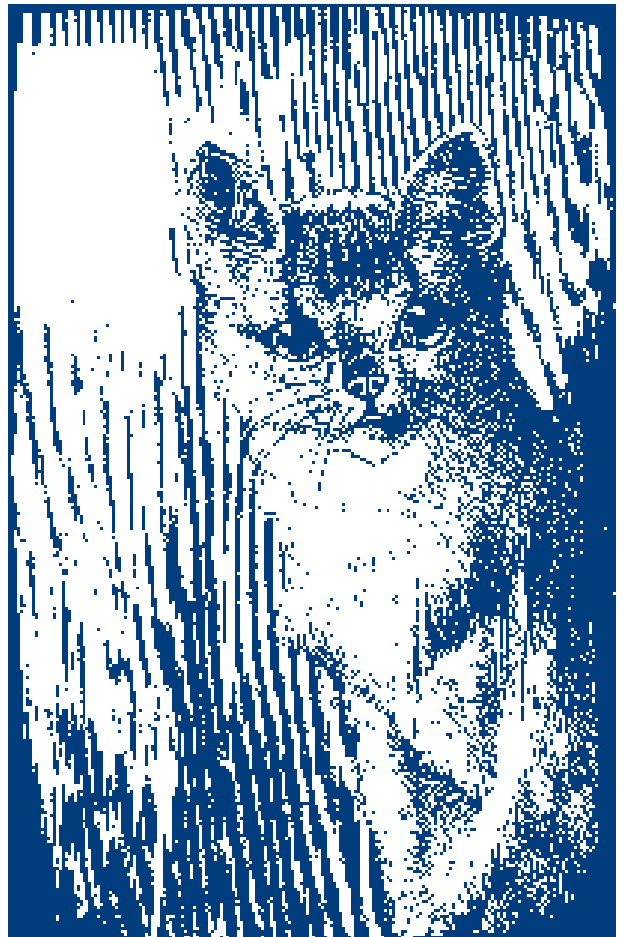
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A Case of Murder

by Vernon Scannell (b. 1922)

They should not have left him there alone,
Alone that is except for the cat.
He was only nine, not old enough
To be left alone in a basement flat,
Alone, that is, except for the cat.
A dog would have been a different thing,
A big gruff dog with slashing jaws,
But a cat with round eyes mad as gold,
Plump as a cushion with tucked-in paws –
Better have left him with a fair-sized rat!
But what they did was leave him with a cat.
He hated that cat; he watched it sit,
A buzzing machine of soft black stuff,
He sat and watched and he hated it,
Snug in its fur, hot blood in a muff,
And its mad gold stare and the way it sat
Crooning dark warmth: he loathed all that.
So he took Daddy's stick and he hit the cat.
Then quick as a sudden crack in glass
It hissed, black flash, to a hiding place
In the dust and dark beneath the couch,
And he followed the grin on his new-made face,
A wide-eyed, frightened snarl of a grin,
And he took the stick and he thrust it in,
Hard and quick in the furry dark.
The black fur squealed and he felt his skin
Prickle with sparks of dry delight.
Then the cat again came into sight,
Shot for the door that wasn't quite shut,
But the boy, quick too, slammed fast the door:
The cat, half-through, was cracked like a nut
And the soft black thud was dumped on the floor.
Then the boy was suddenly terrified
And he bit his knuckles and cried and cried;
But he had to do something with the dead thing there.
His eyes squeezed beads of salty prayer
But the wound of fear gaped wide and raw;
He dared not touch the thing with his hands
So he fetched a spade and shovelled it
And dumped the load of heavy fur
In the spidery cupboard under the stair
Where it's been for years, and though it died
It's grown in that cupboard and its hot low purr
Grows slowly louder year by year:
There'll not be a corner for the boy to hide
When the cupboard swells and all sides split
And the huge black cat pads out of it.



This is a poem with a simple story - but a story with a moral attached. A boy kills a cat and hides the body in a dark cupboard. BUT - over the years the cat grows into a 'huge black cat' and one day it will pad out of the cupboard in search of the boy.

1. Vernon Scannell brilliantly describes the cat - we can feel and hear its presence. Copy out the phrases from the poem which you feel best describe the cat.
2. Why do you think the boy hated the cat?
3. Explain clearly in your own words how the dreadful death of the cat occurred.
4. We all know that a dead cat cannot grow in a cupboard and emerge years later. The cat is obviously a symbol. What do *you* think the cat represents?

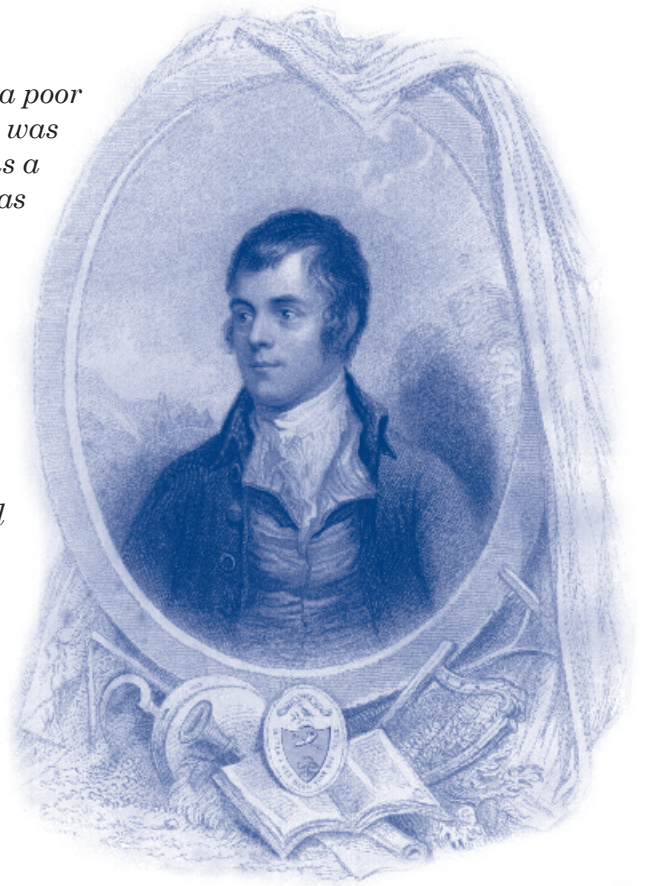
Robert Burns was one of seven children, born in 1759 to a poor farmer near Alloway in Ayrshire, Scotland. Although life was difficult for Robert's father he did manage to give his sons a good education. Robert began writing verses when he was still at school.

Robert certainly worked as a ploughman on the various unprofitable farms tenanted by his family, but he continued to write a great deal of verse. When a selection of his poems was published in 1786 they were an immediate success and Robert soon found himself famous.

But a settled life style was not for Robert Burns. He had many emotional and romantic affairs.

He wrote over two hundred songs, the most famous of which, perhaps, is the song, A Red, Red Rose.

Burns died in 1796.



A Red, Red Rose

by Robert Burns (1759-1796)

O my love is like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June:
O my love is like the melody,
That's sweetly played in tune.

As fair thou art, my bonnie lass,
So deep in love am I;
And I will love thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry.

Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;
And I will love thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run.

And fare thee weel, my only love!
And fare thee weel awhile!
And I will come again, my love,
Tho' it were ten thousand mile.

Question 1

This is one of the most enduring love-songs in the language. What qualities does it have which you think have made it last?

Question Two

Copy out the words of a present-day love lyric that you like. What qualities does it have? Does it have anything in common with this poem by Burns?

Dover Beach

by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)

The Sea is calm to-night.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; - on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! You hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! For the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Question One Write about the scene described by Arnold in the first six lines of the poem. Pay particular attention to the force of the adjectives used by Arnold.

Question Two Write about the change in the scene in lines 7-14. What is the effect of the word "only" and the use of adjectives like "grating"?

Question Three This poem was written in the middle of the nineteenth century. Do you think that the concerns and doubts expressed by Arnold apply equally to our own time?

The tone of this poem is reflective, sad and with a note of pessimism.

At the beginning of the poem the poet stands at the window looking out over Dover beach. He calls to his lover (he was at the beginning of his honeymoon, en route for France) to come to the window and share with him the beauty of the scene.

This moment of perceived beauty soon changes. The movement of the sea begins to suggest sorrow - sorrow, perhaps for the state of mankind - "the eternal note of sadness" which even the Greek dramatist, Sophocles, (496-406 B.C.) heard on the shores of the Aegean Sea.

In the third stanza the sea becomes the "Sea of Faith" (ie the Christian faith), which Arnold claims was once full and strong. But now Arnold expresses doubt and regret that faith (including his own faith) has weakened.

There is little hope in the last stanza in which Arnold says they are on this earth "as on a darkling plain" beset by conflict and pain.

The Hunchback in the Park

by Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)

The hunchback in the park
A solitary mister
Propped between trees and water
From the opening of the garden lock
That lets the trees and water enter
Until the Sunday sombre bell at dark

Eating bread from a newspaper
Drinking water from the chained cup
That the children filled with gravel
In the fountain basin where I sailed my ship
Slept at night in a dog kennel
But nobody chained him up.

Like the park birds he came early
Like the water he sat down
And Mister they called Hey mister
The truant boys from the town
Running when he had heard them clearly
On out of sound

Past lake and rockery
Laughing when he shook his paper
Hunchbacked in mockery
Through the loud zoo of the willow groves
Dodging the park keeper
With his stick that picked up leaves.

And the old dog sleeper
Alone between nurses and swans
While the boys among willows
Made the tigers jump out of their eyes
To roar on the rockery stones
And the groves were blue with sailors

Made all day until bell time
A woman figure without fault
Straight as a young elm
Sraight and tall from his crooked bones
That she might stand in the night
After the locks and chains

All night in the unmade park
After the railings and shrubberies
The birds the grass the trees the lake
And the wild boys innocent as strawberries
Had followed the hunchback
To his kennel in the dark.

Question One

Write about the hunchback who was teased by the children in the park. How is he described? What does he do all day?

Question Two

Write about the way the children teased the hunchback.

Question Three

Write about the games the children played in the park.

Question Four

What do you think Dylan Thomas means in the following phrases?

- (a) "the loud zoo of the willow groves"
- (b) "made the tigers jump out of their eyes"
- (c) "the groves were blue with sailors"
- (d) "innocent as strawberries"

Question Four

Write a vivid description of the places where you played.