

Name: _____ Class: _____

To a Mouse

On Turning up in Her Nest with the Plough, November, 1785

By Robert Burns
1785

Robert Burns (1759-1796) was a Scottish poet and lyricist. In the following poem, a speaker come across a mouse while ploughing a field. As you read, take notes on the speaker's feelings toward the mouse.

MODERN VERSION

- [1] Little, artful, cowering,¹ timid beast,
Oh, what a panic is in your heart!
You need not start away so hasty
 With bickering prattle!²
- [5] I would be loath³ to run and chase you,
 With murdering scraper

I'm truly sorry man's dominion⁴
Has broken Nature's social union,
And justifies that ill opinion

- [10] Which makes you startle
At me, your poor, earth born companion
 And fellow mortal!

I doubt not, sometimes, that you may steal;
What then? Poor beast, you must live!

- [15] An odd ear⁵ in twenty-four sheaves⁶
 Is a small request;
I will get a blessing with what is left,
 And never miss it.

Your small house, too, in ruin!

- [20] Its feeble walls the winds are scattering!
And nothing now, to build a new one,
 Of coarse green foliage!⁷
And bleak December's winds coming,
 Both bitter and piercing!



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1. **Cower** (*verb*): to crouch down in fear
 2. foolish talk
 3. unwilling
 4. **Dominion** (*noun*): control
 5. a single grain plant
 6. a bundle of grain stalks that are tied together after being cut
 7. plant leaves

[25] You saw the fields laid bare and empty,
And weary winter coming fast,
And cozy here, beneath the blast,
 You thought to dwell,
Till crash! The cruel plough passed
[30] Out through your cell.

That small heap of leaves and stubble,
Has cost you many a weary nibble!
Now you are turned out, for all your trouble,
 Without house or holding,
[35] To endure the winter's sleety dribble,
 And hoar-frost⁸ cold.

But Mouse, you are not alone,
In proving foresight⁹ may be vain:¹⁰
The best laid schemes of mice and men
[40] Go often askew,¹¹
And leave us nothing but grief and pain,
 For promised joy!

Still you are blessed, compared with me!
The present only touches you:
[45] But oh! I backward cast my eye,
 On prospects¹² dreary!
And forward, though I cannot see,
 I guess and fear!

SCOTS VERSION

Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous beastie,
O, what a panic's in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,
 Wi' bickerin brattle!
I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee
 Wi' murd'ring pattle!

8. a white coating of ice crystals
9. **Foresight** (*noun*): the ability to predict what will happen or what is needed in the future
10. **Vain** (*adjective*): producing no result; useless
11. crooked, out of line, or wrong
12. a view or outlook

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' 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 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!

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!

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement expresses one of the main themes of the poem?
 - A. It can be better to live in the present, because reflecting on the past and planning for the future can bring worry and disappointment.
 - B. It is humans' responsibility to care for the environment and their fellow creatures on Earth.
 - C. Humans rarely feel guilty about their impact on the environment, because natural resources are necessary for them to survive.
 - D. The damage that humans inflict upon the environment and the animals that inhabit it are irreversible.

2. PART B: Which TWO details from the text best support the answer to Part A?
 - A. "I'm truly sorry man's dominion / Has broken Nature's social union" (Lines 7-8)
 - B. "I doubt not, sometimes, that you may steal; / What then? Poor beast, you must live!" (Lines 13-14)
 - C. "You thought to dwell, / Till crash! The cruel plough passed / Out through your cell" (Lines 28-30)
 - D. "Without house or holding, / To endure the winter's sleety dribble, / And hoarfrost cold" (Lines 34-36)
 - E. "The best laid schemes of mice and men / Go often askew, / And leave us nothing but grief and pain" (Lines 39-41)
 - F. "Still you are blessed, compared with me! / The present only touches you" (Lines 43-44)

3. PART A: How is the speaker affected by the knowledge that he has destroyed the mouse's home?
 - A. The speaker feels guilty that he has destroyed the mouse's home when the mouse is just trying to survive.
 - B. The speaker is upset that the mouse's presence in his field is delaying him from ploughing the rest of the field.
 - C. The speaker is confident that the mouse will be able to survive the cold winter, even without its house.
 - D. The speaker is impressed that the mouse is intelligent enough to prepare for the winter by creating shelter.

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "I would be loath to run and chase you, / With murdering scraper" (Lines 5-6)
 - B. "Which makes you startle / At me, your poor, earth born companion" (Lines 10-11)
 - C. "Your small house, too, in ruin! / Its feeble walls the winds are scattering!" (Lines 19-20)
 - D. "You saw the fields laid bare and empty, / And weary winter coming fast" (Lines 25-26)

5. How does the poet's comparison of mice and humans in the final two stanzas contribute to the poem's overall meaning?
