A Red, Red Rose

POEM TEXT

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

So fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in luve am I;
And I will luve 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;
I will love thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run.

And fare thee weel, my only luve!
And fare thee weel awhile!
And I will come again, my luve,
Though it were ten thousand mile.

SUMMARY

The speaker describes his or her love—meaning either the *person* the speaker loves or the speaker's *feelings* of love for that person—as being as beautiful, vivid, and fresh as a flower that has just recently bloomed. This love is as sweet as a beautiful song played by a skilled musician.

The beloved is so beautiful that the speaker loves her with a deep and strong passion—so strong, in fact, that the speaker's love will last until the oceans have become dry.

Even after the seas have evaporated and the earth has decayed, the speaker will still love the beloved. This love will endure until their own lives have ended and even until all human life has ended.

The speaker concludes by saying goodbye to the beloved—who is, the speaker reminds her, the *only* person the speaker loves. The speaker wishes her well during their temporary separation. The speaker reaffirms his or her faithful love by promising to return even if the journey covers a very long distance and takes a very long time.

THEMES

LOVE AND CHANGE

"A Red, Red Rose" begins by describing the speaker's love for a beloved with images that are beautiful but not necessarily long-lasting. The speaker then affirms, however, that his or her love will outlast human life itself. Through the speaker's paradoxical (but passionate) claims, the poem argues that true love is both constantly renewing and completely unchangeable.

The speaker begins by describing love in terms that are beautiful but that don't immediately suggest permanence. The first lines compare the speaker's love to "a red, red rose." "Luve" could refer to the beloved, the person the speaker loves. It could also refer to the speaker's feelings for this person. Saying the beloved is like a rose "newly sprung in June" emphasizes her beauty and youth. Meanwhile, saying that the speaker's love for her is like a new rose implies that this is a new relationship, with all the freshness and excitement of a developing romance. Of course, a rose can only be "newly sprung" for a short time; June ends after thirty days, and flowers fade quickly. If the speaker's love is just like a new rose, maybe it won't last very long.

The speaker then says this love is like "a melody / That's sweetly played in tune." But again, instruments can go out of tune, just as flowers can fade. The newness and excitement of the speaker's love initially make it seem somewhat unstable.

Then, however, the speaker goes on to emphasize how long this love will last. The speaker uses three images to measure how long these feelings of love will last: the seas going dry, the rocks melting, and the sands of life running out. These events could only occur after eons of time, if ever. It seems now that the speaker's love, far from lasting only as long as a flower, will actually endure longer than human life. Although these conflicting descriptions of the speaker's love sound like a paradox, the speaker continues to insist that true love really can embody these seemingly opposite qualities of newness and permanence.

In the final stanza, the speaker bids farewell to the beloved, as if the speaker is planning to leave on a journey. The beloved doesn't need to worry, though, because the speaker promises to return, even if the journey is "ten thousand mile[s]" long. This promise implies that, just as long stretches of time could not exhaust the speaker's love for the beloved, a long stretch of distance cannot keep the speaker from her. And the length of this journey now seems short—just "awhile"—compared to the near-infinite time the speaker's love will last. It seems, then, that love like the speaker's is powerful enough to make earthly

obstacles (like physical distance) feel insignificant. That is, this love is reliable and constant, but it also feels fresh and exciting enough to adapt to changed circumstances. The moment of farewell in the final stanza highlights the speaker's core argument: love that lasts forever is also love that allows for change over time.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 14-16

BEAUTY, YOUTH, AND AGING

"A Red, Red Rose" initially suggests that the speaker's love is generated by the beloved's youth and beauty—qualities that fade with time. The speaker then affirms, however, that these temporary qualities actually give rise to feelings that persist eternally, through aging and even through death. The poem seems to argue that beauty and youth are so powerful that they can inspire feelings that last long after these qualities themselves are gone.

The speaker begins with an image of the beloved that emphasizes her youth and beauty, suggesting a love that is enthusiastic but likely to fade with time. The speaker tells the reader that this love "like a red, red rose." Roses are most beautiful when "newly sprung"—but this is a beauty that, by definition, cannot last. Newness ends quickly, and all flowers eventually fade—they cannot be "red, red" forever. If "my Luve" refers to the beloved, then comparing her to a rose acknowledges that she is beautiful now but that her beauty will fade over time. Or, if "my Luve" refers to the speaker's feelings for her, then it seems that the speaker's feelings may also fade over time.

As the poem continues, however, the speaker suggests that the impermanent qualities of youth and beauty give rise to a love that is permanent. The speaker's love will remain constant even through aging, decay, and death. In the second stanza, the speaker affirms the beloved's beauty—"So fair art thou"—and the speaker's strong love for her—"So deep in luve am I." The parallel phrases starting with "So" suggest a causal connection between the two ideas. It is because she is so beautiful, as beautiful as a rose, that the speaker's feelings for her are so strong. They are so strong, in fact, that they will last longer than any rose. Somewhat counterintuitively, the poem claims that the speaker's love will actually outlast the rose-like beauty that initially inspired it.

To indicate how long he or she will love the beloved, the speaker uses three images: the sea going dry, the rocks melting with the sun, and the sands of life running out. These images represent great lengths of time (it would take an eternity for these events to happen) and, crucially, also describe processes of decay. They show the natural world losing its vitality and form, in much the same way as an individual flower would. Through these images, the speaker is indirectly confronting the reality of aging and death—not just in the natural world, but also in the lives of this couple. The speaker implies that he or she will continue to love the beloved even as she ages and her beauty decays. That is, her beautiful appearance may have first inspired their love, but their love will endure even when her beauty is gone. It will last, in fact, until the sands of their lives have run out and they draw close to death.

When the speaker promises to return after a long journey, knowing the beloved will have aged in that time, the speaker reaffirms that his or her feelings will remain the same even though the beloved may grow less beautiful. The speaker concludes by bidding farewell to the beloved and promising to return to her, even if the journey is "ten thousand mile[s]" long. The beloved will likely be older, less youthful, and perhaps less beautiful by the time the speaker returns. Nevertheless, the speaker *does* promise to return, indicating that although the beloved may change, the speaker's feelings will remain constant. Through the final promise, the poem indicates again that the love youthful beauty inspires need not end when youth itself ends.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 15-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

O my Luve is like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June;

The speaker begins by using a simile to compare his or her "luve" to a rose (the unfamiliar spelling here is just part of the poem's Scottish dialect). "Luve" here could actually have two meanings. It could refer either to the beloved (that is, the person the speaker loves), or to the speaker's feelings of love for this person. Comparing the *beloved* to a rose emphasizes her youth and beauty, while comparing the speaker's *emotions* to a rose emphasizes how intense, exciting, and new those feelings are.

The rose is also a key symbol in the poem, in two different ways. On the one hand, the rose is an ancient symbol of love in many cultures, including in Western literature. Different colors of roses have different symbolic significance; the color red is associated with true love. By using this common image to

describe his or her love, the speaker frames the experience of love in universal terms, inviting the readers to recall their own experiences of love as a way to understand the speaker's.

The rose has another significance besides love, however. Flowers often symbolize impermanence, since they are so short lived. A "newly sprung" rose is *especially* short lived since its newness, by definition, lasts only a short time. Instead of symbolizing the intensity of the speaker's love, then, the rose may possibly signify that these feelings of love may only last a little while. The reader must continue through the rest of the poem to see which interpretation of the rose is the correct one.

The first two lines also establish the poem's meter, which is alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter (meaning lines alternate between have four and three iambs—poetic feet with a da DUM syllable rhythm—per line):

O my Luve is like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June

The poem follows this meter throughout, though with some irregularities. In the first line, for instance, there is an additional syllable the start of the line for the interjection "O." There is also a spondee with the words "red, red," which can be read as both being stressed. The spondee, like the repetition of "red" and the alliteration of "red, red, rose," emphasizes the brightness and vividness of the color of the rose by emphasizing the sound of the phrase.

LINES 3-4

O my Luve is like the melody
That's sweetly played in tune.

The speaker repeats the opening phrase "O my Luve is like (creating anaphora) to introduce another simile to describes his or her feelings. This time the speaker compares his or her love to a melody that is not simply sweet but played "in tune." The idea of a song being "in tune" implies a sense of harmony, or of connection/unity between two things—between the notes actually being played and the sound these notes are meant to have. With this image, the speaker implies that there is also a sense of connection or unity between his or her own feelings and those of this beloved. The couple is in harmony because they share the same intense love—which suggests that the love may be stronger and more permanent than the first image of the rose, a flower destined to wilt like any other, might imply.

These lines, read together with lines 1-2, create a pleasing series of sound effects through alliteration, consonance, and assonance. Note the /l/ and long /e/ sounds of "newly," "melody," and "sweetly," which also echo the alliterative /l/ in the recurring phrase "Luve is like." The /u/ sound is repeated in "newly," "June," and "tune." These many repeated sounds create a harmony in the lines of the stanza, similar to the harmony the speaker describes in his or her love.

With the second two lines, the verse form and rhyme scheme of the poem is established also: the poem is a ballad, divided into stanzas of four lines (quatrains), with a rhyme scheme of ABCB.

LINES 5-8

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

The poem began with an image of the beloved's beauty; line 5, the first line of the second quatrain, returns to that idea. But while the first image, the rose, connected beauty with *impermanence*, lines 5-6 connect beauty with *permanence*. Lines 5-6 are constructed with parallel phrasing:

So fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in luve am I;

Each line begins with "So" (which could be considered another instance of anaphora) and continues with a description of a person—first the beloved, then the speaker. The parallelism in the structure of the lines creates a connection between the ideas they express. It is not just that the beloved happens to be beautiful and the speaker happens to love her. She is *so* beautiful that the speaker cannot *help* loving her; it is because she is lovely that the speaker loves her so deeply. Her beauty may be something impermanent, like a new rose, but it gives rise to feelings in the speaker that are so strong, they could last far longer than a rose.

Lines 7-8 make this idea explicit. The speaker affirms not only that his or her feelings will last a long time, but that they will last forever: the speaker will love the beloved until the seas themselves have gone dry. This image, taken from the natural world, creates a subtle parallel with the first image of the rose. Roses require water to grow and give forth brightly colored petals. Without water, they quickly decay and die. But the speaker's love isn't as fragile or as short-lived as the rose; this love will last even when all the water in the world has dried up and disappeared. It would take eons for the seas to dry (if this could ever happen at all). The speaker is affirming that his or her love will last for all time.

With this image of the dry sea, the speaker makes a surprising, even counter-intuitive claim about love. The speaker's love may have initially been inspired by the beloved's rose-like beauty, but it will endure even when that beauty is gone. Paradoxically, impermanent qualities like beauty and youth can inspire permanent feelings of love and devotion.

These lines introduce the distinctive diction and dialect that marked Robert Burns' style. Burns wrote in Anglo-Scots, a blend of standard English and the Scottish dialect. "Bonnie" and "lass," for example, are Scottish terms for "beautiful" and "girl," while "gang" is a Scottish variant for "go" or "have gone" (and, as

previously noted, "luve" is a non-standard spelling for "love"). Burns also worked to preserve traditional songs of Scotland and many of his poems, including this one, were inspired by those old songs. The constructions "art thou" and "thee," meanwhile, are an old-fashioned way of saying "are you" and "you."

These lines also continue repeating sounds and structures to create a sense of harmony within the stanza—which is suitable, given that this poem is meant to be read or sung along. "So fair" parallels "so deep"; "my bonnie lass" parallels "my dear." The /ill/ sound repeats in "will," "still," and "till" (further examples consonance and assonance). The repeated phrases create an effect almost like a refrain, which would commonly be found in a song as well.

LINES 9-12

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

The speaker has just promised the beloved that his or her love will last for all of time. The third quatrain, lines 9-12, make this promise more tangible and concrete with a series of images that vividly represent the great lengths of time that the speaker's love will last.

The speaker opens the stanza by repeating the line that closed the previous quatrain, "Till a' the seas gang dry" (an instance of anadiplosis). Repeating the line gives additional weight to the speaker's promise to love the beloved until the seas have gone dry (basically, forever).

The speaker further reinforces this promise with two other images of time passing: rocks melting in the sun and the sands of life running out. The images of seas drying and rocks melting are images of the natural world deteriorating, of fundamental elements losing their form. Beyond representing the passage of time, then, these images also represent the processes of aging and decay. These processes ravage human beings as well as natural elements. With these images, the speaker indirectly confronts the fact that, as time passes, the beloved will also suffer aging and decay. Her youth and beauty will disappear like the seas and the rocks (but much more quickly). Nevertheless, the speaker still promises to love her even as she ages over time.

In fact, he will love her even until the point of death. The "sands of life" is a metaphor taken from the image of an hourglass, an object that measures time by allowing sand to flow from the top bulb of the glass to the bottom. When all the sand has run through to the bottom, time has run out. The "sands of life" is a thus a metaphor for the span of one person's life or, alternatively, for all life on the planet. When the seas dry and the rocks melt from the sun's heat, life on the planet will not be able to continue. Of course, the couple would likely not witness the death of all life. But if the speaker remains faithful to the beloved as promised, he or she will have to watch the beloved not only age but possibly die.

These experiences are much more painful than the first rush of excitement when love is "newly sprung." But, the speaker implies, true love encompasses both that initial joy and the later struggles. Promising to love the beloved "while the sands o' life shall run" echoes the promise in one traditional marriage vow to love the other "till death do us part." The speaker's love is as intense and as faithful as the love that binds partners in a permanent marriage.

This stanza, like earlier ones, has consonance of the repeated /l/ sound in "Till," "melt," "will," "love," "still," "While," "life," and "shall." This repeated sound, and the internal rhyme of "Till," "will," and "still," creates further harmony and euphony in the stanza, with the gentle repeated sounds creating a sweetness that matches the feelings being expressed. The speaker also repeats the phrase "my dear" in lines 7, 9, and 11, almost as if it were a miniature refrain. Repeating this affectionate term over and over again reinforces the idea that the speaker's affection will forever continue.

LINES 13-16

And fare thee weel, my only luve!
And fare thee weel awhile!
And I will come again, my luve,
Though it were ten thousand mile.

In the final stanza, the speaker bids farewell to the beloved as he or she prepares to leave on a journey, but promises also to return again no matter how long the journey takes.

The speaker has just promised to love the beloved until the end of time. The next lines continue, "*And* fare thee weel, my only luve! / *And* fare thee weel awhile!" If the speaker had said "*But* fare thee weel," the implication would have been that this journey was an interruption or a threat to the promise just made—the speaker's absence might jeopardize the couple's faithful love. But by saying "And," the speaker implies that their love will continue in the same way whether they are together or apart. Love as strong as theirs is flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances.

Moreover, the time that the speaker will be gone now seems relatively short. The third stanza invoked time on a geological scale; it would take eons for the seas to go dry or the rocks to melt. Time on the human scale flies by in comparison. So the time that the speaker will be gone now seems very brief—just "a while"—compared to the enormous length of time that the speaker's love will last.

Even so, the speaker reminds the beloved that he or she will remain faithful even however long the journey takes. The speaker promises to return to the beloved even if the journey is "ten thousand" miles long—a great distance that would also

take a great length of time to complete. The ten thousand-mile journey is another image that, like the images in stanza three, is meant to convey the strength of the speaker's love. While he or she is away, the beloved will age and change. Her beauty will no longer be "newly sprung." Nevertheless, the speaker's commitment will remain strong.

The rhyme of "awhile" and "mile" creates a connection between the two different spans of time. The journey is, paradoxically, both long and short—long when used as a measure of the speaker's commitment, but short when compared against the time the speaker's love will last. The journey may cover thousands of miles, but it will still seem just a brief while in comparison to how long the speaker will love the beloved.

There is another sort of miniature refrain in this stanza with "my luve," which is similar to the speaker's repetition of the phrase "my dear" in stanza three. The first time it appears, the speaker says "my *only* luve," emphasizing that he or she will remain faithful to the beloved no matter who else they might encounter on their journey.

This stanza continues to create a pleasing, euphonious effect with its repetition of sounds. The long /ee/ sound creates internal rhyme with "thee," weel," and "only," in line 13 and "thee" and "weel" again in line 14 ("weel" is another example of the Scottish dialect in the poem, and means simply "well"). There is further consonance of the /l/ sound in "weel," "only," "luve," "will," and "mile." The continuation of the soft, gentle sounds from stanza three to stanza four implies, again, that there is no break in the speaker's sentiments. The speaker's absence will prove an expression of love as much as his or her presence does.

SYMBOLS

ROSE

The rose is a traditional symbol of romantic love, especially when its color is red. Here, the rose symbolizes the love between the speaker and the beloved. This traditional symbolism dates back to ancient Greek literature, which associated the rose with Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. In one ancient myth, roses became red when Aphrodite wounded herself and stained the rose's petals with her blood.

As a flower, however, roses also symbolize transience and impermanence. In particular, several famous verses of the Bible use flowers to symbolize the shortness of human life. Examples include Psalm 103:15-16 ("As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more") and Matthew 6:28-30 ("Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow [...] And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you.") In passages like these, flowers are beautiful when new, but they soon age and their beauty quickly fades.

In this poem, the speaker uses the rose's beauty as an image of the beloved and uses the rose's rapid decay as a contrast to his or her eternal feelings for the beloved. Although the beloved is as beautiful as a rose, the speaker will love the beloved even as she ages, and their love will ultimately last far longer than the short lifespan of a rose.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "O my Luve is like a red, red rose / That's newly sprung in June;"

POETIC DEVICES

SIMILE

The poem's first four lines are composed of two similes, both of which are structured in the same way. In lines 1 and 3, the speaker says his or her love is like a particular thing (first a "rose," then a "melody"); in lines 2 and 4, the speaker adds a descriptive phrase to give the reader a more detailed, vivid picture of that thing (i.e., that the rose is "newly sprung" and the melody is "sweetly played in tune").

These two similes suggest that the speaker's experience of love is too rich and complex to be communicated fully. The speaker can only say what his or her love is *like*. And even then, one image alone is not enough. The speaker must use multiple images to capture the multiple facets of this love.

But while the experience is complex, it is not beyond the reader's power to understand and imagine. The images used in the similes—a red rose, a sweet song—are universally associated with love. By using these common images, the speaker suggests that his or her love, while sincere and intense, is not wholly unusual. It is has something in common with all human experiences of love. With these similes, the speaker may be inviting readers to draw upon their own experiences of love in order to imagine what the speaker is feeling right now.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "O my Luve is like a red, red rose / That's newly sprung in June; / O my Luve is like the melody / That's sweetly played in tune."

PARALLELISM

The speaker uses parallelism in the poem to draw connections between key ideas. Lines 1-4 feature parallel sentence structures:

O my Luve is like a red, red rose

That's newly sprung in June;
O my Luve is like the melody
That's sweetly played in tune.

The repeated phrases, at the corresponding parts of the lines, suggest that there is a relationship between the two similes being presented here. The reader may imagine, for instance, a *sweetness* to the rose and a *newness* to the melody. When the similes are connected, they create a more vivid sensory impression of the speaker's love.

The speaker also uses parallel sentence structures in lines 5-6:

So *fair* art thou, my bonnie lass,
So *deep in luve* am I;

Each line begins with "So" and follows with a description of a person—first the beloved, and then the speaker. The parallel structures, especially with the initial word "So," create the sense that the first line is in some sense the *cause* of the second line. The beloved is *so* fair that the speaker cannot help loving her. It is because the beloved is so beautiful that the speaker is so deeply in love with her, and that his or her feelings will outlast the seas.

This connection is significant because the reader might initially wonder whether beauty is a good foundation for love; perhaps the speaker will stop loving the beloved when she stops being so beautiful. But these lines create the sense that beauty can be the foundation for feelings that actually are strong and long-lasting.

Finally, the parallel line beginnings of "And" in lines 13-15 connect the claim that the beloved is the speaker's "only luve" to the promise that the speaker will only be gone "awhile" and will "come again." It is because the speaker is devoted exclusively to the beloved that she—and the reader—can trust the speaker's promise to return.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "O my Luve is like a red, red rose / That's newly sprung in June; / O my Luve is like the melody / That's sweetly played in tune."
- **Lines 5-6:** "So fair art thou, my bonnie lass, / So deep in luve am I;"
- **Lines 13-15:** "And fare thee weel, my only luve! / And fare thee weel awhile! / And I will come again, my luve,"

IMAGERY

The speaker uses a series of images to create a vivid representation of love and its complexities. Initially, the speaker compares his or her experience of love to two images that strongly appeal to the senses. The first image of the rose, with its "red, red" petals, is visually beautiful and also suggests a pleasing scent. The second image of the melody, "sweetly played in tune," appeals to the ear. By appealing to so many senses and evoking such pleasant sensations, these images create a rich impression of love as beautiful, powerful, and full of life.

In the second two stanzas, the speaker turns to imagery in order to emphasize how long that love will last—invoking images of the seas drying, the rocks melting, and the "sands o' life" running out. These images represent events that could only take place on geologic timescale, not the timescale of human life; it would take eons for these drastic changes on the planet to occur. By evoking events on this huge timescale, the speaker more dramatically conveys the enduring nature of this love.

Here, the speaker is also contrasting his or her love with images that represent aging and decay. The seas drying and the rocks melting represent finality, the world coming to an end; in contrast, the speaker's love will never end and never die.

The images are well chosen to represent a total decay of the planet. The planet's surface is covered by water and land masses. The first image represents the loss of all water as the seas dry up; the second image represents the loss of land mass as the continents melt away. In the first image, liquid is missing where it should be; in the second image, liquid is being created where it shouldn't be. All the elements are losing their form. If the seas go dry, what would be left in their place would be a dry, dusty region like a desert—and the third image, of sand running out, suggests that even this desert region would disappear.

Together, these three images represent a complete process of devastation that would take eons to occur—and still the speaker's love will last even longer than those eons. By comparing and contrasting his or her love with strongly evocative images, the speaker conveys a much richer, more dramatic idea of what that love is like.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "O my Luve is like a red, red rose / That's newly sprung in June; / O my Luve is like the melody / That's sweetly played in tune."
- **Lines 8-12:** "Till a' the seas gang dry. / Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear, / And the rocks melt wi' the sun; / I will love thee still, my dear, / While the sands o' life shall run."

ANAPHORA

The speaker uses anaphora to link key ideas together. For example, the speaker repeats "O my Luve is like" at the start of lines 1 and 3 to link the idea that the speaker's love is as fresh and lovely as a new rose and the idea that the speaker's love is as harmonious as a sweetly tuned melody; the relationship is so beautiful because the speaker's feelings harmonize with the

feelings of the beloved, and they share a mutual bond.

Similarly, when the speaker repeats "So" at the start of lines 5 and 6, he or she implies a connection between the lines; it is because the beloved is so beautiful that the speaker has developed such deep feelings of love for her.

The speaker repeats "And fare thee weel" at the start of lines 13 and 14 as he or she prepares to leave the beloved. In line 13, the speaker follows the phrase with "my only luve"; in line 14, the speaker follows the phrase with "awhile." Because they follow the same phrase, there is an implicit connection between "my only luve" and "awhile." Because the beloved is the speaker's one true love, she can be assured that the speaker will not be gone forever but only a short while—the speaker is faithful and will return to her.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "O my Luve is like"
- **Line 3:** "O my Luve is like"
- **Line 5:** "So"
- **Line 6:** "So"
- **Line 13:** "And fare thee weel"
- **Line 14:** "And fare thee weel"

ANADIPLOSIS

The speaker uses anadiplosis in lines 8 and 9 in order to take a thought that might seem conventional or trite and give it sincerity and depth.

The speaker ends the second stanza with the phrase "Till a' the seas gang dry" and begins stanza three with the exact same phrase. In stanza two, the speaker explains that the beloved is so beautiful that she inspires him or her with a deep, long-lasting love—a love that will last until the seas go dry. It's a common thing for lovers to claim that they will be faithful forever, and it's easy to make the promise when the relationship is exciting and new. The promise in lines 7-8 to love the beloved forever might thus come across as another romantic cliché.

To show the beloved how sincere this promise is, the speaker takes up the same image of the sea going dry to start the next stanza. Then the speaker builds up a series of three images, stemming out from that single line about the seas, that create a comprehensive picture of the whole planet in decay: the disappearance of the waters, followed by the disappearance of the earth, followed by the disappearance of even the dust that is left over. This extensive, vivid representation of the end of time, as a measure for how long the speaker's love will last, gives much greater weight to the speaker's promise to love the beloved forever.

Where Anadiplosis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "Till a' the seas gang dry. / Till a' the seas gang dry,"

EPISTROPHE

The speaker uses epistrophe in the repetition of the phrases "my dear" in lines 7, 9, and 11, and "my luve" in lines 13 and 15, as a way of conveying the constancy of his or her love. When repeated, always at the end of a line, these affectionate phrases become almost like a miniature refrain for the poem.

A refrain is a line that the reader learns to expect as part of the poem; no matter what the intervening lines contain, the reader anticipates that the same words will eventually return in the refrain. This is just what the speaker is promising about his or her love. No matter what happens, no matter what circumstances intervene, he or she will always be faithful in love; the beloved will always be "my dear" and "my luve." The speaker will be repeating these affectionate terms forever, because he or she has promised to love the beloved forever.

Where Epistrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "my dear"
- **Line 9:** "my dear"
- **Line 11:** "my dear"
- **Line 13:** "my only luve"
- **Line 15:** "my luve"

HYPERBOLE

The speaker uses hyperbole in order to convey the depth and intensity of his or her feelings for the beloved, especially as he or she prepares temporarily to leave the beloved. The speaker wants to assure the beloved that he or she will always be faithful to her. In realistic terms, this means that the speaker will love the beloved until one of them dies; their love will be measured in terms of human lifespans. But the speaker goes beyond the timescale of a human life and describes his or her love on the scale of geologic time. The speaker promises

> And I will luve 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;
> I will love thee still, my dear,
> While the sands o' life shall run.

The events described in these lines could only take place after eons had passed—time far beyond any human life. The speaker promises to love the beloved "While the sands o' life shall run," meaning not just until the end of their lives, but until the end of *all* life on the entire planet.

Strictly speaking, these claims have to be an exaggeration, since

the speaker and the beloved will be gone long before these events could occur. But the exaggeration gives the beloved a sense of how intense the speaker's love is. If his or her love is this enduring, then the beloved certainly need not worry that the speaker's feelings will change while he or she is away on a short journey.

The final lines probably also exaggerate the distance that the speaker will travel—it would be uncommon for someone in this time and place to make a journey of ten thousand miles (Scotland is only around 250 miles north to south and 150 miles east to west). But again, the fact that the speaker would return *even if* the journey were this long only reinforces the reader's sense of how strong the speaker's love is.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-12:** "And I will luve 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; / I will love thee still, my dear, / While the sands o' life shall run."
- **Lines 15-16:** "And I will come again, my luve, / Though it were ten thousand mile."

ALLITERATION

The speaker uses alliteration sparingly, but where it does appear it adds a musical feel to the poem. It is most prominent in the poem's very first line, which gives greater emphasis to a key phrase: O my Luve is like a red, red rose" is highly alliterative, with its quickly repeated /l/ and /r/ sounds.

This soft /l/ sound is then repeated at the start of words and within words through the entire poem (consonance), which creates a sense of euphony and harmony in the poem as a whole. In other words, because the /l/ appears so strongly in this opening line, it is easier to take note of the other /l/ sounds that echo throughout the rest of the stanzas—each sound subtly reminding the reader of this initial "Luve."

The /r/ sound is another soft, euphonious sound that creates a gentle, musical effect in the lines. The repetition of the /r/ sound, like the repetition of the word "red," also has the effect of intensifying the phrase, helping the reader to imagine an even deeper, more vivid color to the rose. Since a red-colored rose is often symbolic of true love, this phrase also helps the reader imagine a more intense emotion of love in the speaker.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "L," "l," "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 3:** "L," "l"
- **Line 9:** "d," "d"
- **Line 14:** "w," "w"

ASSONANCE

The speaker uses assonance to draw connections between key words and ideas and to create a pleasing, melodic effect in the poem's overall sound. For example, the speaker repeats the /o/ sound in lines 1 and 4, the long /u/ sound in lines 2 and 4, and the long /e/ sound in lines 2, 3, and 4:

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

The repeated vowel sounds, which create both end rhymes and internal rhymes, unify the sound of the stanza, making the lines harmonize with each other much as the speaker says his love is a like a harmonious song.

The recurring sounds also link together the words in which they occur. Because "rose" and "melody" share a similar /o/ sound, it is easier for the reader to see how they have a similar meaning in the poem—both are beautiful things that appeal highly to the senses and that can only exist when the conditions are just right. They both convey a sense of true love as something beautiful and somewhat rare, that enchants you when you find it.

Likewise, the shared sound in "newly," "melody," and "sweetly" suggests that what is new and fresh is also most harmonious and pleasing. In lines 6 and 7, the repeated /ee/ sound in "deep," "thee," "dear," and "seas" links the words together to reinforce the idea that this *strong* love is felt for *this* particular person and it will last *this* long. By linking together the sounds of words, assonance also links together the meanings of words.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "O," "e," "e," "o"
- **Line 2:** "ew," "y," "u"
- **Line 3:** "O," "o," "y"
- **Line 4:** "ee," "y," "u"
- **Line 6:** "ee"
- **Line 7:** "i," "ee," "i," "ea"
- **Line 8:** "i," "ea"
- **Line 9:** "ea," "ea"
- **Line 11:** "i," "ee," "i," "ea"
- **Line 13:** "ee," "ee," "y"
- **Line 14:** "ee," "ee"

PARADOX

The overall structure of the poem creates an implicit paradox. The speaker begins comparing his or her love to the most fragile, impermanent object: a freshly bloomed rose. The speaker goes on to affirm, however, that this love will also outlast the most apparently stable, permanent objects in the

world: the seas and the rocks. It seems impossible that love could embody these contradictory qualities—impermanence and permanence—at the same time, but that is what the speaker claims.

When the speaker says his or her love is like "a red, red rose / That's newly sprung in June," one possible meaning of the lines is that the beloved is as young, fresh, and beautiful as a brightly colored new rose. The very quality that helps make her so lovely—her youth—is a quality that cannot last. Just like a rose can only be "newly sprung" for a short time, she can only be a young woman for a short time. Her beauty seems to create intense passion in the speaker, but her beauty is something that will fade.

Nevertheless, the speaker claims that her beauty, though impermanent, inspires feelings that are permanent. She is "*So* fair" that she causes him or her to be "*So* deep in luve" with her—so deep that the love will last longer even than the seas and the rocks. Given their size and stability, the seas and the rocks seem like the most permanent features of the planet. And yet, the speaker's love will prove to be more permanent than they are. Paradoxically, love that begins with something fragile and temporary can prove to be indestructible and enduring. Youth and beauty may inspire love, but the love can live on even when those qualities have faded.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 5-12

CONSONANCE

The speaker uses consonance to create a unified sound and harmony throughout the poem and to draw a connection between words containing similar sounds. The speaker particularly repeats euphonious consonants to create a gentle, harmonious overall sound to the poem. In the first stanza, for example, the /l/, /r/, and /n/ sounds are frequently repeated:

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

While there is also subtle repetition of the percussive /t/ sound at the end of the stanza, the overall effect of these many soft consonant sounds is a sense of soothing harmony and melody—similar to the sweet melody evoked in lines 3-4.

The repeated sounds also link the ideas in the words containing them. In stanza two (and in the rest of the poem), the soft /l/ and the /r/ sounds are repeated again:

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

The /r/ sounds link "fair" and "dear," reinforcing the idea of the beloved's beauty here. There is also arguable, though subtle consonance of /d/ sounds together with this /r/ in "deep," "dear," and "dry," reinforcing the idea that the beloved will be dear to the speaker and that the speaker will love her deeply until the seas have disappeared.

The sound that repeats most prominently throughout the poem is of course the /l/. Given that this sound is associated with the speaker's "Luve" from the beginning, this repetition subtly keeps that love present throughout the rest of the poem. Overall, the repetition of these same consonant sounds through the whole poem creates a unified sonic effect and links together key words in each stanza.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "L," "l," "r," "d," "r," "d," "r"
- **Line 2:** "n," "l," "n," "n"
- **Line 3:** "L," "l," "l"
- **Line 4:** "t," "t," "l," "l," "n," "t," "n"
- **Line 5:** "r," "r," "l"
- **Line 6:** "l"
- **Line 7:** "ll," "l," "ll," "d," "r"
- **Line 8:** "ll," "d," "r"
- **Line 9:** "ll," "d," "r," "d," "r"
- **Line 10:** "l," "n"
- **Line 11:** "ll," "l," "ll," "r"
- **Line 12:** "l," "l," "ll," "r," "n"
- **Line 13:** "l," "l," "l"
- **Line 14:** "w," "l," "w," "l"
- **Line 15:** "ll," "l"
- **Line 16:** "l"

CAESURA

The speaker employs caesura pretty consistently. For the most part, after the first quatrain, pauses come in the first and third line of each stanza; they show up in the middle of each of these lines, just as the speaker breaks off expressing a thought in order to address the beloved. In line 5, for example:

> So fair art thou, my bonnie lass,

There is a caesura after "thou" and before "my bonnie lass." There is a similar structure in lines 7, 9, 11, 13, and 15. Used this way, the caesura allows the speaker to continually direct his or her attention to the beloved throughout the poem. The speaker never goes too long without breaking off to address the beloved in deeply affectionate terms—"my dear," "my luve." These repeated terms of endearment reinforce the reader's

sense of the constancy of the speaker's love.

The other caesura comes in the poem's very first line, and is more simply a means to break up the epizeuxis of "red, red." The quick repetition of "red" underscores just *how* very red this "Luve" is, and the comma there is a grammatical necessity that also adds a subtle, dramatic pause between these words.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ","
- **Line 5:** ","
- **Line 7:** ","
- **Line 9:** ","
- **Line 11:** ","
- **Line 13:** ","
- **Line 15:** ","

VOCABULARY

Luve (Line 1, Line 3, Line 6, Line 7, Line 15) - Love

Fair (Line 5) - Beautiful

Bonnie (Line 5) - Beautiful

A' (Line 8, Line 9) - A contraction of "all"

Gang (Line 8, Line 9) - Go or have gone

Wi' (Line 10) - With

Sands o' life (Line 12) - The phrase "sands o' life" is a reference to the common image of the hourglass as a metaphor for the passage of human life. The sand in an ordinary hourglass runs from the top glass bulb to the bottom to mark when a certain period of time has ended. When the "sands o' life" have run through the metaphorical hourglass, the period of a human life—or in this case, all life—has ended.

O' (Line 12) - Of

Fare (Line 13, Line 14) - Be

Weel (Line 13, Line 14) - Well

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem has the form of a ballad. It has four stanzas of four lines each (quatrains), with a rhyme scheme in each stanza of ABCB.

The ballad form is an old one in English poetry, dating back centuries. It began as an oral form: ballads were not written but passed down through performance, often set to musical tunes. In the later years of his life, Robert Burns took on the project of collecting traditional Scottish ballads and songs. He would visit Scottish villages in the country and transcribe the ballads he heard sung there. Burns based "A Red, Red Rose" on a ballad he heard in the country, and he commissioned a musical accompaniment for the words. To that end, lines 3-4 are almost a reference to the form of the poem itself. Because ballads are often set to music and sung, the poem itself like the sweet melody to which the speaker compares his or her love.

METER

The poem has the meter associated with the ballad form: alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and trimeter. This means the lines have either four (tetrameter) or three (trimeter) iambs (da DUM) per line. Take lines 5 and 6, which exhibit this perfectly:

> So fair | art thou, | my bon- | nie lass,
> So deep | in luv | am I;

The lines are largely regular in their meter, perhaps because the poem is meant to be sung and too many metrical irregularities would make it difficult to set the poem to a consistent musical tune. Additionally, this steady meter might reflect the strength of the speaker's love.

There are, however, some irregularities. Some come from adding extra unstressed syllables at the start of the line (lines 1, 3, 10, 12, and 16); others come from altering the standard iambic feet to spondees.

The very first line does both, the double stress of "red, red" underscores just how red this rose in question really is:

> O my Luve is like a red, red rose

The third stanza also has some irregularities:

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

Lines 10 and 12 have an additional unstressed syllable at the start of the line. Line 11, by contrast, only has seven syllables instead of the usual eight and doesn't have the unstressed syllable at the start of the line. It could be scanned as iambic otherwise, as in the block quote above, or it could be scanned like this: "I will love thee still, my dear." In either case, the initial "I" gets an extra emphasis; if read the second way, starting with three stressed syllables in a row, the line reads much more slowly and with much greater emphasis than a standard metrical line. In this way, the altered meter would highlight the key message contained in the line—that is, that the speaker will love the beloved forever.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem has the rhyme scheme associated with the ballad form of:

ABCB

This rhyme scheme is maintained regularly through the whole poem—perhaps reflecting the steady, secure nature of the speaker's love. A possible exception could be seen in stanzas 3 and 4: because the first and third lines of those stanzas end with the same word—"dear" and "dear"; "luve" and "luve"—their rhyme scheme could be considered ABAB. This is also called identical rhyme; in any case, this just adds extra emphasis to words of affection.

The end rhymes function to link the words that share the same sound. For instance, the rhyming words "sun" and "run" in lines 10 and 12 reinforce the idea that, as the sun's heat gets intense enough to melt the rocks, it will mean the end of all life on the planet. The rhymes of "awhile" and "mile" in lines 14 and 16 remind the beloved that no matter how long the journey is (up to ten thousand miles), it will still feel short in a certain sense (just a short while) because the separation will never be permanent; the speaker will always return.

SPEAKER

Most basically, the speaker of the poem is someone who is in love with the poem's addressee. The beloved is addressed as "lass," a Scottish term for a young woman, but the gender and age of the speaker are unspecified. The poem was derived from an old country ballad that was passed down through oral performance, and it's likely that the original ballad was adaptable to be sung by performers of either gender.

Overall, the speaker is not given a lot of specific identifying characteristics. This anonymity more easily allows any performer or any reader to imagine him or herself as the speaker of the poem, as do the universal symbols of love (the rose, music) in the first stanza. The Scottish dialect in the poem ("bonnie lass," "gang dry," "fare thee weel") does suggest, however, that the speaker is Scottish.

In the first stanza, the speaker describes his or her love as being like a rose that is "newly sprung." This suggests that their romantic relationship has just begun. But in the final stanza, as the speaker is preparing to leave on an extended journey, he or she tells the beloved that she is their "only luve" and promises to return to her no matter how long the journey is. This suggests that there is already a high level of commitment and trust between the couple. It may not be that the relationship is new but that the speaker still feels the same passion and excitement about the relationship even after some time has passed.

SETTING

As is the case with the poem's speaker, the setting is rather ambiguous. The Scottish dialect in the poem ("bonnie lass," "gang dry," "fare thee weel") suggests that the speaker is Scottish and that the poem may be set in Scotland, specifically in the countryside. The reference to the seas going dry is all the more powerful if the speaker and the beloved live in a country like Scotland where much of the land is close to the ocean; for people used to seeing or living close to the ocean, the image of the seas disappearing is all the more striking. The archaic diction ("art thou," "love thee") suggests that the poem may be set sometime in the past, or else in a remote area of the country where speech has not yet been modernized.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Much of Robert Burns's fame and popularity is due to his distinctive blend of formal English and Scottish dialect, clearly seen in "A Red, Red Rose." At the time Burns was writing, this dialect was known as "Scots." Burns himself spent the last years of his life working to preserve and formalize the traditions of oral Scots poetry, found especially in the Scottish countryside. He collected works for several volumes of traditional Scottish songs and music, including James Johnson's *The Scots Musical Museum* and George Thomson's *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs for the Voice*.

Burns was particularly inspired by the 18th-century Scots verse of the poets Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson. Burns, in turn, provided inspiration for Romantic poets like William Wordsworth ("I Wandered Lowly as a Cloud"), who wanted to leave behind the formal, artificial diction of 18th-century English poetry and adopt the language spoken by the common people. Burns, who grew up farming with his father and who was fluent in the dialect and style of rural Scotland, also inspired other working-class "peasant poets" who wrote in a more conversational style, including James Hogg, Robert Bloomfield, John Clare, and, in America, Walt Whitman ("I Hear America Singing").

"A Red, Red Rose" was first published, set to music, in Pietro Urbana's 1794 *A Selection of Scots Songs Harmonized Improved with Simple and Adapted Graces*. Urbani wrote in the volume that "the words of the RED, RED ROSE were obligingly given to him by a celebrated Scots Poet, who was so struck with them when sung by a country girl that he wrote them down."

In a letter, Burns mentions giving Urbani "a simple old Scots song which I had pickt up in this country." The poem's first three stanzas were reprinted in Johnson's *Museum* in 1797 and in Thomson's *Scottish Airs* in 1799. The poem became most

popular when it was set to the tune "Low Down in the Broom" in Robert Archibald Smith's *Scottish Minstrel* in 1821.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Burns lived during the Scottish Enlightenment, a period in the 18th and early 19th centuries of tremendous philosophical and scientific accomplishment in Scotland. Enlightenment thinkers in the capital city of Edinburgh made a point of being fluent in both Scots and standard English, and Burns was the most accomplished poet to combine both languages.

Burns also arguably draws on Enlightenment science to represent his romantic vision of enduring love. For example, the third stanza of "A Red, Red Rose" features several images that represent the passage of time: "Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear/ And the rocks melt wi' the sun." In these lines, it is possible that Burns is purposely evoking concepts of geology and time that had recently been discovered by Enlightenment scientists.

Also during the late 18th century, the French Revolution and later wars with France meant that Britain took increased pride in its own national traditions. Sir Walter Scott's popular historical novels about Scotland, which also used Scottish dialect, gave more prominence and importance to Scotland's language and heritage. Collections of native folk-songs from Scotland, Ireland, and Wales celebrated the many cultures within Great Britain.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "A Red, Red Rose" Set to Music — Here you can hear Rachel Sermanni sing "A Red, Red Rose" with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra in one of the poem's most popular musical settings. (https://youtu.be/-1-PF2kt2jg)
- "A Red, Red Rose" Original Publication — View a digital copy of the 1794 book "A Selection of Scots Songs Harmonized Improved with Simple and Adapted Graces," in which "A Red, Red Rose" was originally published (scroll to location 80 to see the poem). (https://archive.org/details/selectionofscots00urba)
- The Robert Burns Encyclopedia — This resource includes information on Robert Burns's life, writings, and nearly every person and place connected with Burns. (http://www.robertburns.org/encyclopedia/)
- "A Red, Red Rose" Out Loud — Listen to"A Red, Red Rose" recited by Christopher Tait, an actor who performs as Robert Burns at Burns Suppers and other Scottish events around the world. (https://youtu.be/BpyosZg2WRw)
- Robert Burns Night — This site includes information on Robert Burns Night, a celebration of Scotland's national poet that is held every year in places all over the world. (https://www.scotland.org/events/burns-night)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BURNS POEMS

- Ae Fond Kiss
- To a Mouse

HOW TO CITE

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