

AQA English Literature A-level

Poetry: Love Through the Ages Anthology (Pre-1900)

Robert Burns: 'Ae Fond Kiss'

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AE FOND KISS

Robert Burns

Brief Summary

'Ae Fond Kiss', written by Robert Burns, is about the parting of two lovers. The speaker **laments their parting and distance**, feeling depressed about this as well as other aspects of their life. The introduction of the poem shows the speaker saying farewells to their lover but also being upset about their departure.

Synopsis

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker is seen to be **saying goodbye** to their lover. It is clear that they are **mourning the lover's departure**, visible through the use of **sentimental and depressing language**. The speaker then moves on to explain that they **do not regret the relationship** although it brought them some **pain**. He understands that giving into his desires and love is not a bad thing, recognising that **love can be fleeting**.

The poem ends with the speaker **recounting all the good things** that their lover has provided them with - including **peace and pleasure**. Nevertheless, the speaker still cannot comprehend the departure of their lover, repeating the **same lines** as from the start of the poem. This **circular motion** suggests the speaker's **continuing pain** at losing their lover.

Context

Robert Burns (1759 – 1796)

Robert Burns, born 25 January 1759 (also known as Rabbie Burns), was a **National Bard** with other epithets to his name. Burns was a **Scottish poet and lyricist**, being the **national poet of Scotland**. He wrote many **famous poems** in a **Scottish dialect** as well as **English**. Furthermore, he **inspired** many **contemporary Romantic poets**, making him a **pioneer** of the **Romantic movement**.

Burns published many poems during his time - particularly, *Poems, Chiefly in Scottish Dialect* was published in **1787 in Edinburgh**. This volume catapulted Burns' **reputation** as a writer throughout the capital city. He met a lot of new people in Edinburgh, including his

Summary

Context – Robert Burns was is the national poet of Scotland and is widely regarded for his Scottish songs // his lover, Agnes McLehose is the inspiration behind this poem

Structure - AABBC rhyming scheme // repetition // parallelism

Language – similes // lyrical // metaphors// rhetorical questions // anaphora

Key Points – from the perspective of someone watching their lover leave // tone of reflection, acceptance and regret // the poem may be addressed to Agnes/ Nancy



future love interest Agnes ‘Nancy’ McLehose. When Burns started a relationship with her, Agnes was still **married but estranged** from her husband. The relationship was not documented to be physical but the vast amount of **love letters** between them suggests the **strong passions** that they had for each other.

Agnes may be seen as the **inspiration** behind ‘Ae Fond Kiss’. This is because in 1791, she left to go to Jamaica in order to be with her husband again. Burns and Agnes met up for the last time and he sent her their final letter:

“I have yours, my ever-dearest Nancy, this moment. I have just ten minutes before the Post goes and these I shall employ in sending you some Songs I have just been composing to different tunes for the Collection of Songs, of which you have three volumes-& of which you shall have forth”

The letter portrays Burns’ **appreciation** of Agnes, **reminiscing** about the things that she brought to his life. Nevertheless, Burns met a few **notable people** in his time in Edinburgh, including James Johnson who collected **Scottish songs** and recruited Burns to **rewrite or improve songs** in those collections. He was enthusiastic and became an editor for Johnson’s *The Scots Musical Museum (1787–1803)* which contained most of his poetry. He worked tirelessly to produce poetry and songs, seeing it as a **service to Scotland** and not accepting payment. However, Burns soon left Edinburgh and settled on a farm in **Dumfriesshire**, where he wrote **two song collections** and did other social work. Furthermore, this is where he met and also later married Jean Armour.

Burns’ **legacy** is still upheld today, as his **intellectual contributions** during the **Scottish enlightenment** project were meaningful and valuable. He produced many **popular and well-known poems** that justify his position as the **national poet of Scotland**.

Ae Fond Kiss

Burns’ work with songs is quite **widely documented**, and it is clear that he wrote most of his songs to **tunes** known to the **Scottish public**. This means that most of his songs are never fully his own - it is important to bear this in mind because ‘Ae Fond Kiss’ may **read differently against its corresponding tune**.

‘Ae Fond Kiss’ was written in 1791 and was published in the fourth volume of the Scots Musical Museum **in 1792**. It has a **regular structure, rhyme and meter of a song lyric** set to a **Scottish folk song**. This poem/ song was inspired by his **personal relationship** with Agnes McLehose, who was a married woman and who left him to go rejoin her husband overseas. The **last letter** he wrote for her included aspects that he included in the song later on.



The poem was written in a **traditional Scottish ballad form**. It can be seen as a **biographical song**, as it recounts his relationship with Agnes. However, the poem is much more **idealistic** and includes much more of his **imagination** about how the relationship was in **retrospect**. This is because he later married Jean Armour in 1788 while also having an **affair** with Agnes' maid Jennie Clow. This means that the account of love within the poem may seem a little **questionable** if interpreted through a **biographical lens**. However, when disregarding Burns' own personal experiences that may be embedded within the poem, it is a song that **promises faithfulness, mourns the loss of their lover and the universal feeling of love**. Another Scottish author, **Sir Walter Scott**, especially noted that **lines 13 to 16** were "**exquisitely affecting stanza**" that contained the "**essence of a thousand love tales**". This means that the song **resonates with most people** around the world with Burns' account of love

Ae Fond Kiss

'Ae' means one and is an old variant of the word 'an'. The title and first line immediately signal Burns' Scottish heritage.

The use of alliteration emphasises the finality of the parting with the lover.

The use of "heart-wrung" portrays how deeply hurt the speaker is, but is still able to pledge their love

*The 'sighs and groans' are waging war inside him – this is reinforced by the **onomatopoeia** of 'sigh' (an open sound) and 'groan' (a closed sound); these contrasting sounds signify an internal battle representing his pain at parting.*

The speaker does not blame himself for falling in love with Nancy, as this statement is justified by

Ae **fond** kiss, and then we **sever**;

Ae **fareweel**, and then **forever!**

Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll **pledge**

thee,

Warring sighs and groans I'll **wage** thee.

Who shall say that **Fortune** grieves him,

While the **star of hope** she leaves him?

Me, nae cheerfu' **twinkle** lights me;

Dark despair around **benights** me.

Antithesis of "fond" and "sever", as the speaker is in emotional turmoil about the parting with their lover.

The speaker promises that they will continue to love them in the future and does not mind if they move on - even if it causes them pain.

The speaker suggests that no one should be unhappy if there is even a small chance of them being happy in the future. However, this is not possible for the speaker, justifying their sadness.

AABB rhyme scheme with rhyming couplets which highlight certain stressed syllables. This links back to the sighing, as the lines end with a calmer, unstressed tone.



the following lines about her universal attractiveness.

Speaker relates the effect his lover has on others, suggesting that his love for her is justified - everyone falls in love with her. This changes in the next few lines, where the speaker specifies why they love her.

Here the speaker wishes their lover happiness and pleasure in the future - even if the speaker is unable to be there. The listing of positive words along with the exclamation highlight the genuine nature of their wish.

Parallelism between beginning and end - the repetition of the beginning lines suggests their final goodbye, which the speaker laments.

The speaker is lamenting about the loss of their love by saying that if they never met then they would never have to depart from each other. This amplifies the regret the speaker feels about losing their lover.

The repetition of the farewell suggests that the speaker is trying to delay their departure and that the speaker wants the lover to be happy. The spelling also links back to the poem being associated with Scottish traditions or languages.

I'll ne'er blame my partial fancy,

Naething could resist my Nancy;

But to see her was to love her;

Love but her, and love forever.

Had we never lov'd sae kindly,

Had we never lov'd sae blindly,

Never met—or never parted—

We had ne'er been broken-hearted.

Fare thee weel, thou first and fairest!

Fare thee weel, thou best and dearest!

Thine be ilka joy and treasure,

Peace, enjoyment, love, and pleasure!

Ae fond kiss, and then we sever;

Ae fareweel, alas, forever!

Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge

thee,

Warring sighs and groans I'll wage thee!

The speaker implies that once someone falls in love with her, it is difficult to love someone else. This shows the depth of the speaker's love and commitment, in particular with the word "forever".

The poem begins with the pronouns "I", depicting how the speaker is only relating their love. However, the use of the pronoun "we" shows the selflessness of the speaker's love, illuminating the strength and depth of their longing. This reflects Burns' feelings after Agnes left him, feeling bittersweet after her departure.

The speaker reinforces that he will honour her through the memories they have together and his continuing sadness. Use of superlatives indicate how irreplaceable she is to him - she stands above all others

Two words do not rhyme fully but have similar consonant sounds, which regulates the metre of the poem and makes it more lyrical.



Structure

Form

The poem consists of **three stanzas** with **eight lines** each. This means that they are **octaves**. For example, **stanza one** includes line 1 to 8, **stanza two** includes lines 9 to 16 and **stanza three** includes lines 17 to 24. Furthermore, the song includes **internal structural features** that are significant to its form too. If each stanza is **divided into two groups of four lines** that **link themes** together further, called a **quatrain**; lines 1 to 4, lines 5 to 8, lines 9 to 12, lines 13 to 16, lines 17 to 20 and lines 21 to 24. For instance, lines 5 to 8 have a greater emphasis on the **binary of hope/ hopelessness** using an **apostrophe** to **link the lines** together.

Furthermore, when each **quatrain** is again **divided into half**, they include two rhyming lines - **couplets**. This is significant because the speaker uses the rhyme in order to **connect lines to each couplet**, supported by the **parallel structure of the song**. This is particularly evident in lines 17 to 18, where the lines begin with “**Fare thee well**”, utilising **parallelism** in order to list her good qualities, including “**first and fairest**” / “**best and dearest**”.

All of these aspects of the poems form, including the **couplets/ quatrains and octaves**, have **important functions** in the poem as a whole. For example, the quatrains allow an opportunity to look at the **many sides of love - regret, loss and an optimistic outlook on the future**. The couplets, on the other hand, enable **two different ideas to emerge**; especially lines 11 to 12, which shows Nancy’s effect on others. However, line 11 makes a **general comment** on how anyone is able to love her while line 12 **specifies** that the speaker would love her only.

As such, the form enables the speaker to **explore love deeply and broadly**.

Meter

The poem is written in a **trochaic tetrameter**, which means that there are **four stressed beat patterns per line**. These are called **trochees**. For example, in line 3 to 4, the speaker **stresses certain syllables** in order to **emphasise words** that are central to explain their sorrow:

“**Deep** in **heart**-wrung **tears** I’ll **pledge** thee,
Warring sighs and **groans** I’ll **wage** thee.”

Every line in the poem has a **stressed syllable** at the start, while the **line ends with an unstressed syllable**; this makes the meter regular throughout. This means that it is **easier to play music to the poem**, which was intended by Burns. This is significant as the **music** may highlight the **speaker’s emotional state** more distinctly.



This highly **regular meter** makes the **speaker's calmness and quietness** clearer - even though they are grieving their love. Furthermore, each line is **end-stopped** with **eight syllables**.

Additionally, the **trochaic meter** makes the **calm yet sorrowful tone** more pronounced - as the **lines end with unstressed syllables** suggests the **slow fading away** of the **speaker's voice** after every line. For example, "**pledge thee**", depicting the speaker's love but also a **quiet acceptance** of their departure. This is significant as it **resonates** with the end of their relationship, signifying that their **love is lost**.

The metre is also affected by the **use of caesura** in the middle of some lines. This introduces pauses within the lines, which suggests that the speaker is **deliberately prolonging their farewell**. For example, at the start the speaker wants **one last kiss** from their lover which is **repeated** in line 21 too, further slowing down time before saying farewell.

Overall, the **slow, rhythmic and regular metre** of the poem emphasises the **emotional state of the speaker** who wants to delay the moment before saying goodbye to their lover.

Rhyme scheme

The **rhyme scheme** of the poem is in **AABBCCDD**, as there are **rhyming couplets** in each **eight line stanza**, **repeated** throughout the poem. Furthermore, most of the rhymes are **slant rhymes** where the **stressed syllables** in the lines may not rhyme properly but have a **similar consonant sound** - this is also known as **consonance**. **Slant rhymes** can be found in **lines 3 to 4, 11 to 12, 17 to 18 and 23 to 24**. For example, "**fairest/ "dearest"**" do not rhyme but have a **similar consonant sound**. Nevertheless, Burns **utilises regular rhymes** such as "**sever**" and "**-ever**" as well as **repeating** some of the **rhymes**. This is significant because it makes it **easier to play music** with it.

Rhyming couplets in this **romantic poem** are important because it reflects how two **words are always in relation with each other**. Placing them together **parallels** the **speaker and their lover's relationship**, reflecting their optimism in terms of their love. This **parallelism** within the **couplets** throughout the poem allows the **themes to be linked** more easily. This creates a regular rhythm with the couplets, allowing readers to become aware and anticipate them. As a result, the **sound of each line is similar** and the reader begins to **tie the poem together** effortlessly.

Overall, **rhyme is utilised by Burns** to create a **steady flow** in each line while reflecting the **speaker's relationship to their lover**.



Speaker

'Ae Fond Kiss' is quite different to some of the other poems in the anthology because it has some **biographical influences**. Thus, the speaker can be read as both a **universal individual** or written from **Burns' own experience**. For example, the name Nancy may be the name attributed to his previous lover Agnes McLehose, whose nickname was Nancy. She left him to go to Jamaica to be with her husband, suggesting that the speaker's **sense of sorrow parallels Burns' own sense of loss**.

For example, the first stanza includes references to this **sadness** through the words such as **"tears"**, **"groans"** and **"sighs"** because of **losing his lover**. It is clear that it is the speaker who is affected by this because of the use of the **pronoun "me"** throughout the poem, **reinforcing** their **"broken heart"**. However, the speaker then introduces the **pronoun "we"** in order to encompass the **experience of the lover** as well, including them in their emotional turmoil. As the pronoun "we" becomes dominant within the poem, the speaker shows their **selfless side** because the speaker wants them to have **"peace, enjoyment...and pleasure"**. The speaker wants them to be **happy in the future** and focus on their **happiness**, even if it means that the speaker will experience **sadness**.

Overall, the speaker reveals that their **love is purely selfless**, highlighted through the **intimate and direct address to 'Nancy'**.

Language

Similes

Similes are a **figure of speech** which are used by poets in order to make a **comparison** between **two concepts/ objects**. Poets utilise this in order to make certain **imagery** more **vivid or appeal to the readers feelings**. For example, the speaker in the poem compares their lover to **"joy"** and **"treasure"**. This suggests that the speaker sees their lover as **valuable** and something that brings them **happiness**. This is important because it shows how **attached** the speaker is to their love interest, reinforcing the **extent of their love**. Furthermore, it also emphasises the **difficulty of letting go** that the speaker experiences.

Antithesis

Antithesis is when two **phrases and clauses** with **opposite meanings** are combined. Writers use this in order to highlight the **difference between two ideas** which can have great, **emotional effects**. As a result, the writer is able to highlight which idea is better or more meaningful.

Burns utilises antithesis throughout the poem in order to **illuminate their emotional turmoil**. For example, in stanza 2, Burns creates imagery related to **loss and sadness** in order to emphasise the **emotional state** of the speaker.



However, this is directly **contrasted** with stanza 3, where the speaker recounts the **positive aspects** about his lover. This contrast between the stanzas is significant because it suggests that the speaker is trying to **reconcile** with the idea of their lover leaving them. This is **concluded and summarised** in stanza 3, where the “**peace, enjoyment, love, and pleasure**” is contrasted with the **final imagery** of “**warring sighs and groans**”. This shows the **dual nature of love**, as the speaker feels **depressed** about their lover leaving but **wishes them well** because the speaker loves them a lot.

As such, antithesis is central in Burn’s conceptualisation of **love as painful but fulfilling**.

Parallelism

Parallelism is **central** within the poem within each of the lines, for example, lines 1 to 2 and 3 to 4:

“**Ae fond kiss**, and then we sever;

Ae fareweel, and then forever!

Deep in heart wrung tears I’ll pledge thee,

Warring sighs and groans I’ll wage thee.”

The **parallelism** between lines 3 to 4 start off with describing how the speaker feels **sorrowful at the departure** of their lover. The last part of the line suggests that they promise their lover **eternal love**. Furthermore, parallelism highlights **certain themes** and **develops them**, as can be seen from lines 1 to 4, which reinforces the **speaker’s feelings**.

Furthermore, part of line 18 also parallels line 17, as it highlights the speaker’s **unconventional farewell**. This is because the speaker understands that it is **bittersweet**, putting their lover’s happiness first, wishing them to be **truly happy in the future**. Line 17 first develops the speaker’s **admiration for their lover** as she is the first woman he has **loved so deeply**, allowing the ideas to be further explained in line 18 in order to justify the speaker’s **sense of loss** when their lover leaves.

Overall, **parallelism** is important in the poem because it allows it to have a more **regular rhythm and express ideas more clearly**.



Anaphora

Anaphora refers to when a word is used in order to refer to a previous part of the text in order to avoid repeating that word, usually at the **beginning of clauses**. For example, in some of the stanzas anaphora can be observed:

Had we never lov'd sae kindly,
Had we never lov'd sae blindly,
Never met—or **never** parted—
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.

Fare thee weel, thou first and fairest!
Fare thee weel, thou best and dearest!
Thine be ilka joy and treasure,
Peace, enjoyment, love, and pleasure!
Ae fond kiss, and then we sever;
Ae fareweel, alas, forever!

In repeating these parts within the poem **multiple times**, Burns' relates his **emotions** to the reader, evoking a **sense of empathy**. The **repetition** of “**Had we never**” suggests the sense of **regret** that the speaker feels about **losing** their lover - the speaker emphasises that if they never met, they would not have to experience this **sense of loss**. This is then developed in the next line, with the repetition of “**never**”. In the next stanza, the speaker **repeats the phrase** “**Fare thee weel**” in order to delay their farewell but also insist on the **positive nature** of the farewell. This is a change from the beginning of the poem, where the “Farewell” was **saturated with sadness**. As such, repeating the same words at the end of the poem suggest that the speaker is ready to **finally say goodbye**.

Refrain

A **refrain** is when a phrase or word is **repeated** within the same line or stanza. This is usually used in order to **create a rhythm** or **emphasize a line phrase**.

Ae fond kiss, and then we sever;
Ae fareweel, and then forever!
Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge thee

This refrain is repeated twice in the whole poem; once at the **start** and once at the **end** of the poem. This allows the song to have a much more **regular metre and active rhythm** when played to **music**. As the reader comes across these lines again, the **pace speeds up** due to the **familiarity** with the lines. The use of a refrain also links it back to Burns' purpose of the poem actually being a song, making it easier to be played to music.



Comparisons

Ae Fond Kiss	Whoso list to Hunt
<i>“to see her was to love her”</i>	<i>“she fleeth afore / Fainting I follow”</i>
<i>“Warring sighs and groans I’ll wage thee!”</i>	<i>“I leave off therefore, / Sithens in a net I seek to hold the wind.”</i>
<i>“Me, nae cheerfu’ twinkle lights me; Dark despair around benights me”</i>	<i>“wild for to hold, though I seem tame.”</i>
Both poems speak about an immense attraction towards another individual, however, AFK ends with a more hopeful/ bittersweet tone while WLH explores unrequited love	

Ae Fond Kiss & She Walks in Beauty

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems communicate a sense of impossibility; the woman in <i>She Walks in Beauty</i> is impossibly beautiful, and her beauty is perfect in every last “shade” and “ray”. On the contrary, <i>Ae Fond Kiss</i> suggests the impossibility of attaining the lover’s love as they are departing from them.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The speakers’ positions vary; in <i>She Walks in Beauty</i>, they make no attempt to court the woman walking by, content in admiring her beauty from afar. In comparison, <i>Ae Fond Kiss</i> relates how the speaker wants to follow her but knows they should not - it has a strained but optimistic tone. In <i>She Walks in Beauty</i>, the focus of the poem is on the unnamed woman and her beauty, there is no information on the speaker and we can assume they have no real desire to be with her. In <i>Ae Fond Kiss</i>, there is an insinuation that Burns may be the speaker relating his love for Agnes or it can also be universalised to other individuals in love.

Ae Fond Kiss & Remember

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems explore the idea of memories. In <i>Remember</i>, the speaker wants their lover to remember them after death and asks them to look back on their happier days when upset. In <i>Ae Fond Kiss</i>, the speaker also alludes to the memories they have with their lover which delays the finality of their farewell. <i>Remember</i> is written in a grounded and balanced voice, similarly to <i>Ae Fond Kiss</i> which has a calm and regular voice.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In <i>Remember</i>, the theme of death is prominent as it alludes to the grave, a “marble vault” where mistress’ beauty “shall nor more be found”. In comparison, <i>Ae Fond Kiss</i> explores the speaker’s will to relive the memories of their lover, with much more positive imagery. The speaker in <i>Remember</i> is the passive subject who is asking their lover to remember them, while in <i>Ae Fond Kiss</i> the speaker promises their lover that he will remember them.

