

“To A Louse—On seeing one on a lady's bonnet at church”

By Robert Burns (1759—1796)

Robert Burns was a famous Scottish poet of the 18th century. He wrote in both standard English and the Scottish dialect. He is regarded as an early Romantic poet (more on that to come), and many of his writings were political in nature, and of a sharp wit. “To A Louse” is meant to be satirical. One morning, as Burns was sitting in church, he noticed a louse (plural is lice) crawling through a woman’s very well dressed hair. She became the unlucky subject of his satire, and one theme in this poem is, “The way we perceive ourselves is often dramatically different from the way others perceive us.”

Original Scottish Dialect	Standard English Translation
<p>Ha! Whare ye gaun, ye crowlin ferlie? Your impudence protects you sairly, I canna say but ye strut rarely Owre gauze and lace, Tho' faith! I fear ye dine but sparely On sic a place.</p>	<p>Ha! Where are you going, you crawling wonder? Your impudence protects you sorely, I can not say but you swagger rarely Over gauze and lace, Though faith! I fear you dine but sparingly On such a place</p>
<p>Ye ugly, creepin, blastit wonner, Detested, shunn'd by saunt an' sinner, How daur ye set your fit upon her -- Sae fine a lady! Gae somewhere else and seek your dinner On some poor body.</p>	<p>You ugly, creeping, blasted wonder, Detested, shunned by saint and sinner, How dare you set your foot upon her - Such fine a lady! Go somewhere else and seek your dinner On some poor body</p>
<p>Swith! in some beggar's hauffet squattle: There you may creep, and sprawl, and spr Wi' ither kindred, jumping cattle, In shoals and nations; Whare horn nor bane ne'er daur unsettle Your thick plantations.</p>	<p>Off! in some beggar's temples squat: There you may creep, and sprawl, and scramble, With other kindred, jumping cattle, In shoals and nations; Where horn nor bone never dare unsettle Your thick plantations</p>
<p>Now haud you there! ye're out o' sight, Below the fatt'rils, snug an' tight; Na, faith ye yet! ye'll no be right, Till ye've got on it --- The vera tapmost, tow'ring height O' miss's bonnet.</p>	<p>Now hold you there! you are out of sight, Below the falderals, snug and tight; No, faith you yet! you will not be right, Until you have got on it --- The very topmost, towering height Of misses bonnet.</p>
<p>My sooth! right bauld ye set your nose ou As plump an' grey as onie grozet: O for some rank, mercurial rozet, Or fell, red smeddum, I'd gie ye sic a hearty dose o't, Wad dress your droddum!</p>	<p>My sooth! right bold you set your nose out, As plump and gray as any gooseberry: O for some rank, mercurial resin, Or deadly, red powder, I would give you such a hearty dose of it, Would dress your breech!</p>
<p>I wad na been surpris'd to spy You on an auld wife's flainen toy: Or aiblins some bit duddie boy, On's wyliecoat; But Miss's fine Lunardi! fye! How daur ye do't.</p>	<p>I would not have been surprised to spy You on an old wife's flannel cap: Or maybe some small ragged boy, On his undervest; But Miss's fine balloon bonnet! fye! How dare you do it.</p>
<p>O Jenny, dinna toss your head, An' set your beauties a' abroad! You little ken what cursed speed The blastie's makin! Thae winks an' finger-ends, I dread, Are notice takin'!</p>	<p>O Jenny do not toss your head, And set your beauties all abroad! You little know what cursed speed The blastie's making! Those winks and finger-ends, I dread, Are notice takiing!</p>
<p>O wad some Power the giftie gie us To see oursels as ithers see us! It wad frae monie a blunder free us, An' foolish notion: What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us, An' ev'n devotion!</p>	<p>O would some Power the gift to give us To see ourselves as others see us! It would from many a blunder free us, And foolish notion: What airs in dress and gait would leave us, And even devotion!</p>

Name: _____

Analyzing Robert Burns's "To a Louse"

Tone is the author's attitude toward the subject, the characters, or the implied audience. The tone (which might be admiring, playful, serious, humorous, sarcastic, joyful, formal, melancholy, etc.) is often achieved through other literary devices such as contrast, diction, detail, hyperbole, metaphor, personification, and setting.

1. Considering the poem's subtitle "On Seeing One on a Lady's Bonnet at Church," how does the **setting** of the poem help to emphasize its sarcastic and humorous **tone**?
2. Burns creates a **contrast** between the respectable upper-class lady and the resident of her hat in "To a Louse." How does this contrast reveal the poem's sarcastic tone?
3. The humorous aspects of the poem's **tone** are reinforced through **hyperbole** (exaggeration used to achieve a specific effect). Locate two examples of hyperbole in the poem and explain how they support the tone of humor.
4. The **personification** (attributing human behaviors to non-human entities) that occurs throughout the poem strengthens its humorous tone. Locate two examples of personification in the poem and explain how they support the tone of humor.
5. **Paraphrase** the poem's final stanza (line by line) into your own words.
6. Following the **Romantic** ideals and philosophies, how does Robert Burns criticize not simply an individual but a society through "To a Louse"?