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E- Study Material

B.A- Part-I, Paper-I, Semester-I

Robert Burns as a Poet

His sole poetical work of any magnitude is his volume of Poems (1786) which he edited five times during his life time, with numerous additions and corrections on each occasion. At different times he contributed to The Scots Musical Museum and to Thomson's Select collection of original Airs. After the poet's death his literary editor, Dr. Currie, published (1800) a large number of additional pieces, along with a considerable amount of correspondence. One tale, Tam O' Shanter which was included in the third edition, of the Poems, that of 1793; one longish descriptive piece, The Cotter's Saturday Night, more than two hundred songs ranging in quality from very good to middling and a great number of short epistles, epigrams, elegies, and other types of miscellaneous verse.

The poetry is of such a miscellaneous character, and its composition was often so haphazard in the matter of time, that it is almost impossible to give a detailed chronology of it. The best works of Burns was almost entirely lyrical in motive. He is one of the rare examples, like Shelly, of the born singer who can give him a to human emotion a precious and imperishable utterance. He was essentially the inspired spirit; what interested him was vivid and guiding; what lay outside his knowledge and experience was without life and flavour. He thought of reviving the Scottish drama but even if he had entered on the project it is doubtful if he would have succeeded for he lacked the faculty of putting himself completely in another man's place. His narrative gift, it is revealed in Tom O' Shanter, becomes fused with the heat of some lyrical emotion and then it shines with a clear flame. But with the departure of the lyrical emotion the narrative impulse ends as well. While keeping within the limits of the lyric he traverses

an immense range of emotion and experience. The feelings he describes are those of the Scottish peasant, but the genius of the poet makes them germane to every member of the human race; he discovers the touch of nature that makes the whole world kin. His humor and pathos are as copious and varied as his subject matter. His wit can be rollicking to coarseness as it is in The Tolly Beggars, and there are poems richer than in bochehenalian flavour than Willie brewed a peck o' mairt & Tom o' Shanter. He can run to other extreme of emotion and be graceful and sentimental as well, as in Afton Water and O my Luve's like a Red Red Rose. We have beautiful homely songs in John Anderson, my Jo and O' the Airts, and he can be bitter and scornful in such poems as Address to the Unco Guid and The Holy Fair. His pathos ranges from the piercing cry of Ae Fond Kiss, through the pensive pessimism of Ye Banks and Braes, to the tempered melancholy of my Heart's in the Highlands.

The facility of this previous lyrical gift became a positive weakness, for he wrote too freely and much of his song writing is of mediocre quality.