"**A Red, Red Rose**" [Robert Burns](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Burns)

"**A Red, Red Rose**" is a [1794](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1794_in_music) song in [Scots](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scots_language) by [Robert Burns](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Burns) based on traditional sources. The song is also referred to by the title "**Oh, My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose**", "**My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose**" or "**Red, Red Rose**" and is often published as a poem.

The song is highly evocative, including lines describing rocks melting with the sun, and the seas running dry.

The poem opens with the speaker comparing his love to a "A Red, Red Rose" and to a "melodie / That's sweetly play'd in tune!" In the second and third stanzas, the speaker describes how deep his love is. And it's *deep.*He will love his "bonnie lass" as long as he is alive, and until the world ends. At the end, he says *adios*, and notes that he will return, even if he has to walk ten thousand miles.

* The poem opens with one of the most famous [**similes**](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/simile.html) of all time.
* The speaker is saying his love is like a really red rose that is "newly sprung in June." In other words, the speaker's love is like a flower that has just emerged from the ground.
* You know what that means, Shmoopers: his love is new, fresh, and young. It's doin' just fine.
* Oh, and didn't we tell you we're also experts in Scottish dialects? "Luve" is an older spelling of love, and "'s" is an abbreviation of "is."
* Burns often spells things in strange ways, partly because he wrote over two hundred years ago and partly because he was Scottish (which means he pronounced and spelled words slightly differently).
* One final thing before we keep right on reading: these lines have a bit of a jaunt to them, don't you think? In fact, they're written in [**iambic**](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/iamb.html) meter. The first line has eight syllables, which probably means we're dealing with [**tetrameter**](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/meter.html), and the second line has six, which is a sign of **[trimeter](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/meter.html%22%20%5Co%20%22trimeter%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**, sure as shootin'.

Lines 3-4

*O my Luve's like the melodie
That's sweetly play'd in tune!*

* Not satisfied with the whole rose comparison? No worries. The speaker's got another **simile** for ya.
* The speaker next compares his love to a melodie (an older spelling of the word melody) that is "sweetly play'd in tune."
* The speaker's "luve," then, is like a song that is sung or "play'd" just right, so right in fact that it's kind of sweet.
* Okay. Let's tally it up. So far, we know that the speaker's love is like an oh so red rose, and like an awesome jam. What's next?
* And here's a question. Is the speaker talking about his love for a girl—a bonnie lass? Or is he talking about the girl herself?
* These lines also repeat the **metrical** pattern we got in the first two lines. A line of **tetrameter**, followed by a line of **trimeter**. Only now we've added a [**rhyme**](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/rhyme.html)**scheme**, too.
* June and tune rhyme, which means that our rhyme scheme goes a little something like this: ABCB.
* This repeated meter, combined with the catchy rhyme scheme, can only mean one thing: [**ballad meter**](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/ballad.html).
* Check out our "[Form and Meter](https://www.shmoop.com/red-red-rose/rhyme-form-meter.html)" section for more.

Lines 5-6

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

* The speaker says he is as "deep in luve" as the "bonnie lass" is fair (a word that, once upon a time, meant pretty, beautiful, or attractive).
* Really, this is a fancy pants way of saying something that's not so fancy pants at all. Imagine a really hot girl or guy, and now imagine that you love that person as much as he or she is hot.
* Bonnie, by the way, is a word that means beautiful or pretty (just like "fair"). It is, for the most part, a Scottish dialect word. As is lass, which just refers to a girl (although sometimes it means something like sweetheart).
* This guy is one sweet talker.

Lines 7-8

*And I will luve thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry:*

* The speaker says he will "luve" his "bonnie lass" until all the seas dry up.
* The word "a'" is a shortened form of the word "all"; this elision (the removal of letters from a word) is very common in Scots English (i.e. the form of English spoken in Scotland), but you'll see it in regular English poems, too.
* "Gang" doesn't refer to a group of people; it is an old word that means "go" or "walk." Say it to yourself. Doesn't it kind of sound like "gone" or "going"?
* The seas will probably never "gang dry," so the speaker seems to be saying that he will love his "lass" forever. Or at least until the apocalypse.

Lines 9-10

*Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;*

* With a healthy dose of [**repetition**](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/refrain.html), the speaker tells us again that he will love his "bonnie lass" until the seas "gang dry"; he also tells us he will love her until the "rocks melt wi' the sun."
* In the line 10, you have to pretend the word "till" is at the beginning; the lines are saying "till a' the seas…*and till* the rocks."
* "Till" is just a shortened form of the word until, and "wi'" is a shortened form of the word with, just in case you guys were wondering.
* What does he mean by rocks melting with sun? Does he mean when the rocks melt *in*the sun? Or does he mean melt at the same time as the sun is melting?
* Like the sea going dry, it is unlikely that rocks are going to "melt" (unless they get thrown into a volcano, or a meteor strikes the earth) so the speaker is again emphasizing the fact that he will love her forever or at least until long after their lives are over.

Lines 11-12

*I will luve thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run.*

* Oh for crying out loud, we get it, dude. You really dig this girl.
* Yet again, the speaker pledges that he will love his lass for a really long time—as long as he lives, to be exact.
* That's where that "sands o' life shall run" comes in. It's an interesting phrase, don't you think? It means, "while I'm still alive." So the [**metaphor**](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/metaphor.html)here is of an hourglass, or some other device that measures time with sand.
* The words, however, make us think of the "sands o' life" running out; the phrase "I will luve thee still" makes us think the speaker wants to say "I will love thee still, even after the sands o' life shall run out." He doesn't say that, but we can't help thinking it, can we?
* After all, we're thinking that the sands of this guy's life will probably run out long before [the rocks might melt and the sea may burn](http://www.lyricsfreak.com/t/tom%2Bpetty/learning%2Bto%2Bfly_20138495.html).
* Form-wise, things have gotten a little shakeup. We've got a new [**rhyme scheme**](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/rhyme.html) on our hands, because in these final two stanzas, not only do the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme, but the first and third do, too. This pattern is commonly referred to as—wait for it—common meter. Check out our "[Form and Meter](https://www.shmoop.com/red-red-rose/rhyme-form-meter.html)" section for more.

Lines 13-14

*And fare thee weel, my only Luve,
And fare thee weel a while!*

* Suddenly, it's time to say goodbye. Or in this case, "fare thee weel." Hey, same diff.
* "Weel" does not mean "wheel" but is rather an older form of the word "well"; say it aloud, and you'll see that it sounds really Scottish.
* The phrase "fare thee weel a while" means something like "farewell, for now" or "farewell for the time being."
* But it could also mean "take care of yourself for now" or "may you be well." The word "fare" can be a verb that means do or go.
* For whatever reason, these two lovebirds are splitting like a banana. But we think they're gonna be just fine at the whole long-distance thing. We mean, if your love outlasts the sun, what's a few miles?

Lines 15-16

*And I will come again, my Luve,
Tho' it were ten thousand mile.*

* Okay, let's just get [this](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbNlMtqrYS0) out of our systems.
* The speaker says his final farewell; he tells his Luve that he will come again, even if he has to walk ten thousand miles (that's a long way!).
* So hey, at least we know he's head over heels.
* Here's hoping these two crazy kids can make it work.

Symbol Analysis

Roses, seas, rocks, sun. There's a whole lotta shakin'—oops, we mean nature going on in this poem. The speaker uses nature in various ways to describe the depth and power of his love. But hey, this poem comes from rural Scotland—the land of lochs and glens and heaths. Is it any wonder this guy would use nature to write about his love?

* Lines 1-2: The speaker compares his love to a red, red rose. And because he uses the word "like," this is a [**simile**](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/simile.html).
* Lines 7-8: The speaker says he will love his bonnie lass until the seas dry up. The evaporation of the "seas" appears to be a [**metaphor**](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/metaphor.html)for the end of the world or for something that can't ever really happen. So really he's just avowing his undying, eternal, everlasting (and other cheesy things) love for his special friend.
* Lines 9-10: The speaker mentions the seas going dry again, and adds that he will also love his "bonnie lass" until the "rocks melt w' the sun." Melting rocks are also a **metaphor** for the end of the world, or for something that isn't likely to happen.

Symbol Analysis

It's a love poem, plain and simple. In fact, "A Red, Red Rose" just so happens to be one of the most famous love poems of all time, too. Nearly ever line in the poem says something about love, so it makes sense that this puppy has been slapped on more than its fair share of greeting cards.

* Lines 1-2: Here it is, the most famous love [**simile**](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/simile.html) ever. Or it's at least in the top five, right? The speaker's comparison of his love to a red, red, rose has gone down in history as pure romance.
* Lines 3-4: The speaker says his love is like a "melodie" that's "play'd in tune." Since he uses the word "like," this comparison is a **simile**. Yep, another one.
* Lines 5-6: The speaker says he is as "deep in love" as his "bonnie lass" is "fair." Since the word "as" occurs in this comparison, this is also a **simile**.
* Lines 7-8: the speaker says he will love his "bonnie lass" until the seas dry up; the evaporation of the "seas" is a [**metaphor**](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/metaphor.html)for the end of the world—you know, something that can never happen (zombie apocalypses aside).
* Lines 11-12: The speaker will be all about his lady love, at least while the "sands o' life shall run." "Sands of life" is a **metaphor**; one's time on earth is compared to something like an hourglass that has sand in it to measure time.
* Lines 13-16: The speaker says farewell, and tells his "Luve" that he will return for her, even if he has to walk ten thousand miles.

Symbol Analysis

The entire last stanza of the poem is a big farewell. The speaker is going somewhere, and it's not clear where (here's hoping it's Vegas). He makes it seem like he won't be back for a while; he says farewell twice, then says he will come again, even if he has to walk ten thousand miles. The concluding farewell makes the poem just a little bit sad; after all, when people are in love it's never fun when one of them has to leave for a while. But we're holding out hope that the rumors are true—absence really does make the heart grow fonder.

* Line 13: The speaker says, "fare thee weel" to his "bonnie lass." Wait, where you goin', dude?
* Line 14: The speaker says, "fare thee weel again." Talk about [the long goodbye](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeNyD9UFXHs).
* Lines 15-16: The speaker says he will come again, even if he has to walk ten thousand miles. Never mind the state of him when he gets there.

Form and meter-

Ballad and Common Meter (alternative [iambic](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/iamb.html) tetrameter and iambic trimeter)

This one's a classic, so it's no wonder it uses some of the most classic forms in all of poetry and music. "A Red, Red Rose" is written partly in [ballad](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/ballad.html) meter (the first eight lines) and partly in common meter (the last eight lines).

You know what that means—it's time for a little poetry lesson. Don't worry, we'll be brief, and then we'll get back to the poem at hand.

A poem in ballad meter consists of four-line stanzas (called [quatrains](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/quatrain.html)) that alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. And in ballad meter, the second and fourth line of each stanza must rhyme (but the first and third do not have to). The only difference between ballad meter and common meter is that in common meter the first and third lines of each stanza, in addition to the second and fourth, must rhyme.

## Slow Jamz with Robert Burns

Now back to your regularly scheduled programming.

Burns was no stranger to the [ballad](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/ballad.html), so "A Red, Red Rose" conforms pretty strictly to the form. It alternates between iambic tetrameter in the odd-numbered lines and iambic trimeter in the even-numbered ones.

A line of iambic tetrameter consists of four (tetra-) [iambs](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/iamb.html), a [foot](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/foot.html) that contains an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Line 5 is a great example: As fair art thou, my bonn-ie lass.

Iambic trimeter, as you might have already guessed, is the same as iambic tetrameter, except there are three (tri-) iambs instead of four, as in line 2: That's new-ly sprung in June.

Now, this is all fine and dandy, but things start to get kind of weird, metrically, in the third line and beyond, when Burns starts tossing in extra syllables and other quirky things to keep us on our toes.

Like line 10 for example. It has seven syllables, when it should have six. What's up with that? Not to fear, fellow Shmoopers, we have a very good answer. Let's assume the line's first foot is not an iamb (daDUM) but an [anapest](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/anapest.html) (dadaDUM). If we scan the line in the following way, we have a line of neat, flowing trimeter: And the rocks melt wi' the sun.

TMI, you say? Fair enough. For all intents and purposes, it's totally cool to just notice that the third stanza is a little weirder than the rest and move on. But for all you [scansion](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/scansion.html) lovers out there, just know that this poem is ripe with opportunities to geek out on the meter. What about lines 11 and 12? Or line 16?

## Ballad Versus Common: The Battle of the (18th) Century

We mentioned earlier that in ballad meter the second and fourth lines of each stanza must rhyme (but not necessarily the first and third). That means the first two stanzas rhyme a little something like this: ABCB DEFE. B rhymes with B, E rhymes with E, and so on; because only the second and fourth lines of each stanza (those marked B and E) rhyme, this looks like ballad meter.

But the rhyme scheme of the second half of the poem looks like this: FGFG HIHI. In these stanzas, the first and third lines, and the second and fourth lines rhyme, making these stanzas, strictly speaking, an example of common meter.

In reality, ballad meter and common meter are just about the same thing (used in the same types of traditional, common, folksy poetry). It's just that usually a poem that is looser in its rhyme scheme (like the first two stanzas of "A Red, Red Rose" is called ballad meter, while one that is stricter (like the last two stanzas) is in common meter. But honestly, who's really counting?

Speaker-

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to suss out the two most important qualities of our speaker. The dude's head over heels, prime time 100% in love with his bonnie lass. Oh, and he's Scottish.

Other than that, we know that he's leavin', and it's most definitely not on a jet plane, given that this is the 18th century. And that's unfortunate because his journey's a long one—possibly ten thousand miles. That's way farther than [The Proclaimers](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbNlMtqrYS0) were willing to walk.

And honestly, Shmoopers, that's all you need to know about our new friend. He's Scottish, and [he's in love, and he doesn't care who knows i](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pd0VBm8gU5o)

Setting-

## Rural Scotland

As we mentioned in our "[In a Nutshell](https://www.shmoop.com/red-red-rose/)" section, Robert Burns was The Poet of Scotland. In fact, in many ways, he still is today. His poems are Scottish through and through, and a big part of that stems from his own sense of national identity. The guy really wanted to preserve the Scottish heritage of folk songs, ballads, and other rural oral literature from the countryside.

And this poem is no exception to that rule. With its mentions of the sea, the rocks, the sun, we might as well be wandering the Scottish moors in search of folk songs ourselves. It's hard to imagine anyone other than a rural farmer or shepherd singing this tune, though we're sure many an urbanite has tried.

In "A Red, Red Rose," the speaker of the poem compares his love to a rose. He addresses the girl he loves, proclaiming that his love will flow until the seas dry up, because she is so beautiful. He then bids her farewell for a short time, promising to return, no matter the distance between them. The poem opens with the famous line, "O, my luve is like a red, red rose."He declares that his love for her is so deep and everlasting that it will survive until the sea dries up.For some reason, he feels the need to leave her for a while. He promises to come back, even if he must travel ten thousand miles to get back to her.

“A Red, Red Rose,” also titled in some anthologies according to its first line, “O, my luve is like a red, red rose,” was written in 1794 and printed in 1796. The song may be enjoyed as a simple, unaffected effusion of sentiment, or it may be understood on a more complex level as a lover’s promises that are full of contradictions, ironies, and paradoxes. The reader should keep in mind the fact that Burns constructed the poem, stanza by stanza, by “deconstructing” old songs and ballads to use parts that he could revise and improve. For example, Burns’s first stanza may be compared with his source, “The Wanton Wife of Castle Gate”: “Her cheeks are like the roses/ That blossom fresh in June;/ O, she’s like a new-strung instrument/ That’s newly put in tune.” Clearly, Burns’s version is more delicate, while at the same time audaciously calculated. By emphasizing the absolute redness of the rose—the “red, red rose”—the poet demonstrates his seeming artlessness as a sign of sincerity. What other poet could rhyme “June” and “tune” without appearing hackneyed? With Burns the very simplicity of the language works toward an effect of absolute purity.

Readers who analyze the poem using the tools of New Criticism or other twentieth century critical approaches will observe, on the other hand, contradictory elements that seem to work against the speaker’s innocent protestations of love. The first two lines of the second stanza do not complete an expected (or logical) thought: “So deep in luve am I” (that I cannot bear to leave my beloved). Instead, the speaker rhetorically protests his love through a series of preposterous boasts. His love will last until the seas go dry, until rocks melt with the sun; he will continue to love while the sands of life (in an hourglass) shall run. Yet so steadfast a lover, after all, is departing from his beloved, not staying by her side. For whatever reason, he is compelled to leave her rather than remain. His final exaggerated promise, that he will return to her, though the journey takes a thousand miles, seems farfetched, even ironically humorous: Instead of such a titanic effort, why should he not simply stay with her?

These paradoxical reflections, however, which change a reading of the poem from one of “pure” lyric to one of irony, are not so difficult to reconcile on the level of common sense. What lover has not exaggerated his or her emotions? Are these exaggerated promises of Burns’s speaker any less sincere for being illogical? No matter how the reader resolves this issue, he or she cannot help but admire Burns’s art in revising the meter of his source for the last stanza, an old song titled “The True Lover’s Farewell”: “Fare you well, my own true love/ And fare you well for a while,/ And I will be sure to return back again/ If I go ten thousand mile.” Although Burns’s revisions are minor, they reveal the difference in technique between a merely competent poet and a master.