



To whom does “The coward slave” (line 3) refer?

A. The coward slave, according to Burns, is the man who considers himself a less than worthy human being because of his poverty. He is a coward because he does not have a sense of his own self-worth, and defers to the rank, wealth, or station of others.



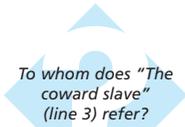
What is the effect of the exclamation mark at the end of line 4?

A. The exclamation mark is a vigorous, emphatic proclamation of independence.



What is the tone of the first stanza?

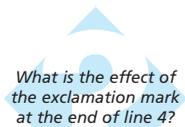
A. The tone is strident, disdainful of those who identify with their poverty rather than with their natural humanity; it is daring in its assertiveness and dismissive of those whose alleged superior rank has been bought with money rather than earned through honest hard work.



To whom does “The coward slave” (line 3) refer?

- 2 Is there for honest poverty
That hings* his head, an a' that?
The coward slave, we pass him by —
We dare be poor for a' that!
For a' that, an' a' that,
Our toils obscure, an' a' that,
The rank is but the guinea's* stamp,*
The man's the gowd* for a' that.

5



What is the effect of the exclamation mark at the end of line 4?



What is the tone of the first stanza?

A Man's a Man for A' That

Robert Burns

FOCUS: RHYTHM; REFRAIN

A CLOSER LOOK

Lines 1-2 can be paraphrased to read, “Is there an **honest** man who hangs his head because he is poor?” Burns obviously feels that one who is honest, even if he is poor, should never be embarrassed by his poverty. Concomitantly, one who is poor should remain honest, and be proud of both conditions.

What though on hamely* fare* we dine,
Wear hoddin grey,* an' a' that?
Gie* fools their silks, and knaves* their wine —

10

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

hings — (Scottish dialect) hangs.
guinea — a gold coin, no longer in use, considered very valuable, and worth 21 shillings at the time the poem was written.
guinea stamp — a mold for stamping gold coins.
gowd — (Scottish dialect) gold.
hamely — (Scottish dialect) plain; unpretentious.
fare — here, food.
hoddin grey — coarse grey wool.
gie — (Scottish dialect) give.
knaves — untrustworthy, dishonest people.

- 1 When enunciated in the Scottish dialect, the poem sounds explosive, emphatic, and decisive. The *a* in *man* and *that* is then read almost like *u* in *fun*. This adds immeasurably to the effectiveness of the message as well as to the power and energy of the poem. Encourage students to be alert to the fact that both the meter and the refrain add to the poem's vigor and strength.
- 2 An alternate version of line 1 reads, “Is there for honesty poverty,” which can be interpreted as asking if poverty is a fair reward for honesty.

A man's a man for a' that.
 For a' that, an' a' that.
 Their tinsel show, an' a' that,
 The honest man, tho' e'er sae* poor,
 Is king o' men for a' that.

15

Ye see you birkie* ca'd* a lord,
 What struts, an' stares, an' a' that?
 Tho' hundreds worship at his word,
 He's but a coof* for a' that.
 For a' that, an' a' that,
 His riband, star,* an' a' that,
 The man o' independent mind,
 He looks an' laughs at a' that.

20

A prince can mak a belted* knight,
 A marquis, duke, an' a' that!
 But an honest man's aboon* his might —
 Guid faith,* he mauna* fa'* that!
 For a' that, an' a' that,
 Their dignities, an' a' that,
 The pith* o' sense an' pride o' worth.
 Are higher rank than a' that.

25

Then let us pray that come it may
 (As come it will for a' that),
 That Sense and Worth o'er a' the earth,
 Shall bear the gree* an' a' that.

35

For a' that, an' a' that,
 It's comin yet for a' that,

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

- sae** — (Scottish dialect) so.
birkie — (Scottish dialect) a lively young fellow.
ca'd — (Scottish dialect) called.
coof — (chiefly Scottish dialect) dolt.
riband, star — decorative ribbons and medals representing titles and awards conferred by the king.
belted — wearing a belt denoting nobility.
aboon — (Scottish dialect) above.
guid faith — (mild interjection) good faith.
mauna — (Scottish dialect) must not.
fa' — fault.
pith — the important or essential part.
bear the gree — (Scottish dialect) carry off the prize.

What is Burns' attitude toward the "birkie"? Why?

How does the poet interpret "might" in line 27?

What effect is achieved by the use of parentheses in line 34?

What are the associations between the last four lines of the poem and the ideals of the French Revolution?



What is Burns' attitude toward the "birkie"? Why?

A. His attitude is one of disdain for an individual who has not earned the honors, but instead has purchased them. The person who has a sense of his own self-worth will ridicule such honors.



How does the poet interpret "might" in line 27?

A. Here the word is used to denote strength. The implication is that the power and dignity implicit in the honest man are worth far more than titles and wealth obtained without real merit.



What effect is achieved by the use of parentheses in line 34?

A. Students should recognize the affirmation of impending equality that is confidently asserted in the statement. The parentheses add emphasis in this case.



What are the associations between the last four lines of the poem and the ideals of the French Revolution?

A. The French revolutionary ideals of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" are echoed loudly and clearly in the poem. The winds of freedom have begun to blow and the impact will soon be apparent to all in every part of the world.