



# Comparative Analysis between Robert Burns' "Auld Lang Syne" and Alfred Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break"

Fuhua Liu\*

School of Foreign Languages, Dalian Jiaotong University, Dalian, Liaoning, 116028, China

**Abstract:** Robert Burns' "Auld Lang Syne" and Alfred Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break" are two well-known poems on friendship. A detailed comparison between the two poems from the perspective of target, tone and writing techniques is made for the purpose of better understanding and appreciating them.

**Keywords:** Auld Lang Syne; Break, Break, Break; Comparison

**Publication date:** December, 2019

**Publication online:** 31 December, 2019

**\*Corresponding author:** Fuhua Liu, taichengxi@126.com

## 1 Introduction

Robert Burns, a peasant poet in the flourishing English pre-romantic period, gained himself worldwide fame for his short lyric "Auld Lang Syne". Similarly, Alfred Tennyson captured his readers' hearts by publishing his morning poem "Break, Break, Break". Based on a detailed comparative analysis of the two poems, we can surprisingly discover several similarities and differences of the two poems with identical themes on friendship, which will definitely better enhance our appreciation of the two poems.

## 2 Body

### 2.1 Comparison from the angle of the poem's target

There is no doubt that the two poems are both on friendship. But here is the subtle difference. "Auld Lang Syne" is directed at "friends" rather than "a

certain friend". "Auld acquaintance" throughout the poem is not aimed at a fixed individual. It may be Jimmy, Tommy, or Rob. We just cannot guess out who this friend is for the poet. It may be any kid that kept the poet company in the good old days. One thing for sure is that those childhood peers really gave the poet so much worry-free fun at that time, and for the poet, the distant happy-being-together in the far past remains clear till today.

As a matter of fact, "Auld Lang Syne" is by no means out of Robert Burns' original creation. It begins as a ballad that has passed down from generation to generation. The poet's role is to modify the ballad to make it perfect. Burns once claimed, "This is an old song. I record it from an elderly man. It has never been published, nor has it got manuscript." It is the poet's adaptation of the song that popularizes it. Due to this reason, it is more widely recognized and liked by ordinary people for mutual understanding and feelings towards friendship. Robert Burns is a humanist, loving all mankind, which may account for his relatively broader theme and humanitarianism in the short poem.

In contrast, Alfred Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break" is sure to have a target. The hero in the poem is Arthur Hallam, the poet's best friend and sister-in-law-to-be who died young at the age of 22. The whole poem is written in honor of him, and nobody else is involved. Tennyson pours all his strong emotions upon this single individual. If we take Hallam's identity as an essayist and poet into consideration, we can speculate how desperate the poet is for losing someone who shared a common interest with him. For Tennyson, Hallam is his all.

Unlike Robert Burns' "Auld Lang Syne", "Break,

Break, Break” is Tennyson’s original creation, a personal pouring of intense feelings or grief toward his best friend Hallam. Although the poem is enjoyed by many poetry fans and highly praised by critics from the literary circle, it has not gained as big a fame as the former relatively speaking. The poem centers more on the friendship between two close friends, which greatly weakens the width of the theme despite the fact that the poem can still strike a responsive chord in the hearts of its readers.

## **2.2 Comparison from the angle of the poem’s tone**

Readers can always feel a hint of optimism when reading Robert Burns’ “Auld Lang Syne”. Readers can be touched, but never be overwhelmed by the poem. “Auld Lang Syne” reminds the readers of the good old days that they have spent together with their own childhood peers. For the readers and the poet himself, the happy moments in the past remains forever, but the present days never seem to have been obscured by the good old days. In addition, the poem also looks forward to the future, as the childhood peers expect to meet again and toast each other for their memorable past. So the poem reflects on the past, pause for the present, and looks forward to another meeting in the future. From the enchanting line “We’ll take a cup of kindness yet”, we can feel the peace and calmness of mind of all people involved, be it the “you” depicted in the poem, the readers or the poet.

Comparatively speaking, overwhelming pessimism can be felt throughout Alfred Tennyson’s “Break, Break, Break”. The poet seems to have been trapped in the past. He is so indulged in the “tender grace” of the days shared in the past that he just cannot get out of it, and he shows his reluctance to get out of it as a matter of fact. The present, for the poet, seems to be of no value and no significance. He lives the present life in order to commemorate the tender grace of the past. The vivid scene of Hallam’s shouting and playing with his sister at the bay paradoxically intensifies the poet’s misery and loneliness for the time being. In the poet’s eyes, the past is his present and his future. The poet tends to count on the past for the spiritual nourishment he needs so that he can collect the courage to continue with his life.

The two poems differ in tone because the poets cultivate vastly different attitudes toward the relationship between the past and the present. In “Break, Break, Break”, there is a sharp contrast between the

lively human activity and the merciless nature. On the one hand, the young sailor, full of vitality, was playing and singing at bay with sister. On the other, on the same seashore, the happy lad fades away, together with his smile and voice. The young lad ceases to be, but the sea, the gray stones and the ships proceed with their daily tasks, showing not an ounce of sympathy for Hallam’s death. The contrast highlights the poet’s grief, desperation and helplessness, and enhances the theme of nostalgia. Quite in the same way, Burns’ “Auld Lang Syne” also delicately handles the relationship between the past and the present. What is different here is that the poet may sigh about the passing of time, but he is never in a contrasting mood. Quite the opposite, he is ready to accept the past as it was.

Both poems give detailed descriptions of the happy time in the past. Burns details in his poem that he and his childhood peers would wander about the hills and streams all day long and were reluctant to go back home, while Tennyson gives a vivid description of Hallam playing, shouting and singing at bay as a fisherman’s boy. They differ in that the former enables the poet to count his blessings at the present, while in the latter poem the happy time described only intensifies the poet’s grief and his yearning for the past.

## **2.3 Comparison from the angle of the poem’s writing techniques**

Concerning the writing techniques, due attention should be paid to the similarities and differences in repetition, language and person. Robert Burns starts his poem with a repeated question, “Should auld acquaintance be forgot / And never brought to min’? / Should auld acquaintance be forgot / And auld lang syne?” The answer to this question is self-evident. The poet uses repetition technique to set the readers thinking about this simple question. The repetition further emphasizes the immortal friendship established in the forming stage of a person’s life. “Auld lang syne” and “We’ll take a cup” are also often repeated in this poem. “Auld lang syne” is Scottish language, which can be literally translated as “old long since”. In the poem, “auld lang syne” refers to “the days long ago” or “childhood or adolescence days” to be accurate. “We’ll take a cup” is a symbol of friendship cherished. “And surely ye’ll be your pint-stowp, / And surely I’ll be mine;” indicates that we’ll part and live in different places and live vastly different lives, but now we are being together again, and we should toast each other for the immortal friendship. We can get that the three

important repetitions discussed are all theme-centered. They are the key words on friendship. In Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break", both "break, break, break" and "Oh, sea!" appear twice in the poem, depicting nature's indifference to the poet's agony. The two repetitions serve well as auxiliary means that enhances the theme, but they are never key words. They are words that help but are not directly to the point.

While the language in Burns' "Auld Lang Syne" is more colloquial and tend to be welcomed by the ordinary folks, Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break" is more formal, which can be illustrated by such words as "utter", "lad" and "stately". Relatively speaking, the latter is stricter in rhyme. Like Wordsworth's selection of words, Burns' simple wording itself is expressive. For example, the wording "auld lang syne" itself is nothing spectacular, but it does stimulate the readers' collective feelings about friendship because the words themselves have power and are inspiring. "Auld acquaintance", "auld lang syne" and "cup" are all common nouns that they themselves do not convey much information and emotion if the readers see the individual word or string of words, but in the poem they automatically become powerful and eloquent. In Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break", instead of self-expressive nouns, verbs and adjectives such as "break", "cold", "gray", "utter", "play", "sing", "stately" and "tender" are more commonly used to create the right atmosphere and mood.

The change of person in both poems also deserves our attention. In Burns' "Auld Lang Syne", at the beginning, the poet starts with a passive voice, because this is a universal question. If we put the sentence in the normal order, it will go like this, "Auld acquaintance

should not be forgot" or "We should not forget our old acquaintance" in the active voice. Running through the poem the poet changes person as follows: the target or an imaginary friend or friend "we"- "You and I"- "we". The second person is employed for most part of the poem after asking his readers a common question at the start of the poem, which enables the poet to talk directly to his imagery friend. In this way, the readers who consider themselves as "you" may go through the same emotional processes. In Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break", however, the poet seems to refuse to communicate directly with his late friend Hallam. He tries to emphasize "I", that is, how I feel now and how I feel about the past. When he has to mention Hallam, he uses the third person such as the fisherman's boy and the young lad. By calling his friend this way, the pain seems to have been alleviated.

### 3 Conclusion

In conclusion, Robert Burns' "Auld Lang Syne" and Alfred Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break" have several similarities and differences from the angle of target, tone and writing techniques. By comparing the two poems, we gain insights into the two poems and poems belonging to the same category.

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