**Tam O’Shanter by Robert Burns**

The following excerpt is from one of Robert Burns’ most famous poems, ‘Tam O’Shanter’. The poem describes Tam, who is riding home on his horse late at night after drinking in a local pub. He rides past the Kirk o’ Alloway and his horse (Maggie) stops, amazed. Burns describes the sight that Tam sees:

And, vow! Tam saw an unco sight!

Warlocks and witches in a dance;

Nae cotillion brent new frae France,

But hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys, and reels,

Put life and mettle in their heels.

A winnock-bunker in the east,

There sat auld Nick, in shape o’ beast;

A towzie tyke, black, grim, and large,

To gie them music was his charge:

He screw’d the pipes and gart them skirl,

Till roof and rafters a’ did dirl.—

Coffins stood round, like open presses,

That shaw’d the dead in their last dresses;

And by some devilish cantraip slight

Each in its cauld hand held a light.—

By which heroic Tam was able

To note upon the haly table,

A murderer’s banes in gibbet airns;

Twa span-lang, wee, unchristen’d bairns;

A thief, new-cutted frae a rape,

Wi’ his last gasp his gab did gape;

Five tomahawks, wi’ blude red-rusted;

Five scymitars, wi’ murder crusted;

A garter, which a babe had strangled;

A knife, a father’s throat had mangled,

Whom his ain son o’ life bereft,

The grey hairs yet stack to the heft;

Wi’ mair o’ horrible and awefu’,

Which even to name wad be unlawfu’.

**Glossary**

**cantraip** – magic/a spell or charm

**cotillion** – an elaborate (fancy) dance from France in the 18th century.

**dirl** – vibrate or shake **gart** – cause

**gibbet airns** – a metal pot held over the fire by a frame

**scymitars** – scythes **span lang** – measured long

**towzie tyke** – a rough, messy, violent person.

**winnock-bunker** – a window-seat (a deep window-sill that you would be able to sit at)

**Understanding *Tam O’Shanter***

Answer the following questions to show that you understand this section of *Tam O’Shanter*:

1. This section of the poem describes what - and who - Tam sees when he stops at the Kirk o Alloway. ‘Auld Nick’ is mentioned – who is he?

St Nicholas A preacher The Devil

Tam’s friend Tam’s enemy

1. What does Auld Nick do?

plays music dances reads from the bible cooks

1. ‘*Coffins stood round, like open presses…*’. What are ‘presses’?

presents doors graves

cupboards bottles

1. ‘*Each in its cauld hand held a light…*’
2. What type of word is ‘cauld’?

noun adjective verb adverb

1. What does ‘cauld’ mean?

stiff old bony

ugly cold

1. Why are the hands ‘cauld’?

They are in winter They are dead They are outside

They are under a spell

1. Select all of the sights that Tam sees:

bones in a pot a man with a knife in his throat

weapons with blood on them two babies

a murdered witch a drowned minister

a thief with his mouth hanging open a ghost holding a sword

a knife used in a murder a coffin full of knives

**Analysing *Tam O’Shanter***

Answer the following questions to show that you can analyse the poetic techniques used in Tam O’Shanter:

1. There are lots of examples of rhyme in this poem. From the poem, pick the words that rhyme with the following:

east beast

skirl dirl

slight light

strangled mangled

1. Burns points out that Tam did not see a ‘cotillion’, which is an elaborate dance, but he did see ‘hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys, and reels’. When a writer compares things to highlight their differences, this is called:

rhyme simile vocabulary contrast

1. Burns uses word choice to help us understand that the sights that Tam witnessed were frightening. Using the words from the poem, give examples of the weapons that Tam sees:

tomahawks scymitars knife

1. Burns deliberately uses a long list to describe what Tam sees. Why does he do this? Select two of the following answers:

To show that Tam was there for a long time.

To show that Tam was very frightened.

To show that Tam was drunk and confused.

To show that Tam was under a spell.

To show that Tam saw a lot of frightening things.

To show that Tam saw a large variety of frightening things.