**Holy Willie’s Prayer by Robert Burns**

The following excerpt is from Robert Burns’ satirical poems, ‘Holy Willie’s Prayer’. The poem’s speaker is believed to be based on ‘Willie Fisher’, a man who was well known for denouncing others while leading a less-than-pious life himself.

Yet I am here, a chosen sample,

To shew Thy grace is great and ample:

I’m here, a pillar o’ Thy temple

Strong as a rock,

A guide, a ruler and example

To a’ Thy flock.—

O Lord thou kens what zeal I bear,

When drinkers drink, and swearers swear,

And singin’ there, and dancin’ here,

Wi’ great an’ sma’;

For I am keepet by the fear,

Free frae them a’.—

But yet—O Lord—confess I must—

At times I’m fash’d wi’ fleshly lust;

And sometimes too, in wardly trust

Vile Self gets in;

But Thou remembers we are dust,

Defil’d wi’ sin.—

O Lord—yestreen—thou kens—wi’ Meg—

Thy pardon I sincerely beg!

O may ’t ne’er be a living plague,

To my dishonor!

And I’ll ne’er lift a lawless leg

Again upon her.—

Besides, I farther maun avow,

Wi’ Leezie’s lass, three times—I trow—

But L—d, that friday I was fou

When I cam near her;

Or else, Thou kens, thy servant true

Wad never steer her.—

**Understanding the Scots language in Holy Willie’s Prayer**

Create your own Scots glossary

Read the words in the excerpt and find the Scots translations of the English words below

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| English | Scots |
| knows | kens |
| from | frae |
| yesterday | yestreen |
| must | maun |
| believe | trow |

**Understanding the poem and poetic techniques**

Answer questions in this section to demonstrate your understanding of the poem and Burns’ poetic techniques.

1. This poem has one speaker – Willie. This type of poem is called a:
2. dramatic monologue b. soliloquy c flyting d. sonnet

2a ‘I’m here, a pillar o’ Thy temple/Strong as a rock/A guide, a ruler and example

Willie declares himself to be ‘A pillar o ‘Thy temple’ to the people in the parish. What does he mean by saying that he is a ‘pillar’?

1. He is above the ordinary people b. He upholds religious values

c. He dominates conversations d. He is closer to God than most

2b In some versions of this poem, the word ‘ruler’ is replaced with ‘buckler’ (small shield) Saying that he is a ‘buckler’ indicates that Willie thinks of himself as a:

1. role model b. superior being c. protector d. victim

3a Willie also refers to himself as being ‘as strong as a rock’. This technique is called:

1. word choice b. dramatic monologue c. imagery d. hyperbole

3b The phrase ‘strong as a rock’ tells us that Willie feels:

1. infallible b. vulnerable c. important d. insignificant

4. Willie confesses to sinful behaviour. What does he promise?

a. To confess to the congregation b. To take pride in himself

c. To make an honest woman of Meg d. To leave Meg alone.

5. Willie excuses his behaviour by blaming:

a. conceit b. drunkenness c. lust d. greed

**Extension Activity**

C. By referring to this excerpt and at least one other poem, discuss Burns’ exploration of religious concerns.

Possible answers may include:

* a chosen sample – ‘chosen’ (word choice) indicates Willie’s belief in his position as one of the divine elect
* a pillar o’ Thy temple – ‘pillar’ (image) reveals Willie’s high regard for himself
* O Lord thou kens what zeal I bear – ‘thou kens’ - assumption of God’s trust and faith in Willie; ‘zeal’ – (word choice) indicates the fervent nature of Willie’s faith
* Thou remembers we are dust, / Defil’d wi’ sin – ‘Defil’d’ – confession of man’s fallible nature
* Thou kens, thy servant true / Wad never steer her – ‘Thou kens’ - assumption of God’s trust and faith in Willie
* Reference to *A Poet’s Welcome to His Love-Begotten Daughter; The First Instance that entitled him to the Venerable Appellation of Father* –the rejection of any political or religious institution which seeks to shame people
* Reference to *Address to the Deil* – satirical treatment of Calvinism