

‘Wandering Willie’s Tale’ and ‘The Two Drovers’

by Sir Walter Scott

Teaching Notes for Higher and Advanced Higher English
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‘WANDERING WILLIE’S TALE’ AND ‘THE TWO DROVERS’

Since the 1960s the writings of Sir Walter Scott have been undergoing major critical re-evaluation. Apart from re-establishing Scott as a major world writer this scholarly scrutiny has reached the consensus that his novels on Scottish subjects are his best work, especially *Waverley* (1814), *Old Mortality* (1816), *Rob Roy* (1818), *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818), *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819), and *Redgauntlet* (1824). While there is no reason why one of these may not be studied by the able class or pupil, teachers may, nonetheless, feel that they are rather daunting and may prefer to introduce Scott through two of his short stories, ‘Wandering Willie’s Tale’ and ‘The Two Drovers’.

RANGE:

- Higher and Advanced Higher English

KEY TEXTS:

- ‘Wandering Willie’s Tale’, from *Redgauntlet*
 - ‘The Two Drovers’, from *Chronicles of the Canongate*
- Both stories are included in
- *Selected Short Stories of Sir Walter Scott* (Glasgow: Kennedy & Boyd, 2011)

‘WANDERING WILLIE’S TALE’

(Page references are to *Selected Short Stories of Sir Walter Scott*, Kennedy & Boyd, 2011)

The story, although taken from *Redgauntlet*, is complete in itself and has been frequently anthologised as an independent short story. Whilst appearing to be a folktale, it displays superb literary sophistication; it explores an exciting supernatural theme and makes magnificent use of the resonances of the Scots tongue, not only in the dialogue but also in the narrative.

Historical Background

The story is told by Wandering Willie, a blind fiddler, grandfather of Steenie Steenson, the hero of the piece. It is set about 1700. During the second half of the seventeenth century Scotland had been torn by political and religious strife (‘The Killing Times’) in which the Covenanters/Whigs had been persecuted by the Episcopals/Tories. The Tory Sir Robert Redgauntlet had enjoyed a tyrannical power in his neighbourhood until the Revolution of 1688 when the situation was reversed and the Stuarts were ousted in favour of William of Orange. The consequent loss of power meant loss of income for Sir Robert: hence the need to enforce the payment of his tenants’ rents, the situation with which Steenie Steenson is faced at the beginning of the story.

The Story

After much difficulty Steenie gathers the necessary money to pay his rent, but is unable to obtain proof of payment due to the sudden death of Sir Robert Redgauntlet. When Sir John, the laird’s son, takes over the estate, there is no record of Steenie’s payment. Steenie is desperate and so, whilst riding through the wood of Pitmurkie, he allows himself to be lured by a mysterious stranger to visit the dead Sir Robert (in Hell!) in order to obtain a receipt. He does so without imperilling his own soul and is able to present the receipt to a horrified Sir John. His money is also later found and its disappearance is blamed on Redgauntlet’s monkey, Major Weir.

Questions for Group Discussion

- Describe the character of Sir Robert Redgauntlet when we first meet him alive. Consider especially the emphasis on drunkenness, ‘sculduddry sangs’, the monkey, the horse-shoe mark on his forehead, the horrendous circumstances surrounding his death and the ‘appearance’ of the devil on his coffin (pp. 14–18). What is the implied moral judgment about such a self-indulgent person?
- Precisely why does Sir John summon Steenie?
- Describe the character of Sir John compared to his father.
- ‘Wandering Willie’s Tale’ has been praised for its tautness and the tension of its atmosphere. Examine the truth of this statement, paying close attention to the events which occur from Steenie leaving Tibbie Faw’s changehouse to his waking up in the Redgauntlet graveyard (pp. 22–26).
- How effective is Wandering Willie’s picture of Hell? Notice that the inhabitants are all leading Tories. Why do you think this is? Consider the effectiveness of the following sentence in its context: ‘The appearance gnashed its teeth and laughed, but it took from a large pocket-book the receipt’ (p. 26).
- David Daiches has described ‘Wandering Willie’s Tale’ as ‘the perfect counterpart in prose, from the point of view of techniques though not of content, of Burns’s ‘Tam o’ Shanter’. Consider the structure of the two pieces:

Wandering Willie’s Tale

1. Steenie is ‘bald wi’ brandy’ leaving the inn
2. Toast to the devil
3. Ride through the wood of Pitmurkie
4. Steenie’s visit to Hell (Redgauntlet’s castle with its merrymaking)
5. Mention of God’s name
6. Receipt recovered by supernatural means
7. Whole story capable of logical explanation?

Tam o’ Shanter

1. Tam is drunk leaving the inn
2. Jean tells him he will be ‘catch’d wi’ warlocks in the mirk’

3. Tam's ride past sinister places
4. Tam views the witches' party at Kirk Alloway
5. 'Weel done, Cutty Sark!'
6. Maggie's tail removed by supernatural means
7. Whole story capable of logical explanation?

Is similar tension achieved in both pieces?
Account for the difference in tone. To what extent is its structure all-important for the success of 'Wandering Willie's Tale'?

Written Assignments

Imaginative Writing

Write a short story which involves a mysterious journey to another world. It can be set in the past or the present. Select the paragraphs of your story which you consider to be the climax. 'Translate' these paragraphs into Scots. The *Essential Scots Dictionary* will be a useful source of vocabulary.

Literary Essays

Write a critical analysis of 'Wandering Willie's Tale', evaluating it, among other things, in terms of structure, setting, atmosphere and dialogue. Discuss the success of 'Wandering Willie's Tale' as a story of the supernatural.

'THE TWO DROVERS'

(Page references are to *Selected Short Stories of Sir Walter Scott*, Kennedy & Boyd, 2011)

'The Two Drovers' also contains a supernatural element with the opening prophecy of Janet of Tomahourich that Robin Oig the Highland drover will shed English blood. To humour her, therefore, and to avoid embarrassment, Robin entrusts his dirk to his friend Hugh Morrison.

Then the journey from Doune begins with Robin Oig in the constant company of a close friend, an English drover called Harry Wakefield. Soon after they cross the Border bitterness breaks out between them when Robin obtains permission from the local landowner to graze his herd for the night on the same field which Wakefield had previously acquired from the same landlord's bailiff, Fleecebumpkin – who had acted informally. This leads to a quarrel in which Robin is unjustly accused and they come to blows. Robin is humiliated. He, therefore, seeks out Hugh Morrison to retrieve his dirk. Two hours later he returns to the scene of his humiliation and stabs Wakefield (thus fulfilling Janet's prophecy).

The story ends with the judge's instruction to the jury that, because of the two hours delay, they must find Robin guilty of premeditated murder.

This story explores the cultural differences between the Highlander and the Englishman (rather than the Lowland Scot as is more common in Scott's novels): Robin did what he did, not out of cold-blooded vengeance, but because of his perception of what constituted honour and self-respect, and his clear sense of duty can be compared with that of that other famous Highlander in *Waverley*, Evan Dhu Maccombich. The author also skilfully evokes the world of droving, the lively atmosphere of the noisy hostelry and that tendency in human nature to unite against the underdog 'from the love of mischief which characterises mankind in all ranks of life,' whilst the judge's summing up evokes compassion for the man who had to be condemned to death for acting according to his own and Highland society's best lights.

Questions for Group Discussion

- How convincing is the treatment of the supernatural at the beginning of the story (pp. 100–02)? How necessary is its inclusion for the story to have a satisfactory ending?
- Examine the speech of Robin Oig (e.g. p. 110). This is how Highland English was represented in literature in Scott's day. How satisfactorily does it represent to you the speech of people who live in the Highlands?
- What differences in attitude to justice and honour can you discern between that of the Highlander Robin Oig and that of the Englishman Harry Wakefield? Does this say anything about national attitudes?
- What is Robin's attitude to Harry Wakefield after he has killed him when he says 'he was a pretty man' (p. 118)?
- The last five pages of this story (pp. 119–23) are told, not by the narrator, but by the trial judge. What is the effect of this?
- Is 'The Two Drovers' a true tragedy?

Written Assignment

Literary Essay

'The Two Drovers' has been praised because it shows Scott's ability to depict vividly and accurately observed human beings, because it has powerful dramatic force, but above all because it reaches the heights of heroic tragedy. Discuss this assessment of the story.

Further Reading

Other nineteenth-century short stories (all with supernatural themes) which would repay study by pupils are:

- James Hogg: 'George Dobson's Expedition to Hell'
- James Hogg: 'The Brownie of the Black Hags'
- James Hogg: 'The Strange Letter of a Lunatic'
- Robert Louis Stevenson: 'Thrawn Janet'
- Robert Louis Stevenson: 'The Tale of Tod Lapraik' (from the novel *Catriona*)
- Margaret Oliphant: 'The Library Window'