

Never Mind the Quality, Feel the Breadth

What AI literary analysis can — and cannot — do: a case study in S. R. Crockett's Heart's Delight

Analysis produced using AI tools by the S. R. Crockett Cultural Legacy Charity research team.

Prefatory Note: What We Asked, and Why

S. R. Crockett was, before he was a novelist, a poet. His first published collection, *Dulce Cor*, was privately printed in 1885 (books carry the 1886 imprint) under the pseudonym Ford Bereton. *Dulce Cor* is dedicated to Ruth Mary Milner, whom Crockett married in 1887. One of the collection's poems, *O Heart's Delight*, is dated 1884 in the collection — composed when Crockett was twenty-four or twenty-five, still a student at New College Edinburgh, before the ministry, before the novels, before any public recognition. An inscription in a presentation copy of *Dulce Cor* reads: 'This was the mask the world wore when Love and I were twenty-four' — a phrase that places the collection, and this poem, within the emotional register of early love and the necessary illusions of youth.

O Heart's Delight is an eight-stanza poem. The two stanzas reproduced in *Bog Myrtle and Peat* (1895), placed immediately before the story *Saint Lucy of the Eyes*, are Stanzas VII and VIII of that longer poem — its concluding movement. Crockett placed them there not as new work but as the structural threshold to his collection's longest and most architecturally complex piece. *Bog Myrtle and Peat* is dedicated to his father-in-law; *Dulce Cor* to the woman who became his wife. The poem's passage from one collection to the other carries, at least implicitly, that biographical arc.

The act of selection is itself significant. In *Dulce Cor*, Stanzas I–VI address a specific beloved directly — she is named throughout as 'Heart's Delight' — and the poem moves through separation, longing, and imagined reunion. Stanzas VII and VIII are its emotional climax: the moment where the accumulated longing finds its most distilled formal expression. Detached from that context and placed before *Saint Lucy of the Eyes*, these two stanzas become formally self-sufficient. The beloved is no longer a person directly addressed but an abstraction: 'this Love of mine.' Crockett's editorial act transforms a love poem of personal address into a meditation on inexpressible desire as such. A fuller analysis of the complete *O Heart's Delight* is warranted and will be pursued separately; this article analyses the two stanzas as they appear in *Bog Myrtle and Peat*.

The poem as placed in *Bog Myrtle and Peat* has received no formal critical attention. This is partly a consequence of the general neglect of Crockett's poetry, which has been shaped — and distorted — by a single remark. In 1887 Crockett sent a copy of *Dulce Cor* to Robert Louis Stevenson. RLS responded warmly. In Crockett's own later testimony, written after Stevenson's death in 1894, 'he alone of mankind saw what pleased him in a little book of boyish verses,' and Stevenson quoted lines from the collection in successive letters — 'to let me see that he remembered what he had praised.'

The remark that has done most damage is this. At some point during their correspondence — Crockett places it at Saranac Lake — RLS wrote: 'Write... my

Timothy no longer verse, but use good Galloway Scots for your stomach's sake — and mine.' Crockett quotes this himself in the preface to the second edition of *The Stickit Minister* (1893), in a passage of affectionate, humorous reminiscence. The tone throughout is that of a younger writer recalling the encouragement of an admired friend who saw something specific and valuable in his prose voice. It is not the tone of a man recording a verdict on his poetry.

Later critics have read the remark as a dismissal. This reading does not survive contact with the evidence. The man who quoted lines from Crockett's verse in successive letters was not indifferent to the poetry. Stevenson's advice was commercial and personal: Crockett's Galloway prose had a character that the market would reward. Whether that advice was right about the poetry is a separate question — one the formal analysis below is designed to help the reader think about.

The question we asked was not *is this a good poem* — that is a judgement requiring a human reader — but: *what kind of poem is this, what is it doing formally, and what does that formal analysis reveal that a reader can then assess?*

We gave the poem to an AI analytical tool and asked it to describe the poem's formal properties precisely (metre, rhyme, structure, rhetoric, vocabulary); identify the literary mode it belongs to; and note relevant points of comparison, without asserting equivalence or making quality judgements. What follows is the result. The working is shown in full. The closing section sets out what the analysis cannot do, and what remains for the human reader.

The Text

The text below is that of *Bog Myrtle and Peat* (1895). Substantive variants from the *Dulce Cor* (1885) text are noted in the analysis.

I.

O mellow rain upon the clover tops;
O breath of morning blown o'er meadow-sweet;
Lush apple-blooms from which the wild bee drops
Inebriate; O hayfield scents, my feet
Scatter abroad some morning in July;
O wildwood odours of the birch and pine,
And heather breaths from great red hill-tops nigh,
Than olive sweeter or Sicilian vine;—
Not all of you, nor summer lands of balm—
Not blest Arabia,
Nor coral isles in seas of tropic calm.
Such heart's desire into my heart can draw.

II.

O scent of sea on dreaming April morn
Borne landward on a steady-blowing wind;
O August breeze, o'er leagues of rustling corn,
Wafts of clear air from uplands left behind,
And outbreathed sweetness of wet wallflower bed,

O set in mid-May depth of orchard close,
 Tender germander blue, geranium red;
 O expressed sweetness of sweet briar-rose;
 Too gross, corporeal, absolute are ye,
 Ye help not to define
 That subtle fragrance, delicate and free,
 Which like a vesture clothes this Love of mine.

Part One: The Formal Working

Stanza Form and Rhyme Scheme

The poem as it appears in *Bog Myrtle and Peat* is twenty-four lines in two stanzas of twelve lines each. The rhyme scheme of both stanzas is identical:

ABABCDCEFEF.

The opening eight lines of each stanza alternate in pairs (ABABCDCE). The final four lines shift to a new quatrain (FEFE), but with a significant structural feature: line 10 in each stanza is a short line, metrically and visually distinct from the surrounding pentameter. This gives the final quatrain an asymmetric shape — two full lines, a short line, a closing line — that is architecturally deliberate.

The scheme is formally consistent and precisely repeatable: Crockett maintains it exactly across both stanzas.

One rhyme in Stanza I requires attention: *Arabia* / *draw* (the F-pair at lines 10 and 12). This is the poem's only significantly imperfect rhyme. Victorian verse regularly employed half-rhymes without critical censure — Tennyson, whose work Crockett knew well and admired, used inexact rhymes deliberately in formal positions. The *Arabia* / *draw* pairing is unusual rather than unacceptable, and it falls at the poem's moment of greatest rhetorical pressure: where the catalogue is refused and the poem strains hardest to say what it cannot name. That the formal imperfection and the argumentative strain coincide may not be accidental. The Stanza II counterpart, *define* / *mine*, is exact. Whether the asymmetry between the two stanzas is a controlled effect or a lapse is a judgement the analysis cannot make.

Textual variants: Dulce Cor (1885) vs Bog Myrtle and Peat (1895)

Stanza I, line 12: Dulce Cor reads 'All Heart's Desire unto my heart can draw'; Bog Myrtle reads 'Such heart's desire into my heart can draw.'
'All' is more absolute; 'Such' slightly more qualified. The revision modulates the refusal.

Stanza II, line 8: Dulce Cor reads 'O express'd freshness of sweet briar rose'; Bog Myrtle reads 'O expressed sweetness of sweet briar-rose.'
'Sweetness' is more sonically integrated (echoing 'sweet' in the same line); 'freshness' is more precise to the sensation. Crockett revised deliberately.
The Bog Myrtle text prioritises music over accuracy; the earlier text the reverse.

Metre: Syllable Count and Stress Pattern

The dominant metre is **iambic pentameter** — the ten-syllable, five-stress line that is the standard measure of serious English verse. A systematic count across all lines:

All lines except line 10 in each stanza are decasyllabic — ten syllables.

Line 10 of Stanza I: *Not blest Arabia* — five syllables.

Line 10 of Stanza II: *Ye help not to define* — six syllables.

These short lines are not accidents or failures of prosody. They occupy the same structural position in both stanzas: the pivot point at which the catalogue is refused and the poem turns towards what cannot be named. The rhythmic break enacts the rhetorical break.

A selection of lines scanned in detail:

O BREATH of MOR-ning BLOWN o'er MEA-dow-SWEET
u / | u / | u / | u / | u /
= five iambic feet: perfect pentameter.

LUSH AP-ple-BLOOMS from WHICH the WILD bee DROPS
/ u | u / | u / | u / | /
= opening spondee, settling into iambic: standard Victorian variation.

IN-e-bri-ATE; O HAY-field SCENTS, my FEET

Inebriate — four syllables — must be elided to three (*In-EBR-yate*) for the line to scan as pentameter. Read with full pronunciation, the line buckles; read with standard Victorian elision, it holds. The semicolon mid-line adds a further rhythmic pressure. The effect is a line that strains before resolving — matching the sensation it describes.

NOT blest A-RAB-i-a
/ / u / u u
= five syllables: two heavy stresses, trailing into a dactylic (Arabia) that falls away.

YE HELP not TO de-FINE
u / u / u /
= six syllables, three clean iambic feet: iambic trimeter.

The two short lines are not identical in their effects: the Stanza I line dissolves into the dactylic trailing of a proper name; the Stanza II line snaps into a crisp refusal. The asymmetry between them is itself expressive.

Metrical summary: The poem sustains iambic pentameter competently throughout, with standard Victorian variations. The short lines are structurally deliberate. The

most strained line (*Inebriate; O hayfield scents, my feet*) is also the most semantically complex; the strain is functional rather than incidental.

Rhetorical Structure

Both stanzas follow an identical three-part movement:

Lines 1–8: The catalogue. Accumulation of sensory detail, overwhelmingly olfactory. Each item is introduced by the apostrophe *O* or equivalent address. The imagery moves from the specifically British and seasonal — clover, meadow-sweet, apple-blossom, hayfield, heather, birch, pine — through to the distant and exotic — Sicilian vine, Arabia, coral isles — before the turn. The second stanza's catalogue stays closer to home — sea-air, corn, wallflower, orchard, germander, briar-rose — a tightening of focus that makes the negation more intimate.

Lines 9–10: The negation and the short line. The catalogue is explicitly refused. Stanza I: *Not all of you, nor summer lands of balm— / Not blest Arabia*. Stanza II: *Too gross, corporeal, absolute are ye, / Ye help not to define*. The short line is the syntactic hinge: the sentence breaks, the poem turns.

Lines 11–12: The attempt at positive statement. Stanza I ends still in negation — *Such heart's desire into my heart can draw* — grammatically, none of these things *can draw* what the poem desires. Only Stanza II arrives at a positive statement, and it does so by simile rather than by naming: *That subtle fragrance, delicate and free, / Which like a vesture clothes this Love of mine*. The love is not described; it is compared to a fragrance that is itself only defined by contrast with the grosser scents already refused.

The governing rhetorical figure is **apophasis**: definition by systematic negation of everything the thing is not. The poem never names what it desires. It ends having circled its subject twice without landing on it.

Vocabulary

Natural and sensory (dominant, throughout): clover, meadow-sweet, apple-blossoms, wild bee, hayfield, birch, pine, heather, olive, coral, sea, corn, wallflower, orchard, germander, geranium, briar-rose. Almost entirely olfactory; visual detail is minimal and subordinate.

Latinate and elevated (four words, strategically placed): *Inebriate* (Latin *inebriatus*); *corporeal* (Latin *corporalis*); *absolute* (Latin *absolutus*); *vesture* (Old French/Latin *vestura*). Three of the four — *corporeal*, *absolute*, *vesture* — appear in the negation and resolution sections, not in the catalogue. The Latinate words are deployed at moments of argumentative strain, where the poem works hardest to articulate something beyond the Anglo-Saxon textures of the sensory list.

Devotional and archaic (distributed): *O* (apostrophe, seven times in the catalogues alone); *ye* (second person plural, archaic); *blest*; *vesture*. These lift the register towards the language of the Psalms or the Prayer Book.

The line *O expressed sweetness of sweet briar-rose* merits particular attention: the double *sweet*, the echo of *expressed* and *sweetness*, and the sustained sibilance are operating musically as well as semantically — the sound enacting the sensation the

words describe. The revision from *freshness* (*Dulce Cor*) to *sweetness* (*Bog Myrtle*) reinforces this effect at the cost of some precision.

Part Two: Mode and Tradition

The two stanzas as they stand in *Bog Myrtle and Peat* belong to a recognisable mode in Victorian lyric poetry: the accumulative ode, in which a catalogue of natural sensory detail is assembled not to celebrate what it describes but to approach something that exceeds it. The catalogue is the poem's method, but inadequacy is its subject. The non-arrival is the argument.

This mode has formal conventions that the poem observes with precision: the extended catalogue in apostrophe, the pivot on a short line, the attempt in the closing movement to name by analogy rather than direct statement. The apophatic structure is not decorative; it is the poem's governing logic.

Tennyson

Crockett knew and admired Tennyson's work. *Tears, Idle Tears* (from *The Princess*, 1847) is written in blank verse organised in four five-line stanzas. Its governing concern is the inexpressibility of a particular feeling approached through sensory analogy, acknowledged as inadequate. Tennyson's closing line names the feeling by paradox rather than description: *O Death in Life, the days that are no more*. Crockett's closing figure names it by simile rather than description: fragrance as vesture. Neither arrives directly. Both accumulate sensory detail in decasyllabic lines to circle something inexpressible, and both acknowledge in their final lines that the circling has not resolved.

The parallel is one of shared mode and sensibility, not formal imitation. *Heart's Delight* is a rhymed lyric where Tennyson's poem is blank verse; the stanza structures differ. But the rhetorical architecture — accumulated sensation deployed to approach and refuse to name an inexpressible feeling — places both poems within the same tradition. That Crockett was working consciously within that tradition, and not stumbling into its conventions, is consistent with everything the formal analysis shows.

The Accumulative Lyric Mode

Heart's Delight sits within a broader Victorian practice of the sensory catalogue poem — a form with roots in the ode tradition and in the Romantic period's preoccupation with scent as the sense most closely associated with memory, desire, and the inexpressible. The concentration of olfactory imagery is not incidental; it is a formal choice that places the poem within a specific lyric mode, one whose conventions Crockett handles with assurance.

What distinguishes Crockett's handling is the precision of the formal design: the exact repetition of the stanza structure, the strategic placement of Latinate diction at moments of argumentative strain, the asymmetry between the two short pivot lines. These are not decorative features.

That these stanzas were composed in 1884 — before any of Crockett's prose fiction existed — and that in *Dulce Cor* they represent the emotional climax of a longer

poem of personal love, adds a further dimension. The formal precision of Stanzas VII and VIII is not the incidental achievement of a prose writer experimenting in verse. It is the work of a young poet who understood the mode he was working in and had something specific to say within it.

Part Three: What the Analysis Can and Cannot Do

The formal analysis above establishes the following without making evaluative claims:

- *Heart's Delight* (as placed in *Bog Myrtle and Peat*) is a formally deliberate poem, not an occasional or decorative one. Its stanza form is consistent, repeatable, and architecturally designed: the short lines are structural, the rhyme scheme identical across both stanzas, the pentameter competently sustained throughout.
- Crockett's selection of these two stanzas from a longer poem was itself a formal editorial act, transforming a poem of personal address into a meditation on inexpressible desire. The two textual variants between *Dulce Cor* and *Bog Myrtle* show him revising with intention: moderating an absolute claim, prioritising sonic integration over perceptual precision.
- The poem is working within an identifiable literary mode. Its formal choices are consistent with that mode throughout. They are not accidental.
- The poem has one significant formal imperfection: the half-rhyme *Arabia / draw*. This falls within Victorian practice and at the poem's moment of greatest rhetorical strain. Whether it is controlled or a lapse is a judgement the analysis cannot make.
- The most metrically strained line (*Inebriate; O hayfield scents, my feet*) is also the most semantically complex. The strain is functional; whether it is successful is a judgement the analysis cannot make.
- The poem's placement as the threshold to *Saint Lucy of the Eyes* is a structural choice. It establishes the mode — desire that cannot be named, language that circles without landing — before the prose narrative begins. Whether this placement illuminates the story, or the story illuminates the poem, is a critical question the analysis opens but does not answer.

What the analysis cannot do is assess whether the poem is good. It can establish that Crockett understood the formal tradition he was working in, that his choices were deliberate, and that the poem performs with precision within a demanding mode. The distance between competence and achievement is not something a formal analysis can measure. The reader will form a view of that distance.

Stevenson's advice — to write prose rather than verse — may have been commercially sound. It does not settle the question of what the poetry is worth. That question is now open again.

The analysis in this article was produced through a structured dialogue with an AI analytical tool, working from the text of the poem. The AI was asked to perform formal description without making evaluative claims. The formal working — scansion, rhyme mapping, rhetorical analysis, vocabulary distribution — is shown in full so that readers can assess it. Comparative references are grounded in documented biographical context.

Companion articles on Saint Lucy: *Saint Lucy: Composition*, and *Four Voices* are available at the [S.R.Crockett Online Museum Reading Room](#).

There is also an exhibition this winter at the [Online Museum](#).