

2- A. E. Housman

A.E. Housman is one of the most important poets of the 19th and 20th centuries. He is best known for his simple style, and memorable and moving images that made his work popular during his lifetime. 'To an Athlete Dying Young' by A. E. Housman describes the death of a youthful man who is celebrated for his glorious passing and remembered for his loss, rather than his athletic achievements. In this poem, the speaker begins by recalling a young athlete who won a small-town race. He was celebrated by everyone around him. Now, in the present, the athlete is being celebrated in a very different way. He's died and is being carried back home. He died gloriously and the speaker seems to praise him for it. The speaker follows this up by providing the reader with a series of dark and thoughtful images that allude to the loss the town has suffered and the future the young man will never get to have. He also brings in images of the afterlife and the crown the young man will be wearing there. There are several important themes to take note of in this poem. These include youth, glory, death, and fear. These are all linked together through the life and death of this young man and the speaker's contemplation of him. There is an implicit fear of death in the speaker's depiction of the young man's early death. He dwells on what has been lost and will now never be regained. There is a good example in the second stanza when the poet's speaker spends time thinking about the period between life and death and the threshold through which the townspeople carry the young man. This liminal space is holding an important place in the speaker's mind. There is a brief allusion in the line "Smart lad, to slip betimes away" to the possibility that the young man killed himself. Therefore meeting death on his own terms. There is also a focus on the man's age and how athletic he was throughout the poem. These things generally do not go together with death and are therefore juxtaposed to bring attention to one another. The speaker describes youth as a period of time that goes by much too quickly, death comes whether one is ready for it or not.

Structure

'To an Athlete Dying Young' by A. E. Housman is an elegiac poem that is made up of seven, four-line stanzas. These are known as quatrains. The quatrains follow a simple rhyme scheme of AABB CCDD and so on, changing end sounds from stanza to stanza. These seven stanzas can be further separated into three sections. The first contains a memory of the past, the second stanza all the way through the sixth brings the reader to the athlete's death and funeral. These stanzas also contain a discussion about youth being the right time for one to die. The final stanza concludes the poem with thoughts about the future and what might be in store for the athlete in the afterlife.

Literary Devices

Housman makes use of several literary devices in 'To an Athlete Dying Young'. These include but are not limited to alliteration, enjambment, and apostrophe. Apostrophe is an

arrangement of words addressing someone, something, or creature, that does not exist, or is not present, in the poem's immediate setting. The exclamation, "Oh," is often used at the beginning of the phrase. The person is spoken to as though they can hear and understand the speaker's words. In this case, the speaker is talking to the athlete who has died. This is quite a common technique in elegies. There is a good example of sibilance in these lines with the words "shady" and "shut" as well as "silence sounds" and "stopped".

To an Athlete Dying Young'

To an Athlete Dying Young
The time you won your town the race
We chaired you through the market-place;
Man and boy stood cheering by,
And home we brought you shoulder-high.

To-day, the road all runners come,
Shoulder-high we bring you home,
And set you at your threshold down,
Townsmen of a stiller town.

Smart lad, to slip betimes away
From fields where glory does not stay
And early though the laurel grows
It withers quicker than the rose.

Eyes the shady night has shut
Cannot see the record cut,
And silence sounds no worse than cheers
After earth has stopped the ears:

Now you will not swell the rout
Of lads that wore their honours out,
Runners whom renown outran
And the name died before the man.

So set, before its echoes fade,
The fleet foot on the sill of shade,
And hold to the low lintel up
The still-defended challenge-cup.

And round that early-laurelled head
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,
And find unwithered on its curls
The garland briefer than a girl's.

