

Housman

- Techniques : narrativity , simple diction
- Themes : death , life , youth and success

Housman grew up in a time known as the Victorian era, during which Queen Victoria ruled England and its territories. Queen Victoria sat on the throne longer than any other British monarch, from 1837 until 1901. This period saw significant changes for both Britain and Europe as a whole, with industrialization leading much of the population to jobs in factories instead of on farms as in the past. The era also saw an extended period of peace and prosperity, leading many free to pursue intellectual interests and occupy themselves with the complex rules of behavior found in “proper” society.

University and A Shropshire Lad Housman entered [Oxford University](#) in 1877. He continued to immerse himself in his favorite subjects, Latin and Greek, and also helped to found *Ye Round Table*, an undergraduate magazine featuring humorous verse and satire. Housman's contributions to this publication demonstrate not only his wit but his talent for nonsense verse, which he kept well-concealed in later years even as his critics were condemning his poetry for being stark and humorless. While at first excelling in his work at Oxford, Housman later inexplicably failed his examinations in 1881 and did not earn his degree until 1892, when he was made professor of Latin at University College in London. The cause for Housman's failure was for many years a subject of speculation among critics and biographers. Today, it is known from Housman's diaries that the reason for his failure at Oxford was at least partially caused by his hopelessness over his relationship with a young science student named Moses Jackson. The realization of his own

homosexuality and the eventual rejection by Jackson embittered Housman. He became a repressed and melancholy recluse who later declined all honors he was offered, including the poet laureateship of England and the Order of Merit, one of the most prestigious distinctions bestowed by the British government. Housman scholars contend that other than the death of his mother, this rebuff by Jackson was the most determinative event of Housman's life.

It was shortly after the crisis at Oxford that Housman wrote all of *A Shropshire Lad*. His declaration that “I have seldom written poetry unless I was rather out of health” seems to substantiate the opinion that emotional trauma greatly influenced his work. Such poems as “Shake Hands We Shall Never Be Friends, All's Over” and “Because I Liked You Better” make direct reference to his relationship with Jackson, although Housman did not allow them to be published during his lifetime. While Housman wrote an ironic poem on the occasion of [Oscar Wilde's](#) imprisonment for homosexual acts, stating in part that “they're taking him to prison for the colour of his hair,” he nonetheless was an extremely proper and reserved Victorian gentleman and dreaded being associated with homosexuality.

In *A Shropshire Lad*, Housman adopted the persona of a young Shropshire yeoman, whom he called Terence Hearsay, in order to distance himself from the autobiographical aspects of his work. This technique has caused some commentators to charge that Housman never developed his themes of unrequited love, the oblivion

of death, and idealized military life beyond the emotional and intellectual capabilities of his main character. Two well-known poems contained in this volume, “To an

Athlete Dying Young” and “When I Was One-and-Twenty,” concentrate solely on the loss of youthful dreams. The thematic limitations of *A Shropshire Lad* and the lack of emotional development led Cyril Conolly to state that “many of Housman's poems are of a triteness of technique equaled only by the banality of thought.” However, other critics praise the economy of Housman's verse and his expertise with the pastoral tradition. Most of the poems included in *A Shropshire Lad* are short, sometimes not more than one stanza in length, and written in the four-line ballad style with rhyming alternate lines. According to many critics, this stylistic symmetry demands great discipline and sophistication and in this sense Housman's poems rival the classics in their mastery of conciseness and subtlety. Concentrating on the stylistic elements of his verse, H. P. Collins justifies Housman's thematic limitations by declaring that “the greatest poetry does not need complex emotions.”

Last Poems and More Poems Housman's *Last Poems* (1922) appeared twenty-six years after the first publication of *A Shropshire Lad*, leading some critics to speculate on the nature of Housman's poetic talent. While this volume was also praised for its fine craftsmanship, it was noted by many reviewers that the themes presented were mere continuances of those expounded upon in his previous volume. This did not prevent *Last Poems*, which included “Epithalamium,” a piece commemorating the wedding of Moses Jackson, and “Hell Gate,” which chronicles a successful rebellion against the forces of death, from becoming quite popular. *More Poems* (1936), published posthumously by Housman's brother, Laurence, was also a popular success, but since most of the poems included had been omitted from the previous volumes by Housman himself, it is generally considered an inferior body of work.

Housman's famous lecture at [Cambridge University](#) in 1933 represents the only statement that Housman ever made about his personal theories of poetry. Housman cited [William Shakespeare's](#) songs, [Heinrich Heine's](#) poetry, and the Scottish border ballads as his major poetic influences. Metrically, his poems stand midway between the lyric and the quatrain form of the ballad, while thematically the influence of Shakespeare is apparent in Housman's dismissal of the theological and emphasis on everything mortal. Dramatic irony and surprise endings are important elements in the work of Heine, and Housman uses them in much the same fashion as the German poet. While critics contend that Housman's comments offer important insights into the motivations behind his own verse, they also speculate that Housman intended to be deliberately vague and misleading to provoke controversy. However, Housman prefaced his lecture with the statement that although he would be attempting to delve into the characteristics of poetry, he was not by nature a critic and preferred instead the discipline of writing verse.

Works In Literary Context

In all of his poetry, Housman continually returns to certain favorite themes.

Time and Death The predominant theme in Housman's work, according to Cleanth Brooks, is that of time and the inevitability of death. As Brooks states, "Time is, with Housman, always the enemy." Housman frequently deals with the plight of the young soldier, and he is usually able to maintain sympathy both for the youth who is the victim of war and for the patriotic cause of the nation. Robert B. Pearsall suggested in a 1967 essay that Housman dealt frequently with soldiers because

“the uniform tended to cure isolation and unpopularity, and soldiers characteristically bask in mutual affection.”

It is not only war but nature, too, that brings on thoughts of death in Housman's poetry. In the famous lyric beginning “Loveliest of trees, the cherry now,” the speaker says that since life is all too short, he will go out “To see the cherry hung with snow,” a suggestion of death. In a well-known verse from *Last Poems*, a particularly wet and old spring causes the speaker to move from a description of nature—“The chestnut casts his flam-beaux, and the flowers stream from the hawthorn on the wind away”—to a sense that his lost spring brings one closer to the grave. To his credit, Housman often does not merely wallow in such pessimistic feelings but counsels a kind of stoical endurance as the proper response: “Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale.”

LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

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