

To an Athlete Dying Young



POEM TEXT

- 1 The time you won your town the race
- 2 We chaired you through the market-place;
- 3 Man and boy stood cheering by,
- 4 And home we brought you shoulder-high.

- 5 Today, the road all runners come,
- 6 Shoulder-high we bring you home,
- 7 And set you at your threshold down,
- 8 Townsman of a stiller town.

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

- 13 Eyes the shady night has shut
- 14 Cannot see the record cut,
- 15 And silence sounds no worse than cheers
- 16 After earth has stopped the ears.

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

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

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

their shoulders).

Moving into the poem's present, the speaker notes that, along the same road that the race runs down, the townsfolk are again bringing the athlete home on their shoulders—but this time, it's to bury him. The athlete is now a citizen of a quieter town.

The speaker praises the young man for dying early and escaping the place where glory is fleeting (essentially, the earth, or this mortal life). In that same place, laurel (a shrub often used given to someone as a form of praise) dies even faster than roses do.

The dark night of death has closed the athlete's eyes, which means he'll never have to see his running record broken. And silence sounds just as good as celebration since, given that the athlete is buried, he can't actually hear either of them.

The athlete will never have to join the ranks of young men whose glory faded. Those men's fame outpaced them, meaning their reputations died before they did.

This stanza could be addressed either to the townsfolk or the athlete. It either tells the townsfolk to set down the athlete's casket before the echoes of his running victory turn to silence, or it tells the athlete himself to put his foot on the boundary between life and death. Either the townsfolk or the athlete should then hold up the athlete's trophy, which technically still belongs to him.

The speaker imagines that in the underworld the athlete will still be wearing his victory crown, and the weak souls of that world will crowd around to stare at him. His garland will not yet have died, but it will be as short as one worn by a girl.



THEMES



YOUTH AND GLORY

"To an Athlete Dying Young" describes the burial of a young athletic man. The speaker directly addresses the deceased, both lamenting and, in a way, celebrating the fact that the man's youthful success is now preserved in death. The poem characterizes youth as a fleeting time of energy, passion, and vigor, during which fame and admiration come easily to young men like this one. But whether it's through death or aging, the poem argues, youth is gone almost as soon as it arrives, and glory and popularity will ultimately vanish too.

On its surface, the poem takes an unusual approach by *praising* the athlete for dying young. This praise is neither entirely sincere nor entirely ironic—it's both—but it allows the speaker to express their own ideas about the meaning of youth and how it functions in this young man's culture. Youth is an obvious



SUMMARY

The speaker begins by recounting a memory about the young athlete of the title. In this memory, the athlete won an inter-town race and was carried through the streets aloft on the shoulders of the townsfolk. Men and boys cheered them on, and the procession carried the athlete all the way home (still on

theme even in the title, and the poem picks up on this right from the start. The dead man's living days are characterized as a time of achievement, celebration, and excitement, with the speaker recounting how the young man won a race for his town and was carried through the streets by his fellow townspeople. The young man was in his youthful peak, popular and athletically strong.

The day of the funeral is presented (somewhat ironically) as almost equally celebratory, as the townspeople carry the man's casket to the burial place. The young man, though dead, is preserved in his prime—his funeral is full of admirers because he didn't live long enough for his youthful glory to fade. The speaker appears to praise the man for dying young ("Smart lad, to slip betimes away"). Though it's not specified, this praise raises the possibility that the death was suicide in that it may have been a conscious decision. Either way, the speaker approves—or appears to approve.

The reason *why* the speaker praises the premature death is that it prevents the athlete from having to witness the gradual fading-away of his youth. The young man has departed from "fields where glory does not stay." He'll never see his "record" broken or hear the cheering crowds fall silent. His *name* won't die before he himself does—that is, he won't have to see his youthful popularity diminish over the years. Indeed, the young athlete becomes enshrined in the collective memory of his youth. He will always be the popular athlete he was when he died. That's why he will retain the "still-defended challenge-cup"—because he'll never race again, no one will ever know if he could have been outrun.

Though he is dead, then, the athlete's "glory" will "stay"—in the speaker's opinion at least. Perhaps there is a lingering hint of jealousy or envy in the speaker's position, as the speaker senses the coming arc of their own life towards old age and, eventually, death. The speaker's exaggerated praise of this early death also suggests an ironic tone—perhaps the poem is implicitly critiquing the society that places so much value on youthful glory at the expense of other forms of achievement.

Youth, then, is presented as the time when it's easiest to achieve glory and the adoration of others. But youth is also fleeting and impossible to hold on to. The speaker sees the athlete as having come closest to achieving this impossibility—because the athlete died young, he will never lose his youth to old age. The poem ironically suggests that perhaps this fate is better than watching one's glory fade over time.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 9-12

- Lines 13-16
- Lines 17-20
- Line 20
- Lines 21-24
- Lines 25-28



FEAR AND MORTALITY

"To an Athlete Dying Young" is an [elegy](#)—a poem composed in honor of someone who has died. It tries to confront mortality, but perhaps reveals more about how the speaker's anxieties about death. The speaker seems to fear the permanence of death, dwelling on its contrasts with the athlete's vibrant life. The more the speaker tries to make sense of death, though, the more frightening it seems, suggesting that there's no point in trying to avoid death's inevitable mysteries.

The poem takes place at a transitional moment between life and death. In the second stanza, the poem makes clear its interest in the transition from life to death, describing the townspeople setting the young athlete down at his "threshold." The athlete is now the "Townsmen of a stiller town." This partly describes the way in which the town has fallen silent because of the tragic death, but it also [alludes](#) to a kind of underworld. This "stiller town" is a haunting image, perhaps hinting at the speaker's subconscious fears of death. The meaning of the young man's life was linked to his physical abilities—his speed and movement—which are stopped abruptly in death. The stillness of this underworld speaks to the permanence of death, playing on the idea of everlasting rest.

The poem further develops this idea of an underworld in an attempt to, [paradoxically](#), put a positive spin on the tragedy and make death seem less fearsome. If, as the last stanza states, the dead will flock to see the young man when he arrives in the afterlife, his status and popularity will, in some way, be restored. Again, though the surface tone of the speaker appeals to ideas of glory in death, the actual image of the almost zombie-like inhabitants of the underworld is more unsettling than reassuring. They "gaze" at the laurel, but they themselves are "strengthless," seeming almost stupefied. This image undermines any sense that the athlete's glory can live on in the underworld. Surely, he too must now be one of the "strengthless."

The speaker's musings about the underworld come across as a kind of wishful thinking when faced with life's one true certainty—death. Essentially, the speaker is trying to weave poetry out of the heightened emotion of a very grim occasion. It seems as if the speaker is trying to take the sting out of death, believing that by presenting mortality as something heroic and noble, it can be made less frightening.

However, the speaker ends up undermining their own fantasies. In stanza 4, for example, the speaker offers an

unsettling concrete detail about the young man's *actual* fate in death: the earth will "stop" his ears (which just means block or fill up). And this stopping—this coming to a halt—is another example of the permanent "stillness" of death. Even sound depends on movement of air—but in the physical reality of lying dead in the ground, all that's left is silence, the sound of nothingness. This gruesome but ultimately realistic image further destabilizes the speaker's attempt to glorify death.

Accordingly, then, the poem makes most sense as a kind of conversation between the speaker and mortality itself. The speaker tries to combat the fear of death by making sense out of it, but the physical presence of the young athlete's body reminds the speaker—and the reader—that death is coming no matter what, and its mysteries can never quite be solved by the living.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 5
- Lines 6-8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-16
- Line 20
- Lines 21-22
- Lines 25-28

quintessentially British market town, and this air of "Britishness" is part of what made *A Shropshire Lad* (the collection from which this is taken) a popular book.

Lines 3 and 4 reinforce the sense of celebration and admiration in this memory. With the phrase "Man and Boy," the poem suggests that this kind of sporting popularity is tied to ideas of stereotypically masculine strength and glory. The [alliteration](#) of "cheering" with "chaired" also creates a sense of poetic "volume," which emphasizes the jubilant atmosphere that surrounded the young athlete's win at the race. Line 4 reiterates that the athlete was brought home "shoulder-high," setting up the comparison between this remembered moment and the poem's present, in which the athlete is similarly carried—but for a very different reason.

LINES 5-8

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

The second stanza brings the poem into its present moment (the first stanza was a memory). The [caesura](#) after "Today" marks this shift in time, allowing the reader a moment to adjust to the very different mood of this present reality.

Essentially, the stanza compares the memory found in the first stanza with the stark reality of "Today." The speaker notices a grim similarity: in both moments, the young athlete was/is carried on people's shoulders. But, of course, the first was a jubilant moment, and the second is tragic. Now, the townsfolk carry the athlete aloft on the shoulders because they are making their way with his casket to the burial place.

The speaker notes how this funeral procession takes place on the same road, presumably, as the actual race or races in which the athlete used to participate (and the [alliteration](#) between "road" and "runners" hints at physical effort and persistence of the kind the athlete must have had). But this road is also a [metaphor](#) for life itself, a race that is run from the starting point—birth—to the finish line: death. This image gently introduces the idea that the poem is, in part, an expression of the speaker's own fears of mortality—it isn't *just* a straight-up elegy in honor of the athlete. Within this metaphor, "home" represents the "nothingness" from which people come, and into which they return. This brings up another tension at play within the poem: the speaker seems to long for an afterlife to help make sense of death, but in the coming stanzas, it becomes clear that the speaker is preoccupied with bleak ideas of the afterlife rather than reassuring ones.

In line 7, the mention of a "threshold" is both literal and metaphorical. As described above, the poem is in part an attempt to make sense of what happens when people make the passage from life to death. The threshold is both the physical empty space of the grave *and* the conceptual border between



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*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.*

As promised by its title, the poem is directly addressed to the young man who has recently died. He is, of course, not part of this conversation—making the entire poem an [apostrophe](#). This choice sets up an immediate tension: if the athlete can't answer or indeed even hear the poem, then whom is the speaker really speaking to? This subtle mystery foreshadows the way the poem eventually comes to seem more like a conversation between the speaker and death itself.

The opening launches straight into a memory of the young athlete, specifically the time that he won a race for his town. Presumably, then, this refers to an inter-town competition, and the victory brought with it popularity and admiration. This is made explicit by the unusual verb in line 2: "chaired." The townsfolk, proud of the achievements of their local "lad," carried him through the streets in a kind of victory parade. The mention of "market-place" also marks the setting as a

these two states (life and death).

And it's here that poem starts to build its idea of an afterlife, again with a line that functions literally *and* figuratively. The athlete is now the "townsman of a stiller town." In part, this just describes the way that the town has fallen silent in sad tribute at the loss of young life. But "stiller town" is also like a metaphorical road sign on the poem's map to the afterlife, instantly conjuring up the sense of a "stiller," more quiet—more *dead*—existence in the underworld. Housman was a keen classical scholar, and already this afterlife feels more like an idea from Ancient Greece or Rome than the joyful reward of the Christian heaven. The poem's discussion of athletics (which is reminiscent of the ancient Olympic Games) and the symbol of the laurel also contribute to this classical [allusion](#).

LINES 9-12

*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.*

Stanza three introduces one of the poem's key ideas—that the young athlete was "smart" to die young ("betimes" means "early"). The speaker praises him for knowing that youthful "glory"—especially the kind built on sporting achievement and popularity—is fleeting. This idea is partly [ironic](#), in that the poem is not *really* building a case in support of dying young. But the speaker undoubtedly does see something attractive about people dying in a blaze of youthful glory, rather than hanging around to witness the gradual decline of aging.

The speaker develops this idea by comparing two plants in lines 11 and 12: the rose and the laurel. The laurel is associated with both sports and poetry. In particular, it is an [allusion](#) to the ancient Greek Olympics, in which laurel wreaths were awarded to the winners of sporting events. Indeed, wreaths are still used for the same purpose in the modern Olympics. With this in mind, then, the laurel represents the young athlete's sporting prowess. It's also worth noting that the laurel was associated—again in Ancient Greece—with poetry, so its presence here reveals the speaker's somewhat self-conscious wish to turn the athlete's death into pleasing poetry (and perhaps make death itself seem less fearsome in the process). The speaker also reinforces the idea that "laurel" will wither "early" through [consonance](#) in those two words.

The laurel is contrasted with the rose. The speaker doesn't delve into the [symbolism](#) of the rose, but roses can traditionally signify many different things. Here, it could be a symbol of the athlete's youthful beauty, on the one hand preserved in death as a kind of memory, but on the other still destined to fade. Interpreting along more classical lines, the rose can still mean a kind of preservation. In *The Iliad*, for example, the goddess Aphrodite helps protect Hector from injury through the application of rose oil. In any case, then, the rose likely relates

to beauty and preservation. But as line 12 admits, the rose is destined to wither—just not as quickly as the laurel (according to the speaker, at least).

The point that the speaker is making is that the athlete was wise to reject the fleeting "glory" represented by the "laurel," as this glory would have quickly died anyway (as the athlete grew older). Perhaps, too, the speaker is predicting that the townspeople will hold the athlete in greater esteem—and celebrate him for longer—because he is now preserved in their collective memory as a young athletic man. However, it's important to note that the "rose" will eventually wither, too, and with its image, the speaker's anxiety about death's inevitability bubbles to the surface.

LINES 13-16

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

The fourth stanza shifts the poem's focus on to the athlete's "eyes" and "ears." On a surface level, the speaker is continuing to point to the supposed virtues of dying young. Now, the athlete will not have to *see* his winning running record beaten, nor *hear* the silence that follows the applause and praise of his townsfolk. However, the images the speaker uses to convey these seeming benefits again reveals that there's really no way to make death look appealing.

Essentially, this stanza portrays aging as something fundamentally negative and undesirable. According to the speaker, old age doesn't equal wisdom and experience, but rather a loss of "glory." Had the athlete lived, eventually a new young man would have come along and run faster—leaving the athlete to retire into the anonymity of old age. The young man died as a winner, and so he'll never become a loser. Of course, there is an [irony](#) at play: there isn't much use in being a winning athlete if you're dead.

In line 13, death is again characterized as a kind of void. It is a "shady night" (an absence of light), the darkness brought on by the closing of the athlete's eyes in death. The paired [alliteration](#) of "shady" and "shut" represents the athlete's two closed eyes, bring this image hauntingly to life. And this shutting of the eyes is made even more prominent by the /t/ sound that ends the line: to make a /t/, the reader has to cut off the air flow in the mouth, thereby creating a momentary closure of their own.

The [enjambment](#) leading into line 14 allows the stanza to further develop this /t/ sound, working [consonantly](#) to make "shut" and "cut" sound more final:

*Eyes the shady night has shut
Cannot see the record cut,*

The speaker then follows this discussion of the eyes by turning

their attention to the athlete's ears. The speaker is trying to take the sting out of death by looking at the positives: at least the athlete won't have to deal with a looming loss of popularity and public affection. The silence of death—which again marks death as a kind of profound absence—is "no worse than cheers" because the athlete, being buried in the ground (and of course, being dead), wouldn't hear these cheers anyway.

Though this stanza is part of the speaker's attempt to give death a kind of honorable and virtuous gloss, it also becomes an expression of anxiety about mortality. The speaker *tries* to glorify the athlete's young death, but the actual images used are quite gruesome. The shut eyes foreground the image of the athlete's inactive body—which was once so full of movement and is now so still—and the idea of "earth" blocking the athlete's ears is morbid and claustrophobic. The stanza unwittingly calls to mind the physical reality of death, rather than a convincing picture of a comfortable afterlife. Here, it starts to become clear that the speaker's attempt to make death less frightening might be doomed to fail.

LINES 17-20

*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.*

The fifth stanza essentially continues where the previous two left off, developing the idea that dying young has its merits.

To do so, the stanza expands the [metaphor](#) introduced in line 5: life is a race. The speaker tells the young athlete that he will not have to join the big crowd ("rout") of people whose youthful glory has faded, those "lads" who "wore their honours out." That is, because the athlete is dead, his honor will not gradually diminish in the face of younger, fitter challengers. For the athletes who do age, "renown" outruns them in the race of life: it gets away from them and they cannot keep up, because their bodies can no longer perform at their youthful best. When this renown is gone, their "names" "die." In other words, they no longer have fame and fortune—their names are no longer on the lips of others, even though they're still alive.

At the same time, however, these lines also subtly reinforce the idea of death's complete and frightening inevitability. For example, line 19 uses the same [alliteration](#) as line 5, with a repeated /r/ sound suggesting persistence and physical effort that ultimately prove to be futile:

Runners whom renown outran

The line also uses [polyptoton](#) between "runners" and "outran" to underscore this idea of the older athletes trying hard (but failing) to maintain their youthful prowess. Though the words come from the same root, the first describes young athletes while the second describes what aging does to them. In other

words, nobody can outrun the aging process.

LINES 21-24

*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.*

The speaker now moves on from listing the merits of dying young. At this moment, the apostrophe may shift from the athlete to the townsfolk, though it's hard to say for sure whom the speaker is addressing here—it could be the townsfolk or the athlete, or both at the same time.

If the speaker is addressing the townspeople here, then lines 21 and 22 are a lofty demand that they should lay the athlete's casket into the ground. This might be a literal instruction, but it's also part of the speaker's attempt to turn this sad moment into poetry. The [caesura](#) after "set" creates a brief pause that suggests permanence, as the speaker considers the athlete's final resting place. The same word—"set"—was used in line 7, creating an echo within the poem that chimes with the mention of echoes after the caesura. The [alliterative](#) and [consonantal](#) /f/ also creates echoes within the lines themselves:

So set, before its echoes fade,
The fleet foot on the sill of shade,

The speaker is here referring to the sound of the athlete's running as his feet hit the ground. The speaker is probably talking about literally setting down the part of the casket that holds the athlete's feet, but this is also another [metaphor](#). The "sill of shade" marks the point in the ground where the athlete will be buried, the brightness of the outside world contrasting with the enclosed hole in the earth. This boundary, it seems, is both literal and figurative, showing how literally moving the athlete's body into the grave will also represent a metaphorical way to preserve the "echoes" of his glory. A "sill" is a part of a window, too, which is itself a kind of transitional space.

If the speaker is talking directly to the athlete here, then this sense of transition is even clearer: the speaker is effectively telling the athlete to get on with it, to go forward into the underworld before it's too late to keep his glory on earth.

Indeed, lines 23 and 24 pick up on this idea of transition. A "lintel" is a block that goes over a doorway, and in Ancient Greece—which this poem definitely [alludes](#) to—they were often decorative. A doorway is another transitional space, foregrounding the athlete's move from the Earth to the underworld (or from being to nothingness). The [assonance](#) of "hold" and "low" has a slow and mournful sound. The "lowness" of the lintel could refer to the athlete's tomb, with the speaker suggesting—probably more for the sake of the poem than reality—that the "still-defended challenge-cup" decorate the athlete's portal between life and death. Of, course, this

challenge-cup remains forever defended because the athlete will never enter another race—someone else may win the cup, but they'll never beat *this* athlete specifically.

LINES 25-28

*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.*

In the final stanza, the poem shifts to its final setting in terms of time and place. Now the speaker imagines what is on the other side of the "threshold," the afterlife that awaits the athlete.

The speaker sounds as if they are trying to end on a somewhat triumphant note, imagining the athlete finding similar admiration and glory in death as in life. It's like this stanza is a final attempt to imagine death as something comfortable rather than something terrifying. But the image the speaker chooses is again unsettling: the "strengthless dead" surrounding the new arrival in the underworld sounds more like a zombie movie than a reassuring picture of life after death. In this imagined scene, the dead "flock" around the athlete to stare at him and his laurel (the [symbol](#) of his athletic achievement).

Again, the speaker is appealing to the idea that the athlete's glory is preserved in death. But the reader may rightly ask how much that laurel actually means in the world of the dead. The other souls in this [allusion](#) to the classical underworld do seem interested in the laurel—they "gaze" at it—but that doesn't mean it has any real value. The "strengthlessness" of the dead is meant to contrast with the athlete's physical prowess. But, [paradoxically](#), his death surely renders him as "strengthless" as all the others. Lines 25 and 25 act as a final confirmation that the speaker hasn't really succeeded in figuring out how to make death feel less frightening.

The closing [couplet](#) is somewhat mysterious. The dead "gaze" at the athlete's garlanded head—and it makes sense to say that it was garlanded *early* because he was young when he became successful. The garland is described as "unwithered" because the athlete's glory won't fade on earth, but the speaker also calls the garland "briefer than a girl's."

The meaning of this final phrase is somewhat unclear. If "brief" relates to a short length of time, then the poem is in a way undoing its central premise: yes, the athlete will be admired in the underworld, but even there the garland will soon wither. Alternatively, perhaps the word "briefer" doesn't relate to time, but rather to clothing. "Brief" can mean scantily clad or exposed, so perhaps the athlete is, in some way, wrongly dressed for the underworld. If that's the case, then the attempt to display physical prowess and achievement—as represented by the garland—means little in the underworld, marking the athlete out as a new and naive arrival. In a word, he is *exposed* by the laurel as someone still holding on to earthly values, so perhaps this line again reveals the speaker's fear that there's

really no way to prepare for death.



SYMBOLS



LAUREL

The laurel wreath is part of the poem's [allusions](#) to classical Greece. In Ancient Greece, the laurel wreath was worn by victorious athletes or poets to mark their success. The Greek god Apollo is often depicted wearing one himself.

The laurel represents sporting achievement and physical prowess. In marking its wearer as a champion, it also signals public admiration and status. Put simply, those who wear the laurel are the best of the best.

But as the poem points out, laurel is also a plant, and plants are living things. When they're cut, pretty soon they wither and die. Accordingly, the laurel is also a sign—in this poem at least—of life's impermanence.

In the poem's closing stanza, the "strengthless dead" are depicted as gathering around the athlete to look at his laurel. Perhaps here it is a kind of alien object, a simple curiosity rather than a sign of glory. Through this shift in the symbol, the poem darkly suggests that the athlete's earthly success might not do him much good now that he's dead and buried.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "the laurel"
- **Line 25:** "that early-laurelled head"
- **Lines 27-28:** "And find unwithered on its curls / The garland briefer than a girl's."



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) is used quite frequently in "To an Athlete Dying Young," usually to reinforce the poem's thematic points or to create a sonic echo of its literal meaning.

In the first stanza, for example, it links "chaired" with the word "cheering." Here, the speaker is recounting a memory in which the townspeople carried the athlete—victorious in a race—through the streets. The alliteration links the words through sound to reinforce that they are linked in meaning too. Both are meant to conjure a sense of celebration, and tying them together by alliteration shows that they are part of the same occasion.

Line 5 uses alliteration in the phrase "road all runners come." Here, the shared /r/ sound creates a sense of exertion and physical effort. The two /r/s are separated by just one syllable,

making the letter sound persistent, as though it is determined to exert its presence on the line.

Line 19 reintroduces this alliterative /r/ sound, again linked with the act of running. Three /r/s make the sound even more persistent, suggesting desperation (though the third is [consonance](#), not alliteration). This is likely intended to evoke the inevitability of what it describes: all "runners" who live to an old age will be "outrun" by "renown:" fame will escape them. Both instances bring to life both the runners' physical efforts and, perhaps, the broader idea of humans doggedly trying to outrun death.

In line 13, "shady" and "shut" alliterate. Here, the speaker is talking about the athlete's eyes, now closed in death. Both words are associated with darkness, and the fact there is a pair of matching sounds perhaps represents the two closed eyes.

In lines 21 and 22, the poem discusses the athlete's echoing footsteps. To bring this to sonic life, /f/ sounds are placed throughout both lines, creating a linguistic echo to match the lines' literal meaning.

Finally, the last line links "garland" with "girl's." Here, the alliteration feels like a decoration, a way of reinforcing the image of a garlanded young girl. The image of a pretty child, which is so different from that of the striving athlete, makes the athlete's garland seem suddenly meaningless, and the alliteration reinforces the idea that his accomplishments might not matter much in the underworld.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "t," "t"
- **Line 2:** "ch"
- **Line 3:** "b," "ch," "b"
- **Line 5:** "r," "r"
- **Line 7:** "y," "y"
- **Line 8:** "T," "t," "t"
- **Line 9:** "S," "s"
- **Line 10:** "F," "f"
- **Line 13:** "sh," "sh"
- **Line 14:** "C," "c"
- **Line 15:** "s," "s"
- **Line 16:** "e," "e"
- **Line 17:** "w," "w"
- **Line 18:** "w"
- **Line 19:** "R," "r"
- **Line 21:** "S," "s," "f"
- **Line 22:** "f," "f"
- **Line 23:** "l," "l"
- **Line 28:** "g," "g"

ALLUSION

A.E. Housman had a keen interest in classical civilization (Ancient Greece and Rome), and [allusion](#) to the classical world

runs throughout this poem. Though the poem was written in a predominantly Christian society, the speaker's ideas of the afterlife seem to have more in common with the Greek underworld (often referred to as Hades) than the lofty bliss of a Christian heaven.

The first of these possible allusions is in line 8, when the speaker refers to "a stiller town" where the athlete now resides. In part, this phrase conveys that the real-life town has fallen silent in tribute, but it is also evocative of a different place altogether: the underworld. Indeed, the mention of the "threshold" in the line before—possibly representing the passage from earth to afterlife—reinforces this idea. This the allusion to the classical world is further developed in the final stanza. Here, the "strengthless dead" have more in common with the lost souls of Hades than the eternally-rewarded inhabitants of heaven.

The other important allusion at work in the poem is the laurel. This symbol harks back to Ancient Greece, in which sporting competition originated. In the classical Olympics, victorious athletes were given a garland to mark their triumph (and this tradition continues in the modern Olympics). Notably, laurel wreaths were also awarded to victorious poets who beat their rivals in competitions, so perhaps the poem's discussion of an athlete's fate also betrays some anxiety about what a poet's fate might be.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "threshold"
- **Line 8:** "a stiller town"
- **Line 11:** "laurel"
- **Lines 25-28:** "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."

APOSTROPHE

The poem uses [apostrophe](#) from start to finish. In fact, as well as being an [elegy](#), the poem is also a kind of [ode](#)—as marked by the "To" in the poem's title. The speaker addresses either the athlete or his fellow townspeople throughout the poem.

Perhaps the final stanza marks a break with the use of apostrophe as it tries to imagine the athlete's future, but the dominance of apostrophe has been so established by now that even this last stanza still seems addressed to *someone*.

The first five stanzas all address the young athlete who has recently died (though the fourth stanza makes a slight digression by not quite explicitly addressing the athlete). The use of the second-person pronoun—"You"—constantly reminds the reader that this is *not* a conversation: the communication is going in only one direction. The apostrophe, then, emphasizes the fact that, though the poem is about him, the athlete is entirely absent. This makes his death seem all the more final.

The apostrophe in the penultimate stanza can be read as directed at either the athlete himself or the other townsfolk. Either the speaker is telling the athlete to take a step on the "sill of shade," or the speaker is telling the townspeople to set down the athlete's coffin—perhaps both. This seeming shift to a broader audience perhaps represents the speaker trying to come to terms with the fearsomeness of death by attempting to *control* the way it proceeds.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "you," "your"
- **Line 2:** "We," "you"
- **Line 4:** "you"
- **Line 6:** "we bring you home"
- **Line 7:** "you," "your"
- **Line 9:** "Smart lad"
- **Line 17:** "you"
- **Lines 21-24:** "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."

ASSONANCE

"To an Athlete Dying Young" is fairly sparing in its use of [assonance](#), but some instances are nonetheless significant. A key example occurs in line 12:

It withers quicker than the rose.

These short /i/ sounds make the line read more quickly than some of the longer vowel sounds found elsewhere in the poem. This makes sense, as the speaker is talking about how quickly laurel—the symbol of success and sporting prowess—witheres away. The accelerated sound of the vowels mirrors the quick death of the plant.

In line 16, assonance shows up again:

After earth has stopped the ears.

The vowel sounds in this line are a little bit more slow-paced and languid than the ones described above, helping to conjure an image of the athlete's final resting place. Though not quite the same sound, the word "ears" sounds similar too. In fact, the poem often has *similar* vowel sounds in a line without making them identical, which perhaps reflects the speaker's underlying uncertainty about trying to turn this tragic death into something poetic.

In the last couple of lines, the poem dials up the poetic "volume" using assonance. Here, the speaker is reaching a rhetorical peak, appealing to an idea of the afterlife that seems more literary than reassuring. The assonance—combined with [consonance](#) of the /r/ sound—seems to highlight how hard the

speaker is trying make death seem less scary:

And find unwithered on its curls
The garland briefer than a girl's.

The garland described in these lines—the "girl's"—is one that is probably purely decorative. It might be beautiful, but it doesn't signify achievement. The patterning of the vowel sound, placed in similar places in each line, has its own decorative quality. But this decoration is at odds with the morbid subject matter, and it's part of what makes the speaker seem somewhat uncertain about whether it's really possible to make death less frightening.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "ou," "ou"
- **Line 3:** "a," "a"
- **Line 7:** "o"
- **Line 8:** "o," "o"
- **Line 11:** "ou," "o"
- **Line 12:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 16:** "e," "ea"
- **Line 18:** "a," "a"
- **Line 19:** "o," "ou"
- **Line 23:** "o," "o," "i"
- **Line 24:** "i," "e," "e," "e," "e"
- **Line 27:** "e," "u"
- **Line 28:** "e," "i"

CAESURA

There are three [caesurae](#) in "To an Athlete Dying Young." The first is in line 5, the first line of the second stanza. Here, the caesura is part of how the speaker sets the scene. The first stanza was a memory, whereas this stanza brings the reader into the poem's present. The caesura after "Today," then, creates a brief pause in which the reader gets used to the time shift from past to present.

The next caesura comes at the beginning of the following stanza. Though the speaker has already been addressing the dead athlete through the second person pronoun ("you"), here the speaker calls him "Smart lad." The caesura creates a small pause in which the word "lad" reverberates, emphasizing the athlete's youthfulness at the time of his death (a "lad" is a young man).

The final caesura is in line 21, at the start of the second-to-last stanza. Having talked about the merits of dying young, the speaker now implores their fellow townspeople to "set" the young athlete into the ground—to lower the casket into the grave. The poem here is moving to its conclusion and the lines are starting to sound more final. The caesura—placed similarly to the previous two—makes the word "set" linger for a moment or two more than it otherwise would. This brief pause gently

hints at the athlete's coming eternal rest.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “”
- **Line 9:** “”
- **Line 21:** “”

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) is used fairly often throughout "To an Athlete Dying Young." It becomes especially prominent in the third stanza, which has a number of /l/ and /s/ sounds:

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.

These /l/ sounds have a soft and slow effect. They give the stanza a kind of mournful tone, almost reminiscent of a lullaby (another /l/ word) which hints at the young athlete's eternal sleep. The /s/ sounds in this stanza, meanwhile, have a whispering quality that contributes to this effect too (/s/ sounds are also known as [sibilance](#)). It's also worth noting that the word with the most /l/ sounds in the stanza is "laurel." This, of course, is a plant that grows—and the /l/ sound grows throughout the stanza too. That is, until the speaker describes its death in line 12—and the /l/ sound suddenly disappears as well.

The next important instance of consonance is in the following stanza (stanza 4). Here, the poem makes effective use of the /t/ sound across "shut," "cannot," and "cut." All three words have similar connotations as kinds of closure ("cut" as in to "cut off"). The consonance not only links them together, but also makes the reader subconsciously perform this act of closure, because pronouncing the /t/ sound involves stopping the airflow in your mouth.

Interestingly, as the poem pushes towards its conclusion, the aforementioned /l/ sound becomes prominent again. The speaker is reaching the end point, and accordingly is striving for language that feels poetic enough for the end of an elegy. The /l/ sound, with its connotations of sleepiness and rest, fills the strange world of the "strengthless dead" and shows how that world is now taking over the athlete's former glory.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "t," "w," "n," "t," "w," "n," "r"
- **Line 2:** "ch," "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 3:** "n," "n," "b," "ch," "b"
- **Line 4:** "h," "b," "h"
- **Line 5:** "d," "r," "d," "r," "r"

- **Line 6:** "r," "h," "r," "h"
- **Line 7:** "t," "t," "wn"
- **Line 8:** "t," "w," "n," "n," "t," "t," "w," "n"
- **Line 9:** "s," "t," "l," "sl," "t," "s"
- **Line 10:** "f," "f," "l," "s," "r," "r," "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "r," "l," "th," "th," "l," "r," "l," "r," "s"
- **Line 12:** "th," "r," "r," "th," "r," "s"
- **Line 13:** "sh," "t," "sh," "t"
- **Line 14:** "c," "t," "c," "t"
- **Line 15:** "s," "c," "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 16:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 17:** "w," "w," "ll," "w," "ll," "t"
- **Line 18:** "l," "t," "t"
- **Line 19:** "r," "r," "r," "n," "r," "n"
- **Line 20:** "n," "m," "m," "n"
- **Line 21:** "s," "s," "t," "f," "t," "s," "f"
- **Line 22:** "f," "t," "f," "t"
- **Line 23:** "l," "l," "l"
- **Line 24:** "ll," "f," "ll"
- **Line 25:** "d," "l," "l," "ll," "d," "d"
- **Line 26:** "ll," "l," "l"
- **Line 27:** "r," "s," "r," "l," "s"
- **Line 28:** "r," "l," "r," "r," "l"
- **Lines 28-28:** "r /"

ENJAMBMENT

There are 10 instances of [enjambment](#) in "To an Athlete Dying Young." In many cases, they're not all that noticeable because the rhymes and meter are so regular. Indeed, the phrase lengths in the poem are quite regular regardless of whether they have punctuation at the ends of the line or not. Still, the enjambment sometimes reinforce the poem's meaning and themes.

In line 1, the enjambment after "race" makes the first line flow easily to the next. Running is obviously important to the poem, and so this literal running-over of one line into the next helps make that obvious. Line 19's enjambment after "outran" does exactly the same thing.

Later, line 9's enjambment fits with that line's idea of "slipping away," with the meaning of the sentence slipping from one line to the next. The enjambment in line 11 makes the word "withers" arrive "quicker," bringing to mind the image of a laurel in speedy decay.

The enjambment in line 13 helps emphasize the [consonant](#) /t/ sounds in that line and the next, all of which create a sense of closure. The enjambment brings them closer together, making the consonance more prominent.

In the final two lines, the enjambment recalls the idea of quickness and acceleration. If the poem's very first enjambment gestured towards the speed of a runner, the echo of that enjambment here helps highlight the "briefness" of the garland

as it moves rapidly from life to death.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "race"
- **Line 2:** "We"
- **Line 9:** "away"
- **Line 10:** "From"
- **Line 11:** "grows"
- **Line 12:** "It"
- **Line 13:** "shut"
- **Line 14:** "Cannot"
- **Line 15:** "cheers"
- **Line 16:** "After"
- **Line 17:** "rout"
- **Line 18:** "Of"
- **Line 19:** "outran"
- **Line 20:** "And"
- **Line 23:** "up"
- **Line 24:** "The"
- **Line 25:** "head"
- **Line 26:** "Will"
- **Line 27:** "curls"
- **Line 28:** "The"

IRONY

The [irony](#) in "To an Athlete Dying Young" is debatable, and it depends upon how much the speaker's words are taken at face value.

On the surface of it, the speaker seems to be arguing that dying young is a genuinely good idea: it preserves admiration and fame, and the deceased never has to grow old. But this is a fairly thin idea that's pretty easy to pick apart (by listing the many celebrated people who grew old and died, for example, or by considering the innumerable people who die young and are forgotten).

There is a tension, then, between the speaker's highly poeticized [elegy](#) for the young athlete and the stark fact of the athlete's death. Indeed, sometimes the tragedy of this death seeps into the poem's attempts to glorify the athlete and make death seem less fearsome. In the fourth stanza, for example, the speaker discusses the merits of dying young while also using unsettling imagery to describe his "shut" eyes and "stopped" ears.

There's a more simple [situational irony](#) at play in the poem, too. Normally, this athletic young man would be carried on the townspeople's shoulders because of his sporting achievements. But they carry him for a different reason now—to lay him down in eternal rest.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-6:** "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. / Today, the road all runners come, / Shoulder-high we bring you home,"
- **Lines 9-16:** "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."

METAPHOR

In "To an Athlete Dying Young," life is presented [metaphorically](#) as a kind of race. The idea is built subtly, first by the mention of running in the first stanza. In the second, the speaker develops the metaphor, pointing out that the road along which the deceased athlete is carried is the very same road that "all runners come" While this claim might be literally true—it *might* be the route of the same competition previously won by the young athlete—it also introduces the metaphor. Life's only true certainty is death: just as a race has its finishing line, so too does life have an endpoint over which everyone must cross.

The fifth stanza picks up on this idea, though it also makes it increasingly complicated. Here, life is still a kind of race, but it's one affected by old age. As young athletes grow older, "renown" outruns them and their "names" (that is, their fame) die before they do.

Another key metaphor is introduced in lines 7 and 8. Here, the speaker talks about setting the athlete down at his "threshold," the boundary between life and death. The athlete is characterized as now belonging to a "stiller town." This stiller town, as the final stanza makes clear, is a metaphor for a kind of afterlife, though not the happy one of Christian heaven. It seems instead to be a kind of Hades, inhabited by souls that lack the vitality of their earthly lives. The "strengthlessness" of the dead is hinted at by the use of "stiller," a full eighteen lines earlier.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "Today, the road all runners come, / Shoulder-high we bring you home, / And set you at your threshold down, / Townsman of a stiller town."
- **Lines 19-20:** "Runners whom renown outran / And the name died before the man."

PARADOX

Much of "To an Athlete Dying Young" is built on [paradox](#). The speaker puts forward the idea that, paradoxically, the athlete will live longer through being dead. Of course, it's not meant

literally. Instead, the speaker means that the athlete will be *youthful* longer, because, now dead, he will never become old. Furthermore, the athlete will not have to experience the sadness of seeing his record broken, or live through the years in which his youthful popularity fades. But these claims are paradoxical because *nothing* makes a difference to the athlete now; he won't experience sadness, but that's because he won't experience anything at all.

This sense of paradox reaches its height in the final stanza, when the speaker imagines the athlete arriving in the afterlife. Here, the athlete finds new fame and admiration—or at least, the curiosity of his new public, the "strengthless dead." The speaker says that they will flock to look at his "early-laurelled head," seemingly wondering what the laurel represents. Line 27 possibly extends this paradox to the laurel itself, as it is now "unwithered." When discussed within the context of earthly life (line 12), it "withers quickly;" here, it seems to be alive again.

The speaker thus tries throughout to turn death into something lively, but this attempt is paradoxical because the literal truth remains: the athlete is dead and won't come back.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Smart lad,"
- **Lines 13-16:** "Eyes the shady night has shut / Cannot see the record cut, / And silence sounds no worse than cheers / After earth has stopped the ears."
- **Lines 17-18:** "Now you will not swell the rout / Of lads that wore their honours out,"
- **Line 24:** "The still-defended challenge-cup."
- **Lines 25-28:** "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."

POLYPTOTON

Polyptoton occurs once in "To an Athlete Dying Young." It can be found in line 19, in which "runners" is soon followed by "outran." The first word speaks of participation and competition, while the second means that the purpose of that activity—winning—is actually gone. This is part of the poem's slightly complicated [metaphor](#) that portrays life as a kind of race. "Runners" try to keep up with their "renown," meaning that they try to hold on to their physical prowess and public admiration. But at the same time, their renown "outruns" them, because they cannot maintain the pace of their youth. It's a complicated sentiment, because presumably the "renown" doesn't win this metaphorical race—if it did, then it seems like the result would be eternal fame. The exact meaning of this line is hard to grasp, which is perhaps a reflection of the way that the speaker can't quite comprehend how impossible it is to outrun aging and, eventually, death.

Regardless, the use of polyptoton shows a subtle command of

words—the two words are not much different, but they mean very different things in this context. This subtlety calls to mind the poem's attention to the transition between life and death—it doesn't take much to move from one state to the other, but they are, of course, completely different.

Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "Runners whom renown outran"



VOCABULARY

Chaired (Line 2) - To chair someone is to carry them aloft, possibly on an actual chair.

Threshold (Line 7) - A threshold is the boundary between two places, a point of entry.

Lad (Line 9) - A lad is a young man or boy.

Betimes (Line 9) - This means earlier than expected.

Laurel (Line 11) - A laurel is a type of plant, often used to make a wreath bestowed on someone as a form of praise. These wreaths have been worn on people's heads to show that that person is a victor (in sports mostly). This dates back to ancient Greece.

Record (Line 14) - This refers to the athlete's record as the fastest runner. It could relate to their specific running time, or just to their status as the fastest.

Stopped (Line 16) - Here this means blocked or filled up.

Swell (Line 17) - This means to make grow larger.

Rout (Line 17) - A rout is a crowd of people who are perhaps disorderly.

Renown (Line 19) - Renown is fame and esteem.

Fleet (Line 22) - Fleet means quick and nimble.

Sill (Line 22) - A sill is the lowest part of a window or door. Here it makes the transition point between the earth—where there is light—and the underworld (which is the "shady night"). It's where the surrounding ground ends and the open grave begins.

Lintel (Line 23) - A lintel is a horizontal part of a structure that spans the gap between two vertical supports. They are sometimes structural and/or sometimes decorated (especially in the world of ancient Greece). This one is perhaps low because it relates to the athlete's tomb.

Garland (Line 28) - This is just another reference to the laurel wreath, which is a circular weave of the laurel plant that is then worn on the head to celebrate a victory or achievement. A garland can also be a necklace made in a similar fashion, but here it is definitely headgear.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"To an Athlete Dying Young" is an [elegy](#), a poem written in honor of someone or something that has died. It is *not* a eulogy, which is a text intended to be read out at a funeral. In keeping with the elegy form, the poem in part tries to praise the young athlete and, in turn, to lament his death.

The poem is made up of seven quatrains, or four-line stanzas, which can be loosely divided into three sections. The first stanza is a memory, and the only point at which the speaker looks exclusively at the past. Stanzas two through six are part of the poem's discussion of the athlete's funeral and death, and see the speaker trying to find the merits in dying young. The third section is the last stanza, in which the speaker imagines the *future* for the athlete, conjuring up an image of the afterlife.

METER

"To an Athlete Dying Young" has a regular meter based on four stresses in each line ([tetrameter](#)). It is mostly [iambic](#) (following an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern).

Generally speaking, the meter is intended to reflect the solemn procession that the poem describes. The metrical regularity has a deliberateness to it, representing the slow but purposeful movement of the townsfolk towards the burial place. Take lines 5-8 in the second quatrain:

Today, | the road | all runn- | ers come,
Shoul- | der-high | we bring | you home,
And set | you at | your thres- | hold down,
Town- | man of | a still- | er town.

The above example also showcases the use of catalexis (in the second and fourth lines of the second stanza). This is the removal of the first syllable of the first poetic [foot](#); note how there is no unstressed syllable starting these lines. This happens a few times in the poem, adding small flourishes to an otherwise steady, plodding pace.

Overall, the sound of the meter is very close to that used in hymns, especially those that were popular in the Victorian era. This, of course, makes sense, as the poem describes a Victorian funeral.

RHYME SCHEME

"To an Athlete Dying Young" has a [couplet](#) rhyme scheme throughout: AABB in the first stanza, and then following that same pattern through each stanza of the poem. Almost all of the rhymes are clear, [perfect rhymes](#) as well ("race" and "place"; "by" and "high"; etc.).

The regularity of the rhyme is, in part, characteristic of Housman as a poet. Many of the poems in *A Shropshire Lad*, the

collection from which this poem is taken, follow similarly simple schemes. This gives the poem a song-like structure that is particularly close to the sound of a hymn.

The use of couplets means that the entire poem unfolds in pairs of rhymes. This pairing is gently suggestive of one of the poem's key images: running. People's admiration for the athlete was based on his ability to, put simply, use his legs more efficiently than anyone else. In other words, his success was based on two units of a pair working well together. The couplets, then, evoke a sense of controlled and purposeful momentum.



SPEAKER

The reader doesn't learn much about the specific identity of the speaker in this poem. It does seem fair to presume that the speaker counts himself as one of the townspeople, given the mention of "We" in the second line.

The speaker addresses the athlete directly, but this doesn't necessarily mean that they knew one another. The speaker looks at the merits of dying young, but in doing so perhaps reveals the speaker's own fears about death (e.g., in the unwittingly gruesome descriptions of the fourth stanza). In the third stanza, the speaker calls the athlete a "smart lad." Though "lad" is a fairly informal term, and can be a kind of term of endearment for a younger man, this still doesn't give enough information to confirm that the athlete was known personally to the speaker. It subtly suggests the speaker is not a particularly young person, or at least that the speaker is somewhat older than this lad; perhaps this is in part what fuels the speaker's anxiety about death.

The speaker's consistent use of the second-person pronoun makes the poem almost read like a conversation. Except, of course, there is only one person speaking. The "you," then, helps highlight the athlete's inability to reply. This emphasizes the reality of the situation—that the young man is gone forever.



SETTING

Generally speaking, the poem is set on the day of the athlete's funeral in the athlete's hometown. The reader learns this from the second stanza, just after the speaker has recounted a memory of a very different occasion in the first stanza: the time when the young athlete won his race and was celebrated by his townspeople.

Though the poem may not state it explicitly, readers often detect a sense of Britishness in Housman's poems when it comes to setting. That's not as obvious in this poem as it is in others from the same collection (*A Shropshire Lad*), but the use of "lad" is distinctly British English. Furthermore, the mention of a "market-place" evokes the kind of market-based town that is very common in England.

There is a second setting at play in the poem too. This is a kind of underworld, a land of the dead that will welcome the athlete once he has passed through or over the "threshold." This is, of course, constructed according to the speaker's imagination. It has a distinctly classical atmosphere, the "strengthless dead" recalling the bodiless souls that occupy the Ancient Greek afterlife. Line 8 hints at this underworld, whereas the final stanza deals with it explicitly.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

A.E. Housman is a poet whose literary reputation is still up for debate. For some, he is a sensitive soul whose poetry—especially *A Shropshire Lad*—captured a sense of mood and place particular to his home country, England ("Shropshire" is an English county). For others, he is a fusty writer with an almost adolescent way of looking at the world. Ezra Pound, the famous Modernist, once characterized Housman's poetry as "woe, etc."

Regardless of the above, Housman's first collection was enduringly popular. It wasn't an immediate success, but its link to an ideal of "Englishness" made it a hit a few years after its release. Many of the other poems in the collection are about dying young, though a number of them tie this more explicitly to war (that said, that is a possible interpretation of this poem too). It was during the Boer War—a conflict fought by the British in the country now known as South Africa—that themes of young death had particular appeal for the public, seeming to chime with the idea of an individual's sacrifice for their country.

Though this poem was written towards the end of the Victorian era, Housman's popularity did not pick up until the start of the later Edwardian era (1901-1910). That said, he does share in common the simplicity of meter and rhyme found in Victorian poets like Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning. This meter, in part, has its roots in church traditions, evoking the rhythm and pace of popular hymns of the day.

Housman was also a keen and prominent classical scholar. Accordingly, this influence shows itself in "To an Athlete Dying Young." Laurel wreaths adorned the heads of victorious athletes or poets in Ancient Greece and, indeed, the poem's depiction of the underworld has more in common with classical ideas than any portrayal of eternal Christian heaven.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"To an Athlete Dying Young" was first published in 1896, in the collection *A Shropshire Lad*. This places it at the tail-end of the Victorian era, a time during which Britain extended the reach of its empire around the world and made significant developments in transport and infrastructure. This was a time

of strict morals and high attendance rates at churches.

The collection's popularity really picks up a few years later, after Britain began fighting the Boer War conflict. This was a conflict that took place in what is now referred to as South Africa, and lasted from 1899-1902. It was euphemistically called "The Last of the Gentleman's Wars," but it was anything but—British forces fought with groups antagonistic to British rule, and total casualties amounted to 60,000 people. More recent scholarship has highlighted the controversial use of concentration camps by the British in the war. In fact, most of the more than 25,000 Afrikaners imprisoned in these camps died due to starvation and disease.

Housman reportedly had young male readers in mind when he wrote the collection. Indeed, the collection's themes of Britishness, youth, death, and nostalgia resonated even more strongly with the onset of World War I; the book was taken by many British soldiers into that conflict.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [A Shropshire Lad](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5720/5720-h/5720-h.htm) — The full text of Housman's most popular book of poems, from which "To an Athlete Dying Young" is taken. (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5720/5720-h/5720-h.htm>)
- [The Invention of Love](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teg8-iqkYOA) — A clip from a play by Tom Stoppard, which imagines A.E. Housman visiting the classical underworld. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teg8-iqkYOA>)
- [Meryl Streep Reads Housman](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yRhm6zfnbY) — Meryl Streep reads the poem in this clip from the Oscar-winning film *Out of Africa*, set at the time of British colonial rule in Kenya. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yRhm6zfnbY>)
- [Ezra Pound's Parody](https://www.americanpoems.com/poets/ezrapound/song-in-the-manner-of-housman/) — In this poem, American modernist poet Ezra Pound mocks Housman's tendency towards "woe." (<https://www.americanpoems.com/poets/ezrapound/song-in-the-manner-of-housman/>)
- [Shropshire's History](http://www.shropshirehistory.com) — A web resource about the history of Shropshire, the English county in which Housman's most famous work is set. (<http://www.shropshirehistory.com>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER A. E. HOUSMAN POEMS

- [When I Was One-and-Twenty](#)



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