

Chapter- 2

Theme of Death

The death of Housman's mother on his twelfth birthday, his sister Katherine Symons reports, had such a lasting effect on him that death became an obsession.¹ Kate also recalled that he was "subject to gloom that spread in spite of his attempts to subdue it."² When setting subjects for poems by children of his family more than a year after his mother died, he began with 'Death', and the two pictures with which he decorated his rooms at Oxford were Durer's *Melancholia* and *The Knight, Death and the Devil*. The sense of loss, of betrayal, of confusion for the child of twelve can only have been agonizing. There is nothing whatever about it in his writings. But it certainly shaped his philosophy of life.

The concern with human transience is one of the most prominent themes of English poetry, and in many respects Housman's treatment of this theme is quite conventional. Exile, love, soldiering and nature are also among his themes. These themes are interconnected and that is why any of these can be associated with the theme of death. Like Shakespeare, he laments

that "Golden lads and girls all must/As chimney-sweepers, come to dust." He discovers, like Keats, death in the midst of beauty. Like Marvell and his contemporaries, he concludes in poems such as "Loveliest of Trees" that an awareness of the brevity of life leads to a desire to experience it more intensely. Even in the London Introductory Lecture there is the same insistence on living now rather than tomorrow. Housman is strongly against those who spend their lives in amassing worldly goods or on putting something aside for a rainy day:

Existence is not in itself a good thing, that we should spend a lifetime in securing the necessities: a life spent, however victoriously, in securing the necessities of life is no more than an elaborate furnishing and decoration of apartments for the reception of a guest who is never to come.... our true occupation is to manufacture from the raw material of life the fabric of happiness; and if we are ever to set about our work we must make up our minds to risk something. Absolute security for existence is unattainable, and no wise man will pursue it; for if we must go to these lengths in the attempt at self-preservation we shall die before ever we have begun to live.³

Many of Housman's poems like "Loveliest of Trees" are reminiscent of Edward Fitzgerald's translation of *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Khayyam laments the brevity of human life in many of his *Rubaiyat* and insists on the utmost enjoyment of each moment of our temporal existence in an Epicurean manner. Housman's attitude to human life is Cyrenaic rather than Epicurean.

However, in many of the poems, the persona recognizes the transience and decay and this recognition leads to the acceptance of death rather than a more meaningful participation in the activities of life. *ASL VII*, for example, characterizes life as a cyclical process of change ending only in death. The speaker in the poem asks: "What use to rise and rise? / Rise man a thousand mornings / Yet down at last he lies....' " (ll. 12-14). And lines from the last stanza strengthen the absoluteness of the process with this analogy: "The sun moves always west; / The road one treads to labour / Will lead one home to rest..." (ll. 27-29). Ultimately the persona adds in an acceptance of death as the end of the cycle: " 'And that will be the best.' "

ASL II, "Loveliest of Trees", appears to be the most simple of poetic utterances. It opens with an image from nature which seems to suggest the beauty of life at its prime:

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

(ll. 1-4)

But the image has an ironic effect on the observer; it reminds him
of his own mortality:

Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score
It only leaves me fifty more.

(ll. 5-8)

His reaction is further complicated by the last stanza, for
instead of becoming pessimistic in the face of approaching death,
the speaker determines to involve himself in the beauty of the world
even though it will be “hung with snow,” coloured by the knowledge
of death:

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow

(ll. 9-12)

The surface statement of the poem is simple: life is beautiful
but it is short; and since it is short, one must enjoy it now. But
Housman’s treatment of the theme is not as simple as it appears.
The poem looks simple because of its pastoral mode. The situation
is perceived through the eyes of the Shropshire lad himself, a
modern pastoral figure. The cherry, “loveliest of trees,” is, in a real

sense, the tree of knowledge in the poem, and the changes in the images associated with it suggest a transition from innocence to knowledge. After its introduction in lines 1 and 2, the cherry tree is mentioned three times. In line 4 it is spoken of as “wearing white for Eastertide,” in line 9 it is referred to as a thing “in bloom,” and in the last line of the poem it is said to be “hung with snow.”

What these three images suggest has been a point of debate for critics. Winifred Lynskey has said that the snow image carries with it the suggestion of winter and death, merely continuing the association with death that the “Eastertide” had introduced in the first stanza;⁴ W.L.Werner has argued that the *snow* is, in a poetic sense, no more than “a mass of white petals,” and the association of Easter with death is “sheer perversion, for if Easter has any meaning, it is resurrection and immortal life.”⁵ It is true that Easter, as a poetic symbol, has been traditionally associated with springtime and rebirth, not winter and death. It is also true that a phrase such as “hung with snow,” cannot be separated from the meanings which cling to it through traditional associations. The phrases “wearing white for Eastertide,” and “hung with snow,” are both clearly descriptive of the whiteness of the cherry blossom. But the images cannot be limited to colour

associations, and snow carries with it winter and death as surely as Easter carries with it the idea of spring and rebirth.

What has been ignored is that the “snow” of the last line derives its full symbolic meaning from the structure of the poem. The image pattern progresses from spring (“wearing white for Eastertide”) to summer (“things in bloom”) to winter (“hung with snow”); or if one prefers, from rebirth, to growth, to death.⁶ This is a clear improvement in the knowledge of the young man who observes that the “loveliest” aspects of nature are the most melancholy, for they reveal a world in decay and death.

ASL IV (“Reveille”), continues the theme established in “Loveliest of Trees”. Title of the poem indicates both its subject and its central metaphor. It is a call for action in the face of approaching death. The poem develops its theme through the metaphor of the sun’s passage from dawn to dusk. The poem, as Keith Jebb states, “catches the note of temptation, the desire for wider horizons.”⁷ The repetition of the phrases like “up lad” and “wake” indicate a note of urgency for the young men fast asleep in the dawn:

Wake the silver dusk returning
Up the beach of darkness brims,
And the ship of sunrise burning
Strands upon the eastern rims.
(ll. 1-4)

Up, lad, up, 'tis late for lying:
Hear the drums of morning play:
Hark, the empty highways crying
"Who'll beyond the hills away?"
(ll. 9-12)

Housman uses traditional symbolic association of light with life and darkness with death. The poem is based on the analogy of the journey of life and the journey of the sun from dawn to dusk. However, Housman saves the poem from becoming commonplace by leaving the comparison unstated. These metaphors seem designed as if to appeal to the young persons to get up and grab what they can of life's good things before death closes the opportunity for action.

Up, lad: thews that lie and cumber
Sunlit pallets never thrive;
Morns abed and daylight slumber
Were not meant for man alive.

Clay lies still, but blood's a rover;
Breath's a ware that will not keep.
Up, lad: when the journey's over
There'll be time enough to sleep.

(ll. 17-24)

In *A Shropshire Lad* we come across two apparently conflicting views regarding the relative values of life and death — on the one hand, an awareness of the brevity of life leads to a desire to

experience it more intensely; on the other, a desire for the release of death. It is the second element of the theme that has led many critics to dismiss Houseman as a bitter pessimist who exposes the dark side and gloomy passions of an existence that is not worth maintaining. However, a careful analysis of the poems in which these two aspects of the theme appear casts some doubt on this conclusion. It becomes clear, after examining the view of life represented by "Loveliest of Trees", that to regard Housman merely as a pessimist is to oversimplify a more complex attitude. "Reveille" opens with dawn and closes with the suggestion of approaching night. In the same way, "Loveliest of Trees" with its progression from springtime to winter; but in neither of these poems does the knowledge of the brevity of life lead to a rejection of it, rather they emphasize the value of life and the necessity of an intense and vital existence.

Some critics of Housman have misinterpreted the view of life contained in *A Shropshire Lad* because they ignore this line of development. Hugh Molson, for example, states that Housman regarded human life "as an unmerited ordeal which serves no useful purpose but from which man obtains his final release after death."⁸ Stephen Spender finds that "the hanging, suicides,

shooting, war, hemlock” of Housman’s poems express his feelings about “the wretchedness of life...”⁹ Edmund Wilson writes that in Housman’s poetry “we find only the realization of man’s smallness ...of his own basic wrongness to himself, his own inescapable anguish.”¹⁰ Yet we have clearly seen that “Reveille” and “Loveliest of Trees” encourages us for a meaningful existence even though they make us equally conscious of approaching death.

This view is not limited to one or two poems. *ASL* XXIV, calls for the same kind of involvement, and for exactly the same reasons:

Say, lad, have you things to do?
Quick then, while your day’s at prime.
Quick, and if ’tis work for two,
Here am I, man: now’s your time.
(ll. 1-4)

Again the basis for action and involvement in youth “while your day’s at prime” is the consciousness that maturity implies decay and death:

Use me ere they lay me low
Where a man’s no use at all;

Ere the wholesome flesh decay,
And the willing nerve be numb,
And the lips lack breath to say,
“No, my lad, I cannot come.”
(ll. 7-12)

ASL LVII is yet another expression of the value of life, even in the face of eternal death:

But better late than never:
I shall have lived a little while
Before I die for ever.

(ll. 6-8)

These poems clearly dispel the doubt about the view that Housman considered life as an “unmerited ordeal” from which death releases man. This is a view which implies that death is superior to life. The tone of lyrics II, IV, XXIV, XXXII, and LVII (from *ASL*) is against such a view. We can give examples of many passages in *A Shropshire Lad* in which Housman states that life at its prime is far superior to death. In *ASL* XXV the speaker states: “A lad that lives and has his will /Is worth a dozen dead.” (ll. 11-12). *ASL* XXXIII introduces the idea of prolonging life through love:

If truth in heart that perish
Could move the powers on high,
I think the love I bear you
Should make you not to die.

(ll. 1-4)

A number of the poems of *A Shropshire Lad* thus emphasize a value to life because it is brief and impermanent. Yet this feature of his work is directly against the view that Housman voices “a philosophy compounded of pessimism and defeat.”¹¹ Actually, *A Shropshire Lad* is self-contradictory in its treatment of the relative values of life and death. A number of critics have pointed out this fact. For instance, Jacob Bronowski says:

Housman's poems reel from one standard to another. If one poem finds love worthy ... The poem over the page will find it pointless ... If one poem is glad that a young man has left life before honour, the next will say that silly lads always want to leave their life.¹²

Hugh Molson also finds that Housman answers the question of the value of life and death in contradictory ways:

The feeling that it is better to be alive than dead is vigorously expressed by a suitor who, rejected while his rival was alive, has survived him with satisfactory results... Exactly the opposite opinion is expressed in another poem.¹³

J.B. Priestley writes:

... his running grievance, on examination, can be resolved into two separate complaints that are not at all consistent; in the first, life is lovely enough, but all too short, and death is the enemy of happiness; in the second, existence itself is a misery only to be endured until the welcome arrival of death the deliverer. ¹⁴

Housman's obsession with death has been widely noted and condemned. R.P. Blackmur found that Housman wrote "almost

entirely of death.”¹⁵ Even after a cursory reading of the work we get the impression that death is somehow central to the theme and mood of *A Shropshire Lad*. According to Keith Jebb , “death is the prime mover in the world of Shropshire; beyond the retelling of myth, beyond the martial theme (which itself occupies only half a dozen poems in *A Shropshire Lad*), beyond the theme of young love, there is death, weaving in and out of all of them.”¹⁶ Housman’s treatment of death has been subjected to frequent oversimplification. Since life is all too short and death is the end of life, it would appear that the poet would be opposed to death as the agent which destroys life. However, this is not always the case, for Housman’s attitude to death in *A Shropshire Lad* is paradoxical. To be fully understood it must be seen in relation to the concern with permanence and change, innocence and experience, which lies at the heart of the work. *A Shropshire Lad* is also marked by a search for permanence in a world of change.

Housman’s own life was also marked by the same kind of quest for permanence mirrored in his poetry. On October 3, 1892, he delivered the traditional introductory lecture to open the academic year before the Faculties of Arts and Laws and Science in University College, London. He spoke of the value of learning and

knowledge, and one passage is particularly important because it indicates that his choice of a life of scholarship may have been related to the theme that characterizes his poetry. He stated:

The pleasures of the intellect are notoriously less vivid than either the pleasures of sense or the pleasures of the affections; and therefore, especially in the season of youth, the pursuit of knowledge is likely enough to be neglected and lightly esteemed in comparison with other pursuits offering much stronger immediate attractions. But the pleasure of learning and knowing, though not the keenest, is yet the least perishable of pleasures; the least subject to external things, and the play of chance, and the wear of time. And as a prudent man puts money by to serve as a provision for the material wants of his old age, so too he needs to lay up against the end of his days provision for the intellect. As the years go by, comparative values are found to alter: Time, says Sophocles, takes many things which once were pleasures and brings them nearer to pain. In the days when the strong men shall bow themselves, and the

desires shall fail, it will be a matter of yet more concern than now, whether one can say “my mind to me a kingdom is”; and whether the windows of the soul look out upon a broad and delightful landscape, or face nothing but a brick wall.¹⁷

Here we find a link between Housman’s scholarship and his poetry. Both represent a search for permanence in a mutable world. The unique quality of learning for Housman is that it is not subject to the “wear of time.” It becomes clear from the lecture that how strongly the process of change affected Housman’s thinking and writing. The lecture was delivered less than three years before the spring of 1895, when a large number of the poems of *A Shropshire Lad* were written. The quest for permanence, which is a part of the argument for the supremacy of the pleasures of the intellect over the pleasures of the senses in Housman’s scholarly activities, becomes a turning point in Housman’s poetry. It is in this context that his concern with death in *A Shropshire Lad* must be seen.

ASL XIX, “To an Athlete Dying Young” very clearly explains the complexity which characterizes Housman’s view of death. The athlete in the poem obviously symbolizes for the poet that period of

greatest value in life, for he has both youth and achievement. "The smart lad who slips betimes away is a moving image of all youthful endeavour."¹⁸ The poem is an example of the paradox which characterizes *A Shropshire Lad*. Death, the enemy of mankind, offers sometimes an occasion for joy.

Housman uses the images which are associated with the youth's achievement to describe his death. Stanzas 1 and 2 of the poem describe the two triumphant processions in which the athlete has taken part. In the first, he is carried triumphantly through the town on the shoulders of his friends after winning a race:

The time you won your town the race
We chaired you through the market-place;
Men and boy stood cheering by,
And whom you we brought you shoulder high.

(ll. 1-4)

In stanza 2 the young athlete is brought home dead, but the parallels between this procession and the former triumph are carefully drawn:

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.

(ll. 5-8)

The implication of this parallel is that death is also a victory. The youth is regarded as a "smart lad" not simply because he is dead

but because death has occurred at the prime of his life. He will not have to watch his records being broken by others, more youthful men after his physical strength has been withered by age:

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

Thus death in the poem becomes the agent by which the process of change is halted. There is a sharp contrast between mutability of the world of living and the new-found permanence of the youth in death. In stanza 3 the physical world is described as “fields where glory does not stay,” and the poet adds that “early though the laurel grows/It withers quicker than rose” (ll. 11-12). The laurel and the rose here apparently represent fame and beauty,¹⁹ both subject to decay in life but not, according to the conceit of the poem, in death. In the last stanza, the poet returns to the laurel and the rose in an indirect way, and he emphasizes the contrast between life and death:

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

Here through the references to the “early laurelled head” and the garland “briefer than a girl’s” the poem suggests again the notions of fame and beauty, which were spoken of in stanza 3 as withering quickly in life. In death, however, the youth’s garland is “unwithered on its curls.” The poem thus emphasizes the contrast between two states, one marked by decay, the other by permanence.

Here we find a relation between Housman’s view of death and his concern with mutability. This relationship provides us with the obvious conclusion that ‘death’ in “To an Athlete Dying Young” is a part of a conceit which runs throughout the poem. It is the very nature of the conceit to bring together radically dissimilar ideas which are illogical to the common-sense world of fact. Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” for example, uses a conceit similar to Housman’s in conveying meaning which could be expressed effectively in no other way. The danger of abstracting Housman’s view of death and discussing it literally as a philosophical belief thus becomes immediately apparent. This danger is illustrated by a comparison of Housman’s “To an Athlete Dying Young” and Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”.

There are numerous parallels between the two poems. In both, life has been frozen at the moment of highest intensity. Keats's urn is a "still unravish'd bride," and Housman's athlete in death holds the "still-defended challenge-cup." There is a triumph over time in both poems. In Keats's poem the figures are frozen in action on an ancient urn, but because they can never consummate their actions, they are "for ever warm and still to be enjoyed/ For every panting, and for ever young." Keats also compares this state of permanence in art with that of life. He finds that the passions frozen on the urn are

All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead and a parching tongue.
(ll. 28-30)

Housman's athlete is frozen in death also. In fact, the description of the dead youth serves to fix him in an immobile position in space and time:

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.
(ll. 21-24)

Elizabeth Nitchie while searching for the sources of this imagery, offers a further parallel with Keats's poem, although she does not herself imply that such a parallel exists. She points out that carvings of some Greek stelae represent the dead person standing

or sitting in a door way. Such pictures, she finds, obviate the necessity of the interpretations of the “low lintel” of line 23 as the edge of the grave or as the lid of the coffin, as other critics have suggested.²⁰ We do not know whether Housman had such carvings in mind, but it is true that his description of the youth in the final stanza is almost that of a statue, around which the dead gather (“And round that early-laurelled head/Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead”).

Both poems, then, are constructed around a poetic conceit which is meaningful only in the context of the poem. Housman uses certain metaphorical conception of death in the same way that Keats uses the conception of art — to halt the decay of time and preserve the moment of highest intensity. To separate either conception from the poem is to destroy it by ignoring its context, a principle very necessary to the integrity of the poem as a whole.

ASL XII illustrates a similar conception of death as a metaphorical agent for halting decay. Again, the poem compares the two states of being and non-being. Life is characterized as “the house of flash” where “the heats of hate and lust /....are strong.” Death is the “house of dust” where “revenges are forgot, / and the hater hates no more.” The time duration of the two states is also

different.. In life man will “lodge a little while,” but in the house of dust, his “sojourn shall be long.” The last stanza of the poem reminds us Keats’s ode because it depicts two lovers in death:

Lovers lying two and two
Ask not whom they sleep beside,
And the bridegroom all night through
Never turns him to the bride.
(ll. 13-16)

In death the lovers are forever bride and bridegroom. Their state can never be altered by time. It is thus regarded as superior to the “house of flesh,” characterized by “the heats of hate and lust.” Death has caught the lovers at the highest point of their love and halted the progress of time.

ASL XLIII, “The Immortal Part,” again highlights Housman’s quest for permanence. The narrator suggests that the only immortal part of the body is the bone, rather than the soul. In Housman’s poem it is the bones, “the immortal part,” that speak, demanding the death of the flesh:

“When shall this slough of sense be cast,
This dust of thoughts be laid at last’
The man of flesh and soul be slain
And the man of bone remain?”
(ll. 5-8)

The permanent man, the man of bone, is born only after the temporal man of flesh and mind has melted away. The bones will

endure long after the narrator's life has ceased. Immortality, the object of man's quest, is achieved, but it is a bitter victory:

"The immortal bones obey control
Of dying flesh and dying soul

" 'Tis long till eve and morn are gone:
Slow the endless night comes on,
And late to fullness grows the birth
That shall last as long as earth."
(ll. 15-20)

Before this fire of sense decay,
This smoke of thought blow clean away,
And leave with ancient night alone
(ll. 41-44)

As Cleanth Brooks notes, "The Immortal Part" offers a paradox because, "the immortal part of man is his skeleton— not the spirit, not the soul — but the most earthy, the most nearly mineral part of his body."²¹ The images used by the poet to describe life are temporal objects like fire, smoke, and dust. The flesh is seen merely as an empty vessel or a garment which is worn by the skeleton, which in death achieves its mastery because it is the only immortal object.

ASL XVI is based on ambiguities and depicts in a single image both the transitory nature of life and the permanence found in death. Randall Jarrell reaches an interesting conclusion in regard

to Housman's treatment of death in this poem. Here is the poem and a summery of Jarrell's argument:

It nods and curtseys and recovers
When the wind blows above,
The nettle on the graves of lovers
That hanged themselves for love.

The nettle nods, the wind blows over,
The man, he does not move,
The lover of the grave, the lover
That hanged himself for love.

(ll. 1-8)

Jarrell considers this as a quasi – philosophical poem meant to infect the reader with Housman's own belief about the cause of any action. That belief involves recognition of the painful and inescapable condition of life, what Jarrell calls the "prosperous evil of the universe." By depicting a nettle as repeating over the grave, compelled by the wind of life, what the man in the grave did once when the gale of life blew through him, the poem implies that living is no more than a repetition of meaningless nodding actions, actions that have not even the virtue of being our own (since the wind forces them out of us). But this general attitude towards life is complicated by the poem in a number of ways. There is irony in a nettle's dancing obviously on the grave of the dead lover, for grass, as a symbol for transitoriness, here outlasts man. The fifth and sixth lines of the poem establish this shocking paradox: a plant

curtseys and nods, while the man, the most active of beings, cannot even move. This is the gloomy message of the poem. But there is also a sense of triumph, the most absolute triumph for man. Once he was tossed about helplessly and incessantly by the wind that blew through him. Now the toughest of all plants is more easily moved than he. In other words, death is better than life, and the recognition of this fact leads to the note of triumph in the poem. Once we acknowledge this note of triumph we may catch the ambiguity of poem's conclusion; that is the possibility that it was the grave, not any living thing that the lover loved, and hanged himself for love of. This is the logic behind the poem, for hanging oneself for love of someone is entirely silly, so far as furthering one's love. But if one is in love with death, suicide is the logical and obvious way to consummate that love. Of course the lover may have been deceived. He might have believed that he killed himself for love of someone, but the implication of the poem is that the lover's one motive must have been the wish for death. Housman does not argue for the truth of that assumption. He merely states it audaciously and innocently as a fact as obvious as the other facts the poem presents about the wind, the nettle, and the grave.

Professor B.J. Leggett remarks:

here is another instance in which Housman gives us a full look at the worst, infects us with his own dark vision, yet manages to defend us against the anxiety of death and leaves us with a sense of victory.²²

In *ASL* LIV, Housman depicts ordinary emotion with great complexity. The poem deals with the sense of loss one feels for the dead. However, in creating this emotion, he tries to suggest both the idea of life's loss through change and the idea of death's ultimate victory over this loss. This suggestion does not occur in the thought of the poem, which is very straightforward and is contained in the first two lines of the poem. But in the pattern of its imagery the idea of death's ultimate victory over the loss can be traced:

With rue my heart is laden
For golden friends I had,
For many rose-lipt maiden
And many a lightfoot lad.

By brooks too broad for leaping
The lightfoot boys are laid;
The rose-lipt girls are sleeping
In fields where roses fade.

John Crowe Ransom has objected to the first line of the poem as "painful, grandiloquent, incredible to the naturalistic imagination." He further states:

... I think we must have misgivings as to the propriety of linking this degree of desolation with the loss of friends in wholesale quantities. Grief is not exactly cumulative, not proportionate to the numerical occasions; it is the quality of a single grief rather than the total quantity of all the griefs that we expect to be developed in a poem, if the poem is in the interest of the deepest possible sentiment.²³

This is true, yet the poem is not at all concerned with the death of a particular person. It is an analysis of the consciousness of death and the effect of this consciousness on the speaker. The poem, after all, begins with the narrator's thoughts: "With rue my heart is laden..." Ransom's quibble with laden in line 1 also misses the irony inherent in the poem. The poem depicts the emotion of the narrator in paradoxical terms, which, in turn, parallels the larger paradox developed in the poem. The sense of desolation, or emptiness, is produced by *laden*, which suggests fullness. The sense of stillness in lines 5 and 6 is depicted by *leaping*. The impression of rosiness in lines 7 and 8 is suggested by reference to the fading of the roses. The poem has thus managed to produce

through this imagery simultaneously the stillness of death and the activity of life.

The image of "Golden Friends" in line 2 also contributes to the paradoxical theme of the poem. Although Ransom objects that "the image needs a little specification: Shakespeare's golden lads and girls were in better order by virtue of the contrast of the Chimney-Sweepers,"²⁴ the absence of explicit colour contrast may in fact help the image to perform its function. In both works, golden must be taken in its classical (Golden Age) and physical sense. Just as in alchemy gold represented the perfect mixture of the elements, the lads and girls of Shakespeare's and Housman's lyrics represent the time in which the elements of life are in perfect harmony. In Shakespeare's imagery this gold is turned to dust by time ("Golden lads and girls all must, / As chimney - sweepers, come to dust"). However, the point which has eluded critics of Housman is that, strictly in terms of imagery of the poem, the golden friends escape the decay of time. Housman manages this by transferring the sense of change from the dead youths to the physical world from which they have escaped. The "lightfoot lad" of line 4 is still described as lightfoot in death. However, the brooks he was accustomed to leap in youth are now "too broad for leaping." Likewise, the "rose-lipt

maiden" maintains the complexion of her youth; yet she is sleeping in "fields where roses fade." Housman thus continues the conceit in which death becomes the agent for halting time, and for fixing and maintaining the moment in which life is golden. Change is a property of the living, not of the dead.

Ransom further objects that Housman does not depict very clearly the shameful end which death involves .He states, referring to the rose-lipt girls:

...that does not seem too shameful an end. Roses fade in the best of fields....What we require is an image to carry the fading of the rosy-lips ; to be buried in the ground involves this disgrace sufficiently for brutal logic but not for poetic imagination.²⁵

If the reader is conscious of the continuing conceit about death, he realizes that the poem obviously avoids the suggestion that death brings decay with it. The poem, instead, emphasizes the decay that characterizes life. Housman's seemingly simple statement about death, which Ransom finds inept, becomes more complex on closer examination. In fact, the attitude towards death in the poem is a complex one. Stanza 1 offers an overwhelming sense of grief. But this feeling of loss is altered in stanza 2 because

here death is both a loss and a gain. But this complexity must be seen in the context of the whole of *A Shopshire Lad*, and critics who consider isolated poems may conclude, like Ransom, that

The ironical detail of the poem is therefore fairly inept. The imagination of this poet is not a trained and faithful instrument, or it does not work for him here. That is not an additional charge, however, to saying that the poem as a whole is not very satisfactory, for it is the specific ground of this poem's failure. There cannot be a fine poetry without a fine texture²⁶

The scene of *ASL XXIII* regards death not wholly as a shameful end. The scene of *ASL XXXIII* is Ludlow fair. The narrator watches the hundreds of lads as they arrive from "the burn and the forge and the mill and the fold..." He watches that some of them are there for the girls and some for the liquor, but his interest lies in another group for "there with the rest are the lads that will never be old" (l. 4). It is in the contrast between the first two groups and the last that the central idea of the poem lies. Many of the first groups are, in their prime, handsome and brave:

And many to count are the stalwart, and the brave,
And many the handsome of face and the handsome of heart,
And few that will carry their looks or their truth to the grave.
(ll. 6-8)

The latter group, however, are regarded as “fortunate fellows”, for they will “carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man” (l. 15). The last line of the poem makes clear why these men are to be regarded as fortunate and how they are to preserve the mintage of man. These are “the lads that will die in their glory and never be old” (l. 16).

Again, it would be easy to oversimplify the attitude towards death in this poem and consider death merely as an escape from the misery of existence. Many of Housman’s critics have done so. The point is not that these lads have escaped some sort of evil inherent in life, but instead, they have escaped the change and decay of time. Housman’s coin image suggests that they have preserved something which in itself is valuable.

ASL XLIV deals with a different aspect of life’s mutability. There is a sudden turn of the wheel of fortune with which living man is powerless to contend. Here, the young man takes suicide as a possible means of defeating fate by stopping time:

Shot? so quick, so clean and ending?
Oh that was right, lad, that was brave:
Yours was not an ill for mending,
‘T was best to take it to the grave.

Oh you had forethought, you could reason,
And so your road and where it led,

And early wise and brave in season
Put the pistol to your head.

(ll. 1-8)

Suicide thus becomes justified because, even though death is not desirable, the ills of time and the disgraces of ever-changing fortune are even less desirable: "Dust's your wages son of sorrow,/But men may come to worse than dust" (ll. 15-16). It becomes clear from stanzas 5 and 6 that, again, death is not considered merely as an escape from the evil and injustice of the world. It is, instead a means to "carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man." Man is considered here in generic terms. By committing suicide the lad has saved himself and his fellow men from the dishonour and guilt which his unnamed disgrace would have brought them:

Souls undone, undoing others, —
Long time since the tail began.
You would not live to wrong your brothers:
O lad, you died as fits a man.

Now to your grave shall friend and stranger
With ruth and some with envy come:
Undishonored, clear of danger,
Clean of guilt, pass hence and home.

(ll. 17-24)

The source of the poem casts some further light on these lines.

Laurence Housman writes in his biography of his brother:

On August 6th, 1895, a young Woolwich Cadet, aged eighteen, took his own life, leaving a letter addressed to the Coroner to say why he had done so. The gist of that letter was quoted in a newspaper cutting of the day, which I found lying in my brother's copy of *A Shropshire Lad* alongside the poem which begins:

Shot? so quick, so clean an ending?

It is quite evident that certain passages in that letter prompted the writing of the poem; one sentence indeed is almost quoted.²⁷

Laurence Housman then quotes a part of the young Cadet's letter:

I wish it to be clearly understood that I am not what is commonly called 'temporarily insane' and that I am putting an end to my life after several weeks of careful deliberation. I do not think that I need to justify my actions to anyone but my Maker, but.... I will state the main reasons which have determined me. The first is utter cowardice and despair. There is only one thing in this world which would make me thoroughly happy; that one thing I have no earthly hope of obtaining. The second — which I wish was the only one — is that I have

absolutely ruined my own life; but I thank God that as yet, so far as I know, I have not morally injured, or 'offended,' as it is called in the Bible, anyone else. Now I am quite certain that I could not live another five years without doing so, and for that reason alone, even if the first did not exist, I should do what I am doing... At all events it is final, and consequently better than a long series of sorrows and disgraces.²⁸

The last two sentences quoted above must certainly have attracted the attention of Housman to the story, because they parallel the concept of death which is repeated throughout the poems written during this period. The young man died to halt the moral decay which is mentioned in the letter ("I could not live for another five years without doing so,..."). Housman praises the idea in lines 19 and 20 : "you would not live to wrong your bothers:/O lad, you died as fits a man." The last sentence quoted from the letter contains the idea which forms the basis of the concept of death stated most clearly in "To an Athlete Dying Young." The young Cadet wrote, "At all events it is final, and consequently better than a long series of sorrows and disgraces." We can compare Housman's lines: "Oh

soon, and better so than later/After long disgrace and scorn,...”
(ll.9–10)

The Cadet thus becomes successful in escaping the ill fortunes of time. The last stanza of the poem offers him still further compensations:

Turn safe to rest, no dreams, no waking;
And here, man, here's the wreath I've made:
'Tis not a gift that's worth the taking,
But wear it and it will not fade.

(ll.25–28)

The wreath mentioned in line 26 may be explained in two ways. On one level, it is the symbol of victory, the poet's sign that the lad has triumphed over the adversities of time. It will not fade because it is artificial, not organic (“a wreath I've made). But the wreath may also be interpreted as the poem itself (an artifact which is made). The poet thus offers the lad the permanence of art, like the conceit of Shakespeare's sonnet 18. Both poets recognize the mutability of the natural world, where “every fair from fair sometimes declines/By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed.” (Sonnet 18, ll.7–8), and both offer the permanence of art to halt decay. Shakespeare argues that through his poem “thy eternal summer shall not fade” (l.9) Housman's statement almost identical: “But wear it and it will not fade.”

So Housman uses both death and art in the same manner in this poem and in other lyrics of *A Shropshire Lad*. Yet many critics have ignored this aspect of Housman's view of death in the work. No critic has assumed that Shakespeare believed his poem would literally preserve the beauty of the young man to whom Sonnet 18 is addressed. But Housman's use of similar conceit has been interpreted literally with the resulting judgment that his philosophy is perverse and contradictory. *A Shropshire Lad* is based on the human dilemma of life and death, and this dilemma can be resolved only in paradoxical terms. Cleanth Brooks, in *The Well Wrought Urn*, has argued for the necessity of the statement of paradox:

If the poet ... must perforce dramatize the oneness of the experience, even through paying tribute to its diversity, then his use of paradox and ambiguity is seen as necessary. He is not simply trying to spice up, with a superficially exciting or mystifying rhetoric, the old stale stockpot....He is rather giving us an insight which preserves the unity of experience and which at its higher and more serious levels, triumphs over the

apparently contradictory and conflicting elements of experience by unifying them into a new pattern.²⁹

It is in this sense that Housman's view of death must be seen. Housman's poetry fails to provide any practical answer to the dilemma posed by time. But it must be agreed that the lyric poet has traditionally not attempted to provide practical answers to life's problems. His poetic answers serve only as occasional insights into the human condition.

Some of Housman's poems can be understood only in terms of Lucretius' atomistic theory. In his 1911 Cambridge Inaugural Lecture, Housman refers to the same scientific and natural laws that governed, thematically and ideologically much of his earlier poetic creativity. Housman had great regard for Lucretius and his ancient philosophy. He once praised the poet-philosopher's *De Rerum Natura* as "a work more compact of excellence than any edition of any classic produced in England."³⁰ "Lucretius's Epicurean ontology profoundly influenced Housman's poetry, particularly in the poet's 1896 volume, *A Shropshire Lad*, while at the same time impinging upon Housman's own interest in the means of human existence and the *topos* of atomic theory —

Lucretian concepts that fathered the notion of ‘the stuff of life’ so prevalent in Housman’s poetry.”³¹

As generally acknowledged by literary critics and philosophers alike, Epicurus (342B.C.–270B.C), had influenced the poetry of both Housman and Lucretius.³² He employed poetry in his landmark study, *On Nature*, to advance his largely scientific arguments.³³ In his work, Epicurus afforded particular emphasis to the notion of free will— an interest that stemmed largely from his conclusions about atoms and their tendencies to swerve of their own accord.³⁴ Epicurean philosophy *per se* functions upon three basic principles. First, Epicurus argues that all pleasure is good, while all evil is bad. The second basic tenet of Epicurean philosophy arises directly from the concepts of good and evil. Epicurus believed that death was a natural part of humanity— an experience not to be feared, but to be embraced.³⁵ He further argues that to the living, death remains an unknown quantity, thus producing an understandable fear. Epicurus believed that such a fear was ludicrous because man has no basis for understanding the experience of death. Only the expectation of it: “Foolish,

therefore, is the man who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect”³⁶

The final principal tenet of Epicurean philosophy relates to the existence of atoms. Epicurus drew his conclusions regarding atoms from another ancient philosopher, Democritus (born 460 — 457 B.C.), who identified atoms as the basic forms of matter. Epicurus believed that atoms were both indivisible and indestructible, and thus they could not be created by men. Accordingly, Epicurus believed that the body in its living state made up of a finite number of atoms that comprised the human soul. According to the Epicurean ontology, when the body enters the state of death, its atoms are immediately dispersed into the world, thus becoming free to form another being. In this manner, Epicurus offers an important observation about the mortality of the human soul and suggests that through death, the body and soul enter into a permanent state of non-existence.³⁷

Lucretius embraced Epicurus’ three principal tenets and his forays into atomic theory.³⁸ Lucretius explores the Epicurean belief that death remains an unknown experience — again, an experience not to be feared but embraced. Lucretius wrote: “Often through fear of death men come to hate life and the sight of the sun

so bitterly that in burst of grief they kill themselves, forgetting that it was this fear that caused their cares, troubled their conscience, broke their bonds of friendship, overturned all sense of decency”.³⁹ Thus, according to Lucretius, the fear of death breeds a fear of living.

Lucretius also replicates Epicurus’ early examinations of atomic theory. In the preface to his discussion of atoms in Book Three of *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius, defines the existence of the soul and its place within the body: “First, I speak of the soul (sometimes called ‘mind’), in which life’s thoughts and governments are placed; it’s no less part of a man than hand and foot and eyes are part of the total living creature”.⁴⁰ Atoms, in this Epicurean sense, are the virtual life-force of the living body. Like Epicurus, Lucretius also demonstrates the phenomenon of atomic dispersal when the body dies. Life, according to the Epicurean argument, creates the restraint that holds the atoms within the body. In death, however, the atoms are released to pursue their own free will. As Lucretius writes: “Say it again: when allure fleshy husk is loosened, and the breath of life cast out, you must admit that sensate soul and mind break up; a single life links soul and body”⁴¹ In this way, Lucretius suggests that with the exodus of

atoms, the body and the soul cease to exist. Lucretius, in addition to making observations regarding the human fear of death, alleges that immortality and after life are non-existent and impossible entities within 'the nature of things'.

Like Epicurus and Lucretius before him, Thomas Henry Huxley revealed two thousand years later that atoms arise out of ordinary matter to become composite forms during life while returning to the realm of ordinary matter in death. Death, according to Huxley, is a natural state of lifelessness, as well as a process that ultimately begins with birth. Housman's poetry and prose contain several examples of Epicurean concepts, particularly in relation to atomic theory, mortality and human fear of death. As his brother Laurence recalled, in religious matters Housman approved of the Church of England as an institution, yet possessed no faith in its tenets.⁴² Critics such as Richard Perceval Graves ascribe Housman's affinity for the philosophies of Epicurus and Lucretius — and later that of Huxley— to their atheism. Housman believed that the soul was as mortal as the body and had strong reservations about the notion of immortality. As Norman Marlow argues, "One can sense in Housman, as in Huxley, Romanes, and other agnostics of the late nineteenth century, the underlying

bewilderment and anguish of a soul naturally Christian....yet to call Housman a Christian, as some have done, is of course nonsense”⁴³

Like Lucretius, Housman believed that the human fear of death prevents any real and productive means of existence. An examination of his poetry reveals the manner in which he employs the tenets of atomic theory to demonstrate the vacuous nature of human life in an enduring face of death.

In *ASL XXXI*, Housman offers images of the gale of life as it blows through the fictive terrain of the poet’s Shropshire. The gale spreads the ashes and atoms of the narrator’s human precursors among the shadows of his fleeting existence:

There, like the wind through woods in riot,
Through him the gale of life blew high;
The tree of man was never quiet:
Then ‘twas Roman, now ‘tis I.

The gale, it piles the saplings double,
It blows so hard, ‘twill soon be gone:
To-day the Roman and his trouble
Are ashes under Uricon.

(ll. 13–20)

Norman Page argues that the movements of the wind in *A Sheopshire Lad* function as a poetic manoeuvre that enables Housman to forge a temporal link between the ancient past, a

dismal present and an uncertain future: “The wind blows not just through a human life but through history,” Page writes; “the wind of the distant past...links dead Roman and Victorian Englishman.”⁴⁴ In this way, Housman alludes — through his references to the enduring winds of ancient Uricon— to the phenomenon that Tom Burns Haber calls the “unending cycle of atomic dissolution and recombination” prevalent throughout the poet’s verse⁴⁵

Housman uses similar images of the wind in *ASL XXXII*. The poet’s insistence upon the value of atomic theory and its ancient philosophical properties also affirms Page’s assertion that “almost any individual poem in *A Shropshire Lad* has a total meaning that is partly supplied by its relationship to other poems in the collection. This relationship may be thematic or it may be a matter of recurrent diction or imagery.”⁴⁶ In *ASL XXXII*, the narrator discusses the existence of atoms— the ‘stuff of life’ — and the way in which they combined to form his very being:

From far, from eve and morning
And yon twelve-winded sky,
The stuff of life to knit me
Blew hither: here am I.

In the second stanza, the narrator warns that he has not yet 'dispersed', referring to his own inevitable death and the atomic dissolution. Through this classical metaphor, the narrator acknowledges the fleeting nature of his existence:

Now —for a breath I tarry
Nor yet disperse apart—
Take my hand quick and tell me,
What have you in your heart.

John Bayley argues that this poem offers additional images of "urgency...heightened into mysteriousness"— emotions intensified by Housman's arguments, via Lucretius, regarding the tenuous nature of human life. As John Bayley concludes: "A lifetime should be enough for any number of such exchanges, but the poem sees the whole of it as a moment." ⁴⁷

Housman concludes in poems such as "Loveliest of Trees" that an awareness of the brevity of life leads to a desire to experience it more intensely. In many of the poems, however, the recognition of transience and decay leads to the desire for the release of death rather than a more meaningful participation in life. It is the second element of the theme that has led many critics to dismiss Housman as a bitter pessimist who exposes the tragic side of life.

Some other critics, however, find that Housman answers the question of life and death in contradictory ways. *A Shropshire Lad* is based on the human dilemma of life and death, and this dilemma can be resolved only in paradoxical terms. To be fully understood it must be seen in relation to the concern with permanence and change, innocence and experience, which lies at the heart of the work. In his 'Apology' to *Late Lyrics and Earlier* Hardy denied the charge of pessimism. Housman had similar problems and made his own attempts to distance himself from the charge of pessimism. I have already quoted from the letter to Houston Martin where he calls pessimism 'silly' and himself a pejorist as opposed to a meliorist. And in his poetry he sounds a note very similar to the line from his own work which Hardy quotes:

Therefore, since the world has still
Much good, but much less good than ill,
And while the sun and moon endure
Luck's a chance, but trouble's sure,
I'd face it as a wise man would,
And train for ill and not for good.
(ASL LXII)

It is possible that both these writers would have embraced pessimism, but they did not want to be thought of as people who could only see the dark side of things. They both wanted to make it clear that they had arrived at their positions after due

consideration of the evidence; as Housman pointed out in the letter to Houston Martin, his pejorism was arrived at “owing to my observation of the world, not to personal circumstances”⁴⁸

Housman’s poetry— often praised by his critics for its simplicity of form and meaning— in fact offers little in the way of poetic resolution. As John Peale Bishop remarks: “Despite an apparent clarity such that almost any poem seems ready to deliver its meaning at once, there is always something that is not clear, something not brought into the open, something that is left in doubt.”⁴⁹ So our discussion of the ideals of Epicurus, Lucretius, and the very ‘stuff of life’ upon which their philosophies function, will demonstrate the complexity of the philosophy of Housman’s poetry, which has its roots in the very confusion and doubt of which Bishop speaks. Like those ancient philosophers, Housman believed that the human fear of death prevents any real and productive means of existence. An examination of his poetry reveals the manner in which he employs the tenets of atomic theory to demonstrate the vacuous nature of human life in an enduring face of death.

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