

# *Chapter- 3*

*Theme of Soldiering*

A. E. Housman was greatly fascinated by soldiering and the accidents of military life. A large number of his poems, including some of his best ones, are on military and warlike themes. An early photograph of Housman, aged seven, and his brother Robert, shows them in the garden with their home-made rifles. His father, Mr. Edward Housman was interested in rifle-shooting. He was a keen member of Bromsgrove Volunteer Rifle Corps. Robert's approach to life was materially altered because of his closeness with Birmingham Small Arms Company, Kynoch; where he was a ballistics expert. However, the most important source for Housman's compassion for the desperate young soldier was his youngest brother, George Herbert Housman. Herbert's letters from the Burmese campaign of 1891 and 1892, have been treasured for many years by the Symons family. A few serialized in *The Housman society Journal*. It was to Lucy, his stepmother, "My dearest Mater", that Herbert was to write letters from the front in

Burma. Herbert's battalion fought in the Boer War of 1901. He was hit by a machine gun while leading a charge of the mounted infantry. Corporal Hobden wrote to Lucy on 1<sup>st</sup> November that Herbert's Corps "lay on the open veldt all night in the pouring rain... with only his underclothing...the Boers having stripped him of every thing."<sup>1</sup> The elder brother was profoundly influenced by the experiences of the younger brother. The fact of his death inspired writing or re-writing of some of Alfred's greatest poetry. *A Shropshire Lad* was published in 1896, but most of the poems were written in the spring of 1893, less than three years after Herbert's letters from Burma. Herbert's story must have been fresh in Alfred's mind when he wrote several of the poems. Spencer Blackett, the manager at Kegan Paul (Publisher), was particularly fascinated with the military element and wanted *A Shropshire Lad* to be renamed as "a romance of enlistment". When Housman's nephew, Clement Symons, third son of his sister Kate, was killed in action in 1916, he wrote to her:

My dear Kate,

I have been scanning the casualty lists in these last days, and when I saw your card this morning I

feared what the news must be. Well, my dear, it is little I or anyone else can do to comfort you, or think of anything to say that you will not have thought of. But I remember your telling me at the beginning of the war that he had almost a hope and expectation of dying in battle, and we must be glad that it was a victorious battle in which he died. I don't know that I can do better than to send you some verses that I wrote many years ago; because the essential business of poetry, as it has been said, is to harmonize the sadness of the universe, and it is somehow more sustaining and healing than prose. Do assure Edward of my feeling for you all, and also, though I do not know her, the poor young girl.

Your affectionate brother, A.E. Housman.<sup>2</sup>

Housman donated generously to the fighting funds. In response to the Chancellor's appeal in 1914 he gave the whole of his current bank balance, said to be five hundred pounds, a massive sum for those days. There is a hidden touch of sentimentality behind Housman's view of war. He told Grant

Richards that he wanted a copy of *A Shrophshire Lad* to be available to every soldier and thus cheap, for an important motive.

I don't make any particular complaint about your doubling the price of my book, but of course it diminishes the sale and therefore diminishes my chances of the advertisement to which I am always looking forward: a soldier is to receive a bullet in the breast and it is to be turned aside from his heart by a copy of *A Shrophshire Lad* which he is carrying there. Hitherto it is only the Bible which has performed this trick.<sup>3</sup>

Something like this in fact came about: Housman carefully treasured a letter from an American soldier who had written to say that, in comforting a wounded British infantryman, he had offered him his copy of *A Shropshire Lad*. But the British soldier had responded by taking from his pocket his own bloodstained copy.

After Housman's death, his copy of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* was found to have a marginal note beside one of T.E.

Lawrence's more tortured passages of self-examination: "This is me."

Writing in the *Edwardian* magazine in 1936, Kate Symons put it like this:

A.E.H. often performed quiet acts of unobtrusive generosity. Consideration of the feelings of people comfortably off he certainly had not; but to a painful degree, he was capable of compassion for suffering, and resentment against the miseries of the world. Students of his poems find this strain in them, as, also, his admiration for those who bear hardships bravely. During the Great War he showed practical concern for his four Edwardian nephews who were with the fighting forces. On its outbreak, he sent £ 100 to help in equipping the three who left civilian life to join the army; and when N.V.H.S., the youngest of them, lost his left hand, he made particular request to be allowed to supply an artificial hand to make good the loss as far as possible.<sup>4</sup>

Housman's compassion extended far beyond his feelings for the common soldier. He told his brother Basil in 1927 that he had met the American defence lawyer Clarence Darrow, and had clearly been moved by the latter's account of criminals facing capital punishment:

I had a visit no long ago from Clarence Darrow, the great American barrister for defending murderers. He had only a few days in England, but he could not return home without seeing me, because he had so often used my poems to rescue his clients from the electric chair. Loeb and Leopold owe their life sentence partly to me; and he gave me a copy of his speech, in which, sure enough, two of my pieces are misquoted.<sup>5</sup>

Yet publicly, Housman appeared wholly unmoved by the Great War, and cynical about its motives. In 1993 he wrote to Maurice Pollet:

"The great war cannot have made much change in the opinions of any man of imagination."<sup>6</sup>

At the outbreak of war in 1914, Lily Thicknesse received this ironic comment:

...The thirst for blood is raging among the youth of England. More than half the undergraduates are away, but mostly not at front, because they all want to be officers. I am going out when they make me a Field-Marshal. Meanwhile I have three nephews being inoculated for typhoid and catching pneumonia on Salisbury Plain and performing other acts of War calculated to make the German Emperor realize that he is a very misguided man...<sup>7</sup>

Soldiering is one of the most important aspects of Housman's poetry. But this feature of his poetry has not been systematically studied. Critics have long tried to explain the reasons for his obsession with certain type of characters, particularly the soldier and the young criminal. Most of the explanations are biographical. According to Stephen Spender, Housman's poetry seems to hide "some nagging Housman secret."<sup>8</sup> Like so many other critics, he suggests that personal tragedy is concealed in the poetry. Many readers give more importance to his personality than his poetry. Norman Marlow says that soldiers attracted Housman "by their colourful uniforms and their destiny," and again because they are "men



paid to die" and in another place, because of their "relentless pursuit of glory,"<sup>9</sup> To John Bayley, "His soldiers provide a refuge between the duty of loneliness and the longing for community," and they gave "Housman a lot of happiness."<sup>10</sup> According to his biographer George L. Watson, a soldier might be "often susceptible to his own sex" appealed to Housman's invert imaginings, and Housman yearned towards "the gallant bearing and the ripe masculinity of men in uniform,"<sup>11</sup> In sharp contrast, he felt through his own disasters "a sense of closer kinship with their unhappy lot."<sup>12</sup>

John Stevenson says that all of these figures are identical with "the only character of the poems, the Shropshire Lad."<sup>13</sup> It may be true, but it does not answer the more basic question of why Housman chose to deal with these particular types. However, Stevenson does make an effort to explain why the rustic personality is central to the meaning of the poems:

If the theme of the response of innocence to experience and to action is the right one, it helps to place the Shropshire lad in a more dramatic position; his effect on the reader is more than a "literary" example of

childish petulance and rebellion against society. We have only to turn to poetry, to point out specific situations, to perceive that the “lad” of the poems, whether soldier, lover, or sinner, is himself a discoverer. Almost always Housman presents him at the moment when the reality is made apparent, forever after which he must, like Mithridates, “sample all the killing store,” and forever after which he knows that “happiness” and “pleasure” are illusions, that life, while perhaps not a sham, is something of a hoax, and that meaning comes only through struggle.<sup>14</sup>

Soldiering is a public responsibility. Soldiers are the defenders of a country. The sacrifices made by soldiers in defending their motherland always won Housman’s admiration. Soldiers in his poetry have all those public or conventional values that are traditionally related to soldiering. In a single couplet Housman sets up these three values:

Duty, friendship, bravery o’er,  
Sleep away, lad; Wake no more.  
(*LP XXIX*, ll.23-24)

In “The Recruit”, a new recruit is introduced to his task. National or patriotic feeling is also added to his duty:

And you will list the bugle  
That blows in lands of morn  
And make the foes of England  
Be sorry, you were born.

(ASL III, ll.17-20)

And in "1887," the first poem in *A Shropshire Lad* which celebrates the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887, God is rejected as the force which has "Saved the Queen" for half a century:

Now, when the flame they watch not towers  
About the soil they trod,  
Lads, we'll remember the friends of ours  
That shared the work with God.

(ll.9-12)

Queen Victoria symbolizes duty and her welfare is the national objective. But the important point is this, that the British soldier, in the work of saving the Queen, "Shared the work with God." We are told of those who saved the Queen that "Themselves they could not save." The soldiers in the poem became "saviours".

To skies that knit their hearstrings right,  
To fields that bred them brave,  
The saviours come not home to-night:  
Themselves they could not save

(ll.13-16)

The last line suggests The New Testament, Matthew 27: 42., where the chief priests, scribes and elders mock Christ by saying, "He saved others; himself he cannot save." Associating

these words with the British soldiers signifies that they are the Christs of the contemporary world on whose shoulders the fate of the crown rests.

This poem and "Epitaph for an Army of Mercenaries" has the same subject matter and caused some controversy in their attitude towards war, religion and patriotism. The latter is the poet's reply to Kaiser Wilhelm's contemptuous joke about professionalism in the British Army:

These, on the day when heaven was falling,  
The hour when earth's foundations fled,  
Followed their mercenary calling  
And took their wages and are dead

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;  
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;  
What God abandoned, these defended,  
And saved the sum of things for pay  
(LP XXXVII)

I agree with Cleanth Brooks when he says;

But can one really be hired to die? Do Housman's "mercenaries" save the sum of things, as the poet asserts they do, "for pay"? Isn't there a concealed idealism after all, despite the poet's refusal to allow anything more than the materialistic reason? Of course there is, and this, I suppose, is the point that the poem is making: that the courage to stand and die rather than to run away,

usually comes from something like *esprit de corps* or professional pride or even from a kind of instinctive manliness rather than from adherence to the conventional rubrics of patriotism and duty.<sup>15</sup>

We can place the logical argument (If ... but since ... therefore) of *ASL LVI* "The Day of the Battle", beside Ricks's argument:

"Comrade, if to turn and fly  
Made a soldier never die,  
Fly I would, for who would not?  
'Tis sure no pleasure to be shot.

"But since the man that runs away  
Lives to die another day,  
And coward's funerals, when they come,  
Are not wept so well at home,

"Therefore, though the best is bad,  
Stand and do the best, my lad;  
Stand and fight and see your slain,  
And take the bullet in your brain."

(ll. 5-16)

The Great War was a nerve shattering experience. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* reflects this tragic gloom and despair of the post-war world. The tragedy of everyday life has induced in the poet a mood of disillusionment. But Housman appeared wholly unmoved by the Great War. However, in assigning causes for the war he abdicated that role.

The olive in its orchard  
 Should prosper and abide;  
 .....  
 Close should the fruit be clustered  
 And light the leaf should wave,  
 So deep the root is planted  
 In the corrupting grave.  
 (AP XXIII)

Military friendship and community is another important characteristic of Housman's poetry. In the very first attempt to write a poem about soldiers, he wrote:

The street sounds to the soldiers' tread'  
 And out we troop to see:  
 A single redcoat turns his head,  
 He turns and looks at me.

My man, from sky to sky's so far,  
 We never crossed before:  
 Such leagues apart the world's ends are,  
 We're like to meet no more;

What thoughts at heart have you and I  
 We cannot stop to tell;  
 But dead or living, drunk or dry,  
 Soldier, I wish you well

(ASL XXII, ll. 1-12)

"A single redcoat" who turns his head becomes 'my man' in the second verse, and a plain soldier in the last. It shows extreme intimacy or friendship between the speaker and the soldier.

Many of his lyrics went on to lament friendship broken by death; which is the inevitable fate of Housman's soldier. He mourns:

A soldier cheap to king  
And dear to me.  
(*MP XL*, ll 7-8)

And lyric XXXV of *ASL*

Dear to friends and food for powder,  
Soldiers marching, all to die.  
(ll. 7-8)

Nor can we ignore a somewhat romanticized picture of a friend  
who is dead and forgotten:

East and west on fields forgotten  
Bleach the bones of comrades slain,  
Lovely lads and dead and rotten  
None that go return again.  
(*ASL XXXV*, 9-12)

And again in *ASL LX*, although the central theme of death is  
not directly mentioned:

Square your shoulders, lift your pack,  
And leave your friends and go  
(ll. 3-4)

When he says, "I will sit me down and weep for bones in  
Africa" (*LP XVII*), he seems to mean his brother, Sergeant  
George Housman, killed in the Transvall; but as his  
manuscripts show, he had caught the tone long before the  
bereavement.

A large number of subsidiary fancies are related to the  
central one. Housman made use of these very frankly and  
cleverly. A battlefield deserter has no room in Housman's

world. Automatically he turns up with broken heart in several poems:

My dreams are of a field afar,  
And blood and smoke and shot.  
There in their graves my comrades are,  
In my grave I am not.

I too was taught the trade of man  
And spelt the lesson plain;  
But they, when I forgot and ran,  
Remembered and remain.

(MP XXXIX)

His friends “remembered and remained” while he forgot and ran” because of cowardice. Housman was a lonely scholar, but he was always a supporter of unity and synchronization in military effort. His soldiers move in columns, and they fall down in rows.

“I will go where I am wanted, where there’s room for one or two,  
And the men are none too many for the work there is to do;  
Where the standing line wears thinner and the dropping dead lie  
thick;

(ASL XXXIV)

This closeness of man to man is superior to the love of man for woman. A soldier bedded with a girl suddenly awakens:

And where am I?  
My friends are up and dressed and dying,  
And I will dress and die.

(LP. XIII, 10-12)



Some others try to continue the comradeship ideal even beyond the grave. The ceaseless activity of living friends troubles them:

Over the dead men roar  
Battles they lost before  
(AP XIX)

While still others even hear political news coming through the fertile land above their grave:

Oh is it my country calling,  
And whom will my country find?  
.....  
Oh is it the newsboys crying  
Lost battle, retreat, despair,  
And honor and England dying?  
(AP XIV)

In two poems, Housman comes out of the regional attitude to include the official enemy. Here too he is utterly conventional.

Once he said, "I lost my heart":

I lost it to a soldier and a foeman  
A chap who did not kill me, but he tried;  
That took the sabre straight, and took it striking  
And laughed and kissed his hand to me and died.  
(MP XXXVII)

From this he moves to the solidly natural imagery of his "Soldier from the wars returning."

Now no more of winters biting,  
Filth in trench from fall to spring,  
Summers full of sweat and fighting  
For the Kesar and the King.

Rest you, charger, rust you, bridle,  
Kings and Kesars, keep your pay;  
Soldier, sit you down and idle  
In the inn of night for aye.

(*LP VIII*. 9 – 16)

Courage and stoic endurance are the two constant themes of Housman's poetry. These are the themes which are almost obsessive for several of our best contemporary writers. Housman presented his battle casualties as:

Fellows who were good and brave  
And died because they were.

(*LP XXXVIII*, 9-10)

The lads of rural Shropshire lived among accidents and encountered unusually serious difficulties. There are some hidden motives behind the soldier's symbolic march into the battle:

Far the calling bugles hollo,  
High the screaming fife replies;  
Gay the files of scarlet follow;  
Woman bore me: I will rise.

(*ASL XXXV*, 13-16)

Through earth and out of life,  
The soldiers follow  
.....

And down the distance they  
With dying note and swelling  
Walk the resounding way  
To the still dwelling.

(*LP VII*, 7-8, 17-20)

Housman's soldiers, like his civilians, had the death wish. His sister, Katherine E. Symons, recalled in her

memorable tribute to him that he had enclosed a copy of his poem "Illic Jacet", with a letter of condolence when one of her sons was killed in France. He asserted that her boy had been "in love with the grave," and now lay "with the sweetheart he chose" (*LP IV*). A girl in another poem is bitter:

Their love is for their own undoing,  
And East and west  
They scour about the world a -wooing  
The bullet to their breast.  
(*LP XIII*, 28-32)

An equally confusing problem arose from the fact that in much of his poetry, Housman expressed the view that life was not better than death, and might be worse. The cosmos is viewed as a torture chamber created by a "brute and blackguard,"

In some of his poems, Housman shows the pain and sorrow certainly involved in the act of dying. Says one soldier:

"Comarade, it to turn and fly  
Made a soldier never die,  
Fly I would, for who would not?  
'Tis sure no pleasure to be shot.  
(*ASL LVI*, 5-8)

Housman's young grenadier recruit is made to die hard:

My mouth is dry, my shirt is wet,  
My blood runs all away.  
(*LP V*, 9 - 10)

When Housman was a professor at London University he accepted a lunch invitation from Frank Harris and some of his journalist friends. They tried to flatter the author by praising 'the bitter sarcasm' or 'unpatriotic attitude' of the first poem in *A Shropshire Lad*. This celebrates the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887. Harris thought that the sentences like –

'Because 'tis fifty years to night  
That God has saved the Queen.  
(ASL I, ll. 7-8)

Or The New Testament allusion:

The saviours come not home to –night  
Themselves they could not save.  
(ll. 15-16)

have a distinctly anti-war message behind them. From their own point of view they were right, but they did not recognize that what they thought of as sarcasm or irony here has an unexpected and different use.

"God save the Queen." we living sing,  
From height to height 'tis heard;  
And with the rest your voices ring,  
Lads of the Fifty –third.

Oh, God will save, her, fear you not:  
Be you the men you've been,  
Get you the sons your fathers got,  
And God will save the Queen.  
(ll. 25-32)

John Bayley writes, "Housman uses the voice of sarcasm to make his point with a very special and personal simplicity and fervour and also piety."<sup>16</sup>

As a matter of fact, Housman's own views on the ending of his poem are on record. Frank Harris, in his *"Latest Contemporary Portraits,"* tells of a talk with Housman about this poem. He writes:

I recited the last verse as if it had been bitter sarcasm which in all sincerity I had taken it for and I went on: "It stirs my blood to find an Englishman so free of the insensate snobbishness that corrupts all true values here. I remember telling Kipling once that when he mixed his patriotism with snobbery it became disgusting to me; and here you have poked fun at the whole thing and made splendid mockery of it.

To my astonishment, Housman replied sharply: "I never intended to poke fun, as you call it, at patriotism, and I can find nothing in the sentiment to make mockery of: I meant it sincerely; if Englishmen breed as good men as their fathers, then God will save their Queen." His own words seemed to have excited him for he added precisely

but with anger: "I can only reject and resent your – your truculent praise."<sup>17</sup>

Harris and his friends were no doubt amused at having angered the poet. Housman loved soldiers because he was naturally patriotic and more importantly because soldiers represented for him a whole world of romance and love. So the "Lads of the Fifty-third", are a sacred talisman, placed by the poet at the front of his book:

Now, when the flame they watch not towers  
About the soil they trod,  
Lads, we'll remember friends of ours  
Who shared the work with God.

To skies that knit their heartstrings right,  
To fields that bred them brave,  
The saviours come not home to-night:  
Themselves they could not save.

(11. 9-16),

In one sense they were right: the poem is irreverent - about Queen, soldiers, the Empire and life itself. None of its honours and glories can or will be saved. However, the poem contains its own irreverence inside the very deep reverence it has for the Queen and her army. This intermingling of both heartfelt and humorous can be found in Housman's own public and private personalities.

Professor B, J. Leggett writes:

The tone betrays no trace of sarcasm, and the function of Housman's redefinition of the phrase which expresses that patriotism is not mockery but the revelation of his persona's insight into the human condition in which patriotism finds its real meaning. The structure of the poem involves a process of revelation, and the repetition of the cant phrase in its different contexts carries the shifts in tone which reveal the growing insight of the persona. Shifting the burden of salvation from God to man does not lessen the speaker's admiration for the heroism involved in "Saving" the Queen, nor do I find the bitterness in his attitude which some commentators have noted.<sup>18</sup>

In an essay Cleanth Brooks adds:

"A pious sentiment, a patriotic cliché is suddenly taken seriously and is made to work in a normal English sentence. It is as shocking as if a bishop had suddenly used his crozier... to lay hold upon a live sheep."<sup>19</sup>

In his masterly essay on Housman, Christopher Ricks has suggested that the poet is positively, and deliberately, blasphemous here; and all the more so because the reference to the supreme sacrifice of Christ is so deadpan and unobtrusive. 'He saved others;

himself he cannot save'. And yet in terms of his own personality Housman is being not so much blasphemous, as quietly and even innocently sober. He is indeed dead serious, and yet a joke lurks in this very seriousness, for the idea of giving God a hand in this work of saving the Queen is something that would have given the troops a certain amount of amusement.

Cleanth Brooks sides with Housman against Harris and says that the use of the phrase 'God save the Queen' in the poem "does not necessarily involve mockery of the Queen or the young men who have helped her".<sup>20</sup> But he judges that Housman went too far to say there was no irony in the poem:

The speaker clearly admires the lads of the Fifty-third but his angle of vision is different from theirs. What they accept naively and uncritically, he sees in its full complexity and ambiguity. But his attitude is not cynical and it is consonant with genuine patriotism. The irony that it contains is a mature and responsible irony whose focus is never blurred. The closing stanza, with its quiet insistence that God will save the Queen but with the conjoined insistence on the all-important proviso that they get them the sons their fathers got dramatizes the speaker's attitude to a nicety.<sup>21</sup>



The discussion of the theme of soldiering evinces that Housman was greatly fascinated by soldiering and the accidents of military life. The most important source for Housman's compassion for the desperate young soldier was his youngest brother, Herbert. Herbert's battalion took part in the Boar War of 1901, and he was killed in action. The fact of his death inspired writing or re-writing of some of Alfred's greatest poetry. In a letter to his sister Kate, Housman wrote that the essential business of poetry was to harmonize the sadness of the universe. Yet publicly, Housman appeared wholly unmoved by the Great War and cynical about its motives.

Duty, friendship, and bravery are the three public or conventional values that Housman expects to find in a soldier. The sacrifices made by soldiers in defending their motherland always won his admiration. Military friendship and community is another important characteristic of Housman's poetry. Many of the lyrics lament friendship broken by death, which is the inevitable fate of Housman's soldier. Courage and stoic endurance are the two constant themes of Housman's poetry. In some of the poems, Housman shows the pain and sorrow certainly involved in the act of dying.

The first poem of *A Shropshire Lad*, “1887”, and “Epitaph for an Army of Mercenaries” has the same subject matter and caused some controversy in their attitude towards war, religion and patriotism.

### Notes and references:

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20. Cleanth Brooks, op. cit. p. 77.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 78.