

## To an Athlete Dying Young

BY: A. E. Housman

### Introduction:

Alfred Edward Housman (26 March 1859 – 30 April 1936) was an English classical scholar and poet. 'To an Athlete Dying Young' by A. E. Housman describes the death of a youthful man who is celebrated for his glorious passing and remembered for his loss, rather than his athletic achievements.

'To an Athlete Dying Young' was a lyric included in Housman's best-known collection, *Shropshire Lad*, published in 1896. This poem uses techniques such as apostrophe and imagery to create a three-part discussion of themes such as life, youth, death, and fame/glory.

**Summary:** In this poem, the speaker begins by recalling a young athlete who won a small-town race. He was celebrated by everyone around him. Now, in the present, the athlete is being celebrated in a very different way. He's died and is being carried back home. He died gloriously and the speaker seems to praise him for it. The speaker follows this up by providing the reader with a series of dark and thoughtful images that allude to the loss the town has suffered and the future the young man will never get to have. He also brings in images of the afterlife and the crown the young man will be wearing there.

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

The final stanza concludes the poem with thoughts about the future and what might be in store for the athlete in the afterlife.

In regards to the meter, Housman uses iambic tetrameter in many of the lines of this piece. But, there are moments in which the lines contain more or less than four metrical feet. There are a few examples of catalexis, such as in the first line of the second stanza.

## **Analysis:**

**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.**

In the first stanza of 'To an Athlete Dying Young,' the speaker begins by addressing a memory that he has of a young athlete. This person was a champion in his small town. When he was a runner he won a specific, important race and people carried him through the streets celebrating. "We brought you home shoulder-high," the speaker recalls. The "we" is the speaker and all the townspeople collectively, while "you" is the young man who the poem is addressed to.

This first stanza, as well as all those which follow, are examples of apostrophe. This is a technique where the speaker of the poem addresses someone or something that is incapable of hearing and understanding what is being said. In this case, the young man has died and will never read or hear these lines.

The poet describes how "Man and boy" were cheering in the streets. This is an allusion to the fact that all the townspeople, young and old, felt the same pride at the accomplishments of this young man. A reader should remember this celebratory atmosphere and take note of how it is mimicked in the following stanza.

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

In the second stanza of this poem the speaker takes the reader out of the past and to "today". There was another procession, but this time it was for a very different reason, the young man has passed away. While this is not revealed until the third stanza, it's very clear that something is changed through the use of the phrase a "stiller town". This alludes to the fact that the young man's presence has made the town less than what it was before. A reader should also take note of the use of

alliteration and the first line of the second stanza with the words “road“ and “runners“. There is another example in the final line of this stanza with “townsman“ and “town“.

**Smart lad, to slip betimes away**

**From fields where glory does not stay,**

**And early though the laurel grows**

**It withers quicker than the rose.**

It's in the third stanza of 'To an Athlete Dying Young' that the youth's death is revealed. The speaker refers to him as a “smart lad“. It is not entirely clear why this is the case, but the fact that the speaker immediately refers to the young man's ability to “slip betimes away” is

interesting. It could suggest that the speaker feels that this boy was smart to die. This also raises the possibility that the young man committed suicide or that it was in some way a conscious decision to die. The mortal world that the young man has left is a place that's quite different from the afterlife. In heaven, or wherever one ends up after death, glory is not fleeting as it is on earth. The athlete slipped away from “fields where glory does not stay .“

Now, he's in a world where things are quite different. Still referring to the mortal world, the speaker describes the “Laurel“ and the way that it “Withers“ even faster than the Rose does. The laurel wreath is a traditional symbol of accomplishment, dating back to Greek and Roman times. The Rose is often used as a symbol of love, passion, and in this case, fragility. Its beauty is almost the pinnacle of temporary pleasure. Then, when it is put up against the laurel, it becomes even more clear how temporary glory is.

**Eyes the shady night has shut**

**Cannot see the record cut,**

**And silence sounds no worse than cheers**

**After earth has stopped the ears.**

Still speaking about athlete's death, in the fourth stanza of 'To an Athlete Dying Young' the speaker says that since the athlete has died he's never going to have to be alive to “see the record cut“. This is in reference to the running record that the

young man set while he was still alive. Now, he'll never have to experience the sorrow over its demise. There is a good example of sibilance in these lines with the words "shady" and "shut" as well as "silence sounds" and "stopped".

In the second half of the stanza, the speaker refers to "silence". Now, it does not matter to the young man whether there is cheering for his accomplishments, crying for his death, or silence. It's all the same to him.

**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.**

Due to the fact that the young man died early, he's never going to have to worry about this feature of life that seems to bother the speaker. He won't have to live to see his glory fade. It is likely that this fact is what led the speaker to suggest that the young man was smart to die. He'll never know when his honors have been worn out. His young death has solidified him as glorious for the rest of the time. The next two lines of 'To an Athlete Dying Young' describe, using a metaphor of a runner and a race, how fame and glory usually outpace the men to whom they so briefly belong.

**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 sixth stanza of 'To an Athlete Dying Young,' is slightly more obscure. It is up to the reader to interpret whether these lines are addressed to the dead young man, as the rest of the poem has been, or if the poet is changing intended listeners and is instead talking to the townspeople of whom he considers himself one. If addressing the town, he tells them to set down the athlete's casket before silence takes over the scene and becomes louder than the cheers for the young man's accomplishments.

Alternatively, he's asking the young man who is in the afterlife, or on the way there, to step into the "sill of shade". This is the boundary between one world and

the next, the windowsill is between the inside and outside. In the last two lines, it is possible still that the speaker is addressing the townspeople or the athlete. Either way, he tells his intended listener to hold up the “challenge cup“. They should still celebrate this young man’s accomplishments.

**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 seventh and final line stanza of ‘To an Athlete Dying Young,’ the speaker moves away from the present and into a discussion of what kind of life the young man is now existing in. He imagines the afterlife, it kind of underworld, and which the young man is still wearing the laurel crown on his head. This fits well in with the speaker’s idea that the young man’s glory is now never going to fade.

Themes:

**Fleeting Nature of Fame:**

The athlete's achievements are celebrated, but the speaker acknowledges that fame is temporary. The young man’s death allows him to escape the inevitable obscurity that time brings.

**Mortality and Immortality:**

The poem juxtaposes the brevity of life with the permanence of death. In dying young, the athlete is immortalized in his prime, his legacy untarnished by age or failure.

**Irony of Death as a Triumph:**

While death is typically mourned, the speaker presents it as a victory for the athlete, sparing him the pain of watching his accomplishments fade.

**Transience of Life and Beauty:**

Housman frequently explores the fragility of youth and beauty. The athlete's death freezes him in a moment of triumph, symbolizing the ephemeral nature of human existence.

### **Analysis of Key Lines:**

"The time you won your town the race, / We chaired you through the market-place":

This opening celebrates the athlete's moment of glory, emphasizing his connection to his community and his role as a local hero.

"Smart lad, to slip betimes away / From fields where glory does not stay":

The speaker suggests that the athlete's early death is a wise choice, as it allows him to escape the inevitable loss of glory and youth.

"The name died before the man":

A poignant reminder that fame often fades before the individual dies, but in the athlete's case, death ensures his fame will live on.

"And round that early-laurelled head / Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead":

The use of "early-laurelled" emphasizes the athlete's youthful accomplishments, while "strengthless dead" highlights the physical fragility of death.

### **Interpretation:**

The poem can be read as both a celebration of the athlete's achievements and a meditation on the transience of life and fame. It presents a paradox: while death is tragic, it also provides a form of immortality by preserving the athlete's legacy. Housman's tone is elegiac yet contemplative, blending sorrow with admiration.

### **Relevance and Reception:**

"To an Athlete Dying Young" remains widely studied for its exploration of universal themes such as fame, mortality, and the human condition. Its timeless message resonates across generations, making it a powerful and thought-provoking piece of poetry.