

Free essay on literary devices in a e housemans to an athlete dying young

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Alfred Edward Houseman's elegy resembling poem "To An Athlete Dying Young" possesses an almost cynical perspective of disenchantment with life, where the only true way of capturing glory is to die immediately after one achieves his highest accomplishment and reaches greatness. This way, he will forever remain in the minds of those who will carry them to eternity "shoulder-high" (Houseman 278). This is a highly thought provoking poem, forcing its readers to rethink and reevaluate life and its true meaning, its inner essence. It is a view of death not as a melancholy and cumbersome occasion, but one of happiness and joy because the person, in this case the young athlete, died at the very peak of his glory and power, and he will remain like that forever in the minds of those who witnessed his greatness. Houseman utilizes numerous literary devices to convey this idea, such as alliteration, metaphor, personification, apostrophe, oxymoron and simile, and amalgamates them into a magnificent unity of significance.

The poem's form is equally relevant when it comes to comprehending its meaning to the full extent. It harmonizes its form with seven quatrains, which are four-line stanzas, with each stanza interlocking in two end-rhyming couplets. The poem is primarily an iambic tetrameter, with certain lines being trochaic tetrameters. Its nursery-rhyme, facile pace of simplistic, yet potent imagery paired with AA BB rhyme scheme format only emphasizes the poem's distinction. By delineating a theme so powerful as death and its (after)effects through simplistic artistry of words, Houseman manages to convey his ideas of an early death as glorious and to be strived for, while life in later years, once the glory days are over and no one remembers them anymore, is a mere obscurity marred by an enervating and plebeian

existence. He warns his readers that this is the worst thing that can happen to a once accomplished person, and that it is better to die young at the peak of one's glory, than to fade away into oblivion.

Apostrophe is evident from the very beginning of the poem: " 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"

(Houseman 278). Here, the speaker addresses the young, deceased athlete as if he were still among the living; as if he is attempting to relieve any doubt the deceased athlete has about his death being a good thing. He feels a close connection to the young man and is reminiscing about his glorious victory, during which everyone knew his name and praised him. The poem is homage to the deceased athlete and utter alignment with the way he has lived his life: not slowly burning out like a candle, but rather going out in flames. The speaker believes this is how everyone should live, not allow himself to reach ripe old age when no one remembers him, but to seize the moment and create his eternal mark on the world. By stating such permanence, the speaker is also drawing the reader inside the poem itself, because most readers can identify with the ubiquitous human urge to live on even after death, through one's accomplishments. It is said that a man lives only as long as he is remembered, and once he is forgotten by everyone, then he is truly dead. This is the speaker's most dreadful fear.

Personification, perhaps one of the easiest literary devices to be spotted in a poem, is also present in the lines: " Eyes the shady night has shut/ Cannot see the record cut" and " After earth has stopped the ears" (Houseman 278).

It has a relatively simple purpose of personifying non-human and inanimate

objects, allowing readers the process of easily relating to the objects described. Thus, Houseman personifies the night and earth to buttress his prevalent theme of an untimely death and to communicate the idea that these stanzas convey. Night is a notion closely connected to the unconscious, darkness, death. It is a time of preservation of energy, of sleep and (eternal) rest. During darkness, the world is asleep, vulnerable because its eyes are closed. Death, which is in most cases a solemn affair enveloped in the color of sorrow and mourning, is a release in Houseman's poem. The night has closed its eyes, it has gone to its everlasting sleep, and the most soothing fact is that the deceased athlete will never bear witness to his glory fading. In his youthful death, he has secured the perpetual remembrance of his name. Consequently, this is far from a solemn occasion. Death is peaceful bliss of eternal glory for the young athlete. Just like the night and the earth, his eyes and ears are ceaselessly closed to the earthly affairs and the cycle of life, in which his name and glory of his accomplishment will be eternal. The following literary device the poet puts to use is one that has been adorning nursery rhymes and Shakespearean sonnets for centuries, and is considered of high relevance when it comes to the poem's imagery as well as meaning. The consistent pattern of alliteration focuses the reader's mind and creates a more dominant engagement of the reader with the poem. It arises in the following lines: " The time you won your town the race," " road all runners," " Townsman of a stiller town," " fleet foot" (Houseman 278). These alliterative sounds adjoin an effortless and serene rhythm to the poem, only to emphasize the blissful nothingness the young athlete now belongs to. Just like the poem, his life has been one glorious cycle, which

reached its pinnacle of accomplishment, and then, like all cycles of nature, it was time for the eternal slumber. This notion creates a higher sense of tranquility in the poem, further strengthening the fact that the death of a young, accomplished man is an eternal reward.

In addition, all of the poem's metaphors allude to the prevailing theme of the poem, death: " Townsman of a stiller town," " fields where glory does not stay," " Eyes the shady night has shut," " Runners whom renown outran" (Houseman 278). His eyes are now forever shut and the speaker refers to the youthful athlete as a " smart lad" because he beat the passage of time by dying young, and he will never be lost in those fields where the glory does not stay, he will never be one of those runners whom renown outran and " the name died before the man" (Houseman 278). His fame will never fade away, despite and even because of, the fact that he is now a " townsman of a stiller town" (Houseman 278). He is now a resident of another world, of a still and peaceful world, being taken to his threshold, his final resting place, and he will have eternity to enjoy his undying glory. The speaker speaks in an envious manner of the athlete's accomplishment in life as well as in death and in a way, reflects on his own existence and desire to be remembered after he dies, instead of slowly burning out, like a withered candle, until not even a memory is left of him.

An oxymoron is also noticeable in the poem: " silence sounds," thus adding more depth and meaning to the issue of silence, that it " sounds no worse than cheers," referring to the deathly silence of the young athlete's afterlife, where he will not hear cheers praising his name, but only silence (Houseman 278). Still, this juxtaposition of ideas works perfectly, because the silence will

be equally gratifying as the cheers, since the athlete's name will be praised even without them, in blissful, everlasting silence. The fact that he is honored during his life will not cease to be true merely because the athlete's ear and eyes will be closed. On the contrary, his name will continue to exist for many years after his death.

Furthermore, Houseman employs similes to further envelop his poem in an effort to describe the sometimes indescribable: death. Every human being comprehends the concept of death to an extent that it understands what it means, but not so far as to be able to fully express it in words and portray the notion in all its might, darkness and infinitude. Thus, the poet utilizes similes such as: " And early though the laurel grows/ It withers quicker than the rose" (Houseman 278). It is relevant to note that, it was a tradition in ancient Greece for athletes, poets and other people of exceptional achievements to be crowned with a wreath made of laurel tree leaves. This tradition has been acknowledged even today, and still, the phrase to win one's laurels is a means that a person has achieved exemplary success in his field of expertise. In the same manner, Houseman has crowned his young athlete, but is not letting him forget the fact that this crown of laurel leaves is a fleeting one; one that is here today to be adored, and gone tomorrow never to return again. He is comparing the wreath to a rose, considered the most beautiful of flowers, yet still not exonerated from the evils of fading away, like any other common flower. That is exactly how the athlete will be treated: he may be the best now, but with the passage of time, he will be thrown into oblivion, like any other nameless face in the crowd. Thus, he is applauding the young athlete for keeping the laurel wreath for eternity, a

symbol of victory and glory, by dying at the peak of his accomplishments. The human capacity for remembering is fickle. Things get easily forgotten in the passage of time, faces dissolve in the mist of the forever spinning cycle of life. Houseman portrays a man who, in order to leave a mark in this world and to transform himself into a figure of remembrance for others, seized his ultimate victory and ended his physical existence, for the sake of his undying one, thus accomplishing what all human beings yearn for: immortality.

References:

Houseman, Alfred Edward. " To An Athlete Dying Young." Currents: Stories, Essays, Poems and Plays. Ed. Kevin McNeilly, et al. 2nd ed. New Jersey: Pearson Education, 1999. Print.