

To an athlete dying
young by a. e.
housman as an
everlasting classic



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One of the most impactful elegies written is, "To an Athlete Dying Young" by A. E. Housman. This poem forces the reader to think about their own life and if it were to slip away in an untimely manner. When reading this poem, it is hard to not have the fleeting thoughts about all the plans you have still and what you have not yet accomplished. There is nothing more tragic than the loss of a young life. Housman elegantly implements many literary elements into his poem to play on many people's biggest fear, death. The poem's versatility makes it a classic that can last throughout time. The author can have the setting at a young man's funeral, but the tone does not stay universally sad and lamenting during the whole poem.

The young man died at the height of his athletic career having won the town race and becoming a champion. For this he is looked at as a bit lucky, he did not live to see his name outran. He never had to see his record broken, because the boy died before the name had a chance. "Smart lad, to slip betimes away" the speaker says, even his friend knows that his glory cannot fade if he is not there to put out the light. People will always remember him as the champion he was, even if that's not what he was destined to be had he lived. It is similar to when an artist dies their artwork will sometimes be worth a lot more since they are not there to make anymore work and their work can never get worse. With death can come immortalization, you can do no wrong. With the Housman's adaptability is impeccable, he does not let the depressing nature of the poem keep it all down.

The poem is also a strong celebration of life and the feats the young man achieved as a runner in the few years he had. "And early through the laurel grows/ It withers quicker than the rose". The laurel wreath is what was given <https://assignbuster.com/to-an-athlete-dying-young-by-a-e-housman-as-an-everlasting-classic/>

to the Olympic champion athletes in Ancient Greece. The author is using this simile to compare the life of the laurel to the rose. If the lifespan of the laurel plant is short, it goes to show how short and not as important the feats of a champion are if they are the only one left to remember it. Luckily for the boy his laurel wreath might as well be cast in concrete above his headstone because it is not going anywhere anytime soon. The cheering of men and boy shall not fade for the runner as it will always be in the distance. This allows the young man to still have his innocence even in death. This elegy is brought to life by the use of bountiful figures of speech, I believe this is why this poem is truly so touching. The way the town and the townsman come alive when read aloud in a class setting is astounding. " Eyes the shady night has shut" and " After Earth has stopped the ears" are both cases in which Housman uses personification in the death and funeral of the young boy. The night is shutting his eyes like he is going to sleep for eternity. It almost makes it easier to blame it on the night and the Earth. Instead of outright stating the ugly facts there are many instances where the author opts to use a beautiful metaphor to get his point across. " Today, the road of all runners come". This is referring to the road that ultimately ends at the graveyard, not the finish line anyone was expecting for such a young man. " Townsman of a stiller town". The boy is no longer a member of his old community instead he is a part of the cemetery once they put him below his threshold.

My first experience with this poem was in American Literature my junior year of high school and my teacher explained that each line has eight syllables which when read aloud is like the pace of a runner. I have never been able to unhear the runner running when reading this poem. The pattern is AABB and

allows for countless alliteration which is extremely pleasing to the eyes and ears. It is interesting that Housman gave us such a solid form to work with, especially when the main theme is Death and all his uncertainties. I do feel like this was done on purpose and we are meant to pick up on it although it is very subtle.

“ To an Athlete Dying Young” is a classic that will last throughout more lifetimes, unlike its main character the young runner who died way before his time. This elegy taps into our fears of death and loss of accomplishment all while remaining positive about the feats of young life. After reading this poem it makes you want to live your life just a little bit better, a little more meaningful, even if only for a while. The relevancy will continue to flourish as we continue to lose young athletes and prominent stars, especially with the rising suicide rates. Just a few weeks ago Edwin Jackson from the Indianapolis Colts died after being struck by a car while parked on the side of the road, he was only twenty-six years old. He is the main reason I chose to write about this poem, as I had just witnessed another athlete dying young.