

# Stylistic devices in to an athlete dying young

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## **Analysis of “ To an Athlete Dying Young”**

A. E. Housman's poem “ To an Athlete Dying Young” is an elegy honoring a particularly gifted young athlete who passes away at the apex of his career. The author effectively communicates his viewpoint on fame and death through use of various literary devices, creating a laudatory tone that carries throughout. A. E. Housman utilizes numerous literary techniques such as metaphors, personification, and parallel structure, all of which serve to establish the narrator's approval of the timeliness of the athlete's death.

The first two stanzas of the poem directly parallel one another in terms of time frame, creating a severe contrasting effect. The first stanza is entirely in past tense, regarding a past victory of the intended athlete. The speaker reminisces how “ we [the people] chaired you [the athlete] through the market-place; / Man and boy stood cheering by, / And home we brought you shoulder-high,” creating a scene that allows the reader insight into past celebrations of the athlete's victories. The next stanza parallels the first, but it is written entirely in present tense. The speaker states “ To-day, the road all runners come, / Shoulder-high we bring you home, / And set you at your threshold down, / Townsman of a stiller town,” contrasting the two scenarios. The parallel situations develop a contrast between the life and death of the athlete. The contrasting scenarios serve to allow the reader insight into the death of the athlete, as well as the author's memories of this young man. The inclusion of “ man and boy... cheering boy” represents the overall attitude towards death of the athlete, which is one of optimism and positivity.

Housman utilizes metaphors as a method of revealing the hidden dangers that accompany the extended life of an athlete. Referencing “ the road all runners come,” Housman metaphorically refers to the final adventure: death. The inclusion of this final “ road” implies the setting, allowing the reader insight into this particular athlete’s outcome. Declaring the young athlete a “ smart lad,” Housman references the ephemerality of the “ laurel,” which is a metaphorical tribute to the laurel wreath bestowed upon the winner of ancient Greek competitions. The inclusion of “ smart lad” moments before revealing the death of the athlete serves to reinforce the concept that death at the opportune time is considered a blessing. The emphasis placed upon the temporary nature of fame and glory is reinforced through its comparison to the “ rose,” which symbolizes life. The distinct juxtaposition between the two metaphors reinforce the narrator’s intended message, which is that the young man’s early death is a blessing considering his stunning success as an athlete. Continuing with metaphorical death references, the author describes “ the fleet foot on the sill of shade,” metaphorically depicting the athlete as on death’s door, completing the transition between life and death.

Housman’s use of personification throughout the elegy serves to highlight certain aspects of life. Housman refers to “ eyes the shady night has shut, / cannot see the record cut,” personifying death as “ the shady night.”

Housman’s statement implies that this young man’s death is a thinly veiled blessing, for death has protected him from the inevitable future of futilely witnessing his glory fade away. Housman’s understanding is emphasized when he continues, “ And silence sounds no worse than cheers / After earth has shut the ears,” personifying earth as a force with the ability to shield the

athlete from listening to the cheers directed towards the athlete who bested him. Housman believes death is a preferable alternative to witnessing a record being broken, for death shields the athlete from being outshone. Continuing, the author references the “runners whom renown outran / And the name died before the man”, personifying the fame and glory that accompanies the successful athlete. Housman is depicting the common outcome of most athletes, whose records are slowly surpassed, forcing them into the background. Housman’s inclusion of this reinforces his positive opinion of the young athlete’s death, for it protects him from this eventuality.

A. E. Housman’s “To an Athlete Dying Young” is an elegy honoring the life of an extraordinarily gifted athlete. The speaker creates an uplifting tone rather than a morbid one, focusing on the positive aspects of the athlete’s death. Through use of the various literary devices, Housman is able to effectively communicate his positive viewpoint: death is the only means by which eternal glory and success can be secured.