

Theme in Housman's  
"to an athlete dying  
young"



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? Theme in Housman's " To an Athlete Dying Young" By Genea Cannon Dr. A. Kantor English 1302 6 March 2009 " To an Athlete Dying Young" by A. E. Houseman 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. Today, the road all runners come, Shoulder-high we bring you home, And set you at your threshold down, Townsman of a stiller 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. Eyes the shady night has shut Cannot see the record cut,

And silence sounds no worse than cheers After earth has stopped the ears: Now you will not swell the rout Of lads that wore their honors out, Runners whom renown outran And the name died before the man. 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. And round that early-laureled head Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead, And find unwithered on its curls The garland briefer than a girl's. Thesis and Outline Thesis: Housman uses visual imagery, double-meaning words, and life cycles to develop a theme of fading glory. I. Visual Imagery A. Presence

B. Effect II. Double-meaning Words A. Presence B. Effect III. Life Cycles A. Presence B. Effect Genea Cannon DC English 1302 Dr. A. Kantor 3/6/09 Theme in Housman's " To an Athlete Dying Young" In Alfred Edward Housman's " To an Athlete Dying Young", the theme of fading glory is evident throughout the piece. Knowing and comprehending the theme is important to understanding the poem. Housman uses visual imagery, double-meaning words, and life cycles to develop a theme of fading glory.

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Visual imagery is used in many ways to present the theme. In the first stanza, the narrator is remembering the day that the runner won a race for his town.

When Housman states that "Man and boy stood cheering by, And home we brought you shoulder-high" (Housman Lines 3-4), it is obvious that the athlete was praised because "he was placed on an emotional/psychological pedestal as well as a physical one" (Napierkowski 230). Next, Housman states that "Today, the road all runners come, Shoulder-high we bring you home, And set you at your threshold down, Townsman of a stiller town." (Lines 5-8) These lines vividly paint a picture of the athlete being carried high again, but this time the athlete in his own casket on the way to his grave.

The saying "The road all runners come" expresses the "speaker's awareness of the mortality of all people" (Napierkowski 230). The story is continued in line 7 by burying the body at his "threshold". "The 'threshold' may literally be the physical edges of a grave, but it could also refer to the boundary between earthly reality and the world of the dead" (231). This shows that all people will die and that this particular athlete was held high even though he was on the way to the grave, because he died young and was still remembered for what he had done in his life.

Another use of imagery is shown in lines 11 and 12, when Housman says "And early though the laurel grows It withers quicker than the rose." This is showing that the athlete gets his fame early in life, but just like the laurels, his glory fades quickly. "The idea of a laurel leaf representing the brevity of

physical beauty and strength is furthered by its comparison to the feminine and delicate rose, which grows early in the season and withers and dies quickly (but not as quickly as the laurel)" (231).

In the last stanza of "To an Athlete Dying Young", the image of the dead athlete having already passed through the threshold and existing in the world of the dead is presented. The athlete is wearing the victory wreath made of laurel. The only difference in the wreath of laurel in the world of the dead and the wreath of laurel on earth is that the laurel does not ever fade in the world of the dead. "The garland is expressed as 'unwithered,' reiterating Housman's theme of the permanent victory an early death might provide" (232).

These are a few of the ways that imagery shows up the theme of glory fading throughout the piece. Not only does visual imagery present the reader with the theme, words that have double-meaning also play an immense role in the poem by Housman. One instance of double-meaning words is in the fifth stanza when it is said: "Now you will not swell the rout Of lads that wore their honors out, Runners whom renown outran And the name died before the man." (Lines 17-20) These lines strengthen the observation made by the speaker that at some point all athletes will fade in their ability to make such a performance and win. Glory is fleeting. The only way a person can capture it and make it last is to die young after achieving greatness" (Cummings). "Their 'renown' eventually outruns them: because they can no longer uphold their athletic reputation by sustaining their peak performance, their reputation, or 'name,' dies before they do" (Napierkowski 231). And the name does not actually "die" it actually fades from people's memories,

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whereas the person dies. This is where the double-meaning comes into play. Since the hero-athlete of this poem has died while at his peak, he will not have to become part of this 'rout' (crowd) of has-been athletes" (231). Words that have double-meanings play a big role in the production of the theme in poem written by Housman. In addition to visual imagery and double meaning words, life cycles have an important effect on the theme of the poem. Lines 9 and 10 of Housman's poem say "Smart lad, to slip away From fields where glory does not stay," These lines are saying that glory does not remain upon the earth long; after a while the accomplishments you achieved will be forgotten. The speaker suggests that the athlete was "smart" to die and leave the natural world, where "glory does not stay" (Napierkowski 231). Had the athlete grown older, the townspeople would have forgotten his accomplishment when other runners replaced him, meaning other runners would steal the spotlight when the athlete was no longer the best. This shows that heroes cycle through our lives like people who cycle through our lives. Alfred Edward Housman's "To an Athlete Dying Young" has an interesting theme of fading glory.

This theme is presented through visual imagery, double-meaning words, and life cycles. These three things used in the poem vividly paint a picture for the reader's mind presenting the theme in a way that the reader can not miss.

Works Cited Cummings, Michael J. "To an Athlete Dying Young". Cummings Guides. 27 Jan 2009. 3 March 2009. . Housman, A. E. , "To an Athlete Dying Young. " The Collected Poems. London: Jonathan Cape, 1939. Napierkowski, Marie Rose, and Mary K. Ruby, eds. "To an Athlete Dying Young. " Poetryfor Students. Vol. 7. Detroit: Gale, 1998.