

The fame of death in  
a. e. housman's to an  
athlete dying young



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Fame is not a new concept. Due to the ever-present social media, reality TV shows, and the general public's ability to reach out and touch the 1% through Instagram and Twitter, the world now a day runs on fame. Sadly, fame has also seeped into politics. Often times, today's elections tend to be decided less on the issues and more on which candidate is more popular. Additionally, many seek fame and believe that it is only a good thing; however, fame is quickly fleeting. Critics come in and set up camp and wait until famous people slip, or they wait for the next One-Hit Wonder to hit the charts. Logan Paul and his video about Japan's suicide forest was a huge slip up. His fame was not only gone, but he then became infamous. A. E. Housman's poem, "To an Athlete Dying Young" addresses fame. The poem's speaker claims that possibly it is better to die young in order to be remembered forever at the height of fame. The speaker delivers a perhaps controversial stance in the form of metaphor, imagery, and symbolism.

The poem's speaker begins recounting a time when an athlete won a race and was brought back into town and chaired through the market-place shoulder high. This could represent a sort of crowd-surfing perhaps, with the athlete maybe perched on someone's shoulders and the town gathering to cheer him home. In the next stanza the speaker snaps back to the present and says that in the present, they carry the athlete shoulder high and "set him at his threshold down, townsman of a stiller town." This is indicative of death, with pallbearers holding the casket, carrying him through town shoulder high, and finally setting him down in at the threshold of his new home: a cemetery. The metaphorical victory that the speaker projects by juxtaposing two different events in the athlete's life shows that as he first

won a race, he also won his fame. As he is carried home a second time, he preserves his fame, sealing it forever in the ground. The speaker does not think that getting in the limelight is the lucky part. He thinks instead that staying in the limelight is where the luck is. By dying famous, one does not have time to lose his fame to age or to other people slandering his name. The speaker represents this through this metaphorical parade through the town on the athlete's way to his grave.

The image of fame is important as well, and the speaker does an excellent job of pointing out what fame looks like, and how to preserve it. The speaker gives an image of a winner in the third stanza: " And early though the laurel grows, it withers quicker than the rose". The laurel if donned early will not last long. The fame will be forgotten. Just as a rose ages and withers, so does the athlete, with his body and mind, and along with that, his accomplishments. However, another solution is provided in the final stanza: " 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". The image of an athlete with a laurel wreath as a crown that never will wither like a young girl's flower tiara shows readers the longevity of fame as preserved through death. Just like fame, death is revealed as well. In the fourth stanza the speaker uses alliteration to create a picture, " and silence sounds no worse than cheers after earth has stopped the ears". The image of dirt filling a grave is very present in this line and argues again that an early death is better than a prolonged life where one can get old and decrepit and lose his fame. The imagery, in tandem with both metaphor as well as symbolism, shows the keeping of fame due to death may not be particularly sad.

Symbols help tie everything together. A metaphor in the sixth stanza is used well, but the symbolism in the metaphor hits it home. “ The fleet foot on the sill of shade”, shows the athlete stepping foot through the metaphorical doorway or window sill of death. Imagery and metaphor are present in this line, but the symbols help drive the meaning home. A sill of shade is similar to the base of a doorframe or windowframe. The athlete, by putting his fleeting foot on the base of the threshold is deciding to move forward. To open, and go through a door or the window. This is very symbolic, as one must step over the threshold of a door in order to pass through to the other side. Often times, life and opportunities are represented as series of doors. It is heard all the time, “ Don’t close any doors just yet; just look at the options.” But by setting foot through the door and crossing the sill, the threshold, that is a decision that has been made to pass through and move forward.