

Chris Sandy

Kim Groninga

Critical Thinking Essay

EN 112

## **To An Athlete Dying Young**

Fame, fortune, money, women, and championships are on the minds of so many young athletes. The sense of invincibility and arrogance may sometimes take hold of them. What could ever deter this feeling of being on top of the world or the brash of personality of certain young athletes today? The answer is a cold and unforgiving death. Death does not care if you are the captain of the football team, a state champion, or a track star. Death waits for no one. When your time is up, how will you be remembered? The poem *To An Athlete Dying Young* by A. E. Housman brings up the ideas of invincibility, gloating, and death to young athletes.

Throughout the whole poem, Housman uses end rhymes to combine lines together. Housman ends every line with a rhyme. In this poem, there are four lines within seven stanzas. The first and second ending words of the line rhyme within each stanza. This is also true of the third and fourth lines of the stanzas. These ending rhymes tie the lines together. It seems there is almost a cause and effect relationship with the rhymes. The end rhymes also help the poem flow in a constant rhythm. I found myself waiting for the end rhyme of the line. The end rhymes not only tied lines together, but they also signaled the end of the phrase and eventually the poem.

In the first stanza of the poem, Housman portrays the glory that an athlete captures from accomplishing a feat. "The time you won your town the race/We chaired you through the market place" (1-2). These lines portray a picture of a young person winning a race and then receiving glory from the town by being carried through the town square. "Man and boy stood cheering by/And home we brought you shoulder-high." (3-4). This section of the stanza explains how society puts achieving athletes on a pedestal. The townspeople cheered the young athlete and brought him home shoulder-high. The author wants to explain that glory does not come from within an athlete, but it comes from society putting an athlete above other individuals.

The next stanza transitioned very well from the first stanza. "To-day, the road all runners come/Shoulder-high we bring you home/And set you at your threshold down/Townsmen of a stiller town" (5-8). There are a lot of things going on in this stanza. First of all, Housman references to the town putting the athlete on a pedestal. The words shoulder-high and threshold provide evidence that they are treating the athlete like royalty. At the end of the stanza though, there is a foreshadowing of death. The cause of the stiller town is the putting down of the athlete. This is the cause and effect relationship between these rhyming lines.

In the beginning of the poem, Housman brought up the glory that the athlete received by winning the race. The next stanza explains that glory fades, so do not bask in glory. "Smart lad, to slip betimes away/From fields where glory does not stay" (9-10). These lines refer to his stage of glory. The glory will not stay when the athlete dies. The death of the young athlete is represented by the fields because they are still and have a sense of silence to them. "And early though the laurel grows/It withers quicker than the

rose.” (11-12). Laurel means a athletic accomplishment. What it is basically saying is even though you win many awards, the accolades can be easily forgotten and taken away. These lines are saying do not bask in your own glory because it will fade quickly as the rose withered.

The next stanza affirms the foreshadowing of death. “Eyes the shady night has shut/ Cannot see the record cut” (13-14). These lines explain that death does not care who you are. Death will come to everyone, so death does not care if you are a star athlete. This is a use of personification; Housman uses death as a person who can see and do actions. “And silence sounds no worse than cheers/ After earth has stopped the ears” (15-16). The first part of the line refers to death as “silence”. These lines mean that death tends to eliminate recognition and glory. The people cannot hear the cheers because of the silence that swept the town. If the silence is death, then it would make sense. This is again a cause and effect relationship between the rhyming lines.

The fifth stanza criticizes gloaters and promotes the idea of modesty. The boastfulness of the athlete is apparent in the first two lines. “Now you will not swell the rout/ Of lads that wore their honours out” (17-18). These lines imply that the athlete is a gloater. He wore his accomplishments on his sleeve for everyone to see. He is not modest at all. “Runners whom renown outran/ And the name died before the man” (19-20). These two lines show a negative outcome to the gloating. People who are gloaters are only shunned and thought less of. You can see that through the athlete’s name dying before him; this refers to ruining one’s reputation. Altogether, this stanza promotes the idea of modesty.

Modesty is another subject in the next stanza. “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” (21-24). What this is saying is that before you die and your echoes fade put forth yourself as an honest man. The fleet foot refers to modesty and being honest. Since the glory will fade a person would want something more pure for others to remember them by. The last two lines imply if you lead your life modestly you will be a true champion. An athlete will have his true trophy if he does not brag about his accomplishments. This is evident when the last line brought up the still-defended challenge-cup.

The final stanza brings the poem to an abrupt stop. This stanza actually uses the word “dead” in the lines. “And round that early-laurelled head/Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead” (25-26). This part is saying that people will gather around the athlete, early-laurelled head, and be amazed at what they see. The people will not see a strong, young, and athletic individual that they put on a pedestal, but they will see a life-less body. The feeling of invincibility is broken in these two lines. “And find unwithered on its curls/The garland briefer than a girl’s” (27-28). The last two lines are affirmation that the athlete was so young. The author used the word withered previously to describe how a rose died. The unwithered in this line implies that something has not decayed, but the line after it says that the garland that is on curls is briefer than a girl’s. This means even though an athlete is having a lot of success, they still may die very young.

Death, invincibility, glory, and gloating were all themes of *To An Athlete Dying Young*. This poem made me step back and analyze my own life in these areas. Do I sometimes think that I will not die until I am an old man? Do I bask in glory that I receive

from my wrestling endeavors? To be honest, sometimes I do, but I do not want to be remembered that way. I am a student-athlete, and this poem really hit home. Death does not care that I won a state championship. Death does not find it important that I wrestle in college. This poem is about knowing a young athlete is not invincible, and an athlete being remembered for modesty when he or she dies. I will strive to do that.

## Works Cited

“A. E. Housman.” Poets.org. 1997-2007. Academy of American Poets. 26 March 2007

<<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/631>>.

Housman, A. E. “To An Athlete Dying Young.” 26 March 2007

<<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/19373>>.

## Appendix

### **To An Athlete Dying Young-A. E. Housman**

1. The time you won your town the race
2. We chaired you through the market-place;
3. Man and boy stood cheering by,
4. And home we brought you shoulder-high.
  
5. To-day, the road all runners come,
6. Shoulder-high we bring you home,
7. And set you at your threshold down,
8. Townsman of a stiller town.
  
9. Smart lad, to slip betimes away
10. From fields where glory does not stay,
11. And early though the laurel grows
12. It withers quicker than the rose.
  
13. Eyes the shady night has shut
14. Cannot see the record cut,
15. And silence sounds no worse than cheers
16. After earth has stopped the ears:
  
17. Now you will not swell the rout
18. Of lads that wore their honours out,
19. Runners whom renown outran
20. And the name died before the man.
  
21. So set, before its echoes fade,
22. The fleet foot on the sill of shade,
23. And hold to the low lintel up
24. The still-defended challenge-cup.
  
25. And round that early-laurelled head
26. Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,
27. And find unwithered on its curls

28. The garland briefer than a girl's.