ALFRED EDWARD HOUSMAN (1859-1936)

THE MAN AND HIS WORK

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ALFRED EDWARD HOUSMAN (1859-1936)

THE MAN AND HIS WORK

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By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Stars, I have seen them fall,
But when they drop and die
No star is lost at all
From all the star-sown sky.
The toil of all that be
Helps not the primal fault;
It rains into the sea.
And still the sea is salt.
—MP VII

Alfred Edward Housman (1859-1936) is one of England's best Victorian poets and scholars. His major contribution in the field of classical scholarship was the editing of the works of the Roman Manilius. He occupied the Kennedy Chair of Latin in Cambridge University for twenty-five years and made numerous contributions to classical and philological journals. Including the seventy-three poems published posthumously, he wrote one hundred seventy-four poems, besides a few juvenilia and humorous ones that do not appear in the Complete Poems.

As a result of a severe emotional crisis in his youth, Housman wrote chiefly about the futility of the search for happiness. He has been called a pessimist with good reason. A pessimist, however, would not have considered it worth the struggle to create and recreate the
things which A. E. Housman did during his seventy-seven years in this vale of darkness. For a pessimist who expects the unvarying worst, Housman spent many exacting hours on just the right word, phrase or thought. And he accepted nothing less from his fellow mortals.

No one knows exactly what went on behind the contrasting faces that Housman presented to the world. He wrote of the inconstancy of love; yet one of the most serious of his poems states,

But if you come to a road where danger
Or guilt or anguish or shame's to share,
Be good to the lad that loves you true
And the soul that was born to die for you
And whistle and I'll be there.

--MP XXX

This does not sound like a person who believes in the frailty of human affection.

He wrote of the utter darkness of life; yet one cannot help feeling a brilliant light in the passages:

Once in the wind of morning
I ranged the thorny wold;
The world-wide air was azure
And all the brooks ran gold.

There through the dews beside me
Behold a youth that trod,
With feathered cap on forehead,
And poised a golden rod.

--ASL XLII

But only a few of his lighter poems are free of a somber note. Housman, like all of his readers, had moods of depression and self-doubt, but his dark periods were
bleaker and longer than those which plague most people. He composed most of his poetry at times when he was extremely unhappy. His poetry, which served as an emotional safety valve, kept him sane. People similarly distressed find solace in identifying with the sorrows and disappointments of the Shropshire lad.

Despite the simplicity of his life and the great disappointment of his one love, Housman led a quiet and outwardly contented life. His unshakable love for his mother and his friend, and his insistence on action based on his own set of principles show that life was not as hopelessly desperate and meaningless as his poems would indicate.

The purpose of this paper has been to delve into the life and poetry of A. E. Housman to try to discover, not only what made Housman the man he was, but why his poetry has appeal.¹

¹The poems of Housman are designated throughout as follows: A Shropshire Lad, ASL; Last Poems, LP; More Poems, MP; and Additional Poems, AP.
CHAPTER II

AN INTERPRETIVE BIOGRAPHY

The facts of A. E. Housman's life are few. The oldest of the seven children of Edward and Sarah Jane Housman, he was born March 26, 1859. He received his education in the Bromsgrove School and St. John's College, Oxford University. After leaving Oxford without taking his degree because he failed to pass the examinations, he taught a year in Bromsgrove, returned to Oxford and took a "pass" degree, spent ten years in the Patent Office in London, filled the chair of Latin at University College in London from 1892 until 1911, and spent the remainder of his life as Kennedy Professor of Latin at Trinity College, Cambridge University. A silent scholarly man, he lived a life of seclusion surrounded by books and papers. After the death of his mother on his twelfth birthday, he was never devoted to any woman except Sophie Becker, who was some sixteen years older than Housman. She was the one woman he put among his three greatest friends. The surmise that Housman had her in mind when he wrote Poem XXXIII of A Shropshire Lad has been discounted by Laurence Housman, though both Percy Withers and Grant Richards felt
that Sophie Becker was the person for whom the poem was written. ¹ The full text of the poem follows:

If truth in hearts that perish
Could move the powers on high,
I think the love I bear you
Should make you not to die.

Sure, sure, if stedfast meaning,
If single thought could save,
The world might end to-morrow,
You should not see the grave.

This long and sure-set liking,
This boundless will to please,
—Oh, you should live for ever
If there were help in these.

But now, since all is idle,
To this lost heart be kind,
Ere to a town you journey
Where friends are ill to find.

—ASL XXXIII

Before his death, in 1936, he published two volumes of poetry consisting of one hundred four highly polished poems. His work in Latin textual emendation is looked upon as the most outstanding of his era, and scholars of his time learned to fear the stinging venom of his pen when he looked at shoddy or careless work which they had done.

Housman presented to the world a curious mixture: a cold impersonal disinterest and a warm friendliness; a generous support of his stepmother and almost passionate

hatred for ingratiating persons who sought his company for personal gain; a cold frown for the world and a happy musical laughter for his friends; a stern dislike for women and a helpful friendliness for his young men students. His love of beauty in nature and his knowledge of and liking for good food and wine contrasted sharply with the ascetic surroundings of his lodgings at Cambridge. His passionate, stirring verse could hardly appear to have been penned by the same man who wrote "When _____ has acquired a scrap of misinformation he cannot rest until he has imparted it," or "I do not know upon what subject ____ will next employ his versatile incapacity. He is well--dangerously well," or "Nature, not content with denying to Mr. _____ the faculty of thought, has endowed him with the faculty of writing."^2

Perhaps the greatest single influence upon Housman's childhood was the early death of his mother whom he loved very dearly. As her oldest and probably brightest child, he spent many hours in his young life talking to her as one adult to another. She recognized in him a good mind and a sensitive nature capable of a strong and enduring love, and felt as she saw her own death approaching that she could fill the empty years ahead by devoting much to

---

him alone. Her death left an emptiness in Housman's life that was never to be filled and a pessimistic attitude concerning God that was never to change. As Sarah Housman had feared, her son became an atheist not long after her death, a position from which he never retreated. Her death also resulted in Housman's strong resentment of his father and of nature's method of perpetuating the race.

No doubt, A. E. felt that his father's irresponsible attitudes toward his family, and his mother's seven children in rapid succession were the indirect causes of her death. This feeling played a large part in his attitude later toward the institution of marriage. His deviant sex orientation, according to Hawkins, was responsible for his refusal to marry. 3

Alfred's ancestry was of the British upper middle class. He was born into a family where financial problems were to become important later, but were not a part of his father's background. Education and a leisurely atmosphere were his heritage. An intellectual backdrop of reading aloud in the family led to the early practice of skits and poetic composition as the children played during their leisure time. That the children would all need scholarships in order to go to school seemed unimportant, since they were certainly capable of winning them.

3Hawkins, op. cit., p. 88.
Alfred was an outstanding student at Bromsgrove School. In 1877, as a result of his performance, he won a scholarship at St. John's College, Oxford. His years at Oxford appear to have been successful and happy until the shadow of his attachment to Moses Jackson fell over him. "During those first years at Oxford, his correspondence with members of the family had been lively and amusing; so also during vacation there was no diminution of his social affability." 4 Soon after his arrival there, he formed two lasting friendships, one with A. W. Pollard and the other with M. J. Jackson.

According to Maude Hawkins, it was the friendship with Jackson which was responsible for the pattern his life was to follow thereafter. Housman was extremely conscious of the kind of life and ways that were expected of him. Understanding the extreme penalty of homosexuality in Victorian society, he realized with horror that his attraction to Jackson was more than spiritual. From the first, Housman had shown reticence, if not shame, about his friend, Jackson. Pollard was invited to Housman's family home in Worcestershire; Jackson was not. Housman did not often mention Jackson even in his letters. The last years at Oxford, however, he spent in a private home with Jackson and Pollard. As Pollard drew away from

4 Laurence Housman, op. cit., p. 57.
the other two, Housman continued to neglect some of his studies and to be more and more withdrawn from his family. Although the following lines were written much later, they clearly describe the turmoil within him during the last years at Oxford.\textsuperscript{5}

And how am I to face the odds
Of man's bedevilment and God's?
I, a stranger and afraid
In a world I never made,
They will be master, right or wrong.
Though both are foolish, both are strong.
And since, my soul, we cannot fly
To Saturn nor to Mercury,
Keep we must, if keep we can
These foreign laws of God and man.

---LP XII

This friendship, with the consequent neglect of his studies and the upheaval within himself, was responsible for Housman's failure in the Greats. There were problems at home, too, both in the rapidly failing health of his father and the lack of money to meet bills; but there is no real indication that he could not have passed except for his miserable state of mind. He "packed his bags in proud misery, and returned in silence to Perry Hall."\textsuperscript{6}

The man who returned home a failure was, as Hawkins says,

\ldots a strange mixture of the old and the new. \ldots
His later symbolism in poetry was to emphasize the

\textsuperscript{5}Hawkins, op. cit., p. 95.

\textsuperscript{6}Ibid.
latter struggles; gales against Nature as symbols of the storm and stress of life; stinging nettles as the symbol of temptation, and the pain of preserving decency; hangings and suicides as the symbol of man's injustice to man. . . . Alfred was changing rapidly into a withdrawn and melancholy man consciously beginning to enact a tragic role.  

He spent the following year teaching Greek and Latin in Bromsgrove School. Although the pay was little and the assignment beneath his abilities, this experience would serve as a reference when he later went to University College in London to teach. After returning to Oxford where he took a "pass" degree, he spent the year studying for the tests to enter the Patent Office in London. He continued his long solitary walks absorbing the beauty of the countryside that was to figure in his poetry later.

His year in Bromsgrove was not a happy one. He must have had many regrets for his Oxford failure and for his attraction to Jackson. During his long walks, some of his most anguished later poems might have had their beginnings. These lines from A Shropshire Lad could have been then in his thoughts:

Others, I am not the first,  
Have willed more mischief than they durst;  
If in the breathless night I too  
Shiver now, 'tis nothing new.  

More than I, if truth were told  
Have stood and sweated hot and cold,  
And through their veins in ice and fire  
Fear contended with desire.

---

Ibid., p. 86.
But from my grave across my brow
Plays no wind of healing now;
And fire and ice within me fight
Beneath the suffocating night.

--ASL XXX

In 1882, Housman returned to London as a Civil Service clerk at the Patent Office. He again took rooms with Moses Jackson and his brother, Adelbert. Laurence felt that his brother was still suffering from his failure at Oxford and says that during this period he kept himself most apart from his family. Even though he visited his brother and sister in London, he never invited them to his rooms. His notebooks show that this poem, published posthumously, could have been grounded in experiences of this time.

Today I shall be strong.
No more shall yield to wrong.
Shall squander life no more;

Days lost, I know not how,
I shall retrieve them now;
Now I shall keep the vow
I never kept before.

How hopeless underground
Falls the remorseful day.

--MP XVI

The rough draft discloses the following phrases in the margin but unused: "aims missed"; "sinks like a stone"; ... "to pave the very floor of hell." Such poems, published posthumously, were among the ones that aroused the storm of curiosity about the secrets in Housman's life, and often resulted in shocked conjectures, for even in this period,
restraint, if not always successful, was certainly attempted.\(^8\)

During the years in Bayswater, when he shared rooms with Jackson, he undoubtedly, according to Hawkins, carried on a homosexual affair, with Jackson as the passive partner. Though Jackson had selected his wife the relationship with Housman did not seem to trouble him at all. Housman, on the other hand, was the most imaginative and sensitive of men. "Heredity as well as training had made him what he was; a man capable of love of an exclusive and subjective nature which fed itself by being unshared, and nourished its roots on the obstacles that lay in the path of its fulfillment."\(^9\)

Maude Hawkins has stated what others had suspected. Housman's affair with Moses Jackson was so very distressing to him that he turned to poetic composition as an emotional outlet. As a result, much of his poetry can be directly traced to the affair.\(^10\) His lonely suffering and the depths of his despair are clearly seen in these lines, some of which were published posthumously:

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 109. \(^9\)Ibid., p. 95.

\(^10\)Fifty of Housman's poems appear to have grown out of his experience with Jackson. In addition to the ones noted above, these include the following: A Shropshire Lad--XIV, XV, XXI, XXIV, XXXVIII, XL; Last Poems--I, X, XVII, XXVI, XXX, XXXI, XXXII, XXXIV, XXXVIII, XXX, XXXIX, XL; More Poems--X, XI, XIII, XIV, XX, XV, XXXIII, XXXIV; Additional Poems--II, IV, XVII, XX.
And so, no doubt, in time gone by,
Some have suffered more than I,
Who only spend the night alone
And strike my fist upon the stone.

--MP XIX

The world goes none the lamer,
For aught that I can see,
Because this cursed trouble
Has struck my days and me.

.................
Oh worse remains for others
And worse to fear had I
Than here at four-and-twenty
To lay me down and die.

--MP XXI

The battle raging within Housman as he fought his attachment and as he rebelled against the "laws of man," is seen in these lines:

The laws of God, the laws of man,
He may keep that will and can;
Not I: let God and man decree
Laws for themselves and not for me;
And if my ways are not as theirs
Let them mind their own affairs.

.................
But no, they will not; they must still
Wrest their neighbour to their will,
And make me dance as they desire
With jail and gallows and hell-fire.
And how am I to face the odds
Of man's bedevilment and God's?

--LP XII

These lines published after Housman's death were written at the time Oscar Wilde was imprisoned for his homosexuality.

Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists?
And what has he been after that they groan and shake their fists?
And wherefore is he wearing such a conscience-stricken air?
Oh they're taking him to prison for the colour of his hair.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Oh a deal of pains he's taken and a pretty price he's paid
To hide his poll or dye it of a mentionable shade;
But they've pulled the baggar's hat off for the world
to see and stare,
And they're haling him to justice for the colour of his hair.

--AD XVIII

His final break with Jackson and capitulation to the demands of society is seen in

Here dead lie we because we did not choose
To live and shame the land from which we sprung.
Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose,
But young men think it is, and we were young.

--MP XXXVI

His anguish at parting from Jackson and at Jackson's marriage--an anguish which continued through the years--is seen in the following selections:

Because I liked you better
Than suits a man to say,
It irked you and I promised
To throw the thought away.

To put the world between us
We parted, stiff and dry:
"Good-bye," said you, "forget me";
"I will, no fear," said I.

If e'er, where clover whitens
The dead man's knoll, you pass,
And no tall flower to meet you
Starts in the trefoiled grass,

Halt by the headstone naming
The heart you have not stirred,
And say the lad that loved you
Was one that kept his word.

--MP XXXI
He would not stay for me; and who can wonder?
He would not stay for me to stand and gaze.
I shook his hand and tore my heart in sunder
And went with half my life about my ways.
---AP VII

Shake hands, we shall never be friends, all's over;
I only vex you the more I try.
All's wrong that ever I've done or said,
And nought to help it in this dull head:
Shake hands, here's luck, good-bye.
---MP XXX

So the groomsmen quits your side
And the bridegroom seeks the bride;
Friend and comrade yield you o'er
To her that hardly loves you more.
---LP XXIV

During his years in the Patent Office in London, Alfred spent many hours in the British museum working on problems of Latin scholarship. Probably these labors were efforts to compensate for his failure at Oxford. They also served as a distraction from his inner turmoil. The publication of some of his articles containing textual emendations of Juvenal and Propertius made his name acceptable when an opening came in University College, London, in 1892.

Following his appointment at the university, he began the serious work on his first book of poems, *A Shropshire Lad*, published in 1896. In 1886, he had moved from Bayswater to Highgate, where he lived alone. Hawkins believes that the separation of Housman and Jackson followed Jackson's realization that Housman was ashamed and
afraid of their relationship. Jackson met Clemence and Laurence at a party, which Alfred did not attend. When he learned that they lived in London and had never been invited to the Bayswater house, he must have quarreled with Alfred when he returned home, with the result that Housman moved out. Not long afterwards, Jackson went to India to teach. He returned to England a year later for his bride. Correspondence between the two men continued after Jackson took his family to Canada to live; and Housman was the godfather of the Jacksons' first-born. Alfred kept Moses' picture over the fireplace in his rooms. "One day, looking at the picture," Laurence has reported, "I asked Alfred who he was. In a strangely moved voice he answered, 'That was my friend Jackson, the man who had more influence on my life than anybody else.'"¹¹

Housman impressed the people he met in many different ways. When George Calderon, the painter, met him he remarked to a friend, "Well, so far from believing that man wrote such a poem, *A Shropshire Lad*, I shouldn't even have thought him capable of reading it."¹²


He acquired a reputation for sarcastic repartee which was respected by his colleagues who prided themselves on their ability in this form of wit. He was affable with his students and could be prevailed upon to serve as after-dinner speaker, where he gained a worthy reputation both as an intellectual and as a wit. He considered the exposure of false pretensions to be his first duty, but he allowed the unpracticed and innocent to pass unscathed. He enjoyed telling the truth in an interesting way. Many of his letters show a lively wit and an unerring ability to sharpen a fine point of sarcasm.

He wrote often to his stepmother, little observations on his job and life around him.

The juvenile son of a friend of mine at the Office has the loftiest ambition I ever heard tell of. When he goes to heaven, which he regards as a dead certainty, he wants to be God, and is keenly mortified to learn that it is not probable that he will. However, his aspirations are now turning into another channel: it has come to his knowledge, through the housemaid, that the devil has horns and a tail; and in comparison with these decorations the glories of heaven have lost their attractiveness.\(^{13}\)

His letters to his stepmother carried descriptions of sights in his travels about Europe covering architecture, the landscape, paintings and casual observations on the way of life in the countries he visited. Even the dogs of Constantinople received his attention. "The dogs and

\(^{13}\text{Hawksins, op. cit., p. 111.}\)
women are kept in their proper place, and consequently are quite unlike the pampered and obstreperous animals we know under those names in England."^14

Alfred's interests in literature, as revealed from his bookshelves, were not highbrow. He liked detective novels and ghost stories—even poor ones apparently. These latter he did not apologize for, only saying that their writers had done better things earlier. He liked American writers much better than he liked America. He claimed to have introduced Gentlemen Prefer Blondes to the English public by first popularizing it among the dons of Cambridge. He read aloud to his family Little Women and Max Adler's Out of the Hurly Burly. Mark Twain, Artemus Ward, Edith Wharton, Sinclair Lewis, and Theodore Dreiser were other American authors whom he admired. Edna St. Vincent Millay appears to have been his favorite American poet. Laurence says that Thomas Hardy was "his one outstanding admiration among contemporary English novelists."^15

A man of Alfred's nature would read widely and with many purposes behind his reading. His selection of the formidable author, Manilius, for his major effort in classical editing suggests a desperate need of an escape

^14 Ibid., p. 143.

^15 Laurence Housman, op. cit., p. 85.
from the battles raging within him. With the wide range of literary interests, Housman exposes "a mind of remarkable penetration and vigor, of uncommon sensibility and intensity, condemning itself to duties which prevent it from rising to its full height." 16

In Alfred's own words:

Good literature continually read for pleasure must, let us hope, do some good to the reader; must quicken his perception though dull, and sharpen his discrimination though blunt, and mellow the rawness of his personal opinions. 17

If Housman was harsh and uncompromising in his criticism of others, he was also cruel in his self-judgment. T. E. Lawrence had given the following introspective account of himself:

"There was my craving to be liked—so strong and nervou that never could I open myself friendly to another. The terror of failure in an effort so important made me shrink from trying; besides, there was the standard; for intimacy seemed shameful unless the other could make the perfect reply, in the same language, after the same method, for the same reasons.

"There was a craving to be famous: and a horror of being known to like being known. Contempt for my passion for distinction made me refuse every offered honour."

Alfred had written in the margin by this passage, "This is me." 18


18 Laurence Housman, op. cit., p. 99.
In his last years, he was indeed offered many honors from various universities; and he declined them all. Glasgow offered him the Degree of Doctor of Laws as early as 1905. St. Andrews did the same in 1922. He even refused the Order of Merit from the British King.

He was able to poke fun at himself, too, as he shows in the following letter to his brother:

I am extremely anxious that you should spend a happy Christmas; and as I have it in my power,—here goes. Last night at dinner I was sitting next to Randall, Principal of University College, Liverpool, and Professor of Greek there, a very nice fellow and a great student of Marcus Aurelius and modern poetry. He was interested to hear that you were my brother; he said that he had got _Green Arras_, and then he proceeded, "Think it is the best volume by him that I have seen; the _Shropshire Lad_ had a pretty cover."

I remain
Your affectionate brother (what a thing is fraternal affection that it will stand these tests!)

A. E. Housman

P. S. After all, it was I who designed that pretty cover, and he did not say that the cover of _Green Arras_ was pretty. Nor is it.

P. P. S. I was just licking the envelope, when I thought of the following venomed dart: I had far, far rather that people should attribute my verse to you than yours to me.19

Not much has been said about the personal appearance of Housman. He made no attempts to dress in the latest fashion; his clothes were common tweeds and dark suits. Reginald Gleadowe, the artist, remarked on the interesting

19 _Ibid._, pp. 76-77.
shape of Housman's ear. "Ordinary criminal type, surely," said Housman. 20

George L. Watson has made a perceptive comment:

In a harsh light, he could sometimes look "elderly and insignificant." His features might also reflect, with the mercurial transitions of middle age, a distinguished meditative gravity. Averse to sittings and plainly one of those refractory subjects unable to strike a natural pose before the easel or the camera, Housman could not yet altogether conceal, from the quick insights of photography, that weary sadness which accompanied, in the early months of 1911, the proud flush of success. It was an elusive glance that, in spite of the down-curled moustache and clamped jaw, betrayed something more akin to the regretful poet than to the choleric pedant; a face of which the set mouth and inflexible chin were defiantly at odds with the sombre introspective eyes. 21

The most striking feature of Housman's appearance was his eyes. At eighteen the dark eyes had a touch of the haughtiness which was later to prevail, but then he showed a faith and friendliness toward the world that are not so noticeable in later photographs. The picture of the seventy-year-old man has still a friendly aspect and natural good looks. At all ages he must have inspired the wish to know him better.

Housman remained aloof from politics. He doubted the benefits of democratic government. He even believed that slavery was essential to a well-governed state. However,

20Clemens, op. cit., p. 109.

Laurence believed that he was so English in his preferences that he probably considered England better governed under democratic mismanagement than any country favored with a despotism which he theoretically approved. ²² He said that he generally preferred a Conservative victory because, "it will vex the kind of people I don't like." Later he summed up the advantages of a democratic government by saying that it was difficult to betray a government you had yourself chosen. ²³

Housman had a great respect for all learning. Having chosen classical languages for his life's work, he defended his choice and stated his philosophy of education in his introductory lecture at University College, London. "The popular view, I say, is that the aim of acquiring knowledge is to equip one's self for the business of life; that accordingly the knowledge most to be sought after is the knowledge which equips one best; and that this knowledge is Science." He quoted Herbert Spencer's theory that most men are employed in the production, preparation and distribution of commodities and, further quoting Spencer, added the ways in which the several sciences served to render one efficient in producing, preparing or distributing

²² Laurence Housman, op. cit., p. 110.

commodities. Spencer's viewpoint looks a little shallow after Housman's lecture.

The following, for instance, is the method by which he [Spencer] endeavours to terrify us into studying geology. We may, any of us, some day, take shares in a joint-stock company; and that company may engage in mining operations; and those operations may be directed to discovering of coal; and for want of geological information the joint-stock company may go mining for coal under the old red sandstone, where there is no coal; and then the mining operations will be fruitless, and the joint-stock company will come to grief, and where shall we be then? This is, indeed, to eat the bread of carefulness. After all, men have been known to complete their pilgrimage through this vale of tears without taking shares in a joint-stock company. But the true reply to Mr. Spencer's intimidations I imagine to be this: that the attempt to fortify man's estate against all contingencies by such precautions as these is in the first place interminable and in the second place hopeless. . . . One lifetime, nine lifetimes are not long enough for the task of blocking every cranny through which calamity may enter. And say that we could thus triumphantly succeed in the attempt at self-preservation; say that we could thus impregnably secure the necessaries of existence; even then the true business of life is not so much as begun. Existence is not itself a good thing, that we should spend a lifetime securing the necessaries: a life spent, however victoriously, in securing the necessaries of life is no more than an elaborate furnishing and decoration of apartments for the reception of a guest who is never to come. Our business here is not to live, but to live happily. We may seem to be occupied, as Mr. Spencer says, in the production, preparation and distribution of commodities; but our true occupation is to manufacture from the raw material of life the fabric of happiness; and if we are ever to set about our work we must make up our minds to risk something.24

Housman did not doubt the inevitable benefit to be gained by all through the study of classical literature. He admitted that "even the wildest enthusiast for the classics" may not have a high "standard of morality or even of amiability." The end of education, then, for the partisans of science, is the useful—for the partisans of the humanities is the good and the beautiful.

Therefore the true and the really valuable knowledge is properly and distinctively human; the knowledge, as Matthew Arnold used to call it, of the best which has been said and thought in the world,—the literature which contains the history of the spirit of man.

Here indeed is an aim which no one will pretend to despise. The names of the good and the beautiful are treated with respect even by those who give themselves little trouble about the things; and if the study of the Humanities will really transform and beautify our inner nature, it will be acknowledged that so soon as we have acquired, with all possible despatch, that minimum of scientific knowledge which is necessary to put our material welfare in a state of reasonable security, we ought to apply ourselves earnestly and long to the study of the Humanities.25

Housman's philosophy, like that of his contemporary, Thomas Hardy, reflected the mood of the nineteenth century with its conflicts between the discoveries of science showing man's position in the universe, and the falling away from the Christian doctrines. He had lost his own Christian faith as a boy. This philosophy led him to describe himself as a pejorist, not a pessimist—owing,

25Ibid., pp. 8-9.
he said, "to my observations of the world, not to personal circumstances." He believed that romantic love was a temporary illness and war a futile waste of human life.

John Squire, in a review of More Poems in the Daily Telegraph, described Alfred's philosophy as being radically unlike everyman's. "He was utterly honest, anguished because 'men loved unkindness,' and unable, though a naturally Christian soul, to find consolation." 26

Throughout his life, A. E. Housman maintained a carefully masked façade. Few knew him well. His phenomenal perception of man's struggles, weaknesses, and strengths is clearly seen in the few volumes that he published. Chief among the characteristics which placed him among the great in English literature and scholarship is his own unyielding battle against the odds of "man's bedevilment and God's." Though convinced that death marked the end of the individual, he faced life with stoical courage and produced in his poetry and prose undying proof that man does have a heart and that he can leave its mark upon the world.

26 Oliver Robinson, Angry Dust (Boston, 1950), pp. 42-43.
CHAPTER III

THE SPIRIT OF HOUSMAN'S POETRY

The poetry of A. E. Housman is among the best in the English language. The beautiful lyrical quality, the crystal clarity and the depth of it make it set up that vibration within the reader that Housman spoke of in his definition of poetry. The timelessness and universality of his subject matter lead the sensitive reader to find some identification with Housman's spirit.

He has been called a romantic, a puritan, a realist, a pessimist and a mystic. He called himself a pejorist and a Cyrenaic hedonist. Of this attitude, Stuart Gerry Brown says:

Housman has none of these faiths and nowhere save in death does he find unity and permanence. He wrote to his French translator that he preferred the Epicureans to the Stoics but that he himself was a Cyrenaic. The Cyrenaics were the followers of the Aristippus and forerunners of Epicurus who held, among other things, that the virtues were not excellent; that is to say, the life of virtue was no guarantee either of happiness or salvation. They found no meaning in life and no hope in faith or in action. Unlike the Atomists they thought the attempt to put a meaning into the cosmic machine was futile. One may, I think, take Housman's declaration that he belongs to these ranks with a grain of the proverbial salt; yet it is certainly true that many of his poems express the same feeling that virtue is futile; and though as his Introductory Lecture shows, his pursuit
of classical scholarship gave meaning to his own life, he could not find it in general life nor did he think the powder worth the candle.

Much of this argues that Housman was a pessimist, that he held a view of defeat so thorough as to be foreign to poetry. He called himself not a pessimist but a "pejorist"; and he composed poems informed with these feelings and ideas of which some, at least, are excellent by any standards.¹

A main point of the Cyrenaic philosophy which Brown does not mention, however, is that pleasure is the chief end of life and that intense and immediate pleasures are to be preferred to milder ones.²

Whatever his philosophy or the quality of his verse, there is no doubt that so long as Man speaks out against the tragic destiny of Man or wonders about the world he never made, Housman will be read.

The themes of his poetry are not new; nor are they numerous. These themes are: 1) death, 2) disbelief in a hereafter, 3) the rejection of a belief in the goodness of the universe, 4) courage in meeting troubles of life, 5) the loveliness of youth, 6) the instability of love, 7) friendship, 8) glory and hardships of the soldier, and 9) fond remembrance of the rural life and the beauty of


²Webster's New International Dictionary, 2nd ed., unabridged (Springfield, Massachusetts, 1960). Unless one includes eating and drinking among the intense pleasures, Housman was a Cyrenaic hedonist only in theory. For his life was one of almost monastic asceticism.
Nature. These themes are treated pessimistically, sometimes with rebellion, and with a certain detachment akin to stoicism.

Poetry [said Housman] is made out of the most ordinary words, yet it is pure from the least alloy of prose. . . . And I think that to transfuse emotion—not to transmit thought but to set up in the reader's sense a vibration corresponding to what was felt by the writer—is the peculiar function of poetry.3

Since Housman wrote lyric poetry almost entirely, his discussions and thoughts of poetry were exclusively in terms of this genre.

This vibration, or identification with the emotions expressed in Housman's poetry, has made it more than mere literature. The poetry expressing the realities of life has been sought by young and old, soldier and scholar.

But I know that when I was on a visit to the front in France and Belgium, during the war, the three volumes of verse that were greatly in demand among the soldiers of the new army, down at the rest camps, were Browning's "Men and Women," Omar Khayyam, and that excellent pocket edition of The Shropshire Lad.

It is not so curious as it may seem at first blush that The Shropshire Lad, with its philosophically pessimistic outlook, should appeal to those men who had been in the firing line and were shortly going up again. For what is loosely called its pessimism is not so much that as a courageously stoical acceptance of the stern facts of human experience. The soldier who could find any pleasure at all in verse was in no mood, just then, for gracious sentiment or optimistic fancies; he was up against stark

realities; accustomed to the sight of death and the thought of its immanence, had shed nearly all his illusions, found a fearful and perhaps morbid joy in treating such things as a grim jest, and the honest facing of the truth in The Shropshire Lad, its wry, whimsical, indomitable realism, must have chimed with his own thoughts and strengthened him to endure the fate that is, in the long run, common to all men.4

John Erskine wrote that he had read Housman while still a student. Erskine knew nothing about Housman, but his reaction to Housman's verses is common to many readers.

It had all happened to him obviously. This haunting and essentially cheerful music was wrung from a tortured soul. I could see why, in the concluding poem, he offered the opinion that life is trying and only a strong man can stand it. The odd thing was that though the flow of my own life had hitherto been smooth, I felt as if every one of these sorrows had happened to me.5

Neilson Abeel, while a student at Princeton, wrote the following:

Instinctively we felt he knew all about us; that some would die young, some fail in love, some end in jail. His wisdom was a bitter brew, but it did not inspire bitterness or despair, and his poems with a marvelous economy told us the strengthening truth that we were very ordinary fellows whose only portion was the estate of man. Those of us who learned this young owe him much.6

The death of Housman's mother completed his loss of Christian faith. His poems treating Christianity state an


6 Robinson, op. cit., p. 45.
if; his then shows his rejection of Jesus and of the contention that Christianity has done good in the world:

Easter Hymn

If in that Syrian garden, ages slay,
You sleep, and know not you are dead in vain,
Nor even in dreams behold how dark and bright
Ascends in smoke and fire by day and night
The hate you died to quench and could but fan,
Sleep well and see no morning, son of man.

But if, the grave rent and the stone rolled by,
At the right hand of majesty on high
You sit, and sitting so remember yet
Your tears, your agony and bloody sweat,
Your cross and passion and the life you gave,
Bow hither out of heaven and see and save.

--EP I

"The Carpenter's Son" also shows the belief in the waste of Christ's martyrdom:

"Comrades all, that stand and gaze,
Walk henceforth in other ways;
See my neck and save your own:
Comrades all, leave ill alone.

"Make some day a decent end,
Shrewder fellows than your friend.
Fare you well, for ill fare I:
Live, lads, and I will die."

--ASL XLVII

Housman's own fierce set of principles demanded that he keep "these foreign laws of God and man--" and yet:

To stand up straight and tread the turning mill
To lie flat and know nothing and be still
Are the two trades of man; and which is worse
I know not, but I know that both are ill.

--MP XXVII
This, as man's destiny, does not leave much room for keeping anybody's laws nor much reason for doing so. Nevertheless, Housman did keep them, under protest.

In better than a hundred of his poems, Housman deals with the subject of death either directly or indirectly. He constantly reminds his reader that death is inevitable, that in most cases it is desirable, and that in others the cause for which people die is lost or unjust. In his reminders of the rapid approach of man to the grave, he shows regret for the shortness of life:

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

---ASL II

Think no more, lad; laugh, be jolly:
Why should men make haste to die?
Empty heads and tongues a-talking
Make the rough road easy walking,
And the feather pate of folly
Bears the falling sky.

---ASL XLI

In writing of death, Housman looked at it from many angles. His own death-wish, in part, accounts for his commendation of the suicide, his satisfaction with the athlete's death while still at his best, and his acceptance of the death of a sweetheart while love still bloomed.

Perhaps the bitterest comment the reader of the poetry finds is the reiteration of the fact that the dead
are soon forgotten. The Roman soldier lived and loved where now the Shropshire lad stands. This is acceptable; it happened two thousand years ago. But "Is my team plowing? ... Is my girl happy? ... Is my friend hearty? ... I cheer a dead man's sweetheart, / Never ask me whose." This is too much.

Not all of Housman's death poetry is gallant or stoic. Often he is rebellious. Passages like

When shall I be dead and rid
Of the wrong my father did?
How long, how long, till spade and hearse
Put to sleep my mother's curse?

--ASL XXVIII

jar the reader and leave him doubting Housman's courage.

The dramatic impact of Housman's poetry is never stronger than in the poems about the execution of criminals:

He stood and heard the steeple
Sprinkle the quarters on the morning town.
One, two, three, four, to market-place and people
It tossed them down.

Strapped, noosed, nighing his hour,
He stood and counted them and cursed his luck;
and then the clock collected in the tower
Its strength, and struck.

--LP XV

So much of A Shropshire Lad speaks of death that John Bishop has referred to Shropshire as the land of the dead. In this death setting, John Priestley has said,

7John Peal Bishop, "The Poetry of A. E. Housman," Poetry, LVI (June, 1940), 141.
"We see death as the great dark curtain against which the lovely things of life stand out pathetically bright. All the lovers in A Shropshire Lad cry out against the piteous brevity of life."\(^8\)

In twenty-five of Housman's poems, he reveals his belief that there is no after life. The hedonistic philosophy is expounded or implied in most of these:

'Tis late to harken, late to smile,  
But better late than never:  
I shall have lived a little while  
Before I die forever.  

--ASL LVII

His satisfaction in the conviction that death brings annihilation is best stated in "Parta Quies":

Good-night; ensured release  
Imperishable peace,  
Have these for yours,  
While sea abides, and land  
And earth's foundations stand,  
And heaven endures.

When earth's foundations flee,  
Nor sky nor land nor sea  
At all is found,  
Content you, let them burn:  
It is not your concern;  
Sleep on, sleep sound.  

--MP XLVIII

The poem he wrote for his funeral notes the creation of man by a god, whose existence Housman denied. This nonexistent god calls man back to earth and to himself:

\(^8\)John Boynton Priestley, "The Poetry of Mr. A. E. Housman," London Mercury, VII (December, 1922), 175.
We now to peace and darkness
And earth and thee restore
Thy creature that thou madest
And wilt cast forth no more.
—MP XLVII

Housman dwelt for most of his life with the conviction that life was a punishment and the world a blasted planet. The individual had committed no sin that justified his punishment, but suffer he would:

Who made the world I cannot tell;
'Tis made and here am I in hell.
My hand, though now my knuckles bleed,
I never soiled with such a deed.
—MP XIX

The chestnut casts his flambeaux, and the flowers
Stream from the hawthorn on the wind away,
The doors clap to, the pane is blind with showers.
Pass me the can, lad; there's an end of May.

There's one spoilt spring to scant our mortal lot,
One season ruined of our little store.
May will be fine next year as like as not:
Oh ay, but then we shall be twenty-four.

We for a certainty are not the first
Have sat in taverns while the tempest hurled
Their hopeful plans to emptiness, and cursed
Whatever brute and blackguard made the world.

It is in truth iniquity on high
To cheat our sentenced souls of aught they crave,
And mar the merriment as you and I
Fare on our long fool's-errand to the grave.

Iniquity it is; but pass the can.
My lad, no pair of kings our mothers bore;
Our only portion is the estate of man:
We want the moon, but we shall get no more.

If here today the cloud of thunder lours
To-morrow it will hie on far behests;
The flesh will grieve on other bones than ours
Soon, and the souls will mourn in other breasts.
The troubles of our proud and angry dust
Are from eternity, and shall not fail.
Bear them we can, and if we can we must.
Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale.
--LP IX

To bear the suffering while awaiting the release of death
was the thing to do. About half of Housman's poems state,
accept, or rebel against this injustice:

Now, and I muse for why and never find the reason,
I pace the earth, and drink the air, and feel the
sun.
Be still, be still, my soul; it is but for a season:
Let us endure an hour and see injustice done.

Ay, look: high heaven and earth all from the prime
foundation;
All thoughts to rive the heart are here, and all
are vain:
Horror and scorn and hate and fear and indignation--
Oh why did I awake? When shall I sleep again?
--ASL XLVIII

Again and again he wonders why the world was ever
made. The soldier gives his life for what? Man has too
much trouble of his own to share another's:

They have enough as 'tis: I see
In many an eye that measures me
The mortal sickness of a mind
Too unhappy to be kind.
Undone with misery, all they can
Is to hate their fellow man;
And till they drop they needs must still
Look at you and wish you ill.
--ASL XLI

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;
What God abandoned, these defended,
And saved the sum of things for pay.
--LP XXXVII
Little is the luck I've had
And oh, 'tis comfort small
To think that many another lad
Has had no luck at all.
--LP XXVIII

With the overwhelming belief that life was indeed ill, Housman softened his pessimistic views with the conviction that the evils and troubles could be met with courage and fortitude--even preparation:

The thoughts of others
Were light and fleeting,
Of lovers' meeting
Or luck or fame.
Mine were of trouble
And mine were steady,
So I was ready
When trouble came.
--MP VI

Although he saw the beauty of Nature, his poems rarely offer hope of any release other than death. The following is an exception:

The world is round, so travellers tell,
And straight though reach the track,
Trudge on, trudge on, 'twill all be well,
The way will guide one back.
--ASL XXXVI

In the next poem the lad gets his encouragement and strength from a stone statue. Since it will not have the hope of death, it is in worse shape than he is:

"Courage, lad, 'tis not for long:
Stand, quit you like stone, be strong."
So I thought his look would say.
And light on me my trouble lay,
And I stept out in flesh and bone
Manful like the man of stone.
--ASL LI
Embracing the conviction that things can only get worse, the man can grow strong. He will not then face new disappointments:

Oh never fear, man, nought's to dread,
    Look not left nor right:
In all the endless road you tread
    There's nothing but the night.
    --ASL LX

One of the best-known poems is the last but one in A Shropshire Lad, the one beginning, "Terence, this is stupid stuff," and ending with the little parable about Mithridates.

The Terence of this poem is Housman, who originally intended to entitle his book The Poems of Terence Hearsay.

In response to a friend's objection that his poems are too gloomy, Housman declares that the true function of poetry is to reflect the world as it is, mainly a vale of woe. Though he admits that it contains some good, he declares that evil predominates. Therefore, one should train for ill and not for good.

If you wish to see the world as it is not, he says, drink ale. For malt does more than Milton can, to justify God's ways to man. The drawback to this remedy, however, is that it will not last.

The little parable about Mithridates which Housman tacks onto the end of the poem is a prescription: if one reads Housman in gradually increasing doses, he will
immunize himself against the destructive effects of this wretched world, which ails from its prime foundations. He will achieve the strength that will enable him to bear evil stoically so that finally he can endure any calamity that life may bring—possibly even the reading of Housman:

"Terence, this is stupid stuff:
You eat your victuals fast enough;
There can't be much amiss, 'tis clear,
To see the rate you drink your beer.
But oh, good Lord, the verse you make,
It gives a chap the belly-ache.
The cow, the old cow, she is dead;
It sleeps well, the horned head:
We poor lads, 'tis our turn now
To hear such tunes as killed the cow.
Pretty friendship 'tis to rhyme
Your friends to death before their time
Moping melancholy mad:
Come, pipe a tune to dance to, lad."

Why, if 'tis dancing you would be,
There's brisker pipes than poetry.
Say, for what were hop-yards meant,
Or why was Burton built on Trent?
Oh many a peer of England brews
Livelier liquor than the Muse,
And malt does more than Milton can
To justify God's ways to man.
Ale, man, ale's the stuff to drink
For fellows whom it hurts to think:
Look into the pewter pot
To see the world as the world's not.
And faith, 'tis pleasant till 'tis past:
The mischief is that 'twill not last.
Oh, I have been to Ludlow fair
And left my necktie God knows where,
And carried half-way home, or near,
Pints and quarts of Ludlow beer:
Then the world seemed none so bad,
And I myself a sterling lad;
And down in lovely muck I've lain,
Happy till I woke again.
Then I saw the morning sky:
Heigho, the tale was all a lie;
The world, it was the old world yet,  
I was I, my things were wet,  
And nothing now remained to do  
But begin the game anew.

Therefore, since the world has still  
Much good, but much less good than ill,  
And while the sun and moon endure  
Luck's a chance, but trouble's sure,  
I'd face it as a wise man would,  
And train for ill and not for good.  
'Tis true, the stuff I bring for sale  
Is not so brisk a brew as ale:  
Out of a stem that scored the hand  
I wrung it in a weary land.  
But take it: if the smack is sour,  
The better for the embittered hour;  
It should do good to heart and head  
When your soul is in my soul's stead;  
And I will friend you, if I may,  
In the dark and cloudy day.

There was a king reigned in the East:  
There, when kings will sit to feast,  
They get their fill before they think  
With poisoned meat and poisoned drink.  
He gathered all that springs to birth  
From the many-venomed earth;  
First a little, thence to more,  
He sampled all her killing store;  
And easy, smiling, seasoned sound,  
Sate the king when healths went round.  
They put arsenic in his meat  
And stared aghast to watch him eat;  
They poured strychnine in his cup  
And shock to see him drink it up:  
They shook, they stared as white's their shirt:  
Them it was their poison hurt.  
--I tell the tale that I heard told.  
Mithridates, he died old.  
--LXII

Youth, like life itself, is fleeting. Housman remembers it as a time when cherries bloomed, lads and maidens danced to the flute, taverns were open and men were merry. But best of all were the dreams of the young man and his
faith in love and life. The youth, in a wryly humorous poem, does not need any advice; for, "I was one-and-twenty, no need to talk to me." In only one year, however, he has grown old and wise under a man's full share of disillusionment. The youth who dies in his prime is the lucky one.

They carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man
The lads that will die in their glory and never be old.

---ASL XXIII

When I would muse in boyhood
The wild green woods among,
And nurse resolves and fancies
Because the world was young,
It was not foes to conquer,
Nor sweethearts to be kind,
But it was friends to die for
That I would seek and find.

---LF XXXII

Nesca Robb feels that there is a unity in A Shropshire Lad and its sequels. She has said that the books are a history of a mind's disillusionment. Also they are a history of the heart's progress in love.9 When the lad is young he falls wholly in love until he's twenty-two. After this age, his romantic interest declines: "The young man feels his pockets and wonders what's to pay"; "Oh follow me where she is flown into the leafy woods alone, and I will work you ill"; and they "Looked at one

---

another and they looked away."¹⁰ These are some of the statements that show how Housman felt when he wrote of romantic love.

His folly has not fellow
Beneath the blue of day
That gives to man or woman
His heart and soul away.
--ASL XIV

The poet had given his heart away, but the shattering sorrow which followed his giving it had only proved his point.

All knots that lovers tie
Are tied to sever.
Here shall your sweetheart lie,
Untrue for ever.
--MP XXIV

About forty of Housman's poems are about love or affection, and according to T. B. Haber, these are among his best. Haber has written that love is connected closely with the death theme. Consummation of love leads to death for one or the other.

"Oh lad, what is it, lad, that drips wet from your neck on mine?
What is it falling on my lips,
My lad, that tastes of brine?"

"Oh like enough 'tis blood, my dear,
For when the knife has slit
The throat across from ear to ear
'Twill bleed because of it."

Under the stars the air was light
But dark below the boughs,

¹⁰LP XXI, LP XXIII, MP XVIII.
The still air of the speechless night,
When lovers crown their vows.
—ASL LIII

The lover may kill himself or be killed by his rival.
"The penalty for love's consummation, if it is a lighter
one than suicide or murder, is still paid with sighs
aplenty, with shame, remorse, and mutual accusation.
Whether one pays or both, the heavy toll is exacted in
the end."11

Friendship, to A. E. Housman, was so closely inter-
woven with love that often it is hard to distinguish
between them. When the friend is not one to die for he
is one who has usurped the lover's place in the heart of
his love. Frequently, Housman speaks with longing of
friends he has had or of the difficulty in finding
friends. Often, lost friends have died or gone to prison.

Housman had a brother, Herbert, who died in Africa
while a soldier. Biographers have attributed the soldier
poems to the heartbreak Housman felt at Herbert's death.
Some of these poems did follow his brother's death.
Watson has said that Housman identified with the soldier
because of his own sex deviation. He does not insinuate
that the poems were an aftermath of affairs with

11Tom Burns Haber, "A. E. Housman's Downward Eye,"
Journal of English and Germanic Philology, LII (July,
1954), 311.
soldiers. The best soldier poems were written before Herbert Housman was killed. Regardless of the reason for the poems, the poet wrote about twenty-five, many of which are his most poignant. Was there ever a more appealing portrayal of the gallantry of the human spirit than:

I lost it to a soldier and a foeman,
   A chap that did not kill me, but he tried;
That took the sabre straight and took it striking
   And laughed and kissed his hand to me and died.
--MP XXXVII

He mourns the futility of the soldiers' deaths. He writes that the soldier could run but he runs to die again. And then he says:

Oh stay with company and mirth
   and daylight and the air;
Too full already is the grave
   Of fellows that were good and brave
   And died because they were.
--LP XXVIII

Housman's intent in the first poem of A Shropshire Lad was to commemorate the golden jubilee of Victoria's reign. It may also be a statement that a part of human destiny is to breed the soldier for compounding the error of war.

"God save the Queen" we living sing,
   From height to height 'tis heard;
   And with the rest your voices ring,
   Lads of the Fifty-third.

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12 Watson, op. cit., p. 144.
Oh, God will save her, fear you not:
    Be you the men you've been,
Get you the sons your fathers got,
    And God will save the Queen.
—ASL I

Housman uses many of his descriptions of nature as striking contrasts. In most of his nature poems, he begins with a description of the beauty of Shropshire only to finish with the loneliness of it or the announcement that he has described a cemetery. Or he begins a day with a renewal of his faith in life to finish with his thoughts of wasted dreams.

How clear, how lovely bright,
How beautiful to sight
    Those beams of morning play;
How heaven laughs out with glee
Where, like a bird set free,
Up from the eastern sea
    Soars the delightful day

... ... ... ... ... ...
—Ensanguining the skies
How heavily it dies
Into the west away;
Past touch and sight and sound,
Not further to be found,
How hopeless under ground
    Falls the remorseful day.
—MP XVI

Housman recognized the breathtaking beauty of nature. He was well acquainted with the feeling it inspired. Even so, he smothered his love by his lines:

Tell me not here, it needs not saying,
    What tune the enchantress plays
In aftermaths of soft September
Or under blanching mays,
For she and I were long acquainted
    And I knew all her ways.
On russet floors, by waters idle,
The pine lets fall its cone;
The cuckoo shouts all day at nothing
In leafy dells alone;
The traveller's joy beguiles in autumn
Hearts that have lost their own.

For nature, heartless, witless nature,
Will neither care nor know
What stranger's feet may find the meadow
And trespass there and go,
Nor ask amid the dews of morning
If they are mine or no.

--LP XL

Alfred E. Housman presented in his poetry an almost hopeless outlook on beauty, love, friendship or a happy life here or hereafter. He offered a choice of rebellion, with no hope of gain; acceptance, with hopeless courage; or negation of the will to live, with release in the finality of death. He counsels his readers simply to make the best of a bad situation.

Despite the conflicts within himself, he exposed an unruffled surface. For this reason his biographers and critics searched long for the origin of his pessimism. His secret has finally been discovered. He has expressed some important truths concerning the destiny of man. His readers identify with the pessimism in his poetry, not as the end of existence, but as the fatalism all people feel at times in their lives. This defeatism is not a burden to be lifted with every living breath. The load of hopelessness and defeat carried continuously as evidenced in
Housman's poetry would weigh a person down and carry him
to the grave in a much shorter time than the seventy-seven
years it took to carry off Housman.

But men at whiles are sober
   And think by fits and starts
   And when they think they fasten
   Their hands upon their hearts.
--LP X
CHAPTER IV

THE FORM AND DICTIO OF HOUSMAN'S POETRY

A. E. Housman said that poetry was either easy or impossible. The easy singing rhythm of his poems and the consistent rightness one feels in his choice of words make them appear, as he said, "easy." He said that the important thing about poetry was not what was said, but the music one heard in reading it. He also said that there were many poetic ways of saying anything. His poetry proves each of his theories.

Housman's critics, even when they speak severely of his work, usually note admiringly the singing quality of Housman's lyrics.

Louis Untermeyer wrote:

His writing has been found to be over fastidious, and repetitive, his style inflexible, his range narrow, and his subject matter immature. There are poems, like "I 'listed at home for a lancer," "The Queen she sent to look for me," and "Oh, sick am I to see you, will you never let me be," which sound like echoes of Kipling's Barrack Room Ballads, while others seem to be translations of poems that Heine never wrote. Yet the terse little quatrains survive; a score of Housman's lyrics continue to tease the mind with their taut and epigrammatic lines. The nimble touch is part of their charm; the intimacy, the trite reminiscences, the troubled youthfulness, appeal to the adolescent in everyone.1

Babette Deutsch has written:

One returns to Housman partly because of a technique which if it does not surprise with its novelty, charms with its skill; like Heine, he has written scarcely a lyric that fails to sing; he is extremely felicitous of his management of tone color: the nice balancing of light and heavy consonants, of closed and open vowels; and he has a way of alliteration which forbids monotony.²

W. R. Benet has said that Housman was "the most faultless writer in the English language of a type of stoical lyric that he made all his own."³

The Housman lyric, by his own description, was something to be heard and felt rather than seen and read. He did not relish the idea of tearing his verse apart to see how it was made nor of analyzing it for extra hidden meanings.

When I examine my mind and try to discern clearly in the matter, I cannot satisfy myself that there are any such things as poetical ideas. No truth, it seems to me, is too precious, no observation too profound, and no sentiment too exalted to be expressed in prose. The utmost that I could admit is that some ideas do, while others do not, lend themselves kindly to poetical expression; and that these receive from poetry an enhancement which gloriifies and almost transfigures them, and which is not perceived to be a separate thing except by analysis.⁴

⁴ A. E. Housman, The Name and Nature of Poetry, p. 34.
Both Henry Johnson and Stuart Brown have divided Housman and his work into the two categories of creative and intellectual founts. Brown says that the two can hardly appear to be the same man and that the fusion of the two creates a music and meaning which "refuses to be broken down like the atom by bombardment."\(^5\)

Of Housman, Johnson writes:

Nijinsky, according to his Diary, strove to eliminate the intellect, so far as he could, both from his art and his creative life—and went mad. Housman, so far as he could, kept his art and intellectual life in separate compartments, and remained sane. It is strange, however, that though he was willing at times to allow the subconscious depths of poetic passion within him to obtain the mastery over him, he never permitted the faintest hint of mysticism to slip from him.\(^6\)

Housman, like any writer of poetry or prose, was influenced in his poetry by more than one poet. Chief among those mentioned as Housman's mentors are Shakespeare, Heine, Johnson, Hardy, and, of course, the Latin and Greek poets.\(^7\) Heine's influence is seen in the use of the anticlimactic ending or the ironic surprise ending.

The king with half the East at heel is marched from lands of morning;
Their fighters drink the rivers up, their shafts benight the air.

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\(^5\)Brown, op. cit., p. 405.


\(^7\)Richards, op. cit., Appendix III, pp. 399-343, traces similarities and sources of many of Housman's poems.
And he that stands will die for nought, and home
there's no returning.
The Spartans on the sea-wet rock sat down and
combed their hair.

--LP XXV

Stuart Brown has listed the old Scotch ballads as
important to Housman, noting that the commonest form of
the Scotch ballad is the quatrains of alternating four and
three stress lines—also characteristic of Housman.

Laurence Housman felt, as most others did, that the
Latin and Greek poets were the greatest influence on
Housman's poetic technique.

The directness of expression, the felicity of
diction, the economy in the use of imagery, the
sparing employment of the adjective—all unite to
justify the application of the epithet "classical"
to the form of his verse. And though no poet is
less a "literary" poet than he, it is clear that
his verse owes in every line a debt to his famili-
arity with the Authorised Version, with English
ballad literature, and with the classics of Greek
and Latin poetry. It is, in truth, as "classical"
in form as it is "romantic" in feeling; and a
strange union of deep passion with severe restraint
characterizes his poetry as it seems to have char-
acterized his life itself.8

Four divisions have been made in discussing the form
and diction of Housman's poetry. They are: 1) organiza-
tion of the poems, 2) diction, 3) rhyme, and 4) meter.

Housman's love of contrast and his anticlimactic end-
ings have already been mentioned. Tom Burns Haber has
analyzed a "typical" Housman poem.

8 Laurence Housman, op. cit., p. 79.
Theme I  spirit of the  Theme II
affirmation ——  perverse —— negation
This is to say, a "typical" Housman poem first
sets up an affirmative theme—an idea of joy, cour-
age, probity, etc.—which his perverse spirit attacks
and overthrows, to leave dominant in the poem the
negative theme of sorrow or defeat. The first theme
is not always fully developed in the poem, as it is
not in "The Carpenter's Son," where tradition sup-
plies the affirmative idea.  

Haber points out that more often than not, the prevailing
theme is the negative theme. "This principle of con-
trast," Haber says, "must have been a fixed habit of
Housman's mind, at least when the muse of poetry dominated
it."  

Housman's choice of words was a carefully planned and
thought out craft. His notebooks show as many as eight
words tried in special places. He told Laurence that he
had dreamed of words that would fit in a troublesome
place. The word that he dreamed about did not always fit,
but often did direct him to the proper one.

Nearly all of the analysts of Housman's poetry have
noted the sparing use of adjectives, the simplicity of the
language, the alliterative effect of his word choices, and
the hyphenated words for graphic descriptions. Signifi-
cant is the discovery that in his Complete Poems the

9 Tom Burns Haber, "The Spirit of the Perverse in
A. E. Housman," The South Atlantic Quarterly, XL (1941),
376-376.
10 Ibid., p. 376.
editors found it necessary to footnote only once to clarify a word used in a Housman poem.\footnote{11}

Housman made extensive use of compound, hyphenated words such as sky-pavilioned, sea-deep, star-defeated, golden-sanded, and death-struck. Grant Richards has counted thirty such epithets in \textit{A Shropshire Lad}, three from \textit{Last Poems}, and sixteen from \textit{More Poems}.\footnote{12} From \textit{Additional Poems} can be added three more, world-seen, far-felled, and far-borne. This list does not include such common words as moonlit, short-lived, stock-still, starlit, single-hearted, short-handed, and night-long.

When a poet uses \textit{lad}, \textit{maiden}, \textit{chap}, and \textit{'tis} as often as Housman did he can expect to be severely criticized. Housman planned to have his poems appear as the musings of a country lad, and even though such words are all too frequently found in the poems, Housman had his purpose in choosing them. In reality, these simple words are about the only ones which identify the poetry as that of a Shropshire boy with limited rural education and interests.

\footnote{11\textit{A Shropshire Lad}--IX:
A careless shepherd once would keep
The flocks by moonlight there.
("Hanging in chains was called keeping sheep by moonlight.")}

\footnote{12\textit{Richards, op. cit.}, Appendix III, pp. 432-433.}
Although Housman did not imitate Wordsworth and did not come up with the same evaluation of Nature, a reader of his poems could not help being reminded of Wordsworth's "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," nor help knowing that Housman was also familiar with it.

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are under less restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated.

Accordingly, such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is more permanent and a far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets, who think that they are conferring honor upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes and fickle appetites of their own creation.\textsuperscript{13}

J. B. Priestley has said:

\begin{quote}
He has indeed made war on the ubiquitous adjective, and concentrated upon the bare noun and verb until they have done most of the work. He has replaced the usual wearisome host of similes by a few apparently simple but astonishingly apt metaphors, and in this way, he has given his style directness, force and a certain "tang."\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14}Priestley, op. cit., p. 181.
The quatrain is the most frequent stanza form of Housman's poetry, although he made striking use of the five-line stanza.

Then my soul within me
Took up the blackbird's strain,
And still beside the horses
Along the dewy lane
It sang the song again:

"Lie down, lie down, young yeoman;
The sun moves always west;
The road one treads to labour
Will lead one home to rest,
And that will be the best."
--ASL VII

They came and were and are not
And come no more anew;
And all the years and seasons
That ever can ensue
Must now be worse and few.

So here's an end of roaming
On eves when autumn sighs:
The ear too fondly listens
For summer's parting sighs,
And then the heart replies.
--LP XXXIX

He used a ballad measure, but wrote few ballads. The rhyme scheme for his quatrain is most often abab, although aabb and abca are frequently found. In this connection Oliver Robinson's comment is relevant:

At all times Housman has kept the form of his poetry simple, using quatrains more often than any other stanza form. In A Shropshire Lad, 48 of the 63 poems are in quatrains; in Last Poems, 29 of the 41; and in More Poems, 34 of the 48. The first stanza from No. XXXIII, A Shropshire Lad, is typical--

If truth in hearts that perish
Could move the powers on high,
I think the love I bear you
Should make you not to die.\textsuperscript{15}

Much has been said of the short words Housman used in his lyrics. This partly accounts for the easy singing rhythms. A. C. Ward has analyzed "Bredon Hill," noting Housman's use of the explosive consonants \( b, t, d, p, k \), and \( m \), especially in the final position. Of the one hundred ninety-one words, only two have three syllables; twenty-seven are two-syllable words and one hundred sixty-two are of one syllable.\textsuperscript{16}

Poetry, to A. E. Housman, was a physical thing. He felt and heard it rather than saw it. He said that real poetry did not depend on good rhyming or strong meaning but on what it made the reader feel.

Poetry indeed seems to me more physical than intellectual. A year or two ago, in common with others, I received from America a request that I would define poetry. I replied that I could no more define poetry than a terrier can define a rat, but that I thought we both recognized the object by the symptoms which it provokes in us. One of these symptoms was described in connexion with another object by Eliphaz the Temanite: "A spirit passed before my face: the hair of my flesh stood up." Experience has taught me, when I am shaving of a morning, to keep watch over my thoughts, because, if a line of poetry strays into my memory, my skin bristles so that the razor ceases to act. This particular symptom is accompanied by a shiver down the spine; there is another which consists in a

\textsuperscript{15} Robinson, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 13.

constriction of the throat and a precipitation of water to the eyes; and there is a third which I can only describe by borrowing a phrase from one of Keats's last letters, where he says, speaking of Fanny Brawne, "everything that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear." The seat of this sensation is the pit of the stomach.17

17 A. E. Housman, The Name and Nature of Poetry, p. 45.
CHAPTER V

HOUSMAN, THE CLASSICAL SCHOLAR AND TEACHER

Because of Housman's insistence on perfection, he made important contributions to classical scholarship. Lawrence Leighton has said,

The three books of verse may be disregarded but the prose that constituted the bulk of his writing cannot be. The prefaces of his editions of Latin poets and even his casual articles and reviews are the work of one of the few contemporary masters of prose writing.¹

Whatever his place as a poet may be, to him his scholarship was the most important concern of his intellectual life. Little has been written about Housman's work in classical scholarship. The predominating interest in his poetry is astonishing in view of the fact that his total contribution to English poetry was three small volumes. John Carter has stated that even yet the stinging pen of Housman is feared.

When, in his lifetime, someone wrote of him as the first scholar in Europe, Housman said, "It is not true, and if it were _____ would not know it." And such was his eventual ascendance that today, after a quarter of a century, the scholar who took up his pen to essay a comparison between Housman and say, Porson or Williamowitz would be likely to put it

¹Lawrence Leighton, "One View of Housman," Poetry, LII (May, 1938), 96.
down again quickly for fear of provoking, if only in imagination, one of those blistering comments for which the editor of Manilius was notorious.²

Housman early showed an affinity for language and an unerring command of classical literature. As a child he devoured many books and took a great interest in Latin and Greek literature. During his years in the Patent Office, his many long hours in the British Museum qualified him to fill the Latin chair at University College and later at Cambridge. To attain such a position after failing the Greats at Oxford was a rare achievement.

In an obituary notice in the Classical Review, D. S. Robertson said of Housman:

Housman's excellence as a scholar was perhaps chiefly due to his simultaneous possession of so many different qualities. His alertness in scenting corruption, the dexterity of his remedies, and the sharpness of his wit are obvious to every reader, and almost equally obvious, though he kept it in the background, is the sureness of his aesthetic judgment, but it is sometimes forgotten that behind this arresting brilliance lay patience which shrank from no drudgery, memory which let nothing slip, and absolute honesty in the pursuit of truth.³

He was able to recognize a false reading of classic writings. Sometimes slight changes he made in the text were later proved to be correct. Edmund Wilson has said:

To this rescue of the Greek and Roman poets from the negligence of the Middle Ages, from the

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³Ibid., pp. ix-x.
incompetence and insensitivity of the scholars,
Housman brought an unremitting zeal which may almost
be described as a passion. It has been said of the
theorems of Newton that they cause the pulse to beat
faster as one follows them. But the excitement and
satisfaction afforded by the classical commentary of
Housman must be unique in the history of scholar-
ship.\(^4\)

In addition to his monumental work on Manilius,
Housman made commentaries on editions of Juvenal and
Lucan. His work, published in classical and philological
journals, dealt with the texts of Lucan, Juvenal, Persius,
Lucretius, Horace, Propertius, Ovid, Martial, Statius, and
the minor Latin poets. In Greek he showed the same skill
in emending some of the new papyrus fragments. During the
ten years he was in the London Patent Office, he spent
virtually all of his free hours working in the British
Museum.

No one knows exactly why he chose Manilius for his
greatest work. Perhaps his selection of such a voluminous
author suggests the need for long-continued distraction
from emotional turmoil—though he did work on Propertius,
too. Hawkins felt that his interest in botany and
astronomy was partially responsible for his selection of
Manilius.\(^5\)

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\(^4\) Edmund Wilson, *The Triple Thinkers*, p. 89.

Of this selection Edmund Wilson has written:

Housman regarded Manilius as a "facile and frivolous poet, the brightest facet of whose genius was an eminent aptitude for doing sums in verse." Gow says that Housman's real favorite was Propertius, and that he had done a great deal of valuable work on him and had at one time contemplated a complete edition. Professor Gow says that presumably Housman saw in Manilius and Lucan (Lucan he seems also to have despised) "More opportunity than in Propertius of displaying his special gifts, and more hope of approaching finality in the solution of the problems presented," but adds that he "cannot help regretting that he abandoned a great and congenial poet on whom so much time had already been lavished." 6

Wilson appears to regret Housman's long hours of Latin scholarship, saying that he "was crude in his writings in prose about the classics where his poetry never was." Yet he admits that "some acquaintance with the classical work of Housman greatly increases one's estimate of his stature." Wilson felt that Housman's Latin scholarship placed on him restrictions and limitations for creation which so vigorous and penetrating a mind should not have had. Through his hours of scholarship, Housman condemned himself to duties which prevented him from rising to his full height and his classical emendation was not a creation but a re-creation. 7

Hawkins wrote:

Alfred always considered scholarship as a bounden duty—his necessity and his obligation

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6 Wilson, op. cit., p. 90.
7 Hawkins, op. cit., p. 61.
to the field in which he had resolved to be master. Later it represented his bread and butter and his hope of atonement. At Fockbury the thought of fame through poetry had not dawned on him. He took a serious satisfaction in good scholarship, and in later life this satisfaction was to intensify into a kind of exhilarated melancholy like that of a monk in his citadel passionately devoted to his laborious tome.8

The hours of labor involved in the completion of Manilius were interminable. Before beginning the project, Housman set up his own apparatus criticus. This necessitated first the thorough examination of all known manuscripts of the work during the nineteen centuries following its composition. Then he made a critical analysis of all previous emendations. In judging manuscripts and their textual emendations, he insisted upon accuracy and truth.

The first virtue of an emendation is to be true; but the best emendations of all are those which are both true and difficult, emendations which no fool could find. It is humiliating to reflect how many of the type commonly called brilliant,--neat and pretty changes of a letter or two--, have been lighted upon, almost fortuitously, by scholars whose intellectual powers were beneath the ordinary. Textual criticism would indeed be a paradise if scribes had confined themselves to making mistakes which Isaac Voss and Robinson Ellis could correct.9

The decision as to which was the earlier manuscript, with the judgment that all following manuscripts had come from the original, was taxing to the fullest.

8Wilson, op. cit., pp. 93-95.
Some ancient authors had descended to modern times in one MS. only, or in a few MSS. derived immediately or with little interval from one. Such are Lucretius, Catullus, Valerius, Flaccus, and Statius in his Siluae. Others there are whose text, though in the main reposing on a single copy, can be corrected here and there from others, inferior indeed, but still independent and indispensable. Such are Juvenal, Ovid in his Heroides, Seneca in his tragedies, and Statius in his Thebais and Achilleis. There is a third class whose text comes down from a remote original, through separate channels, and is preserved by MSS. of unlike character but like fidelity, each serving in its turn to correct the faults of others. Such are Persius, Lucan, Martial, and Manilius.

If I had no judgment, and knew it, and were nevertheless immutably resolved to edit a classic, I would single out my victim from the first of these three classes: that would be best for the victim and best for me. Authors surviving in a solitary MS. are by far the easiest to edit, because their editor is relieved from one of the most exacting offices of criticism, from the balancing of evidence and the choice of variants.  

The problems of selecting the right MS. were tedious. Housman refused to tolerate the scholar who consciously worked with two or three MSS. knowing that the latter manuscripts had come from the first one.

Either a is the source of b and c and d or it is not. If it is, then never in any case should recourse be had to b or c or d. If it is not, then the rule is irrational; for it involves the assumption that wherever a's scribes made a mistake they produced an impossible reading. Three minutes' thought would suffice to find this out: but thought is irksome and three minutes is a long time.

Prose composition for A. E. Housman was precise and seemingly effortless. His choice of words and similes

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10 Ibid., pp. 34-35.  11 Ibid., p. 36.
was, as in his poetry, exact and directly to the point. He had no sympathy for the errant critic or scholar, and with a few well-chosen words he slashed each. Both his publications in learned journals and his prefaces were merciless. Housman never shied away from name-calling.

Not only had Jacob no sense for grammar, no sense for coherency, no sense for sense, but being himself possessed by a passion for the clumsy and the hispid he imputed this disgusting taste to all the authors whom he edited; and Manilius, the one Latin poet who excels even Ovid in verbal point and smartness, is accordingly constrained to write the sort of poetry which might have been composed by Nebuchadnezzar when he was driven from men and did eat grass as oxen.12

One of the qualities of Housman's personality was his ability to criticize severely and at the same time maintain the respect and admiration of his victim. Part of this ability came, perhaps, from his willingness to be his own victim. One quotation from his Preface to Manilius illustrates this trait:

In 1911 an elaborate edition of the Second book was produced by Mr. H. W. Garrod. . . . The commentary, which is full and mainly original, contains much more truth than error, but it contains so much error that the only readers who can use it with safety are those whose knowledge extends beyond Garrod's. . . . But this seems to be a sort of English book which Germans admire, as they once admired Wakefield's Lucretius, and it was greeted as "Garrod's treffli cher Kommentar," "das herrliche Werk," "das vortreffliche Buch." There were no such bouquets for me; and perhaps the reader will do well

12Ibid., p. 33.
to consider how far my judgment of Mr. Garrod's performance may have been warped by the passion of envy.\(^{13}\)

This is the same Garrod who has been quoted earlier as saying that he thought Housman one of the four greatest English poets since Wordsworth.

Most biographers and critics of Housman agree that he was an excellent teacher and public speaker. He remarked on rejecting the office of Public Orator at Cambridge:

>You none of you know . . . what a trouble composition is to me (in prose, I mean: poetry is either easy or impossible). When the job is done, it may have a certain amount of form and finish and perhaps a false air of ease; but there is an awful history behind it.\(^{14}\)

His remaining public addresses are informal, but brilliant and witty. His introductory lecture at Cambridge was both humorous and daring in its free criticism of his predecessors. "Cambridge has seen many strange sights. It has seen Wordsworth drunk and Porson sober. It is now destined to see a better scholar than Wordsworth and a better poet than Porson, betwixt and between."\(^{15}\) Continuing in the same vein, he described his immediate predecessor at Cambridge, J. E. B. Mayor, as a man "who drank like a

\(^{13}\)Ibid., pp. 47-48.


\(^{15}\)Chambers, op. cit., p. 381.
fish—if drinking nothing but water might be so
described."16

On one occasion as he finished with each page of
his notes during his speech he tore it up. On being
asked for a copy of his address for publication he
answered he had none available. His Leslie Stephen lec-
ture, "The Name and Nature of Poetry," he described as
being not wholly sincere and said that he hated to see
it published. Others of his papers and lectures he
promised to destroy before he died. A friend, hearing
of this plan, remarked that if he really disapproved of
his work he would have already burned it. Alfred
answered, "I do not think it bad: I think it not good
enough for me."17

The students who sat under A. E. Housman at London
and in Cambridge said that he taught with great erudition
and patience. But if a student undertook to prove his
own brilliance, he was quickly cut down.

Housman showed to the end that mixture of sar-
castic reproof with friendly good humour which marked
his relations with his undergraduate students from
the time when he had first come among us, more than
forty-three years earlier. It was not only that he
was a thorough and sympathetic teacher; he had shown
himself to be that during the few months of his
teaching at Bromsgrove, between leaving Oxford and

16Ibid., p. 380.
17Gow, op. cit., p. 25.
beginning work at the Patent Office. But his affability to his students was astonishing—I mean that, however severe his criticism of our work might be, he was willing to meet us in the College Literary Society and at Arts Dinners, and to break a lance with any professor, any junior teacher, or any student who was reckless enough to challenge him.\(^{18}\)

Chambers has also told of one experience in his class when Housman announced that in the next class meeting they would discuss some naughty passages of Propertius and that the young ladies in the class would please remain at home. One courageous young woman came anyway. After the class began, he looked out over it and, scowling briefly at the young woman, said, "There being no ladies present, we will now proceed with the lecture."

Alfred E. Housman, as poet, teacher, orator, or scholar, revealed in one personality great proficiency in selecting the precise word to meet the occasion, whether it was to describe Shropshire in spring or to decide what Manilius had in mind almost two thousand years earlier. Because of his reputation as a wit and public speaker, he often disappointed those who met him for the first time. When a person touched the chord of Housman's personal interests, however, he

\[\ldots\] speedily discovered that strong opinions, expressed in a vocabulary enriched by terms of

\(^{18}\) Chambers, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 369.
abuse from four languages besides his own, might easily be elicited from the Shropshire Lad. On any topic concerned with classical scholarship, the poet shed opinions like rain from heaven, and with as little respect for persons.19

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

Alfred E. Housman has been called England's foremost minor poet. In addition to his position as an important English poet, he has unrivaled preëminence as a classical scholar. He is invariably rated a fine teacher and a superior after-dinner speaker. He had an unselfish nature and was a steadfast friend. He had a fine sense of humor and an extremely sharp intellect. Despite all these accomplishments and personal characteristics, Housman did not find the world a friendly, satisfying place in which to dwell.

His one venture into the realm of complete and total love for another brought him shame and heartbreak. This great disappointment and his mother's tragic early death left him with strong convictions that the world, made by a brute and blackguard, lies under a fatal blight.

Housman did not compose his poetry for fame and fortune. The first edition of A Shropshire Lad was published at his own expense and subsequent editions were kept at low prices at his insistence. His poetry was the outpouring of an anguished and rebellious soul.
Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.

—ASL XL

Housman wrote of a death-struck universe. This universe was filled with all the injustice and disappointment that the human heart could stand. The distinctive singing quality of Housman's lyrics appeals to all ages. The sorrows to be borne by mortal man are found in this poet's work; and everyman, groping for an illusive happiness, identifies with Housman and finds solace in understanding that he is not alone.

Although Housman lived a life of seclusion, baring his soul to no person, he seemed to realize that his suffering was universal and that his poetry would find an audience in need of his sad verse.

They say my verse is sad: no wonder.
Its narrow measure spans
Tears of eternity, and sorrow
Not mine, but man's.

This is for all ill-treated fellows
Unborn and unbegot,
For them to read when they're in trouble
And I am not.1

1 Introductory lines on flyleaf of More Poems, selected by Laurence Housman.
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