

THEME AND STRUCTURE IN HOUSMAN'S  
*A SHROPSHIRE LAD*

By

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## PREFACE

A purely critical approach to the study of the poetry of A. E. Housman is justified by the fact that although much has been written about him since 1936, the year of his death, very little sound criticism of his poetry is available and nothing of a comprehensive nature. I have, therefore, undertaken a critical analysis of the work on which Housman's reputation as a poet rests, emphasizing primarily its unity of theme and structure.

After discussing in Chapter I the relationship between this approach to Housman's poetry and other existing critical views, I have in Chapters II and III dealt with the predominant theme of A Shropshire Lad and one significant variation of that theme. Chapter IV constitutes an analysis of the structure of the work, and Chapter V states the conclusions to be drawn from this examination.

Some repetition may be observed in the study, especially in Chapter IV. This repetition is justifiable only by the fact that I wished to examine the relationship between the sixty-three poems of A Shropshire Lad from both a thematic and structural standpoint and therefore found it necessary to analyze the same poems from two different points of view. The distinction between theme and structure may also be objected to since it is an artificial one. In actuality theme and structure in poetry are much more difficult, perhaps impossible, to separate than I have made them appear. Yet such arbitrary distinctions are useful and even necessary for critical analysis.

I wish to thank Dr. Alton C. Morris for his valuable assistance in the completion of this study. I am also indebted to Dr. William Ruff and Dr. Charles Crittenden, other members of my Supervisory Committee.

The quotations from Housman's poetry are taken from the 1959 Centennial Edition of Complete Poems edited by Tom Burns Haber. This edition contains the version of A Shropshire Lad of the 1940 New York edition, which incorporates the minor changes Housman made in the text in 1922.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PREFACE . . . . .	ii
Chapter	
I INTRODUCTION. . . . .	1
II THE THEME OF MUTABILITY IN <u>A SHROPSHIRE LAD</u> . . . . .	24
III THE THEME OF MUTABILITY IN <u>A SHROPSHIRE LAD</u> : HOUSMAN'S QUEST FOR PERMANENCE. . . . .	66 ✓
IV THE STRUCTURE OF <u>A SHROPSHIRE LAD</u> . . . . .	98
V CONCLUSION. . . . .	159
BIBLIOGRAPHY. . . . .	168

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Norman Marlow stated in 1958 that "twenty years after Housman's death there is still no comprehensive study of his poetry and very little balanced criticism of it,"<sup>1</sup> thus noting a deficiency in Housman scholarship which exists today, almost three-quarters of a century after the publication of A Shropshire Lad. One might attempt to explain this lack of critical study by reference to Housman's small body of published poetry. Yet there has been no lack of interest in him since the publication of A Shropshire Lad in 1896. William White's extensive bibliography of Housman has not yet appeared, but in a preview of his listings published in 1953 he reported that since 1896 A Shropshire Lad has been reprinted more than fifty times in England, and that in America more than twenty publishers have issued scores of editions. Although there is still no definitive biography, more than ten books about Housman have been printed, and he is discussed in more than 300 chapters in books, 500 periodical articles, and 350 book reviews. Moreover, his poems appear in over 275 anthologies.<sup>2</sup>

These figures certainly dispel any notion of a lack of interest in Housman the poet. Yet Robert Stallman in a critical bibliography of

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<sup>1</sup>A. E. Housman: Scholar and Poet, Minneapolis, 1958, p. vii.

<sup>2</sup>"A. E. Housman Anthologized: Evidence in the Growth of a Poet's Reputation," Bulletin of Bibliography, XXI (1953), p. 43.

Housman noted in 1945: "Technical criticism of the poetry is quite scarce. Only twenty-four articles attempt analyses of the poems, twelve of these pieces being brief or elementary."<sup>3</sup> Stallman also noted that of the 177 poems in The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman, only 27 had been analyzed in whole or in part.<sup>4</sup> Stallman's bibliography, however, lists a wealth of Housman material and itself supplements the 1941 bibliography of Theodore Ehrsam,<sup>5</sup> which lists over 200 items on Housman.

Clearly, then, the lack of any comprehensive study or analysis of the poetry cannot be explained in terms of a lack of interest in Housman. An explanation must be sought, instead, in an examination of the direction Housman criticism has taken. A review of the major trends of Housman scholarship will reveal, I believe, several good reasons why critical study of the poetry has been largely ignored.

First, it is evident that the enigma of Housman the man has dominated Housman studies. He has suffered, like Byron, from the fact that his personality is of more interest to many readers than his poetry, and that for some scholars the poetry is read only as a key to the personality.) The image of Housman that emerges from his biographers is, it is true, conducive to such an approach, for Housman's life constituted a series of minor tragedies. (The death of his mother on his twelfth birthday, his sister Katherine Symons reports, had such a lasting effect on Housman

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<sup>3</sup>"Annotated Bibliography of A. E. Housman," PMLA, LX (1945), p. 463.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 497.

<sup>5</sup>A Bibliography of Alfred Edward Housman, Boston, 1941.

that death became an obsession with him.<sup>6</sup> His failure in Greats at Oxford disgraced him in the eyes of his family and caused him to seek refuge in London as a civil servant for a time. The death of his father in 1894 was not only a personal loss but threw him into extreme financial difficulties. Finally, his relationship with Moses Jackson, a fellow student at Oxford, was the source of deep emotional scars. It was climaxed in 1887 by Jackson's departure for India after the friendship was strained, some scholars infer, by an unnatural attachment on Housman's part.<sup>7</sup>

But Housman's personality would perhaps not have achieved so much attention were it not for the nature of the poetry which he wrote. It is a poetry, said Stephen Spender, which seems to hide ("some nagging Housmanish secret.") One feels that the poem has its autobiographical aspect; and yet this is realized neither in the situation of the speaker of the poetic monologue nor in that of the "hearts that loved him."<sup>8</sup> There is, in short, says Spender, "a personal tragedy concealed in this poetry."<sup>9</sup> And it must be admitted that the lads of Shropshire, who are obsessed with death even in the prime of life, who grieve for departed friends and express a sense of guilt for nameless sins, suggest parallels with Housman's own personal situation as it has been reconstructed by his

<sup>6</sup>Alfred Edward Housman: Recollections, New York, 1937, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup>The biographies of both George L. Watson (A. E. Housman: A Divided Life, London, 1957) and Maude M. Hawkins (A. E. Housman: Man Behind a Mask, Chicago, 1958) propose the theory that Housman was homosexually attracted to Jackson.

<sup>8</sup>"The Essential Housman," in The Making of a Poem, London, 1955, p. 159.

<sup>9</sup>ibid., p. 162.

biographers. Thus the notion that Housman's poetry is merely the embodiment of his personal dilemma has become the subject of a large body of Housman criticism, and it has been responsible for the widely held dictum that Housman's personality must be seen as the key to his poetry and the resulting corollary that the poetry may contain the key to his personality.<sup>10</sup>

J. K. Ryan illustrates this approach quite well with his insistence on "intimate sources" for Housman's poetry and his assumption that Housman as a poet presents a special problem which cannot be solved by the conventional methods of examining cultural and traditional influences:

In the case of Housman . . . intimate sources for his work must be sought. Experiences common to most men, external conditions and forces, and training and tradition, whether natural or cultural, are not enough to explain the temper of his work. The temper must bear an explanation that is personal in the fullest and most basic sense, for it results not only from an emotional nature that is intense and passionate, but also from a clear intelligence and a deliberate will.<sup>11</sup>

J. P. Bishop states: "Perfect understanding of his poems depends upon knowledge of his personal plight."<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Leighton finds that "Housman's poetry tends to lend itself to confusion between the personality of the poet and the poetry." His poetry needs a key, "which can come only from our knowledge of the poet."<sup>13</sup> Following the same reasoning, Rica

<sup>10</sup>George Watson states in his biography of Housman: "In this study . . . his poetry becomes the indispensable key to a personality which even those who knew him best always confessed to finding adamantine" (op. cit., p. 11).

<sup>11</sup>"Defeatist as Poet," Catholic World, CXLl (1935), p. 35.

<sup>12</sup>"The Poetry of A. E. Housman," Poetry, LVI (1940), p. 150.

<sup>13</sup>"One View of Housman," Poetry, LII (1938), p. 95.

Brenner states that "the poems as transmutations of Housman's experience" cannot be explained until he reveals the clue.<sup>14</sup> Other critics who take this view include Mortimer Raymond, who finds that A Shropshire Lad "is the projection of what Housman . . . suppressed in his own life,"<sup>15</sup> H. W. Garrod, who relates the poems to an unknown personal tragedy,<sup>16</sup> A. F. Allison, who sees Housman's characters as the tragic realization of himself,<sup>17</sup> and Jacob Bronowski, who feels that the poems ask the reader to pity the poet himself.<sup>18</sup>

It is, of course, tempting to look for an autobiographical explanation for Housman's poetry, and doubtless Housman, like all poets, relied on personal experiences and emotions to provide the materials for the construction of his poems. (Yet to insist that Housman's poetry can be understood only in a biographical context is to limit unnecessarily the range of criticism and to subordinate the poetry to the poet.) At its furthest extreme, this approach finds worth in the poetry only as it reveals the poet. Benjamin Brooks, for example, feels that the "poetic" reasons for accepting Housman died away with the Georgians, and it is only personal and psychological reasons which make him of interest to

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<sup>14</sup>Ten Modern Poets, New York, 1930, p. 191.

<sup>15</sup>"Housman's Relics," New Statesman and Nation, XII (October 24, 1936), p. 631.

<sup>16</sup>"Housman: 1939," Essays and Studies, XXV (1939), pp. 7-21.

<sup>17</sup>"The Poetry of A. E. Housman," Review of English Studies, XIX (1943), p. 279.

<sup>18</sup>"Alfred Edward Housman" in The Poet's Defence, Cambridge, 1939, pp. 223-225. For other views on this subject see Stallman, op. cit., pp. 483-485.

later schools.<sup>19</sup> Ernest Moss, whose psychological criticism finds in Housman "a longing for return to the elemental womb," concludes that "it is improbable that the mass of his work can be enjoyed as poetry."<sup>20</sup>

The biographical approach thus suffers from its preoccupation with psychological motivation and its tendency to turn Housman into a "case-book item," to use Benjamin Brooks' phrase. Its tendency is always to exploit the poetry in a study of the poet. Secondly, it explains nothing about the poetry as poetry; it can only explain the poetry as autobiography. But the third and most serious charge which can be leveled against this prevailing view of Housman's poetry is that it can offer no evidence in support of a personalized poetry, only the feeling that the poetry is autobiographical, and to counter this view, one need only point to other critics who feel otherwise. Louis Kronenberger, for example, states that Housman "is intense but remote, pathetic but impersonal."<sup>21</sup> Eda Lou Walton holds that Housman "depersonalized his philosophy and emotions so that they, and his poems, become 'not mine, but man's.'"<sup>22</sup> And H. P. Collins finds that the Shropshire lad speaks objectively; Housman as the poet of a genre, has an objective method of self-dramatization.<sup>23</sup> Finally, one of the paradoxes of the biographical

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<sup>19</sup>"A. E. Housman's Collected Poetry," Nineteenth Century, CXXVIII (1940), p. 71.

<sup>20</sup>Quoted in Stallman, op. cit., p. 484.

<sup>21</sup>"A Note on A. E. Housman," Nation, CXLV (December 18, 1937), p. 691.

<sup>22</sup>"Not Mine, but Man's," Nation, CXLIII (November 7, 1936), p. 552.

<sup>23</sup>Modern Poetry, London, 1925, pp. 66-77.

approach is that its advocates seem to have ignored their prime biographical source, Housman's own statement on the subject. In a letter to a French student he stated flatly, "Very little in the book is biographical."<sup>24</sup>

Thus the attempt to emphasize the personal element in Housman's poetry at the expense of other elements is unsatisfactory on at least three counts. Although much of the criticism of Housman today is based on such an approach, very few tangible results may be found. Such a trend leads inevitably to conjecture over the cause of the personal crisis which is seen reflected in the poetry. For example, we may look at the flurry of activity produced by Housman's remarks in the preface to Last Poems, where he wrote:

I can no longer expect to be revisited by the continuous excitement under which in the early months of 1895 I wrote the greater part of my other book [A Shropshire Lad], nor indeed could I well sustain it if it came.

Scholars who have looked for biographical elements in Housman's poetry have utilized his phrase "continuous excitement" as the starting point in a search for personal events of early 1895 which may have acted as the genesis for the poems of A Shropshire Lad. Grant Richards in his biography of Housman stated:

. . . this passage from the preface to Last Poems concerns A Shropshire Lad more closely than it concerns the later book. It is important for the full understanding of A Shropshire Lad and its author; and it is provocative in leaving so much to conjecture. Time, which dims most things, has cleared the way for an understanding of the experience which Housman records as accompanying the writing of the poems. . . .<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Quoted in Marlow, op. cit., p. 150.

<sup>25</sup>Housman 1897-1936, New York, 1942, p. 311.

This experience, Richards believes, was "a sudden conviction . . . that he was producing creative work that was just as likely to make him immortal as his scholarship."<sup>26</sup>

Tom Burns Haber states that as yet he is "unable to explain this vague reverence,"<sup>27</sup> but cites Percy Withers' testimony that in one of Withers' last meetings with Housman, the poet mentioned the death of a German woman with whom "in the earlier years companionship had been close and constant. . . ."<sup>28</sup> Haber concludes that if Withers' testimony is true, "it provides another reason for examining the background of Housman's romantic lyrics."<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere Haber cites the phrase "continuous excitement" in support of his thesis that the "feminine" language of the suppressed poems of the early months of 1895 suggest an emotional unbalance which reveals the "tragedy of a fruitless search for human comfort which those [Housman] loved best could not give him."<sup>30</sup> Norman Marlow finds that Housman's state of "practically continuous excitement" along with the fact that he was "somewhat out of health" was the result "partly of his father's death in the winter of 1894 . . . and partly of a bitter controversy which he had been waging on some question of scholarship."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup>ibid., p. 312.

<sup>27</sup>"Heine and Housman," JEGP, XLIII (1944), p. 330.

<sup>28</sup>ibid.

<sup>29</sup>ibid.

<sup>30</sup>"A. E. Housman's Downward Eye," JEGP, LIII (1954), p. 318.

<sup>31</sup>op. cit., p. 9.

The basic assumption behind each of these conjectures is that by "excitement" Housman implied an emotional state caused by personal unrest, and each attempts to arrive at the cause of the unrest. A further implication is that a knowledge of the cause of the excitement could reveal something of the motivation behind Housman's writing of A Shropshire Lad and further strengthen the position of those who insist on a biographical interpretation of Housman's poetry. But a hitherto unpublished Housman letter indicates that these scholars' conjectures are the result in part of a misinterpretation of the word excitement as Housman used it in the preface to Last Poems. In a letter to Paul V. Love, an American, dated February 14, 1927, Housman stated, "The excitement was simply what is commonly called poetical inspiration."<sup>32</sup> This clarification dispels the idea that the words of the preface veiled some personal revelation, for excitement suggests an emotional state apart from the creation of poetry while inspiration does not.

Elsewhere Housman also attempted to reject the notion that his poems were the result of a personal tragedy or crisis. In answer to an inquiry whether A Shropshire Lad was the result of 'a crisis of pessimism' he replied that he had never had any such crisis. He added, ". . . I did not begin to write poetry in earnest until the real y emotional part of my life was over. . . ."<sup>33</sup> In addition, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt writes in My Diaries of a conversation with Housman in which he asked the poet whether there was any episode in his life which suggested

<sup>32</sup>The letter contains only the one sentence quoted above.

<sup>33</sup>Laurence Housman, My Brother, A. E. Housman, New York, 1938, p. 72.

the gruesome character of his poems. "Housman assured me it was not so. He had lived as a boy in Worcestershire, not in Shropshire, though within sight of the Shropshire hills, and there was nothing gruesome to record."<sup>34</sup>

Housman's explanation of his remarks in the preface of Last Poems, undiscovered until recently, further frustrates the efforts of scholars to discover personal events which triggered the intensely creative period of the early months of 1895, when most of the lyrics of A Shropshire Lad were written. But by discouraging a purely biographical approach to the poetry, Housman's letter may have helped to prepare the way for a badly needed critical evaluation of the poetry based on its own merit, apart from its revelation of the poet. Certainly the view which holds that Housman's poetry must be read in the light of his personality tends to lead one away from the poetry to the biography with the subsequent devaluation of the poetry. It is one of the purposes of this study, however, to demonstrate that Housman's poetry may be read apart from any biographical reference, and more specifically, that A Shropshire Lad, the work which must certainly be regarded as central to an understanding of Housman, is a self-contained and self-sufficient work which may be read as a whole, not simply as a series of self-revealing lyrics. This is not to deny that there is a personal element in the poetry, but it is to deny that the knowledge of this personal element is sufficient or even necessary to explain the poetry.

If critical neglect of Housman's poetry has been promulgated by the tendency of critics to view his poetry as autobiography, this neglect

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<sup>34</sup>Quoted in Richards, op. cit., pp. 105-106.

has been furthered by a similar tendency to regard Housman's poetry as philosophy. Because he chose to consider in his poems some of the great commonplaces of life--the transience of human existence, the certainty of death, the injustice of man's condition to earth--he was early labeled a "message" poet, more specifically a pessimist, and his poetry has been frequently acclaimed or dismissed on the sole ground of the reader's agreement or disagreement with the poet's message. J. B. Priestley in discussing Housman's critical neglect finds that one important reason for it "is concerned with the charge of pessimism that has been urged against these poems."<sup>35</sup> Tom Burns Haber summarizes the problem in these words:

A. E. Housman is one of those unfortunate poets who pass into literature over-burdened with a message. The earliest reviewers of A Shropshire Lad discovered and announced it; it was found again in Last Poems, and in one way or another many commentators on Housman's collected verse have been busy with this message. Comparatively few have had much to say about his poetry.<sup>36</sup>

The preoccupation with the philosophical import of Housman's work has taken several forms. Some critics<sup>37</sup> have pronounced Housman a pessimist but urged that this pessimism is of value to his poetry, that through it he has revealed to the reader how to enjoy life and how to

<sup>35</sup>Quoted by Albert Fuquay, A Study of the Criticism of the Poetry of A. E. Housman, an Unpublished Thesis, University of Florida, 1948, p. 49.

<sup>36</sup>"Housman's Poetic Ear," Poet Lore, LIV (1948), p. 257.

<sup>37</sup>See, for example, William Benet, "A. E. Housman's 'Last Poems,'" Bookman, LVII (1923), p. 83; Harrold Johnson, 'A. E. Housman: Poet and Pessimist,' Hibbert Journal, XXXV (1937), p. 338; Arnold Whitridge, "Vigny and Housman: A Study in Pessimism," American Scholar, X (1941), pp. 156-169; and F. L. Lucas, The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal, Cambridge, 1937, p. 280.

endure it.<sup>38</sup> But the weight of opinion is that his philosophical beliefs, being unsound and inconsistent, prevent the appreciation or enjoyment of his poetry.<sup>39</sup> In short, many commentators have pronounced Housman a philosophical poet only to reject his poetry because his philosophy is unsound or inconsequential. Cleanth Brooks relates Housman's philosophy to that of Bertrand Russell, his Cambridge contemporary, but states that "a rereading of the mass of Housman's poetry indicates that Housman had no . . . world view to set up. Intellectually, he has not moved far past an austere scepticism."<sup>40</sup> The implication here is that the absence of a "world view" and the belief in scepticism condemn Housman's poetry, for Brooks concludes that Housman is not even the perfect minor poet, as some scholars have ranked him.<sup>41</sup> R. P. Blackmur concurs that Housman "was not a great minor poet," for in his view of life and death "he disciplined out of his verse all but the easiest and least valid form of death."<sup>42</sup> Housman is thus not a profound thinker but "a desperately solemn purveyor of a single adolescent emotion."<sup>43</sup> Even Louis MacNeice, who is generally sympathetic to Housman, holds that although Housman's philosophy has very little meaning, it is essential to his poetry. He states:

<sup>38</sup>See Harrold Johnson, op. cit., p. 338.

<sup>39</sup>I am indebted to Stallman's critical bibliography of Housman for the classification of the conflicting views on Housman's philosophy.

<sup>40</sup>"The Whole of Housman," Kenyon Review, III (1941), pp. 105-106.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>42</sup>The Expense of Greatness, New York, 1958, p. 204.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 202.

. . . the beliefs behind A Shropshire Lad are a pretty thin meaning and rather reprehensible beliefs when abstracted from the poetry, but without them the poetry would be dead. . . .<sup>43</sup>

The charge of inconsistency and contradiction is also leveled against Housman. Jacob Bronowski holds that the poems have no standard of value:

Every standard is called on, now in this poem, now in that. Every poem is at odds with every other. For every poem has a standard and makes a judgment of living: but Housman has no standard.<sup>44</sup>

Hugh Molson states that Housman answers the philosophical questions he raises "in contradictory ways." The feeling that it is better to be alive than dead is vigorously expressed by a suitor [of one poem]. . . . Exactly the opposite opinion is expressed in another poem."<sup>45</sup> Finally, Lawrence Leighton rejects Housman's beliefs because they depend on prejudices, not thought. Leighton states:

If the reader submits to the beliefs, he is in the end baffled. For the poetry does not justify its statements nor for all its apparent effect does it advance his understanding.<sup>46</sup>

Thus the view that Housman is a philosophical poet frequently leads to his rejection because of his limited world view, his thinness of meaning, his inconsistencies and contradictions, and his failure to advance the reader's understanding. And these are perhaps valid objections if Housman is to be considered a philosopher and his poetry is to be

<sup>43</sup>"Housman in Retrospect," New Republic, CII (April 29, 1940), p. 583.

<sup>44</sup>p. cit., p. 221.

<sup>45</sup>"The Philosophies of Hardy and Housman," Quarterly Review, CCLXVIII (1937), pp. 207-208.

<sup>46</sup>p. cit., p. 98.

regarded as a philosophical system. John K. Ryan stated the assumption that seems to underlie these critics' rejection of Housman when he stated, "The appeal and power of the philosophical poet must ultimately rest on his thoughts rather than on the way he expresses them."<sup>47</sup> Yet such an approach has serious drawbacks. No harm is done in speaking of the "philosophy" of a poet on a colloquial level, but to apply the criteria of philosophy to poetry may lead to confusion, for the two admit of conflicting sets of criteria. For example, to say that a philosophical statement is self-contradictory is to discredit it. Yet Cleanth Brooks, who objects to Housman on philosophical grounds, has devoted an entire volume to show that

. . . paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry. It is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox.<sup>48</sup>

Again, clarity and specificity are virtues of the language of philosophy; yet the New Criticism has held that one criterion for great poetry is ambiguity, the ability of a poetic statement to contain two or more meanings simultaneously. There are other conflicting criteria for philosophy and poetry, but it should be sufficiently clear that many of Housman's critics have ignored the fact that poetry is not philosophy. Housman's reputation as a poet has certainly been hurt by the philosophical approach to his poetry. The feeling persists among critics that Housman was attempting to construct some sort of philosophical system, but that he failed because his thought was "adolescent" (a favorite word among

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<sup>47</sup>Op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>48</sup>The Well Wrought Urn, New York, 1947, p. 3.

Housman's detractors), or because his conclusions were perverse or meaningless. Yet it is to be doubted that Housman's poetry can be sufficiently understood if it is to be seen as a series of philosophical statements to be judged as true or false. In considering the view of Housman as a philosophical poet, J. B. Priestley has stated:

We cannot explain [Housman's] dominating mood in terms of something outside poetry, such as a system of ethics or a definitely formulated philosophy. Judged by such alien standards, the poet is contradictory and downright perverse in his determination to make the worst of things; thus his running grievance, on examination, can be resolved into two separate complaints that are not at all consistent; in the first, life is lovely enough, but all too short, and death is the enemy of happiness; in the second, existence itself is a misery only to be endured until the welcome arrival of death the deliverer. Yet when we are actually reading the poems we never feel that the poet is thus cancelling out his complaints. No, because such a contradiction (which would be very awkward if poetry were what some people think it is, philosophy in fancy dress) is not really there--indeed, has nothing to do with actual poetry at all.<sup>49</sup>

Housman's own personal aesthetic, which he gave in the Leslie Stephen Lecture for 1933, entitled The Name and Nature of Poetry, also tends to refute those who have tagged him as a poet of thought. In his lecture Housman stated clearly and unmistakably that, to him, poetry is not thought, but emotion. He says: ("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.)<sup>50</sup> And the essence of poetry is not the abstracted thought but its expression: ("Poetry is not the thing said but a way of saying it."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>"The Poetry of A. E. Housman," London Mercury, VII (1922), p. 173.

<sup>50</sup>A. E. Housman: Selected Prose, ed. John Carter, New York, 1961, p. 172.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 187.

Housman's own careful distinction between philosophy and poetry is thus made clear: "Meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not . . . the intellect is not the fount of poetry . . . it may actually hinder its production."<sup>52</sup>

Housman talks here about the reader's sense and what was felt by the writer; he is not concerned with the construction of any sort of formal system. Furthermore, men who knew Housman have attested to the fact that he was not interested in formal schools of philosophy. Canon J. T. Nance, who was a tutor in St. John's College, Oxford, when Housman was a scholar there, has written: ". . . Housman did not take any interest in Greek philosophy. His interests were in pure scholarship."<sup>53</sup> Percy Withers, who knew Housman well, reports that once when he attempted to discuss some question in metaphysics with Housman, Housman replied angrily: "That is a subject I will not discuss." Withers concludes that Housman objected to "the whole realm of philosophic thought."<sup>54</sup> It is strange then, in view of so much evidence to the contrary, that Housman should be regarded by so many as a philosophical poet, for his poetry does not admit of logical analysis or abstracted meaning. This study, on the contrary, assumes that if Housman is to be understood, he must be studied as a poet through a thematic and structural analysis of his best known and most highly regarded work. The study attempts to examine his ideas in the context in which they appear rather than to abstract them

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<sup>52</sup>ibid., pp. 187-188.

<sup>53</sup>Quoted in Richards, op. cit., p. 322.

<sup>54</sup>ibid., pp. 57-58.

out of context as philosophical statements. It is concerned with the structure of Housman's work, both the individual lyrics and the whole work, regarded as a unit.

But one final aspect of Housman criticism must be considered, for it is fundamental to the present lack of any sizable body of critical analysis of Housman's poetry. As early as 1937, Louis Kronenberger stated that not much remained to be said about Housman's art:

Much has been written about his verse, but very little that was more than a way of expressing pleasure in it--very little, that is to say, which was really critical in method. . . . One could hardly tie him in with anything very original concerning life itself, or explain at great length a philosophy that was almost self-explanatory, or find special meanings in him that the rest of the world has neglected to find.<sup>55</sup>

Kronenberger feels then that Housman's verse is in no need of close analysis since it is so simple as to be self-explanatory. And this view is widely held among commentators of Housman's poems. Oliver Robinson, for example, issued in 1950 when he called a critical essay on Housman's poetry, noting that "the studies of the form and contents of A. E. Housman's poetry which already exist are little more than fragmentary," and that, consequently, "there is room for a more detailed discussion than has appeared up to the present time."<sup>56</sup> But Robinson's discussion of the poetry itself amounts to no more than noting certain themes and quoting the poems in which these themes appear. He apparently feels that no more detailed discussion is necessary, since, as he states, "Usually the

<sup>55</sup>op. cit., p. 690.

<sup>56</sup>Angry Past: The Poetry of A. E. Housman, Boston, 1950, p. 11.

poems are self-explanatory."<sup>57</sup> Lawrence Leighton is in agreement with this conclusion. He finds that Housman's forms are simple, his style easy, his symbols without obscurity, so that they make little demand upon any reader's erudition or Ingenuity."<sup>58</sup>

If Housman's poetry is so simple and direct as not to require explanation, then close textual analysis is unnecessary, and certainly no opinion is so predominant among commentators as that which holds that the verses are marked by an essential simplicity of form and thought. H. P. Collins,<sup>59</sup> Ian Scott-Kilvert,<sup>60</sup> Louis Untermeyer,<sup>61</sup> Herbert Gorman,<sup>62</sup> James Brannin,<sup>63</sup> and Rica Brenner,<sup>64</sup> all point to Housman's simplicity as one of the outstanding characteristics of his poetry. And while all of these critics have praised Housman's simplicity as an asset to lyric poetry, others have utilized the same quality to discredit Housman as a poet. Edith Sitwell states:

This admired simplicity of his seems not so much the result of passion finding its expression in an inevitable phrase . . . as the result of a bare and threadbare texture i. not

<sup>57</sup>ibid., p. 22.

<sup>58</sup>op. cit., p. 96.

<sup>59</sup>op. cit., p. 74.

<sup>60</sup>A. E. Housman, London, 1955, p. 26.

<sup>61</sup>Modern American Poetry: Modern British Poetry, New York, 1942, Vol. II, p. 102.

<sup>62</sup>The Procession of Masks, Boston, 1923, p. 171.

<sup>63</sup>"Alfred Housman," Sewanee Review, XXXIII (1925), pp. 192-194.

<sup>64</sup>op. cit., p. 188.

strong enough to contain an explosive force, or the possibility of a passionate upheaval under the line. . . . I am unable to understand why Housman's technique should have been so much admired by some people. It is not actually incompetent, but it rarely bears the slightest relation to the subject.<sup>65</sup>

Conrad Aiken finds that the verse-texture is thin and the imagery threadbare,<sup>66</sup> and Edwin Muir also uses the term threadbare to describe Housman's epigrammatic style.<sup>67</sup>

Thus if Housman's verses are simple and direct, critics cannot agree whether this simplicity is good or bad. But, more important, if a simplicity of form leads to a self-explanatory poetry, as has been suggested, readers should be able to agree in their interpretations of the poems. Yet, on the contrary, Robert Stallman, who has classified the views of critics on Housman's verse, finds that "on almost every point of Housman criticism which this bibliography records the critics disagree."<sup>68</sup>

It seems fair to state then that most commentators have assumed a simplicity in Housman that has been partly responsible for the neglect of any sort of substantial body of analytic criticism. But the further implication of this view of Housman--that a simplicity of form leads to a self-explanatory poetry--does not necessarily follow, for there is much disagreement among critics on the interpretation of Housman's poetry.

<sup>65</sup>"Three Eras of Modern Poetry," in Trio by Osbert, Edith, and Sacheverell Sitwell, London, 1938, pp. 104-105.

<sup>66</sup>"A. E. Housman," New Republic, LXXXIX (November 11, 1936), pp. 51-52.

<sup>67</sup>"A. E. Housman," London Mercury, XXXV (1936), p. 63. Quoted in Stallman, op. cit., p. 476.

<sup>68</sup>op. cit., p. 480.

But it may also be possible that the basic assumption found in almost all Housman criticism--that a simplicity of form is inherent in his poetry--is also incorrect. Elisabeth Schneider in a work entitled Aesthetic Motive has shown that form in art has two aspects. These are the inherited aspects of form, traditions built up by past artists; and the original form, that which is worked out by each artist for the needs of his particular problems.<sup>69</sup> Certainly Housman's inherited forms, the ballad and pastoral traditions, are marked by simplicity, but this simplicity of genre should not be confused with Housman's own particular use of the genre. At least two critics have suggested that Housman's verse structure may not be as simple as has generally been thought. Mary M. Colum states:

. . . those simple meters of his were used in the beginnings by the men who made the ballads, the little lyrics, and the folk poetry. . . . But [Housman] used them with a current of complexity under their smoothly flowing, familiar surface. . . . For the young poets of our day, his attitude toward life, like his meters, is monotonous; and perhaps they do not see the emotional intensities and perplexities that are behind this clear poetry. . . .<sup>70</sup>

And Nesca A. Robb holds that although the beauty of a style which is "classically simple and strongly individual" has enchanted many readers and kept them from looking beyond it, "a full analysis of Housman's art, verbal and metrical, would be well worth attempting," for she feels that the poems "contain a vision of life more subtle and complex than is generally supposed."<sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup>New York, 1939, p. 91.

<sup>70</sup>"Poets and Psychologists," Forum, CIII (1940), p. 322.

<sup>71</sup>"A. E. Housman," in Four In Exile, London, 1948, pp. 11-12.

Housman's structure, be it simple or complex, must await further investigation, but certainly it is a matter worthy of close study. The nature of Housman's structuring principles in A Shropshire Lad and the relationship of the structure to the theme developed in that work are of primary concern in this study.

This study, then, is not primarily concerned with the personal elements or philosophical implication of Housman's poetry. It also questions the predominant view of Housman criticism that his verses present a simplicity that defies analysis. On the contrary, the need for close critical examination of his poetry is made evident by even a cursory review of available criticism. Too many critics have based their views of Housman's poetry on assumptions that do not bear close scrutiny. It seems almost self-evident that if Housman is to be understood as a poet, his poetry must be the first consideration. This inquiry has therefore attempted to analyze the most fundamental aspects of his poetry--theme and structure as they are used in A Shropshire Lad.

It may appear that restricting this study to A Shropshire Lad is unduly limiting any analysis of Housman's poetry. Yet special reasons exist for such a restriction. In the first place, A Shropshire Lad contains over half of all the poetry Housman published in his lifetime. The only other volume of poems he chose to publish was Last Poems, which was issued twenty-six years after A Shropshire Lad. The other collections, More Poems and Additional Poems, represent verses Housman chose not to publish himself and were published after his death by his brother, Laurence Housman.

A Shropshire Lad contains the core of Housman's poetic achievement. A number of the verses of Last Poems were written at the same time as the poems of A Shropshire Lad but were, for some reason, not included in that volume. A Shropshire Lad also represents not only the most representative but the most highly regarded collection of Housman's poetry. Many critics discredit the posthumous poems as mere repetitions, in a less polished form, of what he had written earlier.<sup>72</sup>

Finally, A Shropshire Lad is of special interest because of the external evidence that Housman may have had some particular arrangement in mind in excluding many poems later published in Last Poems. It is certain that the poems are not arranged chronologically according to the date of their composition, and it is strange that Housman should pass over poems which are of a quality equal to many of those that he published in 1896. Moreover, Housman refused to allow A Shropshire Lad to be published in one volume with Last Poems or to allow poems from the earlier collection to be included in anthologies, although he did not make the same demands of Last Poems. Housman's publisher, Grant Richards, concludes from these facts: "His idea may have been that he looked on the book as a sequence of poems and in consequence disliked any one being divorced from its fellows."<sup>73</sup> None of these bits of evidence can prove anything conclusive, but they do support the view that Housman

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<sup>72</sup>" . . . the posthumous poems are interesting but on the whole they do him a disservice, because although they contain beautiful lines, and even whole poems as good as any he wrote, they say in a cruder form, which sometimes amounts almost to parody, what he has said before. . . ." --Stephen Spender, quoted in Richards, op. cit., p. 369.

<sup>73</sup>op. cit., p. 53.

regarded the arrangement of poems in A Shropshire Lad as important. The contention of this study is that A Shropshire Lad does indeed contain a unity of theme and that it is structured to be read as a whole. The failure to regard it as such has led many critics into conclusions which this study will attempt to reevaluate in light of a new interpretation of the work.

## CHAPTER II

### THE THEME OF MUTABILITY IN A SHROPSHIRE LAD

To demonstrate the thematic unity of A Shropshire Lad one is not obliged to show that all of the sixty-three lyrics it contains have the same theme, only that the work as a whole contains one dominant theme, which runs throughout the poems and which unifies the work by providing a general context into which the individual poems may be fitted. The lyrics, taken separately, are obviously concerned with a number of diverse subjects--war, love, suicide, murder--to name only a few of the most frequently recurring topics. Yet if it can be shown that these poems are the particular manifestations of a larger, more inclusive theme which underlies the whole work, then A Shropshire Lad may be regarded almost as one large poem, not simply as a collection of sixty-three smaller ones.

Although various themes have been postulated for the work by critics,<sup>1</sup> a close examination of A Shropshire Lad reveals it as a work

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<sup>1</sup>John Stevenson states: ". . . the whole theme of Housman's poetry . . . is the loss of Innocence." ("The Martyr as Innocent: Housman's Lonely Lad," South Atlantic Quarterly, LVII [1958], p. 70.)

Edmund Gosse finds: "Mr. Housman, at all events, has, as it seems to me, only one subject, which he treats in a hundred ways--He is the poet of desiderium, of the unconquerable longing for what is gone forever, for youth which has vanished, for friends that are dead, for beauty that was a mirage." ("A Shropshire Lad," in More Books on the Table, London, 1923, p. 23.)

J. F. Macdonald says of A Shropshire Lad: ". . . its theme was an old one, the joy and beauty of life in springtime dimmed by the shadow of swift-coming death. . . . To enjoy the sun and the flowers while one may and lay oneself down at last in acquiescence--this is the bittersweet wisdom of life." ("The Poetry of A. E. Housman," Queen's Quarterly, XXXI [1923], p. 119.)

concerned primarily with time--the mutability of life, the transience of human existence. I am not the first to have noted this theme in Housman's major work. Rica Brenner,<sup>2</sup> Arnold Whitridge,<sup>3</sup> Carl and Mark Van Doran,<sup>4</sup> and Michael Macklem,<sup>5</sup> among others, have commented on Housman's concern with "the shortness of life, the frailty of beauty, the cruelty of time."<sup>6</sup> The theme receives its closest analysis by Macklem, who discusses it in treating Housman's use of the pastoral elegy. No one, however, has traced its development through A Shropshire Lad and shown its relationship to the individual lyrics of the work.

Although the mutability theme is introduced in its most complete form in the second lyric of the volume, "Loveliest of Trees," it is evident even in the opening poem. Lyric I, "1887,"<sup>7</sup> as its title suggests, serves to place A Shropshire Lad in its proper historical setting. It is an occasional poem on the celebration of the fiftieth year of Victoria's reign, and it conveys something of the prevailing mood of the time with its emphasis on imperialism and the far-flung British empire. "1887" may almost be said to serve as an introduction to A Shropshire Lad. In no

<sup>2</sup>op. cit., p. 182.

<sup>3</sup>op. cit., p. 160.

<sup>4</sup>American and British Literature Since 1890, New York, 1925, p. 141.

<sup>5</sup>"The Elegiac Theme in Housman," Queen's Quarterly, LIX (1952), p. 40.

<sup>6</sup>Carl and Mark Van Doren, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup>It is significant that "1887" is one of the few poems of A Shropshire Lad to which Housman gave a title.

other poem in the work is the reader so much aware of historical time and place. After this introductory poem, Housman turns to the universe of his own creation, Shropshire. But here for a moment the reader is reminded that he is in the British Empire of the end of the nineteenth century. It is into the spirit of celebration and faith in the permanence and stability of the British crown that Housman interjects his own note of mutability and prepares the reader for the poems which "1887" introduces.

The poem begins with a description of the fires which dot the English hillsides in honor of the Golden Jubilee:

From Clee to heaven the beacon burns,  
The shires have seen it plain,  
From north and south the sign returns  
And beacons burn again.

Look left, look right, the hills are bright,  
The dales are light between,  
Because 'tis fifty years to-night  
That God has saved the Queen.

(ll. 1-8)

Housman's repetition of this last phrase three times in the poem in various forms underlines the spiritual basis on which the crown, at least traditionally, rests in the English view. But the whole point of "1887" is to show that the permanence of the crown is based on the mutability of its subjects. Housman does this by his emphasis on the British soldier, who in the work of saving the Queen "shared the work with God" (l. 12). The soldiers in the poem are referred to as "saviours," and in his use of Christian symbols, Housman replaces the spiritual basis for the salvation of the crown with a purely physical one. In stanza 4 Housman speaks of the soldiers in words traditionally associated with Christ:

To skies that knit their heartstrings right,  
 To fields that bred them brave,  
 The saviours come not home to-night:  
 Themselves they could not save.  
 (ll. 13-16)

The last line suggests Matthew 27:42, where the chief priests, scribes, and elders mock Christ by saying, "He saved others; himself he cannot save." In associating these words with the British soldiers, Housman signifies that they are the Christs of the modern world on whose shoulders the fate of the crown rests. But if Housman transfers the burden of salvation of the state from God to man, it is not because of any permanence inherent in individual man. The last stanza of the poem is explicit in contrasting the stability of the crown with the mortality of man:

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.  
 (ll. 29-32)

The physical fact of generation, men passing into and out of existence, is thus seen as the basis for the preservation of the crown. Man, considered generically, attains a sort of permanence only in reproducing his own kind. Individual man must, therefore, "get the sons his father got," and the act of generation, the acceptance of his own individual mortality, becomes man's only basis for the preservation of the state. "1887" thus not only introduces A Shropshire Lad into its proper setting of time and place but suggests the theme which is more fully explored in the poem which follows.

Lyrical II, "Loveliest of Trees," is probably Housman's best-known work and certainly the most frequently anthologized of all his poems.<sup>8</sup> It is also Housman's most explicit and direct statement of the mutability theme. Whereas in "1887" the theme served as an underlying assumption in a poem about the celebration of Victoria's Golden Jubilee, in "Loveliest of Trees" it is the sole consideration of the poem.

On the surface the poem is the most simple of poetic utterances. It opens with an image from nature which may be said to symbolize something of the beauty of life:

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now  
Is hung with bloom along the bough,  
And stands about the woodland ride  
Wearing white for Eastertide.  
(ll. 1-4)

But the beauty of the image has an ironic effect on the observer; it reminds him of the transience of life. He has only a short time in which to enjoy the loveliness of the world:

Now, of my threescore years and ten,  
Twenty will not come again,  
And take from seventy springs a score,  
It only leaves me fifty more.  
(ll. 5-8)

But the image has yet another effect on the observer in causing him to drink more deeply of the world's beauty while he is yet alive:

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.  
(ll. 9-12)

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<sup>8</sup>William White (*op. cit.*, p. 43) states that in 1953 it has appeared in 103 anthologies. The second most popular of Housman's poems, Lyrical XIII ("When I Was One-And-Twenty"), had appeared in 78.

The surface statement of the poem is thus simple: life is beautiful but it is short, and since it is short, one must enjoy it now. Translated into these terms, the poem seems commonplace, even insignificant; yet it is a restatement of one of the recurrent themes that most great poets have dealt with--Spenser and Shakespeare, Marvell and Shelley, to name only four of the most obvious examples. But perhaps Housman's treatment of the theme is not as bare as it first appears. An examination of the poem's imagery reveals that "Loveliest of Trees" conveys the idea of transience not only by direct statement but also by the pattern of its images. After its introduction in lines 1 and 2, the cherry tree, the central image of the poem, is mentioned three times. In line 4 it is spoken of as "wearing white for Eastertide." In line 5 it is referred to as a "thing in bloom," and in the last line of the poem it is said to be "hung with snow." These three images, taken separately, could be said to be merely conventional images for white blooms, but taken in order, as they appear in the poem, they suggest something more.

Winifred Lynskey has suggested that the snow image carries with it the suggestion of winter and death, merely continuing the association with death that "Eastertide" had introduced in the first stanza.<sup>9</sup> W. L. Werner argues against this interpretation of the snow image, offering as evidence the fact that one of the poetic definitions of snow is "a mass of white petals." He further states that Lynskey's association of Easter with death is "sheer perversion, for if Easter has any meaning, it is

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<sup>9</sup>"Housman's 'Loveliest of Trees,'" Explicator, IV (1945-46), item 59.

resurrection and immortal life."<sup>10</sup> Werner is certainly correct in pointing out that Easter, as a poetic symbol, has been traditionally used to convey the idea of springtime and rebirth, not winter and death. Yet, in arguing against the association of winter with the snow image, he seems to overlook one of the functions of imagery. It is impossible for a poet, in introducing a word like Eastertide or snow into a poem, to separate it from the meanings commonly associated with it. The phrases 'wearing white for Eastertide' and 'hung with snow' are both clearly descriptive of the whiteness of the cherry blossom, but the images cannot be limited, in this case, merely to color associations, and snow carries with it the idea of winter as surely as Easter (as Werner admits) carries with it the idea of rebirth.

What both critics have failed to notice in the poem is the progression of the three images. The image pattern in the poem progresses from spring ('wearing white for Eastertide') to summer ('things in bloom') to winter ('hung with snow'), or, if one prefers, from rebirth, to growth, to death.<sup>11</sup> Whatever content one cares to impose on the pattern, it is the pattern itself which is important. The cyclical movement of the images mirrors the paraphrasable content of the poem in conveying the theme of mutability. "Loveliest of Trees," then, introduces fully both the theme which underlies A Shropshire Lad and a structuring pattern

<sup>10</sup>Housman's 'Loveliest of Trees,' Explicator, V (1946-47), item 4.

<sup>11</sup>The editors of the Explicator have noted, in connection with this reading of the poem, that Housman equates the spring with the first twenty years of life and winter with the last fifty years (I, [1942-43], item 57).

which recurs repeatedly throughout the work. To see a further example of its use, one need only turn to the poem which immediately follows "Loveliest of Trees."

Lyric III, "The Recruit," is a poem in which the poet wishes a young soldier well on his departure and assures him that his friends will remember him "while Ludlow tower shall stand" (l. 4). The tower acts as the controlling image in the poem in the same way that the cherry tree was used in Lyric II. At the beginning of the poem Ludlow tower stands as a symbol for durability and permanence:

Leave your home behind, lad,  
And reach your friends your hand,  
And go, and luck go with you  
While Ludlow tower shall stand.  
(ll. 1-4)

Irony is introduced into the poem, however, by the repetition of the last line of the first stanza three times throughout the poem, each time with a slight shift in meaning. Stanza 4 states:

Come you home a hero,  
Or come not home at all,  
The lads you leave will mind you  
Till Ludlow tower shall fall.  
(ll. 13-16)

"While Ludlow tower shall stand" has now become "Till Ludlow tower shall fall." The last stanza of the poem completes the progression:

Leave your home behind you,  
Your friends by field and town:  
Oh, town and field will mind you  
Till Ludlow tower is down.  
(ll. 25-28)

In meaning, the three lines are the same; it is only in the subtle progression from stand to fall to down that Housman manages to suggest that

even this symbol of permanence is itself only temporal and that the fame and memory of the recruit are equally temporal.

Housman's structuring principle in this poem thus becomes the manipulation of the central image of the poem, and the comparison in structure between "The Recruit" and "Loveliest of Trees" is obvious. In both cases Housman utilizes the drift or pattern of the images to convey the idea of mutability. But whereas in "Loveliest of Trees" the structure reinforced the paraphrasable content of the poem, in "The Recruit" the structure explicitly contradicts it, and the irony of the poem lies in the disproportion between the truth of the speaker's remarks to the recruit (that he will be long remembered) and the qualification that the poem's structure suggests (that his memory, like the tower, is subject to decay).

The mutability theme is further developed in Lyric V, primarily through the flower imagery of the poem, but also dramatically, through the interchange between two young lovers. The first stanza introduces both aspects of Housman's treatment of the theme:

Oh, see how thick the goldcup flowers  
 Are lying in field and lane,  
 With dandelions to tell the hours  
 That never are told again.  
 Oh, may I squire you round the meads  
 And pick you posies gay?  
 --'Twill do no harm to take my arm.  
 'You may, young man, you may.'  
 (ll. 1-8)

The sense of time is dominant in the poem, as the imagery suggests. In the first stanza the dandelions "tell the hours/That never are told again. Stanza 2 further links the flower image to the mutability theme: "What flowers to-day may flower to-morrow/But never as good as



stanza 1:

Oh, may I squire you round the meads  
 And pick you posies gay?  
 --'Twill do no harm to take my arm.  
 'You may, young man, you may.'  
 (11. 5-8)

stanza 2:

What flowers to-day may flower to-morrow  
 But never as good as new.  
 --Suppose I wound my arm right round--  
 'Tis true, young man, 'tis true.'  
 (11. 13-16)

stanza 3:

My love is true and all for you.  
 'Perhaps, young man, perhaps.'  
 (11. 23-24)

stanza 4.

Be kind, have pity, my own, my pretty,--  
 'Good-bye, young man, good-bye.'  
 (11. 31-32)

The girl's answers to the youth's entreaties reveal an early promise (stanzas 1 and 2), a hesitancy ("Perhaps, young man, perhaps"), and finally a complete negation in stanza 4 ("Good-bye, young man, good-bye"). This pattern of development from the early promise of youth to the growth toward disillusionment and finally complete negation may be related to the patterns we have seen in "Loveliest of Trees" and "The Recruit." Of course, in each poem the content of the pattern is different, but in all three poems the structure suggests roughly the same triad of changes which progresses from an early state of youth or promise to a later state of disillusionment.

Thus, an examination of four of the opening poems of A Shropshire Lad suggests something of the form the mutability theme is to take in the work. Housman asserts what, in his view, is the predominant fact of human existence, the impermanence and decay which characterize the life of

man, and this theme not only forms the basis for the subject of the poems but dictates the structuring principle as well. That is, Housman deliberately chooses mutability as a subject for his poetry, but he also develops the idea through a cyclical pattern or form which acts to convey the notion of change from one state to another.

Both Housman's theme and his structural development of it may be traced throughout the work. At times, as in Lyrics VII and XIII, the theme occurs as a sudden revelation by which youth emerges from innocence to experience. Lyric VII traces such an emergence. The poem opens at morning, which, like spring in Housman's world, suggests the time of youth:

When smoke stood up from Ludlow,  
 And mist blew off the Teme,  
 And blithe afield to ploughing  
 Against the morning beam  
 I strode beside my team, . . .  
 (ll. 1-5)

Line 3 emphasizes the innocent nature of the country lad who strides "blithe afield," and in stanza 2 whistles as he walks beside his team. His mood is interrupted by the song of a blackbird, which the lad interprets in the following manner:

'Lie down, lie down, young yeoman;  
 What use to rise and rise?  
 Rise man a thousand mornings  
 Yet down at last he lies,  
 And then the man is wise.'  
 (ll. 11-15)

Nature, then, as represented by the bird, reveals that life is cyclical and ends in oblivion. Human effort is merely a grim joke, promulgated by an ignorance of the true pattern of life. The youth at first rebels against this view:

I heard the tune he sang me,  
 And spied his yellow bill;  
 I picked a stone and aimed it  
 And threw it with a will:  
 Then the bird was still.  
 (11. 16-20)

But the youth has not succeeded in stilling the doubt which has now grown inside him, and the lesson of nature becomes a part of his own thinking:

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.'  
 (11. 21-30)

The sun, as a metaphor of change, recalls the first stanza of the poem, which represented the lad starting out to his labor in the morning, but "the sun moves always west," and morning is inevitably succeeded by darkness; change is an undeniable fact of life. The cycle of the sun thus becomes analogous with the cycle of life, for the youth sees that "the road one treads to labour" will eventually "lead one home to rest." His resignation to this fact of existence is seen in the last line of the poem: "And that will be the best."

Lyric XIII is structured on a similar pattern. One of the most oft-quoted of Housman's poems, it too records the sudden emergence from innocence to experience:

When I was one-and-twenty  
 I heard a wise man say,  
 'Give crowns and pounds and guineas  
 But not your heart away;

Give pearls away and rubies  
 But keep your fancy free.'  
 But I was one-and-twenty,  
 No use to talk to me.

When I was one-and-twenty  
 I heard him say again,  
 'The heart out of the bosom  
 Was never given in vain;  
 'Tis paid with sighs a plenty  
 And sold for endless rue.  
 And I am two-and-twenty,  
 And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.

The discovery which is significant in the poem is that love is of a different nature from "crowns and pounds and guineas," and the perception of the transitory nature of love brings with it a sudden shock of recognition. Housman manages to convey the suddenness of the lad's discovery by delaying the revelation until the last two lines of the poem: "And I am two-and-twenty,/And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true."

Lyrics VII and XIII deal with the subject of youth on the threshold of discovery. This motif dominates many of the Shropshire lyrics, and it also serves to explain the predominance of poems concerned with young lovers, soldiers, and condemned criminals. Michael Macklem has pointed out that Housman's sense of the transience of life "explains his emphasis on youth, when the joy of the moment is most intense, and on its shortness and its loss."<sup>12</sup> John Stevenson, in an examination of Housman's use of point of view, reaches the conclusion that the soldiers, young lovers, and criminals of Housman's poetry are all various manifestations of one point of view, that of the Shropshire Lad. But Stevenson's

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<sup>12</sup>Op. cit., p. 44.

findings are also important in revealing the relationship between the various personae of Housman's Shropshire and the mutability theme. He states:

The lad is variously the soldier, the lover, the 'young sinner,' and the rustic observer or commentator on life. In any of the roles, he is almost invariably characterized by his ingenuousness in the grip of a strong emotion, by what is often defined as on the threshold of discovery. He is awkward, but straightforward in his actions, and always the process of discovery results in a revelation of some kind. The conflict that becomes dramatized in the action, and in his own mind, is the conflict between the actual and the ideal, the world of being and the world of becoming; what Mr. Cleanth Brooks has described as 'The world 'Presences' that are absolute and do not change, and the world of becoming which passes from birth to decay and death.' . . . Inherent in the discovery is a rejection of an easy optimism and a keen awareness of the cyclic movement of man's march from birth to death and of man's vanity in his achievement.<sup>13</sup>

Housman thus frequently conveys a sense of life's impermanence by concentrating on that moment in time which brings to man an awareness of his essential mortality. In Lyrics VII and XIII this moment flashes with a suddenness of meaning that dismays the lad but also brings with it an element of the truth of human existence. In Lyric VII the lad's soul takes up the blackbird's message as an undeniable truth, and in Lyric XIII the lad exclaims in a moment of discovery, "Oh, 'tis true, 'tis true." The condemned criminals, the soldiers, and the young lovers in A Shropshire Lad are thus important as symbolic manifestations of Housman's mutability theme. Each faces, in his own way, a moment of high intensity which reveals the truth of man's mortality.

The death which the murderer of Lyric IX faces is thus not distant and unreal but imminent:

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<sup>13</sup>Op. cit., pp. 77-78.

They hang us now in Shrewsbury jail:  
 The whistles blow forlorn,  
 And trains all night groan on the rail  
 To men that die at morn.  
 (ll. 9-12)

The pathetic fallacy of those lines emphasizes the change that occurs in the outlook of one for whom death has become a reality, a part of the consciousness. Death, accordingly, is localized in time in the poem:

. . . he will hear the stroke of eight  
 And not the stroke of nine; . . .  
 (ll. 27-28)

The effect of the poems of A Shropshire Lad concerned with condemned criminals is an intensification of the mutability theme, for Housman sets up a dramatic situation in which the transformation from youth and innocence to experience and death is telescoped into one moment of discovery. This is true of Lyric VIII, where Housman represents in a dramatic monologue a murderer's departure from the land of his youth after his crime:

'Farewell to barn and stack and tree,  
 Farewell to Severn shore.  
 Terence, look your last at me,  
 For I come home no more.

'The sun burns on the half-mown hill,  
 By now the blood is dried;  
 And Maurice among the hay lies still  
 And my knife is in his side.  
 (ll. 1-8)

The poem has been condemned for its "cheap theatrics" and "disagreeable melodramatics,"<sup>14</sup> but Housman manages to convey a universality

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<sup>14</sup>See Frank Sullivan, "Housman's 'Farewell to Barn and Stack and Tree,'" Explicator, 11 (1943-44), item 36.

to the poem by his utilization of the Cain and Abel story.<sup>15</sup> Stanza 3 reveals that the murderer and his victim are brothers:

'My mother thinks us long away;  
 'Tis time the field were mown.  
 She had two sons at rising day,  
 To-night she'll be alone.  
 (ll. 9-12)

Stanza 6 mentions both the rick and the fold, suggesting the two occupations of farmer and shepherd:

'Long for me the rick will wait,  
 And long will wait the fold, . . .  
 (ll. 21-22)

We are led to assume that since the speaker is the farmer ("We'll sweat no more on scythe and rake,/My bloody hands and I"), Maurice, the murdered brother was, like Abel, a shepherd.

The recognition of the parallel with the Biblical story emphasizes again Housman's underlying theme of the growth from innocence to discovery, for the poem clearly employs a myth which is a part of the archetypal pattern of loss of innocence, and the Eden-like setting, from which the youth is forced by his sin to leave, offers still another parallel with the creation myth.

Lyric XLVII, "The Carpenter's Son," also reveals Housman employing traditional Biblical symbols in poems dealing with young criminals. The carpenter's son is clearly Christ. He is to be hanged between two thieves, and, in addition, he "hangs for love." Yet Housman's Christ figure in this poem, like the soldiers in "1887," represents a reversal

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<sup>15</sup>This interpretation is suggested by R. T. R., "Housman's 'Farewell to Barn and Stack and Tree,'" Explicator, 1 (1942-43), query 29.

of a traditional concept. Just as the soldiers in Lyric I were used to emphasize the physical rather than the spiritual basis of life, "The Carpenter's Son" reverses the pattern traditionally associated with Christ's crucifixion. Instead of a Christ who dies magnanimously that others may be saved, Housman's poem represents the carpenter's son as regretting his loss of innocence, for experience has taught him that his efforts to better mankind were futile:

'Oh, at home had I but stayed  
 'Prenticed to my father's trade,  
 Had I stuck to plane and adze,  
 I had not been lost, my lads.

'Then I might have built perhaps  
 Gallows-trees for other chaps,  
 Never dangled on my own,  
 Had I but left III alone.  
 (ll. 5-12)

Instead of the symbolic act by which man is redeemed of his sins, the death of the carpenter's son is regarded in the poem only as an example for the lad's comrades to "leave III alone":

'Comrades all, that stand and gaze,  
 Walk henceforth in other ways;  
 See my neck and save your own:  
 Comrades all, leave III alone.  
 (ll. 21-24)

Housman's motives in Lyric XLVII might appear at first quite puzzling unless the poem is related to the over-all theme of A Shropshire Lad. Seen in this larger context, "The Carpenter's Son" becomes another expression of the mutability theme. S. G. Andrews has pointed out that Housman's use of the Biblical allusion in the poem represents a reversal of the traditional poetic use of allusion. Instead of adding to the meaning of the situation described in the poem, Housman's allusion to Christ points

back to the original act of crucifixion and asks the reader to reinterpret its significance in the light of the concept of man represented in A Shropshire Lad. Andrews states:

It is significant that Housman's repeated allusions to Christ do not help us to understand the carpenter's son or his fate. Instead, they encourage us to transfer the speech of the Carpenter's son to the mouth of Christ and to search for a sense in which the speech might apply to Him.<sup>16</sup>

It appears, then, that 'The Carpenter's Son,' like '1887' is a poem which attempts to re-define a spiritual concept in strictly humanistic terms. Housman's Christ is a disillusioned man who is faced with the vanity of his efforts in the light of his knowledge of the true nature of man. As Andrews notes, the lesson Housman draws from the life of Christ is that it is futile to attempt to change man's nature, to war with evil; the mature man has learned to accept it as an inevitable condition in a transitory and imperfect world. Housman's Christ has accepted at his death the essential mortality of man, and the only promise he is able to leave to his comrades is that they will face a better death than he now faces:

'Make some day a decent end,  
Shrewder fellows than your friend.  
Fare you well, for ill fare I:  
Live, lads, and I will die.'  
(ll. 25-28)

Thus, the condemned criminals of A Shropshire Lad make the tragic discovery of man's impermanence in the face of immediate death. Housman's soldiers too become important symbols in the development of the theme.

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<sup>16</sup>Housman's 'The Carpenter's Son,' Explicator, XIX (1960-61), item 3.

Two poems dealing with war, "1887" and "The Recruit," have already been discussed. Housman's attitude toward the English soldier, as revealed in these as well as the other war poems of A Shropshire Lad, is a curious mixture of admiration and irony. In "1887" the soldiers are glorified as men who, in the labor of preserving the state, "shared the work with God." Yet they are saviors who could not even save themselves, and they lie buried now in foreign fields. In "The Recruit" the poem's narrator wishes a young soldier well but hints that his memory may well be short-lived. Yet this ambivalent attitude is explained if one realizes that the soldier is man in Housman's universe, and his tragic dilemma is man's dilemma in "a world he never made." Lyric XXII reveals one aspect of this attitude toward the soldier:

The street sounds to the soldier's tread,  
 And out we troop to see:  
 A single redcoat turns his head,  
 He turns and looks at me.

My man, from sky to sky's so far,  
 We never crossed before;  
 Such leagues apart the world's ends are,  
 We're like to meet no more;

What thoughts at heart have you and I  
 We cannot stop to tell;  
 But dead or living, drunk or dry,  
 Soldier, I wish you well.

The narrator's respect for the soldier in the poem is clearly not based on individual qualities; the soldier is a stranger, and he cannot stop to tell what thoughts are in his heart. The speaker's attitude is based instead on the generic qualities of the soldier; he is respected simply because he is a soldier, because he has accepted the consequences of being what he is. These consequences are amplified in the other war

poems of A Shropshire Lad. In Lyric XXXV, the first two stanzas present the image of soldiers following the sound of drums to certain death:

On the idle hill of summer,  
 Sleepy with the flow of streams,  
 Far I hear the steady drummer  
 Drumming like a noise in dreams.

Far and near and low and louder  
 On the roads of earth go by,  
 Dear to friends and food for powder,  
 Soldiers marching, all to die.  
 (ll. 1-8)

(The fate of the soldier and the fate of man is to march to an inevitable death.) Housman does not glorify or romanticize this process. Stanza 3 presents a stark picture of the forgotten dead:

East and west on fields forgotten  
 Bleach the bones of comrades slain,  
 Lonely lads and dead and rotten;  
 None that go return again.  
 (ll. 9-12)

The significance of the soldiers of A Shropshire Lad lies in the fact that Housman is able to magnify his theme through the war imagery. The soldier is man stripped of all superfluous trappings. In Housman's war poems, an elemental dichotomy may be observed between life and death. The soldier's symbolic function is to dramatize man's inevitable march toward death: "None that go return again." The last stanza of Lyric XXV illustrates something of the motivation behind the soldier's willing acceptance of that march:

Far the calling bugles hollo,  
 High the screaming fife replies,  
 Gay the files of scarlet follow:  
 Woman bore me, I will rise.  
 (ll. 13-16)

The scarlet-clad soldiers rise to answer the call of war because 'woman bore me.' It is of the nature of man to experience the fate of certain death, and Housman's admiration for the soldier, which is evident throughout A Shropshire Lad, is based on the fact that the soldier represents man at his highest, stoically accepting the fate of his creation. He can accept death, as the last line of the poem makes clear, because he has accepted the truth of his own transitory existence. In this respect, the poem's ending is close to the ending of "1887" in recalling that man's individual existence is based on the act of generation and is therefore impermanent in contrast to the permanence of the generic class of man.

Two concluding war poems, Lyrics LVI and LX, support the view that the soldier's primary symbolic function is to depict dramatically man's inevitable journey toward death. Lyric LVI deals with the futility of attempting to escape this fate. It is entitled "The Day of Battle," and, like many of the poems of A Shropshire Lad, it centers on a crisis which reveals to man the truth of his transitory existence. Stanza 1 depicts the dilemma which confronts the soldier:

'Far I hear the bugle blow  
 To call me where I would not go,  
 And the guns begin the song,  
 'Soldier, fly or stay for long.'  
 (ll. 1-4)

The choice that is presented in the first stanza dictates the structure of the remaining three stanzas; each is structured as one step of a logical argument (if . . . but since . . . therefore):

'Comrade, if to turn and fly  
 Made a soldier never die,  
 Fly I would, for who would not?  
 'Tis sure no pleasure to be shot.

'But since the man that runs away  
Lives to die another day,  
And cowards' funerals, when they come,  
Are not wept so well at home,

'Therefore, though the best is bad,  
Stand and do the best, my lad;  
Stand and fight and see your slain,  
And take the bullet in your brain.'  
(ll. 5-16)

The crux of the argument lies in lines 9 and 10. The inevitability of death makes escape merely a cowardly delaying tactic. The soldier is thus left with the decision to 'stand and do the best,' to accept the fate of being a soldier, which involves facing death squarely without flinching.

Lyric LX too concentrates on the death which is the inevitable fate of the soldier, though in a more indirect manner. Where Lyric LVI contained a reasoned, logical structure, Lyric LX reaches a similar conclusion without logic or even without a reference to death:

Now hollow fires burn out to black,  
And lights are guttering low:  
Square your shoulders, lift your pack,  
And leave your friends and go.

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.

The light-dark image pattern of the poem becomes yet another of Housman's unstated analogies through which he structures his theme. The simplicity of the pattern perhaps accounts for the fact that we recognize that the poem is about death without actually being told directly that it is. And we may even recognize that, like Lyric LVI, the poem offers a sort of argument of its own, though, of course, a very indirect one. It

is an argument by analogy to which we have to supply the literal terms which the poem, in its pattern, only implies. It is not necessary, in understanding the poem, to consciously label the corresponding dichotomies (light--life, darkness--death), but this unstated correspondence is certainly present. Housman's structure, as Elisabeth Schneider has observed, has the effect of driving in the meaning although leaving certain ideas unexpressed.<sup>17</sup> Housman accomplishes this in Lyric LX by a fusion of pattern and meaning, for in a significant way the pattern of the poem is the meaning, and the final line of the poem ("There's nothing but the night") becomes meaningful only when the reader accepts the light--dark pattern that is developed in the poem. Likewise, the poem's argument (that since death is inevitable, it is not to be feared) becomes meaningful only when the further implications of Housman's structure are realized.

The function of the large number of poems of A Shropshire Lad dealing with criminals and soldiers should now be clear. These figures are utilized by Housman as symbols of mutable man, and they present in a simplified and dramatic form the dilemma of man on which the poet concentrates. In a sense the soldier, the condemned criminal, is archetypal man, confronted by the penalty of death and forced to rationalize that death as a part of human existence.

The poems of A Shropshire Lad dealing with young lovers are also important in the development of the mutability theme. Macklem has noted Housman's frequent use of love as a traditional symbol of the intensity

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<sup>17</sup>Op. cit., pp. 95-96.

and brevity of happiness.<sup>18</sup> Stevenson has spoken of Housman's lover as one who, "aware of the inevitability of death and decay, aware of the ambiguity of honor and love, accepts the moment of fulfillment as the only reality."<sup>19</sup> Yet, as Stevenson further notes, the lover in Housman's poetry soon discovers the transitory nature of love, and his commitment ends in frustration. It is thus that love frequently functions as a symbol for mutability in Housman's poetry. The ideal love of youth, characterized by a sense of permanence, leads to the disillusioned love of actuality in the same way that the process of growth brings with it an ever-increasing awareness of the decay and impermanence of life. Housman further implements the close correlation of love with the mutability theme by his constant identification of love with death. Tom Burns Haber, noting this interweaving of love and death, states: "When Housman mentions the sex-embrace he usually casts the odor of death around it."<sup>20</sup>

Three consecutive poems, Lyrics XXV, XXVI, and XXVII, illustrate Housman's juxtaposition of love and death. All three poems deal with a triangle of lovers in which one of the lovers is now in the grave. Lyric XXVII, often called "Is My Team Plowing," reveals the inconstancy of love in depicting a dead lover speaking from the grave. The poem alternates the dead man's questions and his friend's answers:

'Is my team plowing,  
That I was used to drive  
And hear the harness jingle  
When I was man alive?'

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<sup>18</sup>Op. cit., p. 44.

<sup>19</sup>Op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>20</sup>A. E. Housman's *Downward Eye*, p. 312.

Aye, the horses trample,  
 The harness jingles now;  
 No change though you lie under  
 The land you used to plow.

'Is football playing  
 Along the river shore,  
 With lads to chase the leather,  
 Now I stand up no more?'

Aye, the ball is flying,  
 The lads play heart and soul;  
 The goal stands up, the keeper  
 Stands up to keep the goal.  
 (ll. 1-16)

The first four stanzas serve to emphasize the changelessness of the scene the dead man has left. The cycle of life has continued unaltered: "No change though you lie under/The land you used to plow." This idea is continued in the last four stanzas of the poem with added poignancy as the dead man asks about his friend and his sweetheart:

'Is my girl happy,  
 That I thought hard to leave,  
 And has she tired of weeping  
 As she lies down at eve?'

Aye, she lies down lightly  
 She lies not down to weep;  
 Your girl is well contented.  
 Be still, my lad, and sleep.

'Is my friend hearty,  
 Now I am thin and pine,  
 And has he found to sleep in  
 A better bed than mine?'

Yes, lad, I lie easy,  
 I lie as lads would choose;  
 I cheer a dead man's sweetheart,  
 Never ask me whose.  
 (ll. 17-32)

The last stanza emphasizes the paradox that is inherent in the poem, for in asserting the permanence of the life that the dead man has left, his

friend has also emphasized the transience of individual man as contrasted with generic man. The friend and the sweetheart remain unchanged, but only at the expense of the dead lover. The poem thus reveals Housman's use of love as a symbol of the brevity and transience of life. It deals with two kinds of love--the love of a friend and the love of a sweetheart. The dead youth's questions reveal that he naively regards love as fixed and unchanging. He asks if his sweetheart has "tired of weeping," as if physical exhaustion were the only force which could end her grief. His innocence and naivete are also revealed in the ambiguity of his desire that his friend has found "a better bed" to sleep in. The poem's last stanza, however, destroys the dead youth's notion of love's permanence as an illusion. Love, like life, is marked by an inconstancy and a brevity which is emphasized further by the juxtaposition of the lover and the grave which characterizes this poem and the two which precede it.

Lyric XXV presents the same situation from a different point of view--that of the lover who steals a dead man's sweetheart:

This time of year a twelvemonth past,  
 When Fred and I would meet,  
 We needs must jangle till at last  
 We fought and I was beat.

So then the summer fields about,  
 Till rainy days began,  
 Rose Harland on her Sundays out  
 Walked with the better man.

The better man she walks with still,  
 Though now 'tis not with Fred:  
 A lad that lives and has his will  
 Is worth a dozen dead.

Fred keeps the house all kinds of weather,  
 And clay's the house he keeps;  
 When Rose and I walk out together  
 Stock-still lies Fred and sleeps.

Lyric XXVI completes the triangle by viewing the situation from the third point of view--that of the lover who accepts a new sweetheart after the death of the old one:

Along the field as we came by  
 A year ago, my love and I,  
 The aspen over stile and stone  
 Was talking to itself along.  
 'Oh, who are these that kiss and pass?  
 A country lover and his lass;  
 Two lovers looking to be wed;  
 And time shall put them both to bed,  
 But she shall lie with earth, above,  
 And he beside another love.'  
 (ll. 1-10)

The last stanza of the poem reveals that the prophecy of the aspen tree has indeed been fulfilled:

And sure enough beneath the tree  
 There walks another love with me, . . .  
 (ll. 11-12)

However, the poem further strengthens its characterization of love's inconsistency by suggesting an endless cycle of lovers forgotten in death and betrayed by the surviving lover:

And overhead the aspen heaves  
 Its rainy-sounding silver leaves;  
 And I spell nothing in their stir,  
 But now perhaps they speak to her,  
 And plain for her to understand  
 They talk about a time at hand  
 When I shall sleep with clover clad,  
 And she beside another lad.  
 (ll. 13-20)

These three lyrics illustrate on a small scale the sense of continuity which characterizes the whole of A Shropshire Lad. Examined closely, the three poems are seen as three perspectives of the same theme. Each is concerned with the destructive power of time, and each develops

its theme by concentrating on the ephemeral nature of those feelings and emotions which are traditionally regarded as the most enduring, the least subject to change--love and the memory of the dead. But the sense of the cruelty of time is strengthened in each of the poems by Housman's depiction of the transiency of the individual against the background of the permanence of his class. All three poems are structured around this contrast; the pattern of life continues for the living, and the dead are soon forgotten. As Nesca Robb has stated in discussing these poems:

Life goes on with its claims and affections, and time brings the swift onset of forgetfulness and the betrayal of the dead by the living. . . . It is a discovery so bitter that it shakes the poet as death itself has not the power to do.<sup>21</sup>

The unity observed in the theme of these lyrics may be noted in all of the poems of A Shropshire Lad dealing with young lovers. Each depicts something of the cruelty of time, and transiency of love and of life. "Bredon Hill," Lyric XXI, is structured on the pattern which characterizes many of the lyrics of the work. It opens "in summertime on Bredon" with a scene suggestive of youth and promise, but in the course of the poem the early hope of youth is extinguished by death, and there is a corresponding transition from summer to winter, "when the snows at Christmas/On Bredon top were strown." The poem contains yet another image pattern through which the mutability theme is developed--the church bells which sound through the shires. This image is introduced in stanza 1:

In summertime on Bredon  
The bells they sound so clear;

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<sup>21</sup>Op. cit., p. 25.

Round both the shires they ring them  
 In steeples far and near,  
 A happy noise to hear.  
 (ll. 1-5)

The two young lovers who lie on Bredon Hill on Sunday morning resist the call of the bells as a summons to worship but reinterpret them as symbolic of the fulfillment of their love; they hear them as wedding bells:

The bells would ring to call her  
 In valleys miles away:  
 'Come all to church, good people;  
 Good people, come and pray.'  
 But here my love would stay.

And I would turn and answer  
 Among the springing thyme,  
 'Oh, peal upon our wedding,  
 And we will hear the chime,  
 And come to church in time.'  
 (ll. 11-20)

In stanza 6 the bells have become funeral bells, for one of the lovers "stole out unbeknown/And went to church alone." Because of her death the sound of the bells has taken on a new meaning for the lad who now listens to them alone. The sound which was in youth and innocence "a happy noise to hear" and a symbol of promise has now become, through the experience by which the lad has discovered the impermanence of love and of life, a call to death, and it is a call which the youth realizes he must answer. The last stanza of the poem states:

The bells they sound on Bredon,  
 And still the steeples hum,  
 'Come all to church, good people,'--  
 Oh, noisy bells, be dumb;  
 I hear you, I will come.  
 (ll. 31-35)

"The True Lover," Lyric LIII, again centers on the inconstancy of love with what appears to be symbolic implications. The poem is concerned

with the suicide of a young lover; yet critics have been intrigued by its cryptic message. Brooks, Purser, and Warren talk of the poem's "symbolic force" and its ability to project "something beyond itself."<sup>22</sup> Maude K. Hawkins also finds that the suicide "may be entirely symbolic."<sup>23</sup> Much of the poem's force lies in its effective use of the ballad form. It is stripped of all but the most significant details with no attempt at characterization, and the true nature of the situation described in the poem is not immediately given but is revealed by degrees so that it is not until the last line of the poem that the reader is able to interpret (or perhaps reinterpret) the ambiguous title of the poem and to understand the phrase which is repeated in the poem: 'when lovers crown their vows.'

The poem deals with a lover who desires to see his sweetheart (who has presumably rejected him) once more before he departs for some unnamed destination:

The lad came to the door at night,  
When lovers crown their vows,  
And whistled soft and out of sight  
In shadow of the boughs.

'I shall not vex you with my face  
Henceforth, my love, for aye;  
So take me in your arms a space  
Before the east" is grey.

'When I from hence away am past  
I shall not find a bride,  
And you shall be the first and last  
I ever lay beside.'

(ll. 1-12)

<sup>22</sup>An Approach to Literature, New York, 1952, pp. 296-297.

<sup>23</sup>"Housman's 'The True Lover,'" Explicator, VIII (1949-50), item 61.

It is not until stanza 5 that the reader discovers the true nature of the lad's journey. The first suggestions come through the sweetheart's questions:

'Oh do you breathe, lad, that your breast  
 Seems not to rise and fall,  
 And here upon my bosom prest  
 There beats no heart at all?'  
 (ll. 17-20)

. . .

'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?'  
 (ll. 25-28)

The lad's answers, which reveal that his heart has stopped and "never goes again" and that his throat has been cut, only make more emphatic the point which has already become clear--that his journey is a journey of death. Realizing this fact, the reader may well wonder at Housman's purpose in depicting such an unrealistic situation. Yet the death of the young lover is important to the theme which the poem develops. Darrel Abel's analysis<sup>24</sup> of "The True Lover" is quite perceptive in finding that the poem's real center is the assumption that human nature is incapable of an enduring passion. The true lover of the poem's title is one whose love never ceases, but a knowledge of the inconstancy of love brings with it the realization that the lover must eventually break his vow to be true. Therefore, as Abel further notes, the lover in this poem "remains true by adopting the desperately logical expedient of suicide at the

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<sup>24</sup>Housman's 'The True Lover,' Explicator, VIII (1949-50), item 23.

consummating moment of love.<sup>25</sup> With this interpretation in mind, we may note, again following Abel's analysis, that the line which is repeated twice in the poem, "when lovers crown their vows," takes on new meaning. In the opening stanza the line may be read conventionally as suggesting the lovers' promise to consummate the act of love. But through the course of the poem Housman has again<sup>26</sup> redefined the line so that when it appears as the last line of the poem, it refers to the act of suicide as the true crowning of the vows of love. Thus the poem emphasizes the transitory nature of human emotions by suggesting that only by death is man freed from the inconstancy that characterizes life.<sup>27</sup> The true lover of the poem's title is defined as a dead lover.

All of Housman's love lyrics in A Shropshire Lad are not as serious in tone as the preceding analysis might indicate. Yet all of them are characterized by the same emphasis on inconstancy. The lover in Lyric XVIII is almost flippant in his attitude toward the inconstancy of love. Yet even though the poem is light in tone and avoids Housman's customary association of love with death or suicide, Lyric XVIII does emphasize the brevity of love and further underscores Housman's theme that "nothing will remain":

Oh, when I was in love with you,  
Then I was clean and brave,

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>See, for example, Lyrics I and III, where Housman accomplishes the same feat of redefining a phrase or line through the course of the poem.

<sup>27</sup>This point--that death furnishes a permanence which man is denied in life--is an important corollary to the mutability theme and is discussed more fully in Chapter III.

And miles around the wonder grew  
 How well did I behave.

And now the fancy passes by,  
 And nothing will remain,  
 And miles around they'll say that I  
 Am quite myself again.

Lyric VI contains something of the same lighthearted view of love. It treats love as an illness in the courtly love tradition, and the lover is "mute and dull of cheer and pale," lying "at death's own door." The maiden can "heal his all" but at the risk of becoming infected herself. So transitory is the nature of love that if the lover's desires are fulfilled, his love is over, and it is the maiden who must "lie down "forlorn":

Then the lad for longing sighs,  
 Mute and dull of cheer and pale,  
 If at death's own door he lies,  
 Maiden, you can heal his all.

Lovers' ills are all to buy:  
 The wan look, the hollow tone,  
 The hung head, the sunken eye,  
 You can have them for your own.

Buy them, buy them: eve and morn  
 Lovers' ills are all to sell.  
 Then you can lie down forlorn;  
 But the lover will be well.

The last two lines indicate not merely that the maiden is now in love also, but that the lad is now "well," that is, has recovered from the ills of love and no longer holds the same affection for the maiden, so that it is now she who is "forlorn." The process has thus come full circle, and the poem emphasizes the presumably endless cycle for which love's intransiency is responsible.

Recognizing the cyclical pattern in the poem, we may see its relationship to Lyrics XXV, XXVI, and XXVII, which depicted the shifting pattern of affections among a triangle of lovers, and to Lyric XXI, which utilized the metaphor of the changing seasons to portray love's changefulness. The constant recurrence of this cyclical pattern in the love lyrics as well as its frequent occurrence in the opening lyrics such as II, III, V, and VII, emphasizes again that Housman consistently employs such a structural pattern as submerged metaphor for change.

Tom Burns Haber has noted the frequency of this cyclical structure in Housman's poetry.<sup>28</sup> He quotes, for example, from Lyric XXXVI, which employs the metaphor of the circle, and states that in the two stanzas quoted below Housman wrote "his poem of his poems," that is, we are to understand, his poem which describes his poetic method:

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.

But ere the circle homeward hies  
 Far, far must it remove:  
 White in the moon the long road lies  
 That leads me from my love.  
 (ll. 9-16)

Haber points out that not only does Housman utilize the circle metaphorically in his structure but he also creates a circular pattern through his practice of making one or more of the last lines of a poem identical with one or more of the first or, at times, repeating a key word or phrase in the last line that was found in the opening of the

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<sup>28</sup>A. E. Housman: "Astronomer-Poet," English Studies, XXXV (1954), pp. 154-158.

poem. Yet Haber ignores the relationship between this structuring principle and the theme of Housman's poetry. He theorizes instead that Housman's interest in astronomy<sup>29</sup> is responsible for his tendency to employ the circle as a frequent metaphor in his poems. Housman's use of cyclical structure Haber regards as "the habituated movement of his mind, which did not act in tangential and parabolic patterns, symbols of the true maker."<sup>30</sup> Haber, in fact, is convinced that Housman's utilization of the cyclical pattern works to the detriment of his poetry:

As to form, these influences have not been fortunate: the stuff of poetry was too often subdued to what the scholar worked in. . . . When the poet's mind began to give form to the emotional flux, it too often was set spinning in the well-worn cycle. Scit vox missa reverti. Without his circles and ellipses the astronomer is nothing but they are death to poetry.<sup>31</sup>

Haber fails to see, however, that Housman's structuring principle is indeed parabolic<sup>32</sup> in another sense of the word, for his structural pattern frequently acts as a parable or image of the theme that is predominant in the poems of A Shropshire Lad. For example, a close analysis of Lyric XXXVI, which Haber uses as illustrative of the cyclical pattern in Housman's poetry, reveals that the circle, as the central metaphor of

<sup>29</sup>Haber records that as a child one of Housman's games involved placing his two younger brothers on the lawn to illustrate the mechanics of the solar system. Housman maintained a lifelong interest in astronomy. The majority of his scholarly work was devoted to editing the five books of the Astronomica of Manilius. . .

<sup>30</sup>p. cit., p. 158.

<sup>31</sup>ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Haber apparently means by the term parabolic "in the form of a parabola." Another meaning is "in the form of a parable or allegory."

the poem, is not merely an habituated movement of the poet's mind. Instead, the cyclical movement is essential in depicting and reinforcing the poem's theme of life's pattern of change. Haber omitted stanza 2 of the poem, which fuses the circle metaphor and the poem's meaning. Stanzas 1 and 2 are as follows:

White in the moon the long road lies,  
 The moon stands blank above;  
 White in the moon the long road lies  
 That leads me from my love.

Still hangs the hedge without a gust,  
 Still, still the shadows stay:  
 My feet upon the moonlit dust  
 Pursue the ceaseless way.  
 (ll. 1-8)

The pattern of this stanza is a familiar one that occurs repeatedly in A Shropshire Lad. It contrasts ceaseless change with stability and permanence. In the first two lines the word still is repeated three times, and the phrase without a gust and the word stay also emphasize a motionlessness that is in sharp contrast to the lover's "ceaseless" pursuit of his way. Furthermore, Housman utilizes a cyclical structure for the whole poem. The last stanza repeats essentially the rises of the first stanza and repeats two of the lines of the first stanza. Thus the structure seems to represent not merely an obsessive trait in the mind of the poet but a functional element of the poem. In fact, the whole poem functions as an expressive metaphor of mutability, with the lover's endless change shown against a backdrop of changelessness.

A similar pattern of change may be observed in Lyric XXXI. Again a cyclical pattern is developed in the poem, and again the functional

relationship between the pattern and the poem's theme may be demonstrated.

The poem, quoted in full, is as follows:

On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble:  
 His forest fleece the Wrekin heaves;  
 The gale, it plies the sapling double,  
 And thick on Severn snow the leaves.

'Twould blow like this through holt and hanger  
 When Uricon the city stood:  
 'Tis the old wind in the old anger,  
 But then it threshed another wood.

Then 'twas before my time, the Roman  
 At yonder heaving hill would stare:  
 The blood that warms an English yeoman,  
 The thoughts that hurt him, they were there.

There, like the wind through woods in riot,  
 Through him the gale of life blew high;  
 The tree of man was never quiet:  
 Then 'twas the Roman, now 'tis I.

The gale, it plies the saplings double,  
 It blows so hard, 'twill soon be gone:  
 To-day the Roman and his trouble  
 Are ashes under Uricon.

A knowledge of the geographical references in the poem is necessary if it is to be completely understood. Robert Stallman explains them as follows:

The Wrekin, near Shrewsbury and Wenlock in Salop or Shropshire, the region about Ludlow celebrated by Housman, is a solitary West-country hill over 1300 feet high. "It is interesting to the geologist," Murray's Handbook of England and Wales reports, as being a remarkable example of eruptive trap. . . . There are traces of British camps on the summit, but they are much overgrown with plantations." Since the Wrekin was an extinct volcano. "When Uricon the city stood," the ashes of the Roman under Uricon are not volcanic; they are the ashes simply of Roman and English yeomen levelled by Time and Fate.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>"Housman's 'On Wenlock Edge,'" Explicator, III (1944-45), item

As Stallman implies, the poem is concerned with time but, more specifically, with the paradoxical notions of continuity and change in time. The poem, of course, has a much broader scope than the love lyric like No. XVIII; its scene takes in centuries. The Wrekin is itself a symbol of both the change and continuity of time. Its slopes show evidence of the Roman city of Uricon, which has now been levelled by the decay of centuries. Yet the wind which blows now "through holt and hanger"<sup>34</sup> is the "old wind in the old anger" that blew through another wood when a Roman watched the saplings of the woods double. Thus both mutability and permanence are represented by the scene on Wenlock Edge.

Housman also emphasizes the continuity of feeling which exists in generic man: "The blood that warms an English yeoman,/The thoughts that hurt him, they were there" [in the time of the Roman]. Yet within this continuity Housman also reveals change. In line 16 the Englishman who watches the wind riot through the woods acknowledges the cycle of change which constitutes human existence: "Then 'twas the Roman, now 'tis I." The last two lines of the poem are eloquent in their implication that the Englishman realizes the significance of his discovery that "then 'twas the Roman, now 'tis I":

To-day the Roman and his trouble  
Are ashes under Uricon.

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<sup>34</sup>The sense of history is strengthened in the poem by Housman's use of the archaic words holt and hanger, both from the Anglo Saxon word stock. Hanger, according to the OED, refers to "a wood on the side of a steep hill or bank." A holt is a wooded hill.

As Spiro Peterson has observed,<sup>35</sup> line 16 almost echoes after the conclusion of the poem. That is, the reader may be tempted to supply line 16 as the final line of the poem. The Roman had his day and is now ashes under Uricon; now 'tis I. The parallel between past and present is complete, and the pattern of human existence has again come full-circle.

But the poem's structure is more complex than the preceding analysis indicates. Two dominant motifs run throughout the poem--the historical perspective of man as symbolized by the hill and its ruins, and the close correlation between man and nature as depicted in the wind imagery. As Peterson has noted, the man-nature parallel reinforces the past-present parallel in the poem.

The poem opens with a scene of a "woods in riot." The forest "heaves"; the "saplings double"; the leaves show "thick on Severn." This disturbance parallels the emotional unrest of the observer (the Englishman, but, by implication, the Roman also), who watches the scene. The poem's structure establishes this parallel by the fusion of the images of man and the images of the wind-torn woods. Fused images such as "gale of life" in line 14 and "tree of man" in line 15 link the two motifs. In addition Housman gives the wind human qualities in his reference to its "old anger" in line 7. Thus Housman, through the structure of the poem, makes the further implication that the pattern of nature and the pattern

<sup>35</sup>The sense of the complete parallel, the logic of the poem, the structure of the stanza demand that the poem conclude with the same three words [now 'tis I]. Like the Roman, the speaker (and 'his trouble') are soon to be under the ashes of Wenlock. The Force, which meant disturbance or change for nature, destruction for past civilization, now signifies oblivion for the speaker himself. All the more conspicuous for their absence are the expected words 'now 'tis I.'" ("Housman's 'On Wenlock Edge,'" Explicator, XV [1956-57], item 46.)

of man's existence are imaged by the same cycle. Peterson finds that the poem's images

reinforce the structure because they interpret the subject, namely, that physical and human nature are passive victims of a Force violent but not malevolent . . . the poem says nature avoids complete destruction by an endless cyclical process--as does man. The Roman and his man-made Uricon are succeeded by the English yeoman and his Wenlock. Man succumbs to his never-quiet spirit, just as nature (wood, hill, river) meets its trouble, gale, old wind in the old anger.<sup>36</sup>

Lyric XXXI thus becomes another of the many expressions of the mutability theme in A Shropshire Lad. It also serves as an impressive argument against Haber's contention that Housman's cyclical structure is not a meaningful and necessary element in his poetic construction. Lyric XXXI, like many of the other lyrics of A Shropshire Lad examined in this study, demonstrates that Housman utilizes structure as an inseparable part of the poem's total meaning. The mutability theme which dominates A Shropshire Lad and the cyclical structure which recurs repeatedly in the poems are fused into a unity of meaning which cannot be explained away merely by reference to Housman's study of astronomy or an obsessive habit of mind.

Haber and other Housman critics have tended to ignore the essential unity of theme which characterizes A Shropshire Lad and the close relationship which exists between this theme and the structural patterns of the poems of the work. Yet it should be clear that a recognition of the unity of theme which characterizes the work is necessary for an

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<sup>36</sup>ibid.

understanding of Housman's reliance on certain symbolic characters and incidents as well as his reliance on certain recurring structuring principles. The preceding examination of the mutability theme in A Shropshire Lad has attempted to demonstrate its predominance in the work; yet the theme is by no means restricted merely to the poems discussed in this chapter. Housman develops two important variations on the mutability theme, and these must be considered in Chapter III.

## CHAPTER III

### THE THEME OF MUTABILITY IN A SHROPSHIRE LAD: HOUSMAN'S QUEST FOR PERMANENCE

The theme of mutability is, of course, one of the great commonplaces of English poetry. Yet the great poets of every age have managed to transform the clichés of the theme into eloquent statements on the human condition. In many ways Housman's treatment of this recurring theme is quite conventional; however, one variation represents something of a departure from tradition.

Lyric II of A Shropshire Lad, "Loveliest of Trees," suggests the more conventional aspects of Housman's utilization of the theme. First, life is short; "fifty springs are little room" to enjoy the beauty of the world. But, further, an awareness of this brevity leads to a desire to experience life more intensely; "since to look at things in bloom/Fifty springs are little room," the observer is motivated to experience the beauty of spring immediately. Thus a knowledge of life's mutability here leads to a more vigorous participation in life.

Yet a seemingly contradictory reaction to the consciousness of life's mutability may be observed in the work. In many of the poems an awareness of the brevity and decay which characterize life leads to the acceptance of death instead of a more intense participation in life. Lyric VII, for example, had characterized life as a cyclical process of change ended only by death.

What use to rise and rise?  
 Rise man a thousand mornings  
 Yet down at last he lies, . . .  
 (ll. 12-14)

And in the last stanza of the poem:

The sun moves always west;  
 The road one treads to labour  
 Will lead one home to rest, . . .  
 (ll. 27-29)

And the poet adds to the last stanza in an acceptance of death as the end of the process of mutability: "And that will be the best."

These two apparently conflicting reactions to the awareness of life's essential mutability may be traced throughout A Shropshire Lad. They represent the poet's attempts to work out some of the implications that his theme suggests. They also support the unity of theme in the work, for in tracing these two threads of the theme through the poems of A Shropshire Lad, one discovers that the mutability theme lies at the center of almost every lyric. Furthermore, a careful analysis of these two aspects of the theme casts some doubt on many of the assumptions of critics of A Shropshire Lad, especially the large majority who view Housman as the bitter pessimist who is content merely to express in his poetry the evil and injustice of life. It is clear, in fact, in examining the view of life represented in "Loveliest of Trees" that to regard Housman merely as a pessimist is to oversimplify the complex issues involved in his treatment of the mutability theme.

Lyric IV, entitled "Reveille," continues the idea introduced in "Loveliest of Trees." The poem's title suggests both its subject and its central metaphor. It is a call for action in the face of approaching

death, and it develops its theme structurally through the controlling metaphor of the sun's passage from dawn to dusk:

Wake: the silver dusk returning  
 Up the beach of darkness brims,  
 And the ship of sunrise burning  
 Stands upon the eastern rims.

Wake: the vaulted shadow shatters,  
 Trampled to the floor it spanned,  
 And the tent of night in tatters  
 Straws the sky-pavilioned land.  
 (ll. 1-8)

Housman's use of the conventional symbolic association of light with life, darkness with death has previously been noted. Here the poem is structured on the analogy of the journey of life from youth to old age and the journey of the sun from dawn to darkness. The unstated analogy serves as the basis for the argument for action and involvement in life in youth before death removes the opportunity for action:

Up, lad: thews that lie and cumber  
 Sunlit pallets never thrive;  
 Morns abed and daylight slumber  
 Were not meant for man alive.

Clay lies still, but blood's a rover;  
 Breath's a ware that will not keep.  
 Up, lad: when the journey's over  
 There'll be time enough to sleep.  
 (ll. 17-24)

The poem opens with dawn, closes with the suggestion of falling night (l. 24) In the same way that Lyric II progressed from springtime to winter, and the use of the journey of the sun as a structuring device develops the same underlying notion that mutability is the essential fact of existence.

But Lyric IV reveals one additional aspect of the mutability theme. The consciousness that life is subject to decay, that 'breath's

a ware that will not keep," does not lead Housman to a rejection of life, rather, as "Reveille" suggests, to an emphasis on an intensity of living. In other words, the fact that life is inevitably marked by a slow decay and eventual death does not therefore make it worthless; on the contrary, the recognition of mutability leads to an emphasis of the value of life at its prime. Ignoring this aspect of Housman's theme has led to some misinterpretation of A Shropshire Lad. Hugh Molson, for example, states that Housman regarded human life "as an unmerited ordeal which serves no useful purpose but from which man obtains his final release after death."<sup>1</sup> Stephen Spender finds that "the hangings, suicides, shooting, war, hemlock" of Housman's poems express his feelings about "the wretchedness of life. . . ."<sup>2</sup> Edmund Wilson writes that in Housman's poetry "we find only the realization of man's smallness . . . of his own basic wrongness to himself, his own inescapable anguish."<sup>3</sup>

Yet clearly "Reveille" predicates some value to life. It encourages a participation in life even as it retains a consciousness of approaching death, and this idea is not restricted to one poem. It may be found in a number of the poems of the work. In Lyric XXIV the same theme is expressed:

Say, lad, have you things to do?  
Quick then, while your day's at prime.

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<sup>1</sup>"The Philosophies of Hardy and Housman," Quarterly Review, CCLXVIII (1937), p. 205.

<sup>2</sup>op. cit., p. 159.

<sup>3</sup>"A. E. Housman" in The Triple Thinkers, New York, 1948, p. 62.

Quick, and if 'tis work for two,  
 Here am I, man: now's your time.  
 (ll. 1-4)

Again the call for action is based on the consciousness of life's transience, as may be seen in the last lines of the poem:

Use me ere they lay me low  
 Where a man's no use at all;  
  
 Ere the wholesome flesh decay,  
 And the willing nerve be numb,  
 And the lips lack breath to say,  
 "No, my lad, I cannot come."  
 (ll. 7-12)

In Lyric XXXII the mutability theme again produces an appeal for immediate action:

From far, from eve and morning  
 And yon twelve-winded sky,  
 The stuff of life to knit me  
 Blew higher: here am I.  
  
 Now--for a breath I tarry  
 Nor yet disperse apart--  
 Take my hand quick and tell me,  
 What have you in your heart.  
  
 Speak now, and I will answer;  
 How shall I help you, say;  
 Ere to the wind's twelve quarters  
 I take my endless way.

In this poem Housman's habitual use of the natural elements to suggest mutability may also be observed. The metaphorical use of the wind parallels Housman's use of the seasons and the journey of the sun from morning to night in producing controlling image of man's mutable state. Man is like the wind that gathers from its twelve quarters, tarries "for a breath," then takes its "endless way." And the realization that life is only a moment in an eternity of time serves to quicken the intensity of

that moment: "Take my hand quick and tell me" . . . "Speak now, and I will answer." The repetition of quick cited in lines 2 and 3 of Lyric XXIV quoted above achieves the same end. It is also possible to interpret quick as a pun on the older meaning of the word.

Lyric LVII again emphasizes the value of life even in the face of eternal death:

You smile upon your friend to-day  
 To-day his ills are over:  
 You hearken to the lover's say,  
 And happy is the lover.

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

These poems clearly cast some doubt on the view that Housman regarded life as an "unmerited ordeal" from which death releases man, a view which implies that for Housman death is superior to life. S. G. Brown, in fact, states that for Housman "death is good because it is a release from trouble, an endless sleep."<sup>4</sup> The tone of Lyrics II, IV, XXIV, XXXII, and LVII refute such a view. And, in fact, it is possible to quote passages in A Shropshire Lad in which Housman states that life at its prime is far superior to death. Lyric XXV states:

A lad that lives and has his will  
 Is worth a dozen dead.  
 (ll. 11-12)

And Lyric XXXIII introduces the idea of prolonging life through love:

If truth in hearts that perish  
 Could move the powers on high,

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<sup>4</sup>"The Poetry of A. E. Housman," Sewanee Review, XLVIII (1940), p. 397.

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 held in these.  
(ll. 1-12)

Thus a number of the poems of A Shropshire Lad predicate a value to life not in spite of but almost because of the recognition of its essential mutability. Yet this aspect of the work is in direct contradiction to the widely held view that Housman voices "a philosophy compounded of pessimism and defeat."<sup>5</sup> But is A Shropshire Lad self-contradictory in its view of the relative values of life and death? A number of critics have felt that such is indeed the case. Jacob Bronowski states:

Housman's poems reel from one standard to another. If one poem finds love worthy . . . the poem over the page will find it pointless. . . . If one poem is glad that a young man has left life before honour, the next will say that silly lads always want to leave their life.<sup>6</sup>

Hugh Molson finds that Housman answers the question of the value of life and death in contradictory ways:

The feeling that it is better to be alive than dead is vigorously expressed by a suitor who, rejected while his rival was alive, has survived him with satisfactory results. . . . Exactly the opposite opinion is expressed in another poem.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 101.

<sup>6</sup>op. cit., pp. 222-223.

<sup>7</sup>op. cit., pp. 207-208.

J. B. Priestley writes:

. . . his running grievance on examination, can be resolved into two separate complaints that are not at all consistent; in the first, life is lovely enough, but all too short, and death is the enemy of happiness; in the second, existence itself is a misery only to be endured until the welcome arrival of death the deliverer.<sup>8</sup>

Rica Brenner states that in the variations of the theme of A Shropshire Lad we find:

. . . an insistence on enjoying to the full the pleasures of the moment, or an equally insistent welcoming of death as a happy solution to life's cares. . . . Whatever the line of reasoning may be, the same conclusion is reached. Life is beautiful but brief; or life is a burden, to be laid down gladly. In either case, death comes; and, more often than not, it is a welcome release.<sup>9</sup>

Thus it is obvious that a number of critics have found Housman inconsistent in working out the implications of the mutability theme. Although in a number of poems Housman has emphasized that an awareness of time leads to an increased awareness of the value of life and of living, commentators have pointed out that the emphasis on the value of death in A Shropshire Lad contradicts this view. It is necessary, therefore, to examine Housman's treatment of death in the work and to relate his view of death to the mutability theme.

Housman's obsession with death has been widely noted. R. P. Blackmur states that Housman wrote "almost entirely of death."<sup>10</sup> Bronowski is concerned with "the steady place of death in Houseman's

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<sup>8</sup>Op. cit., p. 173.

<sup>9</sup>Op. cit., pp. 182, 184.

<sup>10</sup>Op. cit., p. 202.

poems."<sup>11</sup> Stephen Spender finds that although there is "very little feeling about the dead" in Housman's poetry, "there is a great deal of death."<sup>12</sup> William Lyon Phelps attempts to explain Housman's "constant dwelling on death,"<sup>13</sup> and John Peale Bishop has identified Shropshire as "a country that belongs to the dead."<sup>14</sup> The notion that death is somehow central to the theme and mood of A Shropshire Lad is borne out by even a superficial reading of the work. Yet Housman's treatment of death in the poems has been subject to frequent oversimplification and a rigidly literal interpretation. To be fully understood it must be seen in relationship to the mutability theme. Ignoring this relationship leads to the view that Housman's attitude toward death in the work is merely capricious and inconsistent.

Since life is all too brief and death is the end of life, it would seem to follow that Housman would be opposed to death as the agent which destroys life; however, this is not the case. Housman's view of death in A Shropshire Lad takes a paradoxical turn. From the opening poem of the work a world of change is established, and Housman's quarrel with life in the lyrics of A Shropshire Lad lies in the realization that change and decay are the primary facts of existence. But A Shropshire Lad is also marked by a search for permanence in a world of change. And

<sup>11</sup>Op. cit., p. 221.

<sup>12</sup>Op. cit., p. 159.

<sup>13</sup>The Advance of English Poetry in the Twentieth Century, New York, 1924, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup>Op. cit., p. 151.

Housman's search for an agent to arrest the decay, to halt the mutability of life and freeze life at its prime, leads to the conceit which is central to the work, a conceit in which death paradoxically becomes the only agent of stability in a life of ceaseless change.

Housman's own life was marked by the same sort of quest for permanence that we find mirrored in his poetry. On October 3, 1892, Housman delivered the traditional introductory lecture to open the academic year before the Faculties of Arts and Laws and Science in University College London. He spoke in the lecture of the value of learning and knowledge. One passage is particularly revealing in indicating that his choice of a life of scholarship may have been related to the theme which underlies his poetry. He stated:

The pleasures of the intellect are notoriously less vivid than either the pleasures of the sense or the pleasures of the affections; and therefore, especially in the season of youth, the pursuit of knowledge is likely to be neglected and lightly esteemed in comparison with other pursuits offering much stronger immediate attractions. But the pleasure of learning and knowing, though not the keenest, is yet the least perishable of pleasures; the least subject to external things, and the play of chance, and the wear of time. And as a prudent man puts money by to serve as a provision for the material wants of his old age, so too he needs to lay up against the end of his days provision for the intellect. As the years go by, comparative values are found to alter: Time, says Sophocles, takes many things which once were pleasures and brings them nearer to pain. In the days when the strong men shall bow themselves, and desire shall fail, it will be a matter of yet more concern than now, whether one can say 'my mind to me a kingdom is'; and whether the windows of the soul look out upon a broad and delightful landscape, or face nothing but a brick wall.<sup>15</sup>

Here then is a link between Housman's scholarship and his poetry. Both represent a search for permanence in a mutable world. The unique

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<sup>15</sup>A. E. Housman: Selected Prose, p. 20.

virtue of learning for Housman is that it is not subject to the 'wear to time.' The world of scholarship exists apart, 'the least subject to external things.' How strongly the idea of mutability affected Housman's thinking and writing is thus evident from the lecture delivered less than three years before the spring of 1895, when most of the poems of A Shropshire Lad were written. The quest for permanence, which was a part of the argument for the supremacy of the pleasures of the intellect over the pleasures of the senses or the pleasures of the affections in Housman's scholarly activities, becomes a molding idea in his poetry. It is in this context that his concern with death in A Shropshire Lad must be seen.

Housman's view of death is nowhere seen more clearly than in Lyric XIX, 'To an Athlete Dying Young.' The athlete in the poem obviously symbolizes for Housman that period of greatest value in life, for he has both youth and achievement. Consequently, he is regarded as a "smart lad, to slip betimes away" from the ever-fleeting phantom of life and into the permanence of death. 'To an Athlete Dying Young' is thus one expression of the paradox that is central to A Shropshire Lad, for death at times is a matter of joy rather than of sorrow.

The paradox that the poem develops is carefully reinforced through the poem's imagery. As Brooks and Warren have noted,<sup>16</sup> Housman uses the images which are associated with the youth's athletic achievements to describe his death. Stanzas 1 and 2 of the poem describe the two triumphant processions the athlete has taken part in. In the first he is carried through the town on the shoulders of his friends after winning a race:

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<sup>16</sup>Understanding Poetry, New York, 1938, p. 385.

The time you won your town the race  
 We chaired you through the market-place;  
 Man and boy stood cheering by,  
 And home we brought you shoulder-high.  
 (ll. 1-4)

In stanza 2 the young athlete is brought home dead, but the parallels between this and the former triumph are carefully drawn:

To-day, the road all runners come,  
 Shoulder-high we bring you home,  
 And set you at your threshold down,  
 Townsman of a stiller town.  
 (ll. 5-8)

This parallel implies that the athlete's death is another victory in a race. He has beaten his fellows in the race toward the final destination of all men, death. But the youth is regarded as a "smart lad" not because he is dead but because his death has occurred at the prime of life. He will not have to watch his records being broken by other, younger men after his physical prowess has been withered by age:

Eyes the shady night has shut  
 Cannot see the record cut,  
 And silence sounds no worse than cheers  
 After earth has stopped the ears:

Now you will not swell the rout  
 Of lads that wore their honours out,  
 Runners whom renown outran  
 And the name died before the man.  
 (ll. 13-20)

Thus death in the poem becomes the agent by which the process of mutability is halted. There is a sharp contrast between the mutability of the world of the living and the new-found permanence of the youth in death. In stanza 3 the world is identified as "fields where glory does not stay." And Housman adds:

And early though the laurel grows  
 It withers quicker than the rose.  
 (ll. 11-12)

The laurel and the rose here apparently symbolize fame and beauty,<sup>17</sup> both subject to decay in life but not, according to the conceit of the poem, in death. In the last stanza Housman returns in an oblique way to the laurel and the rose, and he presses the contrast between life and death. He is describing the athlete in death:

And round that early-laurelled head  
 Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,  
 And find unwithered on its curls  
 The garland briefer than a girl's.  
 (ll. 21-24)

Here through the references to the 'early-laurelled head' and the garland 'briefer than a girl's' Housman suggests again the notions of fame and beauty, which were spoken of in stanza 3 as withering quickly in life. In death, however, the youth's garland is 'unwithered on its curls.' The poem thus emphasizes the contrast between two states, one marked by decay, the other by permanence.

Recognizing the relationship between Housman's view of death and his concern with mutability, one is thus led to the obvious conclusion that death in "To an Athlete Dying Young" is a part of a poetic conceit which runs throughout the poem. Of course it is the very nature of the conceit to bring together radically dissimilar ideas, which in the common sense world of fact would appear ridiculous. Perhaps one of the most famous is Eliot's comparison of the evening with "a patient etherised upon

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<sup>17</sup>Brooks and Warren, op. cit., p. 385.

a table. . . .<sup>18</sup> The metaphysical poets also utilized the conceit, like Housman, to develop an idea which appeared illogical to the common sense view of reality.<sup>19</sup> Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" also utilizes a conceit similar to Housman's in conveying meaning which cannot be expressed effectively in any other way. The danger of abstracting Housman's view of death and discussing it literally as a philosophical belief thus becomes immediately apparent. This danger is illustrated by a comparison between Housman's "To an Athlete Dying Young" and Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

Parallels between the two poems are numerous. In both life has been frozen at the moment of highest intensity. Keats' urn is a "still unravish'd bride," and Housman's athlete in death holds high the "still-defended challenge-cup." In both poems there is a triumph over time. In Keats' poem the figures are frozen in action on an ancient urn, but because they can never consummate their actions, they are "for ever warm and still to be enjoy'd/For ever panting, and for ever young." (ll. 26-27). Keats too contrasts this state of permanence in art with that of life. He finds that the passions frozen on the urn are

All breathing human passion far above,  
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,  
A burning forehead and a parching tongue.  
(ll. 28-30)

<sup>18</sup>From "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," ll. 2-3.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," where the oneness of two lovers who must part is compared to the two legs of a compass. Donne's conceit, like Housman's, is more than a mere decorative image but attempts to depict meaning which is apparently impossible without the use of such paradoxical language.

Housman's athlete is frozen in death also. In fact, the description of the dead youth serves to fix him in an immobile position in space and time. In stanza 6 the poet addresses the dead athlete:

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.  
(ll. 21-24)

The youth is thus fixed between the two states of life and death, his foot on the "sill of shade." Brooks and Warren explain the "sill" and the "low lintel" as the edge of the grave, into which the youth is about to be lowered.<sup>20</sup> Nat Henry, however, rejects the grave image and feels instead that the sill of shade belongs to the vertical door between the town of the living and the "stiller town" of the dead.<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Nitchie's interpretation<sup>22</sup> offers a further parallel with Keats' poem. She states that carvings of some Greek stelae represent the dead person standing or sitting in a doorway. Such pictures, she finds, obviate the necessity of the interpretations of the low lintel as the edge of the horizontal grave or as the lid of the coffin, as C. R. B. Combellock suggested.<sup>23</sup> Whether or not Housman had such carvings in mind, it is true that his description of the youth in the final stanza is almost that of a statue, around which the dead gather.

<sup>20</sup>op. cit., p. 386.

<sup>21</sup>"Housman's 'To an Athlete Dying Young,'" Explicator, XII (1953-54), item 48.

<sup>22</sup>"Housman's 'To an Athlete Dying Young,'" Explicator, X (1951-52), item 57.

<sup>23</sup>"Housman's 'To an Athlete Dying Young,'" Explicator, X (1951-52), item 31.

Both poems are then constructed around a poetic conceit which is meaningful only in the context of the poem. Housman utilizes a certain metaphorical conception of death in the same way Keats uses the conception of art--to halt the decay of time and to preserve the moment of highest intensity. And it is important to recognize that this conceit runs throughout A Shropshire Lad. To ignore it is to fail to recognize the full implication of Housman's treatment of death in the work.

Lyric XII, "When I Watch the Living Meet," illustrates Housman's further use of death as a metaphorical agent for halting decay. The poem again contrasts two states. Life is characterized as "the house of flesh" where "the heats of hate and lust . . . are strong." Death is the "house of dust" where "revenges are forgot/And the hater hates no more." The two states are contrasted also in time of duration. In life man will "lodge a little while," but in the house of dust, his "sojourn shall be long." The last stanza of the poem again recalls Keats' ode. Housman depicts two lovers in death:

Lovers lying two and two  
 Ask not whom they sleep beside,  
 And the bridegroom all night through  
 Never turns him to the bride.  
 (ll. 13-16)

In death the lovers are forever bride and bridegroom. Their state can never be altered by the decay of time. They are thus to be regarded as fortunate because death has caught them at one of the highest points of life and halted the progression of time.

"The Immortal Part," Lyric XLIII, further displays Housman's search for permanence as he presents the ironic view that only the bones of man survive death. Stanza 2 asks:

'When shall this slough of sense be cast,  
 This dust of thoughts be laid at last,  
 The man of flesh and soul be slain  
 And the man of bone remain?

(ll. 5-8)

The central statement of the poem is that the permanent man, the man of bone, is born only after the temporal man of flesh and mind has melted away. The force of the juxtaposition of the man of flesh and the man of bone is to stress again the impermanence of life. Stanzas 3, 4, and 5 develop a now-familiar contrast:

'This tongue that talks, these lungs that shout,  
 These thews that hustle us about,  
 This brain that fills the skull with schemes,  
 And its humming hive of dreams,--

'These to-day are proud in power  
 And lord it in their little hour:  
 The immortal bones obey control  
 Of dying flesh and dying soul.

'Tis long till eve and morn are gone:  
 Slow the endless night comes on,  
 And late to fulness grows the birth  
 That shall last as long as earth.

(ll. 9-20)

In "The Immortal Part" the images associated with life are temporal objects--fire, smoke, and dust, and the flesh is regarded merely as an empty vessel or a garment which is worn by the skeleton, which in death achieves mastery over the flesh and soul because it alone is permanent. The poem also repeats the carpe diem theme. Man must "do [his] will/ Today while [he is] master still":

Before this fire of sense decay,  
 This smoke of thought blow clean away,  
 And leave with ancient night alone  
 The steadfast and enduring bone.

(ll. 41-44)

Lytic XVI is interesting in depicting in one image both the transitory nature of life and the permanence found in death. The entire poem is devoted to the description of a scene in which a nettle is tossed about on a grave by the wind:

It nods and curtseys and recovers  
When the wind blows above,  
The nettle on the graves of lovers  
That hanged themselves for love.

The nettle nods, the wind blows over,  
The man; he does not move,  
The lover of the grave, the lover  
That hanged himself for love.

Even without understanding anything of the meaning of the poem, one may note, first of all, that the contrast in the image is in terms of motion. The nettle "nods and curtseys and recovers," but the man, "he does not move." This pattern is frequently utilized by Housman in depicting life's ceaseless change as contrasted with the stability found in death. Yet Housman's choice of symbols in this poem seems to suggest something more than this. Randall Jarrell, in analyzing the poem, equates the nettle with living man, the wind with the force of life:

The nettle is merely repeating above the grave, compelled by the wind, what the man in the grave did once, when the wind blew through him. So living is (we must take it as being) just a repetition of little meaningless nodding actions, actions that haven't even the virtue of being our own--since the wind forces them out of us; life as the wind makes man as the tree or nettle helpless and determined.<sup>24</sup>

It is not necessary, however, to view the poem in the fatalistic light which Jarrell's reading suggests. Housman is able, through the symbols of the nettle, the wind, and the dead lover, to draw a complex

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<sup>24</sup>"Texts from Housman," Kenyon Review, I (1939), p. 267.

image of life's transitory state--complex, as Jarrell suggests, because grass, which is a common symbol for transitoriness, here outlasts man and serves, in addition, to reinforce the notion of man's mutable state. Perhaps the key to understanding Housman's choice of the nettle as a symbol may be found in one of his other poems in which the nettle is also used, Lyric XXXII of More Poems.<sup>25</sup> The poem, in its entirety, is as follows:

With seed the sowers scatter  
 The furrows as they go.  
 Four lads, 'tis little matter  
 How many sorts they sow,  
 For only one will grow.

The charlock on the fallow  
 Will take the traveller's eyes,  
 And gild the ploughland sallow  
 With flowers before it dies,  
 But twice 'twill not arise.

The stinging-nettle only  
 Will still be found to stand:  
 The number less, the lonely,  
 The thronger of the land,  
 The leaf that hurts the hand.

It thrives, come sun, come showers,  
 Blow east, blow west, it springs;  
 It peoples towns, and towers  
 About the courts of kings,  
 And touch it and it stings.

The nettle in both poems thus may be seen as a symbol of the state of man's existence. Lyric XXXII of More Poems also suggests Housman's use of it in Lyric XVI, for "the stinging-nettle only/Will still be found to stand." Housman implies that that part of life which is painful, which "hurts the hand, outlasts that part symbolized by the charlock

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<sup>25</sup>Jarrell also notes a connection between the two poems.

on the fallow, which 'will take the traveller's eye' and 'gild the ploughland sallow' but dies and will not arise again. The lover that hanged himself for love in Lyric XVI corresponds to the charlock. The stinging nettle has survived him. He is dead and will not rise again.

Yet the paradox of the poem is that the "lover of the grave" has triumphed over the forces of life symbolized by the nettle and the wind, for he has escaped the ceaseless cycle of change which the nettle must continually undergo as it is buffeted by the wind. Thus the ambiguity of line 7 becomes meaningful. At first the reader assumes that he is to regard the lover in the poem in the conventional sense--that is, he hanged himself for love of a woman. Yet line 7 identifies the lover as "the lover of the grave." This may be read in two ways: the lover who now lies in the grave or the man who loved the grave. It is in this second sense that the line must be read if the poem is to become meaningful. The nettle, symbolic of the hurtful nature of man's existence, is characterized as being thrown into an endless cycle by the wind, or life force (a cyclical pattern being suggested by the series of motions--nods, curtseys, recovers). The lover, however, has escaped this cycle: "he does not move." He was able to exchange the transitory nature of life for the permanence found only in death because he was a "lover of the grave" and "hanged himself for love" [of the grave]. He has thus escaped "the fields where glory does not stay" in the same way as the athlete of Lyric XIX.

This conceit may be further illustrated by another quite popular lyric, number LIV:

With rue my heart is laden  
 For golden friends I had,  
 For many a rose-lipt maiden  
 And many a lightfoot lad.

By brooks too broad for leaping  
 The lightfoot boys are laid;  
 The rose-lipt girls are sleeping  
 In fields where roses fade.

Lyric LIV illustrates Housman's ability to depict a commonplace emotion with great complexity. He is dealing with the sense of loss one feels for the dead, yet in structuring this emotion he manages to again suggest the idea of life's loss through change and death's victory over this loss. Yet it is significant that this suggestion does not occur in the thought of the poem, which is rather straightforward and simple, contained essentially in the first two lines, but instead in the poem's image pattern.

John Crowe Ransom has objected to the first line of the poem as "painful, grandiloquent, incredible to the naturalistic imagination." He states further:

. . . I think we must have misgivings as to the propriety of linking this degree of desolation with the loss of friends in wholesale quantities. Grief is not exactly cumulative, not proportionate to the numerical occasions; it is the quality of a single grief rather than the total quantity of all the griefs that we expect to be developed in a poem, if the poem is in the interest of the deepest possible sentiment.<sup>26</sup>

Ransom ignores the fact that the poem is not at all concerned with any specific death. It is instead an analysis of the phenomenon of death itself, of the thought of death and the effect of these death-thoughts on the narrator. The poem, after all, begins with an emphasis on the narrator's thoughts: "With rue my heart is laden. . . ." Ransom's quibble

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<sup>26</sup>"Honey and Gall," Southern Review, VI (1940), p. 7.

with laden in line 1 also misses the irony inherent in the imagery of the poem. Housman here has attempted to depict feelings in paradoxical terms (and this parallels the larger paradox which the poem develops). The sense of desolation or emptiness is produced by laden (or fullness). The sense of stillness in lines 5 and 6 is depicted by an image which emphasizes a leaping motion, and the impression of rosiness in lines 7 and 8 is suggested by Housman's reference to the fading of roses. Housman has thus managed to produce through this imagery simultaneously the stillness of death and the activity of life.

Ransom also objects to the golden of line 2. He finds that "the image needs a little specification: Shakespeare's golden lads and girls were in better order by virtue of the contrast with the chimney-sweepers."<sup>27</sup> But "golden friends" should not be taken strictly as a color image. In poems dealing with mutability, as both Housman's and Shakespeare's certainly are, golden must be taken in its earlier physical sense. Just as in alchemy gold represented the perfect mixture of the elements, the lads and lassies of Shakespeare's and Housman's lyrics represent that period in time in which the elements of life are in perfect balance. In Shakespeare's imagery this gold is turned to dust by time,<sup>28</sup> yet the fact to notice in Housman's poem is that, strictly in terms of

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Fear no more the heat o' the sun,  
 Nor the furious winter's rages;  
 Thou thy worldly task hast done,  
 Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages.  
 Golden lads and girls all must,  
 As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.  
 (Sung in IV, ii of Cymbeline as a dirge for the supposedly dead Imogen.)

the imagery of the poem, the golden boys and girls escape the decay of time. Housman manages this conceit by transferring the sense of decay from the dead youths to the physical world they have left. The "light-foot lad" of line 4 is still described as lightfoot in death; however, the brooks he was accustomed to leap in youth are now too broad for leaping." Likewise, the "rose-lipt maiden" of line 3 maintains, in the poem's imagery, the complexion of her youth; yet she is sleeping in "fields where roses fade." Housman thus continues the conceit in which death becomes the agent for halting the decay of time, for fixing and maintaining the moment in which life is at its prime.

Ransom's objection that Housman does not depict strikingly enough the shameful end which death involves ignores the conceit which is a part of the poem. He states, referring to the rose-lipt girls:

. . . that does not seem too shameful an end. Roses fade in the best of fields. . . . What we require is an image to carry the fading of the rosy lips; to be buried in the ground involves this disgrace sufficiently for brutal logic but not for poetic imagination.<sup>29</sup>

Ransom's statement serves to point up the danger of ignoring the unity of theme of A Shropshire Lad. He feels the poem requires an image to suggest that the rosy lips fade in death. Yet if the reader is conscious of the continuing conceit Housman constructs about death in the work, he realizes that the poem scrupulously avoids the suggestion that death brings with it a decay, and, instead, emphasizes the decay which characterizes life. Therefore, Housman's seemingly simple statement about death, which Ransom finds inept, becomes somewhat more complex on

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<sup>29</sup>p. cit., p. 8.

closer examination--complex because the attitude toward death in the poem is a complex one. Stanza 1 offers only an overwhelming sense of grief; yet this feeling of loss over the death of youth finds compensation in stanza 2 with the fuller realization that death is both a loss and a gain. But this is a complexity which must be seen, finally, in the whole of A Shropshire Lad, and critics who consider only isolated poems may conclude, like Ransom, that

the ironical detail of this poem is therefore fairly inept. The imagination of this poet is not a trained and faithful instrument, or at least it does not work well for him here. That is not an additional charge, however, to saying that the poem as a whole is not very satisfactory, for it is the specific ground of the poem's failure. There cannot be a fine poetry without a fine poetic texture.<sup>30</sup>

Ransom's judgment of Housman's poem is then based, in part, on Ransom's lack of understanding of the theme of the work of which the poem is a part. He condemns the poem partly for the fact that it fails to provide "an image to carry the fading of the rose lips" without realizing that to have done so would have involved violating the continuity of the conceit which Housman utilizes in developing the theme of A Shropshire Lad. And even though the conceit is not clearly stated in Lyric LIV (although it is certainly present), elsewhere in the work it receives more direct treatment. Lyric XXIII, for example, helps strengthen the interpretation of Lyric LIV as a poem which regards death not wholly as a shameful end but at least partly as an agent which halts the mutability of life. The scene of Lyric XXIII is Ludlow fair. The narrator watches the hundreds of lads as they arrive from "the barn and the forge and the

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

mill and the fold" (l. 2). He sees that some are there for the girls, some for the liquor, but his interest lies in another group, for "there with the rest are the lads that will never be old." It is in the contrast between these two groups that the heart of the poem lies. Many of the first group are, in their prime, handsome and brave:

And many to count are the stalwart, and many the brave,  
 And many the handsome of face and the handsome of heart,  
 And few that will carry their looks or their truth to the  
 grave.

(ll. 5-8)

The latter group, however, are regarded as "fortunate fellows,"<sup>31</sup> for they will "carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man" (l. 15). The last two stanzas of the poem make clear why these men are to be regarded as fortunate:

I wish one could know them, I wish there were tokens to tell  
 The fortunate fellows that now you can never discern;  
 And then one could talk with them friendly and wish them  
 farewell  
 And watch them depart on the way that they will not  
 return.

But now you may stare as you like and there's nothing to  
 scan;  
 And brushing your elbow unguessed-at and not to be told  
 They carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man,  
 The lads that will die in their glory and never be old.  
 (ll. 9-16)

Again, it would be easy to oversimplify the attitude toward death in this poem and regard death merely as an escape from the misery of existence, as many of Housman's critics have insisted. But, viewing the poem in relation to the theme of the whole work, one must conclude that here, as elsewhere in A Shropshire Lad, the point is not that these lads

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<sup>31</sup>Compare this with the "smart lad" of Lyric XIX, who also escapes through death the decay of age.

have escaped some sort of evil inherent in all of life; they have, instead, escaped the change and decay of time, and as Housman's coin image suggests, they have preserved the essence of man and gained something of that permanence which is the object of Housman's quest throughout much of A Shropshire Lad.

Lyric XLIV deals with another aspect of life's mutability, the sudden change of fortune with which man is powerless to contend. Here even the act of suicide becomes an acceptance means of halting life's mutability:

Shot? so quick, so clean an ending?  
 Oh that was right, lad, that was brave:  
 Yours was not an ill for mending,  
 'Twas best to take it to the grave.

Oh you had forethought, you could reason,  
 And saw your road and where it led,  
 And early wise and brave in season  
 Put the pistol to your head.  
 (ll. 1-8)

Suicide thus becomes justified because even though death is not desirable, the ills of time and the disgraces of ever-changing fortune are even less desirable:

Dust's your wages, son of sorrow,  
 But men may come to worse than dust.  
 (ll. 15-16)

Stanzas 5 and 6 of the poem make clear that, again, death is not regarded merely as escape from the evil and injustice of the world. It is, instead, a means to "carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man." Housman considers in Lyric XLIV generic man. By his act of suicide the lad has saved himself and his fellows the dishonor and guilt which his unnamed disgrace would have brought them:

Souls undone, undoing others,--  
 Long time since the tale began.  
 You would not live to wrong your brothers:  
 Oh lad, you died as fits a man.

Now to your grave shall friend and stranger  
 With ruth and some with envy come:  
 Undishonoured, clear of danger,  
 Clean of guilt, pass hence and home.  
 (ll. 17-24)

The source of this lyric casts some further light on these lines.

Laurence Housman states in his biography of his brother:

On August 6th, 1895, a young Woolwich Cadet, aged eighteen, took his own life, leaving a long letter addressed to the Coroner to say why he had done so. The gist of that letter was quoted in a newspaper cutting of the day, which I found lying in my brother's copy of A Shropshire Lad alongside the poem which begins:

Shot? so quick, so clean an ending?

It is quite evident that certain passages in that letter prompted the writing of the poem; one sentence indeed is almost quoted.<sup>31</sup>

Laurence Housman then quotes a part of the young Cadet's letter:

"I wish it to be clearly understood that I am not what is commonly called 'temporarily insane' and that I am putting an end to my life after several weeks of careful deliberation. I do not think that I need justify my actions to anyone but my Maker, but . . . I will state the main reasons which have determined me. The first is utter cowardice and despair. There is only one thing in this world which would make me thoroughly happy; that one thing I have no earthly hope of obtaining. The second--which I wish was the only one--is that I have absolutely ruined my own life; but I thank God that as yet, so far as I know, I have not morally injured, or 'offended,' as it is called in the Bible, anyone else. Now I am quite certain that I could not live another five years without doing so, and for that reason alone, even if the first did not exist, I should do what I am doing. . . . At all events it is final, and consequently better than a long series of sorrows and disgraces."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Op. cit., pp. 103-104.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

The last two sentences quoted above must certainly have attracted Housman to the story, for they parallel the concept of death which recurs throughout poems written during this period. The young man utilized death to halt the moral decay which is hinted at in the letter ("I could not live another five years without doing so. . . ."). Housman applauds this idea in lines 19 and 20:

You would not live to wrong your brothers:  
Oh lad, you died "as fits" a man.

The last sentence quoted from the letter contains the idea which forms the basis of the concept of death stated most clearly in "To an Athlete Dying Young" but found throughout A Shropshire Lad, the notion that it is better to flee the mutable world at one's prime before the adversities of fortune and the decay of age set in. The young Cadet wrote, "At all events it is final, and consequently better than a long series of sorrows and disgraces." Compare Housman's lines:

Oh soon, and better so than later  
After long disgrace and scorn, . . .  
(ll. 9-10)

Thus the Cadet parallels the "smart lad" of Lyric XIX and the "fortunate fellows" of Lyric XXIII in escaping the ill fortunes of time. The last stanza of the poem offers the youth still further compensations:

Turn safe to rest, no dreams, no waking;  
And here, man, here's the wreath I've made:  
'Tis not a gift that's worth the taking,  
But wear it and it will not fade.  
(ll. 24-28)

The wreath mentioned in line 25 may be identified on two levels. On the literal level it is the token of victory, the poet's sign that the lad has triumphed over the adversities of time. It will not fade because it

is artificial, not organic ("a wreath I've made"). It may be compared to the garland which the athlete of Lyric XIX wears "unwithered on its curls." But the wreath may also be seen as the poem itself (an artifact which is made and, again, because it is artificial, not organic, not subject to the wear of time). The poet thus offers the lad the permanence of art in repeating the conceit of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18. Both poets recognize the mutability of the natural world<sup>33</sup> and offer the permanence of art to halt the decay. Shakespeare states that through his poem "thy eternal summer shall not fade" (l. 9). Housman's statement is remarkably close: "But wear it and it will not fade."

Perhaps it is not necessary to point out that both death and art are utilized in much the same manner by Housman in this poem and in other lyrics of A Shropshire Lad, as poetic answers to the dilemma posed by an awareness of the mutable nature of man's existence. Yet apparently numerous critics have ignored this aspect of Housman's treatment of death in the work. Their error lies in confusing poetic conceit and philosophical belief. No critic has been naive enough to assume that Shakespeare believed his poem would literally preserve the beauty of the young man (or woman) to whom Sonnet 18 is addressed. Yet Housman's utilization of a similar conceit has been interpreted literally with the resulting

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<sup>33</sup>Shakespeare's statement of the theme is, of course, a familiar one:

Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
 And often is his gold complexion dimmed,  
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed;  
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade  
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st, . . .  
 (ll. 5-10)

judgment that his philosophy is perverse and contradictory. The contradictions, however, seem to dissolve on close analysis. Life at its prime is good, Housman asserts; the evil lies in its essential transience. And the great paradox lies in the fact that the preserver of permanence is also the destroyer of life. Housman, in A Shropshire Lad, emphasizes both aspects of death. The results have been called inconsistent, but they have only the inconsistency of all poetic conceit. Examined in the harsh light of common sense, Housman's poetry may indeed appear self-contradictory. Yet if A Shropshire Lad is analyzed as a whole work, the thread of its theme traced through the short lyrics, it is revealed only as stating the paradox of human existence. A Shropshire Lad, it is true, is centered around the human dilemma of life and death, mutability and permanence, and this dilemma can be resolved only in paradoxical terms. Cleanth Brooks states in The Well Wrought Urn, a study of the statement of paradox in poetry:

If the poet, then, must perforce dramatize the oneness of the experience, even through paying tribute to its diversity, then his use of paradox and ambiguity is seen as necessary. He is not simply trying to spice up, with a superficially exciting or mystifying rhetoric, the old stale stockpot. . . . He is rather giving us an insight which preserves the unity of experience and which at its higher and more serious levels, triumphs over the apparently contradictory and conflicting elements of experience by unifying them into a new pattern.<sup>34</sup>

It is in this sense that Housman's treatment of death must be seen. As a practical answer to the dilemma posed by time's decay, Housman poetry fails. But the lyric poet, it must be agreed, has traditionally not attempted to provide practical answers to life's problems, and his poetic answers serve only to reveal what has been called the human condition.

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<sup>34</sup>Op. cit., pp. 213-214.

In his own terms, in the framework of his poetry, the pattern which Housman imposes on the flux of experience is rigidly consistent. But this is a unity of pattern which must be viewed in the whole work. It is, of course, not a strictly logical unity in the sense that one lyric leads logically to another (even though, as may be seen later in this study, the arrangement of the poems of A Shropshire Lad is meaningful). It is instead what Brooks has called "the unification of attitude."

He states:

The characteristic unity of a poem (even of those poems which may accidentally possess a logical unity as well as this poetic unity) lies in the unification of attitudes into a hierarchy subordinated to a total and governing attitude. In the unified poem, the poet has "come to terms" with his experience. The poem does not merely eventuate in a logical conclusion. The conclusion of the poem is the working out of the various tensions set up by whatever means--by propositions, metaphors, symbols. The unity is achieved by a dramatic process, not a logical; it represents an equilibrium of forces, not a formula. It is "proved" as a dramatic conclusion is proved: by its ability to resolve the conflicts which have been accepted as the donnees of the drama.<sup>35</sup>

And Brooks concludes:

Thus, it is easy to see why the relation of each item of the whole context is crucial, and why the effective and essential structure of the poem has to do with the complex of attitudes achieved. A scientific preposition can stand alone. If it is true, it is true. But the expression of an attitude, apart from the occasion which generates it and the situation which it encompasses, is meaningless.<sup>36</sup>

This study has attempted thus far to demonstrate the "unification of attitudes," to repeat Brooks' term, in A Shropshire Lad. It seems clear that such a unity pervades the work. Yet if A Shropshire Lad is

<sup>35</sup>ibid., pp. 206-207.

<sup>36</sup>ibid., p. 207.

to be regarded as having the unity of a single poem, there remains yet the matter of the relationship of each part to the whole. In the discussion of theme it has been necessary to examine the lyrics separately, taking them out of context. But the unity of the whole depends upon the arrangement of its separate parts, in this case the sixty-three lyrics which make up A Shropshire Lad. Therefore, the structure of the whole must next be examined.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE STRUCTURE OF A SHROPSHIRE LAD

One of the earliest reviewers of A Shropshire Lad noted that its sixty-three lyrics must be studied as a whole; yet a curious fact of Housman criticism is that a half century of critics have ignored this approach in their attempts to understand the work. Richard Le Gallienne stated in 1896, shortly after the publication of A Shropshire Lad:

. . . A Shropshire Lad, therefore, to be properly appreciated, must be regarded as a whole. . . . A character is self-revealed and a story is told, with here and there glimpses of a comrade and his story . . . all having a certain personal bearing, all contributing to paint the picture of the "Shropshire Lad's" world and its ways. . . .<sup>1</sup>

A systematic examination of the arrangement of the lyrics which make up the work has never been attempted, although Nesca A. Robb's essay on Housman, which appeared in 1948, does present a perceptive analysis of one type of unity, primarily a narrative unity, which must be the starting point for anyone who wishes to examine the structure of the work considered as a whole. Of the hundreds of other critical analyses of A Shropshire Lad only a handful have hinted at any meaningful arrangement of the poems. George L. Watson stated in his 1957 biography of Housman:

The principle by which Housman selected from the jumbled contents of his note-books, this orderly sequence appears to be more judicious than meaningful, though certainly one of its effects was the omission of any material that might betray to the world at large, some oblique biographical reference.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Richards, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>op. cit., p. 158.

Watson adds, however:

Housman's critical instinct happily coincided with his natural self-effacement, and now both operated not only to weed out the less perfect specimens of his work, but to impose on the remainder a formal, consistent, arbitrary design.<sup>3</sup>

Watson does not elaborate on this formal and consistent design, so that it is not clear exactly what design he finds in the work. He states, however, that it was primarily "the matrix of stifled feeling from which Housman's poetry broke forth, combined with its narrow range of experience and deliberate sameness of theme" which "helped to give it the effect of unity."<sup>4</sup> Watson thus implies that the work has only the "effect" of unity.

Rica Brenner states that Housman's poems have "an essential unity," but he sees this as only a unity of "material and mood," since all the poems "center about country folk, about soldiers, or young people in love of contemplating the future."<sup>5</sup> Ian Scott-Kilvert is a bit more specific, stating that the poems "are grouped in the manner of a sonnet sequence, introducing and contrasting a succession of themes so balanced that none should overweigh the others."<sup>6</sup> Scott-Kilvert fails, however, to support his view with any specific illustrations, and his contention that the poems have the unity of a sonnet sequence is opposed by J. B. Priestley. Priestley states:

<sup>3</sup>ibid.

<sup>4</sup>ibid.

<sup>5</sup>op. cit., p. 181.

<sup>6</sup>op. cit., p. 24.

The poems are not, as it were, threaded on a string . . . they have not that sort of unity, that dependence upon one another, which we usually find in--say--a sonnet-sequence; but nevertheless one spirit breathes through them; they flow out of one central mood.<sup>7</sup>

Yet Priestley does suggest some sort of orderly arrangement of the poems:

. . . what he did in this volume was to depart from the usual practice of our modern lyric poets: instead of directly expressing his various moods he partly dramatised them in a more or less definite atmosphere, on a more or less consistent plan. By doing this he dowered his work with a certain concrete and particular effect, the success of which is one reason for its power. . . . Indeed, there are all degrees of dramatisation, shading off one into another, in these two small volumes [A Shropshire Lad and Last Poems], and in any long study it would certainly be worth while examining them and trying to decide what the poet has gained by adopting so unusual a plan, gained, that is, not in this poem or that, but in the whole mass regarded as a complete and distinct work.<sup>8</sup>

Housman had the opportunity to provide some of the answers to the study suggested by Priestley. Grant Richards reports that Housman was sent a questionnaire by a French student, Maurice Pollet, which contained, among others, the following inquiry:

"Though the poems have been grouped according to a certain principle of unity, rather than one of chronology, may I however rely on their general order to infer from it some sort of evolution which I seem to discern in certain themes?"<sup>9</sup>

Curiously enough, though Housman replied to several of Pollet's other questions regarding A Shropshire Lad, he chose not to answer this question. However, certain of Housman's other actions regarding A Shropshire Lad may indicate that he did regard the work as constituting a complete

<sup>7</sup>Op. cit., p. 173.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 176-177.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Richards, op. cit., p. 267.

whole. First of all, he refused to allow poems from A Shropshire Lad to be included in anthologies, although he did not make the same demands of Last Poems. In a letter of March 14, 1924 to his publisher Grant Richards he writes:

I have never laid down any general rule against the inclusion of poems from Last Poems in anthologies.

The rule regarding A Shropshire Lad still holds good. It is true that the Poet Laureate has printed three poems from it in his recent anthology, but he does not pretend that I gave him permission to do so.<sup>10</sup>

Richards feels that Housman's idea may have been that he looked on the book as a sequence of poems and in consequence disliked any one being divorced from its fellows.<sup>11</sup> Housman's emphasis on the necessity of viewing any aesthetic work in its entirety may be seen in a passage of his letter to Richards on December 20, 1920:

I am told that composers in some cases have mutilated my poems,--that Vaughan Williams cut two verses out of Is my team ploughing (I wonder how he would like me to cut two bars out of his music). . . .<sup>12</sup>

Housman also steadily refused, in spite of pressure from the publishers, to allow A Shropshire Lad and Last Poems to appear together in one volume. On October 5, 1924 he wrote to Richards:

Certainly I will not have the two books published in one volume; and as this is what the Florence Press asks, the answer is simply no.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Richards, op. cit., p. 211.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

Ten years later he is still firm in his belief that the two books should not be published together. In a letter of September 26, 1934 to Houston Martin, an American student, he stated:

"A Shropshire Lad' and 'New Poems' [a slip for Last Poems, as Housman later states] will never be joined together while I am here to prevent it. I think it a silly notion.<sup>14</sup>

Not until after Housman's death were the two books published in one volume.

Although nothing conclusive can be established in speculating about Housman's motives in these actions, it is impossible not to feel that the poet regarded A Shropshire Lad and Last Poems in quite different lights. It may have been that Housman simply felt a strong affection for his first and greatest poetic achievement which Last Poems did not elicit. Yet the possibility remains that Housman saw the earlier work as having a definite order which he wished not to be disturbed, Last Poems being regarded as a collection of lyrics from which individual poems might be selected and published separately. What is certainly true is that Last Poems contains at least seven poems<sup>15</sup> written in whole or in part during or before 1895 but not included in A Shropshire Lad. And More Poems and Additional Poems, published after Housman's death, contain still others.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup>ibid.

<sup>15</sup>"Her strong enchantments falling"; "Yonder see the morning blink"; "In the morning, in the morning"; "In the midnight of November"; "As I gird on for fighting"; "The fairies break their dances"; "In valleys green and still." These poems, identified by their first lines, are listed in the chronology table in Complete Poems, ed., T. B. Haber, New York, 1959. This table incorporates data from Laurence Housman's memoir and from a list of thirty-nine dated titles published by Sir Sydney Cockerell in the London Times Literary Supplement for November 7, 1936 (p. 908). The information was dictated to Cockerell by Housman on October 28, 1922.

<sup>16</sup>"The weeping Pleiades wester" (More Poems); "It is no gift I tender"; "Morning up the easter stain" (Additional Poems). This information is also from the 1959 Complete Poems.

Of course, some of these poems were incomplete at the time of the publication of A Shropshire Lad. Of the others, one possible explanation for Housman's excluding them from the earlier work is that he felt that they were of an inferior quality; yet this does not explain why he later published several of these poems in Last Poems. Certainly a reasonable hypothesis is that these poems did not fit into a certain arrangement which he tried to achieve in A Shropshire Lad.

But one is on dangerous ground in trying to determine what Housman intended in the structure of A Shropshire Lad. Even if the poet had left some indication of what he had attempted to achieve in the ordering of the work, there is yet no certainty that he was successful in his endeavors. A more valid approach is to analyze the structure of the work itself to determine if the arrangement of the sixty-three lyrics is meaningful and if some pattern or design may be found, although certainly the evidence provided by Housman's actions in dealing with the publication of poems from A Shropshire Lad does furnish some justification for the hope that such an analysis might prove rewarding.

The most logical starting point in an analysis of the structure of A Shropshire Lad is an examination of the traces of the narrative unity which Nesca A. Robb has discussed at some length.<sup>17</sup> Her statement of the poem's unity is the strongest and most explicit which has yet appeared. She states:

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<sup>17</sup>Miss Robb and I reached similar conclusions about the unity of A Shropshire Lad independently. I am encouraged in my interpretation of the work by the fact that her analysis, though from a slightly different point of view, has not caused me to change my own observations about the kind of unity which the poem contains.

A Shropshire Lad is an ordered sequence. One might almost go farther and call it a poem, for the more one studies it the more intimately do its component parts appear to be related to one another. They are arranged with deliberateness, so that not only does one theme follow another in logical sequence, but the themes prophecy, recall and intertwine with each other so that, as one grows familiar with the whole, one comes to feel the closest organic connection between the individual poems.<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately, Miss Robb is not always entirely specific in dealing with the importance of the arrangement of the poems. She states, for example, in supporting the above statement:

The feelings expressed in The Immortal Part (No. XLIII) add a new content to the phrase "the lover of the grave" in No. XVI. The exile's dream of the "high snowdrifts on the hawthorns of his native shire recall inevitably "the cherry hung with snow" and makes one feel more strongly what a capacity for pain is already implicit and stirring in the poet's delight. The casual love-making of "Oh, see how thick the gold cup flowers" emphasizes the gulf of human experience that lies between the light-hearted falsehood and the tortured sincerity of "If truth in hearts that perish."<sup>19</sup>

What has been noted here is a unity of theme. However, the examples drawn from the work do not support a meaningful order among the poems. For example, if The Immortal Part (No. XLIII) had preceded No. XVI, Miss Robb could still have made the same statement about the relationship between the two poems. The same may be said of two of her other examples. "Oh, see how thick the gold cup flowers" and "If truth in hearts that perish" emphasize between them "the gulf of human experience that lies between . . . light hearted falsehood and . . . tortured sincerity" no matter in what order they appear in the work. Yet Miss Robb does find a logical sequence in the work, and she connects this primarily with the narrative element devoted to the Shropshire Lad himself:

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<sup>18</sup>op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

. . . this unity is made concrete in the person of the imaginary Shropshire Lad, Terence. By a process analogous to that by which the athlete in No. XIX is transformed from an individual country boy into an image of the universal tragedy of early death, the slight rustic accent that marks many of the poems passes, by an almost imperceptible transition, into the delicately restrained and classical utterance of others, so that two worlds, the individual and the universal, are kept continuously but unobtrusively before us.

The personal fortunes of Terence are made to appear not merely local and particular, but general and typical, an image both of man's struggle with circumstances, and of his inward experience of conflict.<sup>20</sup>

Miss Robb thus sees the poem's development as correlating to the Shropshire Lad's development, but she also notes that within this order the work also contains certain groupings of themes, poems about murderers, for example, and poems about young lovers. She is mainly concerned, however, especially in talking about the earlier lyrics of the volume, to trace the Shropshire Lad's emotional development. She finds that the first poem introduces us "to a world of youth." The young man of the narrative "watches the beacons leaping on the hills, and cheers and drinks with his fellows." These festivities represent "a celebration of present friendship and of the valour and delight of young manhood."<sup>21</sup> In the second lyric the youth experiences "the moment when youth, emerging from the strange timelessness of childhood, first grows aware of the lapse of hours, and instinctively reaches out to clasp life's joys more closely. . . ."<sup>22</sup> In the next poem, Miss Robb finds, "the young man is called to

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<sup>20</sup>ibid., p. 13.

<sup>21</sup>ibid., p. 18.

<sup>22</sup>ibid., p. 19.

seek the military glory that has dignified his fellows."<sup>23</sup> In "Reveille," No. V, he is bidden to "cast off sloth and taste all the experience he may while the day lasts."<sup>24</sup> Miss Robb's method, then, is to relate each of the poems in turn to the progress of the narrative of the Shropshire Lad himself. She follows this method in her discussion of the poems up to Lyric IX, but here she is forced to drop this poem-by-poem analysis and replaces it with a more thematic discussion of the poems as a whole.

This shift in approach points up one of the difficulties in analyzing A Shropshire Lad on the narrative or literal level alone, tracing through each successive poem an advance in the narrative. Many of the lyrics simply do not fit such a scheme. Only about a third of the poems are specific enough to utilize either Shropshire place names or other clues to a specific speaker or situation. Others are obviously not concerned with the Shropshire Lad directly, since they are spoken by, for example, a young man departing for war (Lyric XXXIV) or a soldier engaged in battle (Lyrics LVI and LX).<sup>25</sup> To suggest that the arrangement of poems is according to a narrative scheme alone, then, is to leave unaccounted for a number of poems in the work. Certainly it is necessary to take into account the narrative element in the work, but it is also necessary to realize that it is only a part of the poem's larger structure,

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>See Ralph Franklin, 'Housman's Shropshire,' MLO, XXIV (1963), pp. 164-171. Franklin notes that of the sixty-three poems constituting A Shropshire Lad, only fifteen contain references to Shropshire (p. 164). The conclusion of his study is that the lyrics "do not depend upon the reality of Shropshire for their value" (p. 171).

although, of course, a most vital part. To state this in another way, the work may be read on a literal level as the narrative of the Shropshire Lad, but a more significant reading may be made by taking into account other structural elements, primarily the general pattern of the images and symbols as they emerge in the poetry.

In examining this larger structure, one notes that A Shropshire Lad contains something of a frame, Lyric I and Lyrics LXII and LXIII enveloping the sixty lyrics within the frame. The first lyric acts as an introduction to the volume. As has already been noted in another context, "1887" is the one poem of the work which emphasizes a particular occasion in history and which seems to reach beyond the provincial limits of the mind of the rustic narrator to depict a national or even international mood. Lyric I, then, may be seen as setting out the wider background within which the Shropshire pastoral takes its meaning. Certainly the poem draws a sharp contrast between the easy optimism of Victorian England depicted in the first two stanzas and the more homely realism which the Shropshire Lad introduces in the last stanza. The first two stanzas introduce the note of celebration and hope which England feels as it observes Victoria's Golden Jubilee:

From Clee to heaven the beacon burns,  
The shires have seen it plain,  
From north and south the sign returns  
And beacons burn again.

Look left, look right, the hills are bright,  
The dales are light between,  
Because 'tis fifty years to-night  
That God has saved the Queen.  
(ll. 1-8)

The poem's last stanza, however, makes the transition from the tone of faith and trust in the nature of things which characterizes the national mood to the grim mortality of the Shropshire cycle:

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.  
 (ll. 29-32)

The final two lyrics also represent a unit separate from the poems which precede them. These two poems constitute the poet's apologia, and they assume a knowledge on the reader's part of the general nature of the poems which they conclude. These concluding poems are important elements in the development of the work as a whole; yet they must await examination until the remainder of the work has been discussed in more detail.

What has not generally been recognized is that the lyrics which remain to form the body of the work are divided almost equally into two groups, the first set in Shropshire, the second outside of Shropshire. In between these two groups is a journey motif dominating six poems which depict lovers, soldiers, and finally the Shropshire Lad himself leaving the world of Shropshire. To understand the significance of this arrangement, we must examine in some detail those poems set in Shropshire, the transition poems, and, finally, the London poems.

Looking first at the Shropshire poems, we may note that it is indeed to a world of youth that the early lyrics of A Shropshire Lad introduce us. Many of these early poems voice an intensity and joy in life which is missing in the poems set in London. Lyric IV exemplifies the

aspirations of youth, the notion that life has much to offer but that it requires a personal involvement:

Up, lad, up, 'tis late for lying;  
 Hear the drums of morning play;  
 Hark, the empty highways crying,  
 'Who'll beyond the hills away?'

. . .

Clay lies still, but blood's a rover;  
 Breath's a ware that will not keep.  
 Up, lad: when the journey's over  
 There'll be time enough to sleep.  
 (ll. 9-12, 21-24)

Lyric XI cautions against wasting "the light in sighing" (l. 3) and Lyric XXIV again calls for immediate involvement:

Say, lad, have you things to do?  
 Quick, then, while your day's at prime.  
 Quick, and if 'tis work for two,  
 Here am I, man; now's your time.  
 (ll. 1-4)

The general mood of youthful promise and aspiration is again reinforced by the kinds of activities and situations described in the early poems of the work. Many are concerned with young love and with the playful frivolities of youth. Lyric V deals with a courtship which ends in the rejection of one of the lovers; yet its tone is playful, and its view of life emphasizes the richness and fullness of a world at its prime:

Oh, see how thick the goldcup flowers  
 Are lying in field and lane,  
 With dandelions to tell the hours  
 That never are told again.  
 Oh, may I squire you round the meads  
 And pick you posies gay?  
 --'Twill do no harm to take my arm  
 'You may, young man, you may.'

Ah, spring was sent for lass and lad,  
 'Tis now the blood runs gold,  
 And man and maid had best be glad  
 Before the world is old.

What flowers to-day may flower to-morrow,  
 But never as good as new.  
 --Suppose I wound my arm right round--  
 'Tis true, young man, 'tis true.'  
 (ll. 1-16)

Lyric X describes a world which rejoices in its youth. The tone is optimistic and gay in spite of a recognition of love's fickleness:

The Sun at noon to higher air,  
 Unharnessing the silver Pair  
 That late before his chariot swam  
 Rides on the gold wool of the Ram.

So braver notes the storm-cock sings  
 To start the rusted wheel of things,  
 And brutes in field and brutes in pen  
 Leap that the world goes round again.

The boys are up the woods with day  
 To fetch the daffodils away,  
 And home at noon day from the hills  
 They bring no dearth of daffodils

Afield for palms the girls repair  
 And sure enough the palms are there,  
 And each will find by hedge or pond  
 Her waving silver-tufted wand.

In farm and field through all the shire  
 The eye beholds the heart's desire;  
 Ah, let not only mine be vain,  
 For lovers should be loved again.

The last two lines may appear startling to the reader, since they interject a brief personal note after eighteen lines of general description.<sup>26</sup> Yet it is to this final couplet that the whole poem leads, for it is the speaker's perception of the forces of life quickening around him which lead to his final optimistic conclusion that "lovers should be loved

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<sup>26</sup>Compare Surrey's sonnet "Description of Spring, Wherein Each Thing Renews Save Only the Lover," in which the same device is used. Twelve lines of general description are followed by a couplet in which the poet suddenly introduces his own plight.

again." He sees that in the "farm and field through all the shire/The eye beholds the heart's desire." He is therefore strengthened in his belief that the pattern of life dictates that his present lovesickness may soon be cured.

In Lyric XXIX similar activities are described:

'Tis spring; come out to ramble  
The hilly brakes around,  
For under thorn and bramble  
About the hollow ground  
The primroses are found.

And there's the windflower chilly  
With all the winds at play.  
And there's the Lenten lily  
That has not long to stay  
And dies on Easter day.

And since till girls go maying  
You find the primrose still,  
And find the windflower playing  
With every wind at will,  
But not the daffodil,

Bring baskets now, and sally  
Upon the spring's array,  
And bear from hill and valley  
The daffodil away  
That dies on Easter day.

The association of death here with the activities of youth (the daffodil "that dies on Easter day") points to the other strain, the dominant strain, which runs through the lyrics set in Shropshire, for the world of youth is also a world of discovery, and the early poems of A Shropshire Lad chronicle a growing awareness that youth must lead inevitably to decay and death. This awareness comes gradually in the work. In Lyric II the youth calculates his Biblical threescore years and ten and realizes that he has but fifty more. In Lyric III the young soldier

who departs from Shropshire is reminded that temporal things are subject to decay.<sup>27</sup> The optimism of youth is still strong, however, when in Lyric VII as the country lad strides "blith afield" he is reminded by a bird's song that his optimism is futile:

'Lie down, lie down, young yeoman;  
 What use to rise and rise?  
 Rise man a thousand mornings  
 Yet down at last he lies,  
 And then the man is wise.'  
 (ll. 11-15)

For the first time the truth of life's mutability becomes a part of the lad's perception of life: "Then my soul within me/Took up the black-bird's strain. . . ." At first this awareness of the brevity of life and of death is only an intellectual idea, but this abstract consciousness of death is made concrete in Lyrics VIII and IX, for here for the first time death becomes a reality. In Lyric VII Terence discovers that his friend is a murderer, and in Lyric IX death is made even more vivid as the lad awaits his friend's execution in Shrewsbury jail. The narrator's musings on the details of the act of death reveal how deeply the fact of death now pervades his mind:

And naked to the hangman's noose  
 The morning clocks will ring  
 A neck God made for other use  
 Then strangling in a string.

And sharp the link of life will snap,  
 And dead on air will stand  
 Heels that held up as straight a chap  
 As treads upon the land.

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<sup>27</sup>See Chapter II for a more complete discussion of the poems mentioned here.

So here I'll watch the night and wait  
 To see the morning shine,  
 When he will hear the stroke of eight  
 And not the stroke of nine; . . .  
 (ll. 17-32)

Other lyrics in the Shropshire section reveal the extent to which the pervasive idea of death now colors the youth's perception of the world. In Lyric XII as he watches the pageant of life move before him, he can think only that this "house of flesh" will soon be replaced by a "house of dust." In Lyric XIV he characterizes those about him as "the careless people/That call their souls their own" (ll. 1-2). In Lyric XXIII at the Ludlow fair he sees not the excitement of a country celebration but the death and decay about him. Of the "lads in their hundred" who come for the fair, "many to count are the stalwart, and many the brave,/And many the handsome of face and the handsome of heart" (ll. 6-7). But the youth is conscious of the decay which time brings. He sees that there are "few that will carry their looks or their truth to the grave" (l. 8). The few who will escape the decay of time are "the lads that will die in their glory and never be old" (l. 16).

Paralleling this growing perception of death and decay, the early lyrics depict a progressive awareness that love, like life, is fleeting and transient. The earliest love lyric, No. V, as has been previously noted, is lighthearted in its view of love's misfortunes. Lyric X states the belief that "lovers should be loved again." Lyric XIII, however, marks the turning point in the youth's attitude toward love, as his sudden maturity reveals to him the true nature of human affections. At twenty-one he is warned by "a wise man" that love will bring "endless rue":

But I was one-and-twenty  
 No use to talk to me.  
 (11. 7-8)

Now, however:

. . . I am two-and-twenty,  
 And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.  
 (11. 15-16)

Hereafter the lighthearted view of love is replaced by a more tragic one. We are shown in 'Bredon Hill' the death of young lovers and in three consecutive poems, Lyrics XXV, XXVI, and XXVII, the true tragedy of love, for all three poems reveal that the memory of love is short, and a lover who dies is quickly forgotten, his place taken by his rival.

Thus Shropshire is a world of youth, but a youth clouded by the knowledge of the loss which human existence involves. The group of poems set in Shropshire move from an early innocence to discovery.<sup>28</sup> These poems thus anticipate the departure from Shropshire, the land of youth, depicted in Lyrics XXXII-XXXVII, and the group of exile poems set in London, in which a new direction in thought begins.

Lyrics XXXII and XXXIII, the first two poems of the transition group, are concerned primarily with death, but they utilize the journey metaphor to suggest this death. Lyric XXXII depicts life as a momentary resting place in an endless trek. And to emphasize the transitory state of life, Housman characterizes this journey as a journey of the winds, which blew from far" the 'stuff of life to knit me':

Now--for a breath I tarry  
 Nor yet disperse apart--

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<sup>28</sup>See Stevenson, *op. cit.*, p. 70, where he discusses the theme of A Shropshire Lad in terms of a loss of innocence.

Take my hand quick and tell me,  
What have you in your heart.

Speak now, and I will answer;  
How shall I help you, say;  
Ere to the wind's twelve quarters  
I take my endless way.<sup>29</sup>  
(ll. 5-12)

The image of death as a journey is continued in the next poem. The poem begins by speaking of death in literal terms:

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.  
(ll. 1-4)

However, in the last stanza of the poem death has become a journey to a distant town:

But now, since all is idle,  
To this lost heart be kind,  
Ere to a town you journey  
Where friends are ill to find.  
(ll. 13-16)

The following two lyrics are concerned with a more literal journey, but again the journey is associated with death, for both poems deal with soldiers leaving their native lands for battle. In Lyric XXXIV, "The New Mistress," the journey becomes the direct result of the misfortunes of love:

'Oh, sick I am to see you, will you never let me be?  
You may be good for something, but you are not good for me.  
Oh, go where you are wanted, for you are not wanted here.  
And that was all the farewell when I parted from my dear.  
(ll. 1-4)

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<sup>29</sup>See Chapter III, pp. 70-71 for a further discussion of this poem. Many of the poems examined in the following pages are discussed out of context but at greater length in Chapters II and III.

The title, "The New Mistress" offers a guide to the poem's meaning. By repeating certain key phrases of the first stanza which characterized the soldier's old mistress, the poet indicates who the new mistress is. In stanza 2 she is the Queen, for the lad is to be a soldier of the Queen:

'I will go where I am wanted, to a lady born and bred  
 Who will dress me free for nothing in a uniform of red;  
 She will not be sick to see me if I only keep it clean:  
 I will go where I am wanted for a soldier of the Queen.  
 (ll. 5-8)

But by continuing the same process of repetition for the last two stanzas, the poet reveals the ambiguity of the title. It refers also to the lad's sergeant:

'I will go where I am wanted, for the sergeant does not mind;  
 He may be sick to see me but he treats me very kind:  
 He gives me beer and breakfast and a ribbon for my cap,  
 And I never knew a sweetheart spend her money on a chap.  
 (ll. 9-12)

Finally, in the last stanza Housman extends the title to include the "enemies of England" and suggests that the soldier's final new mistress may be death:

'I will go where I am wanted, where there's room for one or two,  
 And the men are none too many for the work there is to do;  
 Where the standing line wears thinner and the dropping dead lie thick;  
 And the enemies of England they shall see me and be sick.'  
 (ll. 13-16)

The effectiveness of Housman's use of the controlling love imagery to characterize war may be seen in the ambiguities of the last stanza. The soldier, metaphorically the suitor in the courtship of war, is finally where he is wanted, for this new mistress, unlike the old one, has "room for one or two." The soldier may now also achieve the consummation of his courtship with this new mistress, for "the standing line wears thinner." This may be taken literally as the battle line but metaphorically,

to continue the conceit of the poem, as the line of suitors who wait to achieve the logical ends of their roles as suitors, death ("the dropping dead lie thick"). Dying, of course, has been frequently utilized as a metaphor for the consummation of the sex act, so that Housman's imagery here achieves perfect consistency on both the literal and metaphorical level. And the poem continues the motif of the group in which it appears by dealing with the journey and with death.

The following lyric, No. XXXV, makes even more explicit that the soldier's journey is to certain death. It opens with a distant call to battle which the country lad hears in the comfort of the idle hills and sleepy streams of his own shire:

On the idle hili of summer,  
Sleepy with the flow of streams,  
Far I hear the steady drummer  
Drumming like a noise in dreams.  
(ll. 1-4)

He sees others making the journey and he realizes their fate:

Far and near and low and louder  
On the roads of earth go by,  
Dear to friends and food for powder,  
Soldiers marching, all to die.  
(ll. 5-8)

But in spite of the realization that the march leads to certain death, the youth realizes that he has no other choice except to join the march:

Far the calling bugles holló,  
High the screaming fife replies,  
Gay the files of scarlet follow:  
Woman bore me, I will rise.  
(ll. 13-16)

The fifth poem of this group (No. XXXVI) returns to the theme of the lover who journeys from his love:

White in the moon the long road lies,  
 The moon stands blank above;  
 White in the moon the long road lies  
 That leads me from my love.  
 (ll. 1-4)

The lover's only consolation is the conceit which the poem develops, that since the earth is round, the road he takes away from his home will eventually lead him back:

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.  
 (ll. 9-12)

Finally, Lyric XXXVII picks up the thread of the narrative again, for now it is the Shropshire Lad who departs from Shropshire for London streets:

As through the wild green hills of Wyre  
 The train ran, changing sky and shire,  
 And far behind, a fading crest,  
 Low in the forsaken west  
 Sank the high-reared head of Clee,  
 My hand lay empty on my knee.  
 Aching on my knee it lay:  
 That morning half a shire away  
 So many an honest fellow's fist  
 Had well-nigh wrung it from the wrist.  
 (ll. 1-10)

Housman's use of more obvious narrative techniques in Lyric XXXVII, particularly the fast-moving couplet, emphasizes the difference between this poem and the more general lyrics which surround it. This difference in form and style suggests that Lyric XXXVII serves as a functional poem in the ordering of the lyrics, since Housman needed a transition here between the preceding group of poems set in Shropshire and the group of poems which follow, set in London (with the exception of Lyric

LXII, which is a part of the frame).<sup>30</sup> Lyric XXXVII looks both backward to the Shropshire poems and ahead to those set in exile in London. The poem recalls the rural setting in these lines:

And if my foot returns no more  
 To Teme nor Corve nor Severn shore,  
 Luck, my lands, be with you still  
 By falling stream and standing hill,  
 By chiming tower and whispering tree,  
 Men that made a man of me.  
 About your work in town and farm  
 Still you'll keep my head from harm,  
 Still you'll help me, hands that gave  
 A grasp to friend as to the grave.  
 (ll. 27-36)

And the loneliness and anxiety of the London exile is anticipated in the following lines in which Terence addresses the hand which still aches from the handshakes of his departure:

You and I must keep from shame  
 In London streets the Shropshire name,  
 On banks of Thames they must not say  
 Severn breeds worse men than they;  
 And friends abroad must bear in mind  
 Friends at home they leave behind.  
 (ll. 17-22)

Like the other poems of this group also, Lyric XXXVII retains the association of death with the journey from the land of birth, and death again is imaged as another distant land:

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<sup>30</sup>This view of Lyric XXXVII is supported by the fact that Housman interjected the poem in the ordering of the lyrics immediately prior to the printing of A Shropshire Lad and after the printer's copy of the work had supposedly been completed. Other changes Housman made at the same time in the ordering of the poems strengthen the sense of relocation immediately after Lyric XXXVII. Housman added Lyric XLI, beginning "In my own shire, if I was sad. . . ." This poem, of course, helps to contrast the pastoral existence of the old shire with life in London, as does Lyric XXXIX, which was moved to its present position from its original position as No. XLIII. Housman thus succeeds through these changes in emphasizing the shift in setting from Shropshire to London, and Lyric XXXVII is especially important in pointing up this shift. See Tom Burns Haber, "The Printer's Copy of A Shropshire Lad," in The Manuscript Poems of A. E. Housman, Minneapolis, 1955, pp. 120-129.

Oh, I shall be stiff and cold  
 When I forget you, hearts of gold;  
 The land where I shall mind you not  
 Is the land where all's forgot.  
 (ll. 23-26)

The significance of this group of six poems is apparent when one realizes that to completely understand the lyrics which follow No. XXXVII, one must be aware that the scene has changed, as has the tone of the poetry. The poems now look back westward to Shropshire (London, of course, lies to the east of Shropshire), and the mood of the speaker in the poems is now largely one of nostalgia for something lost and never to be recovered.

The poem immediately following the transition group, Lyric XXXVIII, illustrates this reorientation in thought and setting. In the first two stanzas the narrator now looks back to the west, to the land from which he has departed:

The winds out of the west land blow,  
 My friends have breathed them there;  
 Warm with the blood of lads I know  
 Comes east the sighing air.

It fanned their temples, filled their lungs,  
 Scattered their forelocks free;  
 My friends made words of it with tongues  
 That talk no more to me.

(ll. 1-8)

The wind becomes metaphorically the life force which was active in the home county. This image of the wind as a force of life is emphasized by line 2: "My friends have breathed them there," and by line 3, which refers to the winds as "warm with the blood of lads I know." In line 4 also the wind is the breath of life which "filled their lungs." Elsewhere in A Shropshire Lad Housman makes the same identification with the

wind. In Lyric XXXI he refers to the "gale of life" which exists in an observer who watches the wind blow through the woods of Wenlock Edge. In Lyric XXXII the speaker states that the "stuff of life" "blew hither" like the wind. In Lyric XVI the wind may also be identified as the life force which blows the nettle about on the grave of the lover "that hanged himself for love."

The importance of noting this correlation between the wind and the life force becomes clear when the last two stanzas of the poem are examined, for here it becomes evident that the transition from Shropshire to London involves a certain loss for the speaker:

Oh lads, at home I heard you plain,  
But here your speech is still,  
And down the sighing wind in vain  
You hollo from the hill.

The wind and I, we both were there,  
But neither long abode;  
Now through the friendless world we fare  
And sigh upon the road.

(ll. 13-20)

In London, then, this life force, this intensity of life which characterizes the poems set in Shropshire, is lost. The three poems following Lyric XXXVIII contribute a similar tone. Like Lyric XXXVIII they look back to a land of youth with nostalgia, for, like Wordsworth, the persona of these lyrics sees that ". . . there hath passed away a glory from the earth."<sup>31</sup> Lyrics XXXIX-XLI recall, like Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode, the hour "of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower."<sup>32</sup> Lyric XXXIX states:

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<sup>31</sup>Ode: "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," l. 17.

<sup>32</sup>ibid., l. 180.

'Tis time I think by Wenlock town  
 The golden bloom should blow;  
 The hawthorn sprinkled up and down  
 Should charge the land with snow.

Spring will not wait the loiterer's time  
 Who keeps so long away;  
 So others wear the bloom and climb  
 The hedgerows heaped with may.

Oh tarnish late on Wenlock Edge,  
 Gold that I never see;  
 Lie long, high snowdrifts in the hedge  
 That will not shower on me.

One great difference, however, between Housman's treatment of the theme of mutability in A Shropshire Lad and Wordsworth's in the "Intimations" ode lies in the fact that Housman pictures the loss of youth not in terms of time, as Wordsworth does, but in the motif of two lands, one a land of youth, the other a land of old age and death. In Lyric XL the memories of youth come from "yon far country" of "blue remembered hills." Furthermore, Wordsworth finds compensation even in the midst of loss, in the memories of youth:

We will grieve not, rather find  
 Strength in what remains behind;  
 In the primal sympathy  
 Which having been must ever be;  
 In the soothing thoughts that spring  
 Out of human suffering;  
 In the faith that looks through death,  
 In years that bring the philosophic mind.<sup>33</sup>

To the persona of Lyric XL, however, the remembrance of things past is "an air that kills":

Into my heart an air that kills  
 From yon far country blows:

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., II, 181-188. See Stevenson, "Housman's Lyric Tradition," Forum, IV (1962), pp. 17-21. Stevenson compares Wordsworth's and Housman's attitude toward nature.

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.

Nature has for Housman, as for Wordsworth, a therapeutic value, but it does not teach intimations of immortality, even in youth. It serves only as a "homely comforter," sorrowing with youth by displaying "the beautiful and death-struck year." Even this, however, has been lost in the London exile. Lyric XLI:

In my own shire, if I was sad,  
 Homely comforters I had:  
 The earth, because my heart was sore,  
 Sorrowed for the son she bore;  
 And standing hills, long to remain,  
 Shared their short-lived comrade's pain.  
 And bound for the same bourn as I,  
 On every road I wandered by,  
 Trod beside me, close and dear,  
 The beautiful and death-struck year:  
 Whether in the woodland brown  
 I heard the beechnut rustle down,  
 And saw the purple crocus pale  
 Flower about the autumn dale;  
 Or littering far the fields of May  
 Lady-smocks a-bleaching lay,  
 And like a skylit water stood  
 The bluebells in the azure wood.  
 (ll. 1-18)

This closeness to nature--albeit a sorrowing, mortal nature--is lost in London:

Yonder, lightening other loads,  
 The seasons range the country roads  
 But here in London streets I ken  
 No such helpmates, only men;  
 And these are not in plight to bear,  
 If they would, another's care.  
 (ll. 18-24)

The contrast between Shropshire and London is continued in two other poems of the London group. Lyric LII is close to Lyrics XXXVIII-XLI both in its use of direction as symbolic and its conscious comparison between conditions in Shropshire and those in London:

Far in a western brookland  
That bred me long ago  
The poplars stand and tremble  
By pools I used to know.

There, in the windless night-time,  
The wanderer, marvelling why,  
Halts on the bridge to hearken  
How soft the poplars sigh.

He hears: no more remembered  
In fields where I was known,  
Here I lie down in London  
And turn to rest alone.  
(ll. 1-12)

The last stanza of the poem returns to the symbol of the wind to suggest again the loss involved in the departure from the pastoral existence of Shropshire, for the wind which the wanderer hears in the "windless night-time" is the soul of the lad who has forsaken the land of his youth for the barren existence of London:

There, by the starlit fences,  
The wanderer halts and hears  
My soul that lingers sighing  
About the glimmering weirs.  
(ll. 13-16)

Lyric LV is similar in its mood, but it offers a complication to the Shropshire-London motif, for while the exile poems previously quoted emphasize the loss involved in the transition from Shropshire to London, Lyric LV suggests that the transition has also its compensation. The journey has allowed the lad to escape one feature which characterized the existence in Shropshire:

Westward on the high-hilled plains  
 There for me the world began,  
 Still, I think, in newer veins  
 Frets the changeless blood of man.

Now that other lads than I  
 Strip to bathe on Severn shore,  
 They, no help, for all they try,  
 Tread the mill I trod before.  
 (ll. 1-8)

The last two lines of stanza 2 suggest that the lad in London no longer must "tread the mill I trod before," and the poem recalls Housman's image of the nettle on the grave of the lover which was tossed in an endless cycle by the wind of life. The dead lover, however, had escaped this cycle through death. He "does not move" (l. 6). The last two stanzas of Lyric LV further contribute to the picture of Shropshire, the land of youth, as a time of uncertainty and change:

There, when hueless is the west  
 And the darkness hushes wide,  
 Where the lad lies down to rest  
 Stands the troubled dream beside.

There, on thoughts that once were mine,  
 Day looks down the eastern steep,  
 And the youth at morning shine  
 Makes the vows he will not keep.  
 (ll. 9-16)

Thus, if Shropshire and London are to be taken as symbolic of two states of existence, one marked by youth, the other by old age and death, it is necessary to realize that Housman continues in these symbols the central conceit of A Shropshire Lad--the notion that youth is marked by a mutability which can be halted only by death. The complex attitude toward life and death which is seen in all of the poems of A Shropshire Lad is paralleled by Housman's complex treatment of the symbols of London and Shropshire.

Lyric XLII utilizes the journey motif on a smaller scale.<sup>34</sup> The poem is entitled "The Merry Guide," and this guide is, as Louise Boas has pointed out, the god Hermes, identified by his feathered cap (stanza 2) and his "serpent-circled wand" (stanza 15).<sup>35</sup> In the poem Housman brings together many of the symbols which are utilized in the preceding poems-- the journey, the winds, a pastoral Arcadia, and an association of the destination of the journey with death. Housman's choice of Hermes as the guide in the poem seems especially significant. As a classical scholar Housman must have known that Hermes is the god who guides the dead to Hades. Furthermore, his birthplace was Arcadia, and he is the pastoral god and the god of roads and the protector of travellers.<sup>36</sup> All of these functions are consistent with the images Housman utilizes in dealing with the transition from Shropshire to London. Wind imagery dominates the poem. It opens in "the wind of morning (l. 1) as the narrator recalls the journey which took place in the past 'when I ranged the thymy wold' (l. 2). The journey itself is described as the journey of the wind:

Across the glittering pastures  
And empty upland still  
And solitude of shepherds  
High in the folded hill,

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<sup>34</sup>"The Merry Guide" is chronologically one of the earliest of the poems of A Shropshire Lad. It is significant that the structure of this poem is similar to the structure of the whole work.

<sup>35</sup>"Housman's 'The Merry Guide,'" Explicator, III (1944-45), item 6.

<sup>36</sup>Miss Boas points out these functions of the god in her analysis of the poem.

By hanging woods and hamlets  
 That gaze through orchards down  
 On many a windmill turning  
 And the far-discovered town,

With gay regards of promise  
 And sure unslackened stride  
 And smiles and nothing spoken  
 Led on my merry guide.

(ll. 21-32)

Like Shelley's west wind, the wind through which the narrator and his guide travel is both "destroyer and preserver"<sup>37</sup> "from whose unseen presence the leaves dead are driven,"<sup>38</sup> but which also carries "the winged seeds"<sup>39</sup> of rebirth. The poem mentions in stanza 12 "the drift of blossoms/Whose petals throng the wind: which come "from gardens thinned." But it is the wind not only of spring but also of autumn. In stanza 13 the two journey through

. . . the heaven-heard whisper  
 Of dancing leaflets whirled  
 From all the woods that autumn  
 Bereaves in all the world.  
 (ll. 49-52)

Thus it is the wind of autumn and of spring, of the destruction of life and of its preservation. However, it is primarily with the wind as the symbol of the journey to death that Housman is most concerned in the poem. Stanza 14 makes this association clear:

And midst the fluttering legion  
 Of all that ever died

<sup>37</sup>"Ode to the West Wind," l. 14.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., ll. 2-3.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., l. 7.

I follow, and before us  
 Goes the delightful guide, . . .  
 (ll. 53-56)

Housman's characterization of the guide as "delightful" in line 56 must seem oddly out of place to the reader who realizes that he guides the speaker to the land of the dead. In fact, the title and the description of Hermes all through the poems points up what appears to be the irony of the poem. The guide is described in stanza 5 as "my happy guide," and in stanza 8, as in the title, as a "merry guide." In stanza 10, as in stanza 14, he is again "my delightful guide." In addition, he is characterized in stanza 3 a "gay delightful guise" and "friendly brows and laughter," and in stanza 5 by "kind looks and laughter" and in stanzas 8 and 15 by "gay regards of promise" "lips that brim with laughter." This characterization of the guide has prompted Louise Boas to call "The Merry Guide" a highly ironic poem. She states:

Man might expect this merry guide to lead him to life and love--to Arcadia. But like the trickster he is, he leads man on through the fields and flocks, through the woods and orchards, through sunlight and clouds, to the world of the dead. He makes gay promises--unspoken but implied. A happy journey? So it seems on the surface. But is not the happiness a dream? Hermes is the dream guide. If one follow him then one is in a dream. Man travels then through the dream of life to the reality of death. It is the guide who laughs.<sup>40</sup>

Granted there may be an element of irony here, but like other of Housman's titles,<sup>41</sup> the title of this poem may be seen as ambiguous, capable of two simultaneous interpretations. Since, as has been noted in Chapter III, death is itself, like the wind, a preserver and a

<sup>40</sup>Op. cit.

<sup>41</sup>Compare, for example, "The True Lover" and "The New Mistress."

destroyer, it can be approached both with dread and with rejoicing. "To an Athlete Dying Young" clearly establishes the fact that, at times, death is an occasion of joy rather than of sorrow. "The Merry Guide," then, may not be as "highly ironic" as Miss Boas has suggested.

This reading of the poem is supported by the fact that the three poems which follow "The Merry Guide" in the sequence of A Shropshire Lad deal with the preserving aspect of death. Lyric XLIII, "The Immortal Part," presents the idea that man's immortal state begins only after death:

'When shall this slough of sense be cast,  
This dust of thoughts be laid at last,  
The man of flesh and soul be slain  
And the man of bone remain?

'These [flesh and soul] to-day are proud in power  
And lord it in their little hour:  
The immortal bones obey control  
Of dying flesh and dying soul.

'Tis long till eve and morn are gone:  
Slow the endless night comes on,  
And late to fulness grows the birth  
That shall last as long as earth.

(ll. 5-8, 13-20)

Lyric XLIV views death as the preserver of man's good name, of his honor:

Shot? so quick, so clean an ending?  
Oh that was right, lad, that was brave:  
Yours was not an ill for mending,  
'Twas best to take it to the grave.  
(ll. 1-4)

Death becomes, in this case, the destroyer of individual man but the preserver of generic man, for the lad in the poem chose suicide rather than dishonor his fellows with his unnamed disgrace, and they are still "undishonoured" and "clean of guilt":

Now to your grave shall friend and stranger  
 With ruth and some with envy come:  
 Undishonoured, clear of danger,  
 Clean of guilt, pass hence and home.  
 (ll. 21-24)

The controlling conceit of Lyric XLIV, that to destroy is in one sense to preserve, is continued in the following poem, and here Housman echoes a Biblical passage to give support to what would otherwise appear a most unorthodox doctrine:

If it chance your eye offend you,  
 Pluck it out, lad, and be sound:  
 'Twill hurt, but here are salves to friend you,  
 And many a balsam grows on ground.

And if your hand or foot offend you,  
 Cut it off, lad, and be whole;  
 But play the man, stand up and end you,  
 When your sickness is your soul.

The first two lines of stanza 1 recall Christ's words in Matthew V, 29: "And if thy right eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out and cast it from thee. . . ." And lines 5 and 6 continue the allusion to verse 30: "And if thy right hand causeth thee to stumble, cut it off and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish and not thy whole body go into hell." Housman thus justifies an idea that has been attacked by numerous critics by paraphrasing quite closely a passage from the Sermon on the Mount. However, he extends the metaphor one step further so that generic man, the race itself, is seen as the whole man, and the individual member is sacrificed for the purity of the whole.

Lyrics XLIII-XLV thus qualify the symbolic associations Housman has constructed in his arrangement of the poems of A Shropshire Lad. But

these poems contribute only the sort of complexity to the symbols of Shropshire and London that may be noted in Housman's attitude toward youth, old age, and death throughout the work. Youth, like Shropshire itself, signifies a state of intense feeling for life but also of an increasing anguish in the recognition of time's decay. The transition from youth to old age and death involves, like the transition from Shropshire to London, the loss of this intensity but also a gain, an escape from the anguish connected with life's transience, the "troubled dream" of youth. This complexity is exemplified in the varied moods of the poems set in London, which deal both with a sense of loss and a new-found stability.

One may note, for example, the conceit of Lyric LI, where the lad sees a Grecian statue in a London gallery. The lad is "brooding on [his] heavy ill" but the statue is "still in marble stone" and "stedfast." He imagines that the statue speaks to him, for he sees that they share a common fate:

'Well met,' I thought the look would say,  
 'We both were fashioned far away;  
 We neither knew, when we were young,  
 These Londoners we live among.'  
 (ll. 7-10)

The statue is imagined to be giving advice to the lad, and he imparts to the boy the philosophy of stoicism: "'Courage, lad, 'tis not for long:/ Stand, quit you like stone, be strong'" (ll. 21-22). Thus in London, as in death, is achieved a degree of permanence in the face of life's transience. It is the permanence of the stone statue:

And light on me my trouble lay,  
 And I stept out in flesh and bone  
 Manful like the man of stone.  
 (ll. 24-26)

Other poems of the London group echo the new stoic philosophy which the wisdom of age brings. In Lyric XLVIII the persona is resigned to "endure an hour and see injustice done" (l. 12). The first stanza of the poem reveals the futility of struggling against "earth and high heaven":

Be still, my soul, be still; the arms you bear are brittle  
 Earth and high heaven are fixt of old and founded strong.  
 Think rather, --call to thought, if now you grieve a little,  
 The days when we had rest, O soul, for they were long.  
 (ll. 1-4)

The poem depicts a time when youth is spent, for the phrase "the arms you bear are brittle" in line 1 suggests both the weakness of man's forces against the world and the feebleness of old age.

Lyric XLVI too is concerned with the stoical acceptance of old age and death. Its conceit is that the appropriate symbols of death are not the green, living plants which survive the winter and are reborn in spring. Death is an eternal state, and its proper emblem is "whatever will not flower again :

Bring in this timeless grave to throw,  
 No cypress, sombre on the snow;  
 Snap not from the bitter yew  
 His leaves that live December through;  
 Break no rosemary, bright with rime  
 And sparkling to the cruel clime;  
 Nor plod the winter land to look  
 For willows in the icy brook  
 To cast them leafless round him: bring  
 No spray that ever buds in spring.  
 (ll. 1-10)

The juxtaposition of those plants which survive the winter and experience the rebirth of spring with the "timeless grave" of one who "never shall arise" only serves to increase the irony of man's anguish about death.

Reflecting the new stoicism, the poem implies that man must be comforted by those objects of nature which are for "a single season, never two":

But if the Christmas field has kept  
 Awns the last gleaner overstept,  
 Or shrivelled flax, whose flower is blue  
 A single season, never two;  
 Or if one haulm whose year is o'er  
 Shivers on the upland frore,  
 --Oh, bring from hill and stream and plain  
 Whatever will not flower again,  
 To give him comfort: he and those  
 Shall bide eternal bedfellows  
 Where low upon the couch he lies  
 Whence he never shall arise.

(ll. 11-22)

Almost all of the London poems are concerned directly with death, but not the sudden, brutal death of the Shropshire poems--that is, not the sort of death which cuts off youth at its prime (one means of escaping life's mutability), but the sort of death which follows the aging process. Lyric L, for example, is the poem of an older man who looks back to the time when he was a Knighton lad:

In valleys of springs of rivers,  
 By Ony and Teme and Clun,  
 The country for easy livers,  
 The quietest under the sun,

We still had sorrows to lighten,  
 One could not be always glad,  
 And lads knew trouble at Knighton  
 When I was a Knighton lad.

(ll. 1-8)

Even in youth "one could not be always glad," but in London these sorrows have increased, for London is "the town built ill" (l. 10), and "'Tis small matter for wonder/If sorrow is with one still" (ll. 11-12). Stanza 4 establishes the parallel between the transfer from Knighton (a town in

southwestern Shropshire on the river Teme) to London and the aging process:

And if as a lad grows older  
 The troubles he bears are more,  
 He carries his griefs on a shoulder  
 That handselled them long before.  
 (ll. 13-16)

Thus, in the imagery of the poem, the aging process brings troubles which are as a heavy weight which must be set down:

Where shall one halt to deliver  
 This luggage I'd lief set down?  
 (ll. 17-18)

The poem looks to a time when this burden may be relieved. The answer comes in the last stanza:

'Tis a long way further than Knighton,  
 A quieter place than Clun,  
 Where doomsday may thunder and lighten  
 And little 'twill matter to one.  
 (ll. 21-24)

The pun in line 23 continues the imagery which structures the poem, for the poem looks to a place "where doomsday may thunder and lighten." Both senses of lighten are meaningful in the context of the poem: "to shine like lightning," and "to relieve of a load." The association of the word with thunder in the same line justifies the first interpretation, and Housman's usage of the word in line 4 ("We still had sorrows to lighten") and the general pattern of the poem's imagery of life as a burden which death relieves justifies the second interpretation.

The London poems thus depict, on the whole, the mood of one who is resigned to the fact of death and has lost the anger of the youth who first becomes aware that he must die. Anguish is replaced by nostalgia

for dead friends. Especially toward the end of the work this nostalgic mood dominates. Lyric LIV is perhaps the most famous example:

With rue my heart is laden  
 For golden friends I had,  
 For many a rose-lipt maiden  
 And many a lightfoot lad.  
 (ll. 1-4)

Lyric LVIII mourns "two honest lads" who accompanied the lad when he "came last to Ludlow," and Lyric LIX, "The Isle of Portland," also mourns a dead friend:

On yonder island, not to rise,  
 Never to stir forth free,  
 Far from his folk a dead lad lies  
 That once was friends with me.  
 (ll. 5-8)

Finally, Lyric LXI, "Hughley Steeple," the last of the poems within the frame, is concerned entirely with the death of friends whom the lad has survived:

The vane on Hughley steeple  
 Veers bright, a far-known sign,  
 And there lie Hughley people,  
 And there lie friends of mine.  
 Tall in the midst the tower  
 Divides the shade and sun,  
 And the clock strikes the hour  
 And tells the time to none.  
 (ll. 1-8)

The pattern of the poem's imagery is controlled by Hughley steeple itself, which divides the shade and sun, the north and the south. These two locations take on special significance in the poem, for the shaded northern side contains the suicides:

To south the headstones cluster,  
 The sunny mounds lie thick;  
 The dead are more in muster  
 At Hughley than the quick.

North, for a soon-told number,  
 Chill graves the sexton delves,  
 And steeple-shadowed slumber  
 The slayers of themselves.  
 (ll. 9-16)

The poem's narrator, with his new resignation toward death, makes no distinction between the two groups. Death, which in the early poems of A Shropshire Lad was met with fear and trembling, is now, sixty poems later, so welcome that even suicide is acceptable:

To north, to south, lie parted,  
 With Hughley tower above,  
 The kind, the single-hearted,  
 The lads I used to love.  
 And, south or north, 'tis only  
 A choice of friends one knows,  
 And I shall ne'er be lonely  
 Asleep with these or those.  
 (ll. 17-24)

On the surface, "Hughley Steeple" may appear to violate the order which this study has noted in the poems of A Shropshire Lad, since its setting is Shropshire, not London. Yet there is nothing in the poem to suggest that the speaker is now in Shropshire viewing the scene he is describing. Like other of the London poems, this lyric may be seen as the vivid recollection of the lad who sits in London and remembers the scenes of Shropshire. The nature of the description itself justifies such a reading, for the poem reconstructs not so much a specific scene described in detail as a pattern such as the mind imposes on a scene half-remembered, the tower neatly dividing the cemetery between sun and shade. Hughley steeple is, moreover, a "far-known sign," a famous landmark which would be apt to be recalled to the consciousness of one who has left it. This interpretation is supported also by the fact that the speaker refers to the scene as there, not here: "And there lie Hughley people,/And there

lie friends of mine" (ll. 3-4). Finally, it may be pointed out that in other poems of the London group the narrator describes scenes in Shropshire as if he were present, though obviously he is not. Lyric LII pictures a scene in "a western brookland" where "poplars stand and tremble" (l. 3) and a wanderer "halts on the bridge to hearken/How soft the poplars sigh" (ll. 7-8). In lines 11 and 12 it is made clear that this scene is viewed only in the imagination, for the narrator says of himself:

Here I lie down in London  
And turn to rest alone.

Of the twenty-five poems set in London, only one other must be examined as a possible violation of the Shropshire-London ordering.

Lyric LVIII states:

When I came last to Ludlow  
Amidst the moonlight pale,  
Two friends kept step beside me,  
Two honest lads and hale.

Now Dick lies long in the churchyard,  
And Ned lies long in jail,  
And I come home to Ludlow  
Amidst the moonlight pale.

The poem obviously depicts a long absence, since Ned, who "lies long in jail," was with the speaker when he last visited Ludlow. But has the speaker now returned to Shropshire? Lyric LVIII does not state that he has returned, only that he is in the act of returning or anticipates returning. In accepted usage the present tense of the verb carries with it the idea of futurity. "I go now" implies "I will go" or "I am about to go." Coming as it does at the conclusion of A Shropshire Lad, Lyric LVIII thus merely echoes the resignation of all the concluding poems of the work. The lad is preparing to join his lost friends at Ludlow,

symbolically to meet death, just as in "Hughley Steeple" he is willing to accept the fate of those who lie in the graves at Hughley.

Lyrics LIX and LX, the two poems which lie between Lyric LVIII and "Hughley Steeple" depict in the archetypal imagery of day and night a similar acceptance of death. In stanza 3 of Lyric LIX the narrator states to his friend who lies dead:

Lie you easy, dream you light,  
 And sleep you fast for aye;  
 And luckier may you find the night  
 Than ever you found the day.  
 (ll. 9-12)

And in Lyric LX:

Now hollow fires burn out to black,  
 And lights are guttering low:  
 Square your shoulders, lift your pack,  
 And leave your friends and go.

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.

The latter poems of the London group thus signal the end of a process which began in Lyric II, when the Shropshire Lad first calculated his "three-score years and ten." It is a process which Housman is concerned with both in the theme and in the ordering of the poems of A Shropshire Lad. The structure of the work thus becomes meaningful as it reinforces the pervasive theme of the poems. The relationship of each poem to every other cannot be defended. A Shropshire Lad does not contain this type of order. Yet the general arrangement of the poems is clearly meaningful.

One notes a structural relationship between Housman's A Shropshire Lad and Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode, especially in the "ages" of

man and the changing response to the external world which these ages bring. But for Housman the recollections of youth bring only intimations of mortality, and it is primarily with these feelings that A Shropshire Lad is concerned.<sup>42</sup> The philosophic mind which age brings in Housman's poetry is not based on a Wordsworthian intimation of immortality but a stoical acceptance of man's essential mortality and a view of death which makes it--at least in the logic of the work itself--not merely destructive. Like Wordsworth's child who is "father of the man," Housman's Shropshire Lad undergoes a process which takes him from innocence to knowledge (and anguish) and, finally, to resignation. Both poets are thus deeply concerned with the theme of mutability, though of course from radically differing points of view.

It is in the final two lyrics of A Shropshire Lad that Housman justifies his own point of view. Though these last two poems are not a part of the process which is depicted in the sixty lyrics inside the frame, they form a logical conclusion to the work as a whole. In Lyric LXII the persona, who has been variously the soldier, the young lover, the exile, now becomes the poet, and the poem becomes the apologia of the poet, his justification of the sixty-one poems which precede Lyric LXII. Of course, in the conceit of the work Terence is the author of all the poems. Housman, it may be recalled, had originally intended to entitle the work Poems by Terence Hearsay but was persuaded to change the title to A Shropshire Lad on the suggestion of his friend A. W. Pollard.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Housman's relationship to the Romantics, especially Wordsworth and Keats, is a matter of some importance and deserves further study. Stevenson has suggested several interesting parallels between Wordsworth and Housman in "Housman's Lyric Tradition."

<sup>43</sup>Richards, op. cit., p. 71.

The first fourteen lines of Lyric LXII voice the objection which the poet rightly anticipated his work would encounter--the charge that his verses are too despondent:

'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.'  
 (ll. 1-14)

The lighthearted tone of the poem should not obscure its importance. In fact, one of the ironies of the poem is that while the poet is accused of being too serious, his justification for his seriousness is given in the form of light verse. Thus, one might expect that some significance lies behind the mockery of the poem. A clue to this significance may be found in the poem. Line 13, "moping melancholy mad," is an echo of lines 485-8 of Book XI of Paradise Lost: "moping melancholy/And moon-struck madness. . . ."<sup>44</sup> The lines appear in a passage in which Adam is first shown Death by Michael:

Immediately a place  
 Before his eyes appeared, sad, noisome, dark,  
 A lazar-house it seemed, wherein were laid  
 Numbers of all diseased, all maladies  
 Of ghostly spasm, or racking torture, qualms  
 Of heart-sick agony, all feverous kinds,

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<sup>44</sup>George O. Marshall, Jr., "A Miltonic Echo in Housman," Notes and Queries, V (1958), p. 258.

Convulsions, epilepsies, fierce catarrhs  
 Intestine stone and ulcer, colic pangs,  
 Demoniac frenzy, moping melancholy  
 And moon-struck madness, pining atrophy,  
 Marasmus, and wide-wasting pestilence,  
 Dropsies and asthmas, and joint-racking rheums.  
 (ll. 477-488)

As Marshall points out, Housman's poem "adds one more potential cause of death to Milton's list of fatal maladies--the possibility of being rhymed to death by one's friend's despondent poetry."<sup>45</sup> But, in addition, the context in which Milton's lines appear in Paradise Lost suggests another parallel between the two works. Adam's anguish over the discovery of death is exactly that which the poet depicts in the poems to which his friend objects. Adam's reaction to viewing the scene which Housman echoes is quite similar to the reaction of the youth to the thought of death and decay in many of the poems of A Shropshire Lad:

Why is life given  
 To be thus wrested from us? rather why  
 Obtruded on us thus? who if we knew  
 What we receive, would either not accept  
 Life offered, or soon beg to lay it down,  
 Glad to be so dismissed in peace.  
 (Paradise Lost, XI, 502-507)

Thus Terence, like Milton, is concerned with the transition from a perception of life characterized by Innocence (Adam's innocence in Eden and the Shropshire Lad's early innocence in Shropshire) to one characterized by the discovery that the essential fact of existence is mutability and death.

But Terence's answer to his friend's charges also echoes Milton:

Why, if 'tis dancing you would be,  
 There's brisker pipes than poetry.

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<sup>45</sup>ibid.

Say, for what were hop-hards meant,  
 Or why was Burton built on Trent?  
 Oh many a peer of England brews  
 Liveller liquor than the Muse,  
 And malt does more than Milton can  
 To justify God's ways to man.

(ll. 15-22)

Terence's allusion to Milton's lofty purpose in Paradise Lost thus comes in answer to the voiced objection to the kind of poetry which he has written, and the juxtaposition of the two Miltonic references makes both meaningful. The friend has characterized the effect of the poetry in words connected with the discovery of death in Paradise Lost. The poet's reply says something both about Milton's attempt to justify the human condition and his own attempt. Milton's efforts to "justify God's way to man" are not entirely successful, since "malt does more than Milton can." Yet even strong drink is not the answer, since it leads one "to see the world as the world's not" (l. 26). Terence recalls his own experience with Ludlow beer:

. . . 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.

(ll. 35-42)

But significantly the poet describes his own poetry in terms of a kind of malt:

'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.

(ll. 49-52)

The image of lines 51 and 52 is that of a hand squeezing the juice from a thorny vine. Yet the source for Terence's "brew" is "a weary land" and the stem from which the juice flows is therefore described as thorny (it "scored the hand"). His draught is bitter, but therein lies its virtue:

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; . . .  
(ll. 53-56)

Terence next provides an example (ll. 59-76) of the value of his own brew as contrasted to the example (ll. 29-42) which revealed the futility of ordinary malt. The "poisoned drink" of Mithridates becomes symbolic of Terence's bitter brew, and in the parable of the king who sampled from "the many-venomed earth" all "her killing store" and then "died old," Terence exemplifies the therapeutic value of his own poetry.

To read Lyric LXII as a statement of Housman's defense of the kind of poetry one finds in A Shropshire Lad--that is, to assume that just as Terence shares Housman's "view of life" he shares his view of his art<sup>46</sup>--is to conclude that the poet feels his own work and Milton's Paradise Lost share a common purpose however widely they differ in style and form. The allusions to Paradise Lost, and particularly the context in which Milton's lines appear, point to the fact that both works spring from a concern with the human condition as characterized by mutability and death. Housman writes, in his own way, of

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<sup>46</sup>See Housman's letter to Pollet quoted in Marlow, op. cit., p. 150, where Housman says, in part, "The Shropshire Lad is an imaginary figure, with something of my temperament and view of life."

. . . the fruit  
 Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste  
 Brought death into the world, and all our woe, . . .  
 (Paradise Lost, I, 1-3)

But Milton's mythopoetic justification of the ills of human existence are replaced in A Shropshire Lad by a view which sees the universe not in terms of myth, but in terms of what Cleanth Brooks has called "the scientific neutralization of nature."<sup>47</sup> That is, the supernatural framework is removed and Housman is forced to justify human ills in "naturalistic"<sup>48</sup> terms. As John Stevenson has noted in a comparison of Housman and Wordsworth:

. . . whereas Wordsworth could accept earnestly and devoutly the doctrine of nature's divinity, Housman could only accept the attitude toward nature that looks toward the modern world. . . . The early sympathy is gone, the alienation has set in to complicate the vision. It is just here that the modern attitude is found because with the strong awareness of incongruity, of the ambiguity between belief and fact, there begins the redefining and the reappraisal which marks the beginnings of modern literature.<sup>49</sup>

Thus the imagery by which the poetry of A Shropshire Lad is characterized in Lyric LXII seems particularly appropriate. It is first a brew which has been wrung from a thorny plant growing in "a weary land." Secondly, it is compared to a "poisoned drink" which is gathered from the "many-venomed earth." Both images suggest a poetry which has its source in exactly those kinds of human experiences which earlier poets had tried to explain through the use of mythic framework (Milton) or a spiritualizing

<sup>47</sup>Quoted in Stevenson, "Housman's Lyric Tradition," p. 19.

<sup>48</sup>Naturalistic in the sense that man is seen as tied directly to his earthly environment and excluded from outside spiritual forces.

<sup>49</sup>"Housman's Lyric Tradition," p. 19.

of nature (Wordsworth). Yet Terence's--and Housman's--point in Lyric LXII is that only through an honest appraisal of life, an acceptance of both the good and the ill, does one progress from the anguish of youth to the resignation characteristic of maturity. Therefore, the poetry is as a bitter malt brewed from the ills of life, by which man may come to understand and accept his own condition:

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.  
 (ll. 43-48)

Finally, regarding the poetry of A Shropshire Lad as a kind of malt, the reader is able to read lines 21-22 in a new light:

And malt does more than Milton can  
 To justify God's ways to man.

The final lyric of A Shropshire Lad continues the metaphor of the poetry as a product of the earth itself, but here the image shifts slightly with new suggestions and allusions. The poems are now plants which spring from the soil through the care and attention of the poet:

I hoed and trenched and weeded,  
 And took the flowers to fair:  
 I brought them home unheeded;  
 The hue was not the wear.  
 (ll. 1-4)

The poem continues the metaphor with further implications. The flowers bear seeds, which will be sown about the land:

So up and down I sow them  
 For lads like me to find,  
 When I shall lie below them,  
 A dead man out of mind.

Some seeds the birds devour,  
 And some the season mars,  
 But here and there will flower  
 The solitary stars, . . .  
 (ll. 5-12)

The reader certainly recognizes in these lines the allusion to Christ's parable of the sower of seeds,<sup>50</sup> for the poem is the poet's parable of the value of his poetry. Contrary to critical opinion which views Housman's poetry as an essentially negative force, the work of a pessimist who sees life as 'an unmerited ordeal which serves no useful purpose,'<sup>51</sup> Lyric LXIII proposes a positive worth in the poetry. In the last poem of the volume, as in the first, Housman is concerned with the paradox of permanence and mutability. The individual must perish; the race survives, but the final two lyrics of the work reveal the poet's sense of responsibility to the race. His work traces one pattern of universal human experience--the growth from innocence to experience, from a sense of permanence to the consciousness of decay and death. The poems, individually, work out some of the implications of this experience; collectively they structure the experience. The final lyrics, however, add another dimension to the mutability-permanence pattern. In Lyrics LXII and LXIII the poetry itself provides the poet a means to transcend his own mutable nature. John Stevenson has observed that in Lyric LXII the analogy between ale and poetry points up the permanent "after-effect" of the latter:

As the poem progresses, we find that poetry is 'not so brisk a brew as ale,' for its intoxication brings another kind of "after-effect," one that is more permanent; instead of the hoped-for

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<sup>50</sup>Mark, IV:3-8.

<sup>51</sup>Molson, op. cit., p. 205.

escape out of the world, it becomes an escape into the world,  
into the real. . . .<sup>52</sup>

More particularly, poetry as a product of the mind of man has a permanence which is denied man himself. In a perceptive analysis of the analogy of Lyric LXII between the man drunk on ale and the man drunk on poetry, Stevenson draws further implications:

. . . the man who comes under the effects of ale expands; he relaxes and becomes frank and easy, throwing off acquired poses, social restrictions, and the stiffness of propriety. In brief, he becomes himself; for once he is real and honest, and, paradoxically, the escape from what he thinks of as reality leads him to discover the real. Now, in a sense, the poet experiences the same elation; the intoxication of insight, or, of aesthetic discovery, suspends him into the same realm of frankness and freedom of expression. He suddenly perceives reality and must disclose it to the discomfiture of some and to the delight of others. Both conditions produce a temporary madness, or what some might call simplemindedness; that is, the discovery of reality is sometimes so harsh and unpleasant, revealing as it often does man's vanity, avarice, and pride, that we refuse to listen to the drunk man or the poet, calling the one "fool" and the other "madman," laughing at both. Here the analogy stops, for the elation of the drunk man is produced from the outside and is irresponsible, leaving his "necktie God knows where" and only happy till he wakes again; but the poet's elation, coming from inside, has permanence; if you allow him, he can, when your soul is in his soul's stead, friend you. . . .<sup>53</sup>

Thus, the poet's product, paradoxically, arising out of the mutable has permanence. It has the permanence of art, which can withstand the decay of time. Housman recognized this fact in a lecture delivered before the Faculties of Arts and Laws and of Science in University College London, on October 3, 1892, when he said, ". . . the pleasure of learning and knowing, though not the keenest, is yet the least perishable of pleasures;

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<sup>52</sup>"The Pastoral Setting in the Poetry of A. E. Housman," p. 494.

<sup>53</sup>ibid., pp. 495-496.

the least subject to external things, and the play of change, and the wear of time.<sup>54</sup> In Lyric LXII he states, concerning his poetry:

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.  
(ll. 55-58)

Thus, through his own vision of man, the poet is able to overcome the limitations of his mutable nature, to bridge the gap of generations. In Lyric LXIII the poems achieve the permanence of physical nature, which in the succession of the seasons experiences a rebirth which the naturalistic doctrine denies man. In the last stanza of A Shropshire Lad, lines 13-16 of Lyric LXIII, the poet states concerning the "flowers" or poems of the volume:

And fields will yearly bear them  
As light-leaved spring comes on,  
And luckless lads will wear them  
When I am dead and gone.

Thus, the order of the poems of A Shropshire Lad is truly meaningful, and the poet's apologia at the end of the work achieves its resolution in terms of the problem treated in the earlier poems. But the significance of the structural unity of the work may be seen even more clearly in abstracting the pattern we have observed in the poems and discussing it in more detail. It has been suggested that the structure reinforces the mutability theme of the work through the pattern which it develops. This is to suggest an archetypal interpretation of A Shropshire Lad. And it is clear that the journey from Shropshire to London has certain archetypal features. Housman emphasizes this aspect of the

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<sup>54</sup>A. E. Housman: Selected Prose, p. 20.

transition from Shropshire to London by employing certain images and symbols associated with the life-death archetype. The wind is an important symbol throughout much of the work, and its function seems at all times entirely consistent. It is identified as a life force, and in the pattern of the work this force is strong in Shropshire but lost in London. In Archetypal Patterns in Poetry Maud Bodkin considers wind and calm as archetypal symbols. In examining these symbols in "The Ancient Mariner," she notes that "Coleridge felt in wind and in stagnant calm symbols of the contrasted states he knew so poignantly, of ecstasy and of dull inertia."<sup>55</sup> She finds that the calm, coming after the wind, is symbolic of a state of death and decay, and that the renewed blowing of the wind, which occurs after the mariner blesses the water snakes, is symbolic of the rebirth archetype. Yet these associations of wind and calm with inner states of experience are not confined to Coleridge alone. She states further:

In The Ancient Mariner the magic breeze, and the miraculous motion of the ship, or its becalming, are not, of course, like the metaphor, symbolic in conscious intention. They are symbolic only in the sense that, by the poet as by some at least of his readers, the images are valued because they give--even though this function remains unrecognized--expression to feelings that were seeking a language to relieve their inner urgency.<sup>56</sup>

Miss Bodkin next gives evidence to show the universal association between the wind and calm and rising and falling of the human spirit. She states:

<sup>55</sup>New York, 1958, p. 33.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

In the case of this symbolism of wind and calm we have a basis of evidence so wide that we hardly need go for proof to introspective reports of reader or poet--interesting as it is to see the confirmatory relation between evidence from the different sources. We find graven in the substance of language testimony to the kinship, or even identity, of the felt experience of the rising of the wind and the quickening of the human spirit.<sup>57</sup>

The wind-imagery pattern which emerges in 'The Ancient Mariner' is from wind to calm to a renewing of the wind, symbolizing rebirth. In A Shropshire Lad, however, the last part of the pattern, the renewing of the wind, is not to be found. Instead, there is only what may be called the death archetype, the contrast, as in Lyric XLI, of the movement of the wind as symbolic of a strong life force, the lack of movement as symbolic of death.

The journey itself has such obvious symbolic significance throughout literature that it is not necessary to support Housman's use of it as a structural element. Housman, however, enriches the symbolic associations connected with the journey in much the same way Coleridge does in 'The Ancient Mariner' by correlating it with the wind imagery. Furthermore Housman enriches the mythic associations of the journey by appointing, in Lyric XLII, Hermes, the god who directs the dead to Hades, as guide for the traveller in the journey. In addition, the poet suggests, especially in Lyric LII, that in the transition from Shropshire to London the traveller leaves his soul behind (and the soul is again imaged as the wind), thus further strengthening the identification of the structural pattern in the poems as an archetypal journey to death.

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

Some of the symbolic associations involved in the transfer from Shropshire to London, however, must be seen as a part of the pastoral tradition to which the work belongs. Housman's use of the pastoral form has been widely noted by critics, and the poet has been both praised and condemned for his use of certain pastoral conventions.<sup>58</sup> Obviously the pastoral form provides another unifying element in A Shropshire Lad. By use of the tradition the poet achieves a consistent speaking voice, a mood, an attitude toward experience which structures the view of life given in the work. William Empson has observed in Some Versions of Pastoral that the pastoral process works by "putting the complex into the simple."<sup>59</sup> It is this process which we observe at work in A Shropshire Lad. The complexities of life have been reduced to a level which can be communicated, and this simplicity is made possible through the convention that the reader must accept in approaching the work--the poet is a rustic youth named Terence whose lack of sophistication and whose closeness to the primal forces of life allow him to comment meaningfully on the human condition. Only the naive reader confuses the speaking voices of Housman and Terence. Housman, the sophisticated traveller, gourmet, and scholar, thus avoids the sentimentality which is always dangerously near in any comment on the great commonplaces of human experience such as life's mutability or the world's injustice. Terence, however, is able to express the simple and obvious truths of his own insight into existence since his

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<sup>58</sup>H. W. Garrod attacks Housman for the 'false pastoralism' which he feels mars A Shropshire Lad (op. cit., p. 223).

<sup>59</sup>Norfolk, Connecticut, 1960, p. 23.

rustic innocence makes him unaware that these feelings have been expressed by men throughout history in much more sophisticated and learned ways.

John Stevenson, who has examined in some detail Housman's use of the pastoral convention, analyzes the function of the pastoral as an attitude toward experience in the following manner:

A complex of attitudes is implied here [in the pastoral], but the essential meaning is a shift of emphasis, and the achievement is a tone of humility. Actually, the trick of the pastoral is a trick of irony; perhaps a better phrase is ironic revelation. Put in another way, it says: I see a man hanged, or a young man killed in war, or a lover deceived, or the indifference of time and the inexorableness of change, and I realize that society is basically vain and cruel, or that happiness is elusive, or that man is not really free, either from nature or from systems, and as a poet I must interpret and see into the crux of existence. How shall I say it? How shall I write it? Unfortunately, there are no final answers, but one answer seems to lie in adopting the pastoral mode; here there is an escape from the complex to the simple, and ironically the naive man utters naked truth which the complex man can only surround with a complicated dialectic or a high sounding moral platitude. There is this further note of irony: the country lad, probably does not realize his discovery, is really not interested in it and accepts it as obvious. Thus, the poet achieves the tone of humility, which is a quality of the pastoral; he imagines the feelings of the simple man, and the refined thing is judged by fundamentals; strength is learned in weakness. In a sense, then, the pastoral convention becomes a means for criticism, and the poet himself is able to stand apart; the poetry does the work, and that is the important thing.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, the pastoral form provides Housman with a unifying attitude toward his theme, which is reflected in the mood and tone of the poetry of A Shropshire Lad. Yet Housman makes more extensive use of the pastoral form than merely to provide his speaking voice, the pose by which he views experience. Even though his is a "realistic" pastoral, he

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<sup>60</sup>"The Pastoral Setting in the Poetry of A. E. Housman," pp. 492-493.

employs, as one critic has noted, many of the conventions of the pastoral, especially those of that branch of the genre which is closest to Housman's own poetry, the pastoral elegy. Macklem states in his study of Housman's use of the elegiac theme:

This contrast between the joy of life and its transience is the source of Housman's elegiac theme. His use of it relates him directly to the elegiac tradition of poetry and, in a particularly intimate way, to its classical forms. Furthermore, his treatment of elegiac material is distinctively pastoral--so much is clear, to go no farther, from the title of A Shropshire Lad. As such, his poetry appears as a contemporary modification of the traditional form of pastoral elegy.<sup>61</sup>

To understand Housman's relationship to the tradition of pastoral poetry--that is, to see how Housman utilized the symbolic associations inherent in the pastoral tradition to give unity and coherence to his theme--it is necessary to summarize briefly some of the conventions of the pastoral elegy. These are discussed by Macklem and by J. H. Hanford in 'The Pastoral Elegy and Milton's Lycidas.'<sup>62</sup> The following summary borrows from these two studies certain aspects of the tradition which relate to Housman's use of it.

In the pastoral of classical literature (Theocritus, Bion, Moschus) the theme of death and change is associated with the imagery of nature and of spring, as is the case in Housman's poetry. As Macklem observes in discussing the classical tradition of the pastoral elegy:

The fact of human death is set beside images of natural rebirth in spring, to combine the poetry of death (elegy) with the poetry of life (pastoral). The pastoral elegiac theme is taken, essentially, from the contrast between the immortality of nature

<sup>61</sup>Op. cit., p. 45.

<sup>62</sup>PMLA, XVIII (1910), pp. 403-447.

and the mortality of man, between the natural cycle of rebirth and the finality of human death.<sup>63</sup>

Virgil, Macklem points out, uses the same imagery but reaches a different conclusion. In the fifth Eclogue the rebirth of nature in spring becomes a symbol of human rebirth in death. This theme becomes more significant in terms of Christian belief as the classical form becomes a means of expressing a Christian myth, and Petrarch, Boccaccio, Spenser, and Milton use the symbols of spring and nature to parallel the spiritual rebirth of man.<sup>64</sup> Macklem finds, however, that "later modifications of the pastoral elegy show the effects of a progressive disintegration of faith in the union of spring and spiritual rebirth, a weakening of belief in the validity of love and spring as symbols of rebirth of a higher, a spiritual, order." In particular, Shelley's Adonais, Arnold's Thyrsis and Tennyson's In Memoriam represent a weakening in "the belief from which pastoral elegy had grown, that spring means resurrection."<sup>65</sup>

In A Shropshire Lad one notes also the use of traditional conventions of the pastoral elegy, but, like Shelly, Arnold, and Tennyson, Housman made important modification in his use of the form. In Housman's poetry Easter and spring, important symbols in the traditional Christian pastoral, are utilized symbolically, but Easter attains a symbolic meaning in Housman which differs radically from that of traditional Christian poetry, and the seasons, especially spring, no longer signify the rebirth pattern of Christian myth.

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<sup>63</sup>Op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

The Easter theme appears in both "Loveliest of Trees" and "The Lent Lily." In the latter poem Easter is detached from the symbolic association of resurrection, since the lily "dies on Easter day" (l. 10).

Macklem states concerning Housman's use of Easter as a symbol:

Its Christian meaning is reversed. Easter means not suffering in life on earth (Good Friday) redeemed and relieved by resurrection to eternal life, but brief beauty and joy in life and then sudden and eternal death.<sup>66</sup>

In "Loveliest of Trees" Easter seems to contain some of its traditional associations of birth and rebirth, but it is in the pattern of the images that Housman represents a divergence from the traditional uses of pastoral imagery. The traditional pattern was birth-death-rebirth, symbolized in the progression from summer to winter to spring. Housman, however, reverses the order so that the pattern is one from spring to summer to winter, thus emphasizing not the rebirth which follows death but rather the eternal death which follows youth and spring. The same pattern may be found in other poems of A Shropshire Lad.<sup>67</sup> "Bredon Hill," for example, associates spring with youth and young love, winter with death, and the direction of the poem is from spring to winter, from youth to death. Throughout A Shropshire Lad Housman maintains his symbolic associations of youth with spring, winter with death, but significantly the pattern is always from spring to winter, never the reverse. This usage of the pastoral imagery is, however, entirely consistent with his emphasis on the mortality of man. Thus, the pastoral form serves not only to furnish Housman with the rustic narrator and the pastoral setting but

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<sup>66</sup>Op. cit., pp. 50-51.

<sup>67</sup>See Chapter II.

also a set of symbols and images by which his mutability theme achieves a recognizable expression, for the pastoral imagery contains its own inherent values. Macklem states:

In the setting of classical culture pastoral elegy had been a means of expressing sorrow for the shortness of life. The form became a complex of conventions, but the formal conventions unite to express a single idea: the beauty and joy of life as contrasted with its transience. The mood of pathos, irony, or sorrow thus set up is deepened by contrasting the shortness of human life and the finality of death with the re-birth of spring in nature.<sup>68</sup>

What is most significant to this study in Housman's use of the material of the pastoral elegy is that this usage supports a formal unity of design and expression in A Shropshire Lad which has been largely ignored. Macklem concludes his study by stating of Housman's utilization of the conventions of pastoral elegy:

It unifies the random 'commonplaces' of his verse and gives it a logical texture. It brings into focus his preoccupation with youth and love, joy and beauty, war and death, and shows the connection between them. It clarifies the recurrent symbols of Easter, youth, spring, flowers, and winter. It gives his poetry a coherence and a strength of meaning, an intelligence and an emotional control that it has not been supposed to have.<sup>69</sup>

Though critics like Stevenson and Macklem both demonstrate the further unity of mood and poetic form which is made possible by Housman's use of various conventions of the pastoral, they both ignore the fact that the structural order which patterns the whole work is itself based on pastoral convention. One of the assumptions of the pastoral is that a life close to the soil, close to nature, is a 'good' life whereas the life

<sup>68</sup>Op. cit., p. 51.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

apart from the pastoral setting, at court or in the city, involves a loss of this simple and intense acceptance of existence, a complication but also a corruption. Thus assumption runs through Spenser's Shepherd's Calender,<sup>70</sup> Goldsmith's Deserted Village,<sup>71</sup> and Wordsworth's Michael,<sup>72</sup> works which illustrate the persistence of the convention in three different centuries of English poetry. This convention is also utilized by Housman in the structure of A Shropshire Lad for the transition from the Arcadian-like setting of Shropshire to the exile in London carries with it the pastoral associations of the loss of a simple and innocent acceptance of life. The exile from Shropshire brings about, as has already been noted, a different way of viewing experience, and a stoic acceptance of death replaces the earlier tragic view of life. This acceptance is made possible by the persona's emergence from innocence to knowledge. That is, the Shropshire lyrics display such anguish over the fact of human transience primarily because of the innocent nature of the persona, the innocence is characterized by a sense of permanence so strong that a recognition of decay and death cannot be harmonized or rationalized in the persona's thought. Yet the progress of the work is away from innocence toward knowledge, a knowledge which accepts at the end of A Shropshire Lad the mutability of everything which is important to man except his own art.

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<sup>70</sup>See especially the September Eclogue, where a good shepherd is corrupted, his flock wasted when he "drove his sheepe into a farre countrye."

<sup>71</sup>Goldsmith emphasizes that when "the rural virtues leave the land" (l. 398) death and decay result.

<sup>72</sup>Luke's disgrace occurs when he leaves his pastoral existence for the "dissolute city" (l. 444).

Therefore, the departure from Shropshire is quite significant on the symbolic level as a transition from innocence to knowledge. It corresponds to the Christian archetype of the emergence from innocence which is depicted in the Eden myth. And, in fact, Milton's treatment of the myth in Paradise Lost, as Empson has pointed out, is quite close to the pastoral tradition.<sup>73</sup> The closeness to nature which one finds in the earthly paradise of Eden is essentially a pastoral simplicity, and the pastoral convention and the death archetype seem to merge here into one pattern.

Housman's ordering of the poems of A Shropshire Lad, then, shows definite parallels with Milton's structuring of a similar theme--the loss of innocence which brings about a recognition of death and decay in human existence. Both poets utilize a tradition and a pattern of thought which has become common to Western man, although, of course, Housman's utilization is much more oblique than is Milton's. In fact, Housman's structural development of his theme is apt to be completely ignored unless the reader is prepared to consider the work as one poem with a thematic and structural development which takes place in the whole unit. Yet if the reader is thus able to shift his perspective, he discovers a dimension which has been overlooked but which is essential for a complete understanding of A Shropshire Lad.

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<sup>73</sup>op. cit., pp. 141-183.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The findings of this study may now be stated somewhat more conclusively. An examination of A Shropshire Lad reveals a thematic and structural unity which has not generally been recognized. In theme, the work is centered around the concept of time. It is concerned directly with mutability and, especially in the early lyrics, with the emergence from a state of relative innocence, characterized by a sense of permanence, to a state of knowledge, in which the decay of time and the recognition of death dominate the perception of the lyric speaker.

Numerous other critics have noted Housman's obsession with decay and death and have commented on the sameness of mood in this poetry, but what has not been sufficiently emphasized is that A Shropshire Lad is more than a collection of lyrics<sup>1</sup> loosely connected by a similarity of mood and subject matter. Housman is not content merely to state his theme in numerous ways in the short lyrics of the work. Instead, he attempts to work out some of its implications. His development of the theme takes place not in any one poem but in the interplay between the various poems of the work, so that although the individual lyrics may be read as complete poems, to be completely understood, they must be seen within the context in which they appear.

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<sup>1</sup>Although, of course, the individual poems may be read separately, having a certain completeness of their own, as is demonstrated in Chapters II and III, where these lyrics are analyzed as individual units.

In considering A Shropshire Lad as a whole, one discovers that it is not only a work about the mutability of human existence but also a work concerned with an attempt to overcome the transience and change which characterize life. The work represents, that is, a search for permanence in a world of change. This quest for permanence leads the poet to the conceit concerning death which lies at the heart of the work, a conceit which has led to much of the adverse criticism directed toward Housman's poetry. Critics have objected to Housman's obsession with death in A Shropshire Lad, but, more particularly, with his seemingly inconsistent attitude toward death.<sup>2</sup> In some lyrics death seems a desirable end; in others it is to be avoided and is associated with dread and fear. To read A Shropshire Lad as one unified work, however, is to resolve the surface contradictions of the various poems, and to discover that the resolution lies in the conceit which runs throughout the work. Experience is characterized in the work by an essential mutability. Death and decay lurk even in the midst of beauty. In a search for an agent to arrest the decay of time, to halt the mutability of life and to freeze life at its prime, the poet can find only death. This conceit is a part of the poet's ironic treatment of the essential paradox of human existence. Life at its prime in youth is good, he asserts, but even here the youth is conscious that youth and spring are inevitably succeeded by old age and winter and subsequently death. And, paradoxically, the preserver of permanence, death, is also the destroyer of life.

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<sup>2</sup>See Chapter III, pp. 72-73.

This quest for permanence in the work springs from the early consciousness of mutability, and the development of the theme must be seen in the totality of the poems of the work. As Nesca Robb has stated, the poems "prophecy, recall, and intertwine with each other,"<sup>3</sup> so that only as one grows familiar with the relationship between the individual poems does he see the significance of the whole. The unity of the theme is so pervasive in the work that to examine one of the individual lyrics out of its context is to risk, as John Crowe Ransom does in his analysis of Lyric LIV, a complete misinterpretation.<sup>4</sup>

An examination of the ordering of the poems of A Shropshire Lad strengthens the sense of unity one feels in the theme of the work. Such an examination reveals that the work is unified not only by its development of a single theme but by the manner in which the theme is reinforced. That is, the structure of the work repeats on a larger scale the pattern which predominates many of the individual lyrics, where Housman frequently employs an image pattern which emphasizes change. Thus, as in "Loveliest of Trees," where the image pattern progresses from spring to winter and parallels the statement of the poem that life is transient, the structure of the whole work, by the pattern which it develops, reinforces its mutability-permanence theme.

The pattern of the whole work emerges as a transition from one state of existence to another, from the pastoral existence of Shropshire to the exile and estrangement of London. This is the direction of

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<sup>3</sup>Op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>4</sup>See Chapter III, pp. 86-90.

movement in the work, for the early poems are set in Shropshire, the concluding poems in London, and the transition from the one setting to the other is emphasized by a group of poems (Lyrics XXXII-XXXVII) dominated by a journey motif. The significance of this arrangement and its relationship to the mutability-permanence theme is revealed by a close examination of the difference in mood and emphasis in the poems of the two distinct groups. The paradox of human existence which the work emphasizes is that the beauty and joy of youth is clouded by the overpowering sense of mutability; and, on the other hand, the loss of the intensity of life and of life itself is compensated for by the permanence of death, since death removes one from the realm of time. Thus, both states involve an irreconcilable paradox. This pattern of thought is continued in the structural order of the work, for Shropshire is characterized by both the intensity of living and the anguish over the recognition of death which characterizes the prime of life. The transition to London, accordingly, involves both a loss--the fervent acceptance and involvement in life--and a gain--a sense of permanence in the stoical acceptance of death.

The journey from Shropshire to London is, in one sense, the archetypal journey of life from youth to old age and death. Housman emphasizes the archetypal nature of the journey in the image patterns and symbols he employs in describing it. The symbols of wind and calm, the journey itself, the god Hermes as the guide for the travellers, the suggestion that the soul is left behind in the transfer from one state to another--all these elements point to the pattern which emerges in the organization of the work as an archetypal death pattern. This underlying

pattern gives form to the theme developed in A Shropshire Lad, for it serves as an unstated and structuring metaphor which lies behind and gives meaning to the problem of mutability which the poems deal with both individually and collectively.

Unity is also achieved in A Shropshire Lad through Housman's use of the pastoral tradition. By the use of the conventions of this tradition, the poet is able to achieve a consistency of mood and tone, for the pastoral view of life offers the poet a consistent speaking voice, an attitude toward experience which reduces the complexities of experience into a simpler form so that they may be examined and communicated more readily. Housman, furthermore, utilized many of the symbolic associations inherent in the pastoral tradition--especially those of the pastoral elegy--to give unity and coherence to his theme. Michael Macklem has examined Housman's use of the conventions of the pastoral elegy, and he concludes that A Shropshire Lad is a contemporary modification of the form.<sup>5</sup>

In the tradition of pastoral elegy, the theme of death and change is associated with the imagery of nature, especially images of spring and rebirth. In Christian pastoral the poet frequently utilizes the symbols of spring and the rebirth of nature to parallel the spiritual rebirth of man. Housman makes significant modifications in his utilization of this convention of pastoral elegy, for his usage of spring and Easter divorces these symbols from their Christian associations except in an oblique way. He accomplishes this primarily through the structuring of the images.

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<sup>5</sup>See Chapter IV, pp. 153-157.

The traditional pattern was birth-death-rebirth, symbolized in the progress from summer to winter to spring. Housman, however, reverses this order. His pattern is one from spring to winter, for he emphasizes not the rebirth which follows death but rather the death which follows youth.

This pattern--spring to winter--structures many of the individual lyrics of A Shropshire Lad. Yet the architectonics of the whole work is also closely connected to a convention of the pastoral. One of the assumptions of pastoral poetry is that the rustic life, being close to nature, is a more intense, a simpler, and, hence, a "better" existence than the complicated, sophisticated life at court or in the city. The pastoral existence also involves in its simplicity an innocence which is lost in the transition from the land to the city. Housman's treatment of the mutability theme involves this loss of innocence. His resolution of the problem connected with the conception of time found in A Shropshire Lad--apart from the death conceit which runs through the individual poems--involves the acceptance of life's mutability, a transition from the early state characterized by a sense of permanence which finds only anguish in its discovery of the effect of time to a state which accepts stoically life's transience as an essential part of experience. This transition in the view of human existence in the work--from innocence to experience--is paralleled by the transition from the Arcadian-like setting of Shropshire to the exile in London, which in the pastoral tradition is itself an archetypal pattern for the loss of innocence. Its closeness to the Eden myth is readily apparent. The lyrics of A Shropshire Lad, then, are unified in being structured on a consistent order,

but this order itself has meaning also in relationship to traditional patterns of thought common to Western man.

If one accepts Richard Harter Fogle's perceptive comment that a good poem "should impose an imaginative unity upon diverse materials; that it should provide a complex human problem with a satisfactory solution; that though the medium of artistic form it should give coherence to the intellectual, emotional, and sensuous experience of the poet,"<sup>6</sup> then A Shropshire Lad may be legitimately considered as one poem. It contains an essential unity of thought and expression; it deals with a complex human problem and provides--although not a practical solution--a poetic resolution; and it organizes and gives form to experiences, both intellectual and emotional, of the poet through the utilization of traditional poetic forms and symbols. It is, in short, more than a collection of lyrics. It has the organic unity of any good poem, for its lyrics could not be rearranged without serious loss to its effect and meaning.

Yet such a view of A Shropshire Lad has further implications. First, to see it as a carefully wrought whole tends to refute the widely held theory that, in the words of one critic, "perfect understanding of [Housman's] poems depends upon knowledge of his personal plight,"<sup>7</sup> and that the poetry needs a key to be understood, a key "which can come only from our knowledge of the poet."<sup>8</sup> Seeing the work only as the

<sup>6</sup>"The Imaginal Design of Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind,'" reprinted in An Introduction to Literary Criticism by Marlies K. Sanziger and W. Stacy Johnson, Boston, 1961, p. 225. The article originally appeared in ELH, XV (1948), pp. 219-226.

<sup>7</sup>J. P. Bishop, op. cit., p. 150.

<sup>8</sup>Lawrence Leighton, op. cit., p. 95.

autobiographical reflections of a disturbed man leads one logically to the conclusion expressed by Ernest Moss, who stated that "it is improbable that the mass of [Housman's] work can be enjoyed as poetry."<sup>9</sup> But to see the design and form of the work, to follow the development of a single theme to its resolution, one is led to emphasize the work as a poetic construction, not as an autobiographical revelation. It is to deny that the work has value only as it relates to the personal and psychological motivations of the poet, for such a view reveals that the work has meaning apart from our knowledge of the poet.<sup>10</sup>

The second implication of the view of A Shropshire Lad proposed here is concerned with the very nature of Housman's resolution of the problem he chose to consider. His poetry has been condemned on philosophical grounds because of the feeling of many critics that Housman's philosophy is perverse and contradictory, the adolescent thought of one who hates life and is content to picture the evil and injustice of human existence.<sup>11</sup> This study answers such a charge by showing that such adverse criticism is the result of a fragmented reading of the work. In

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Stallman, op. cit., p. 484.

<sup>10</sup>It may appear that in emphasizing the archetypal nature of Housman's poetry I am myself utilizing a psychological interpretation of the poetry, and it is true that archetypal criticism assumes that poetry expresses in its patterns the inner feelings of the poet. Yet a further assumption is that all poetry (especially lyric poetry) expresses, perhaps even unconsciously, such feelings and that these feelings are not confined to the poet alone but may be shared by his audience. Thus the recognition of these archetypal patterns does not depend upon our knowledge of specific events in the poet's life. These are patterns of thought which are common to the entire race.

<sup>11</sup>See Chapter 1, pp. 9-16.

a careful analysis of A Shropshire Lad in its entirety the surface contradictions are resolved--many of them in the recognition that the central conceit of the work depends on certain paradoxical elements of human experience, others in the realization that there is a development of mood and attitude in the lyrics so that the later lyrics express a different view from that introduced in the early lyrics. Furthermore, this study suggests, by emphasizing the image patterns, the symbolic design, the literary tradition of the work, that it cannot be understood in philosophical terms, only in poetic terms, for A Shropshire Lad contains not the logic of a philosophical system but the pattern of subjective experience.

Finally, this study suggests that Housman's poetry is not as simple and direct as has been supposed. Critics have long assumed that his symbols and images are so obvious as not to require close analysis. This view may be partly responsible for the critical neglect of the poetry and the corresponding emphasis on the biography of Housman. But it is a view which is not warranted in fact. An analysis of Housman's A Shropshire Lad reveals that it is of much greater complexity than has been supposed, employing devices such as ambiguity, irony, and paradox which modern critics now hold as indispensable to poetic statement. Its view of life is more subtle than the simple pessimism which it has been assumed to advance. It is, finally, a work of intricate design and form, and any critical analysis which attempts to arrive at a complete understanding of the work must take into account its essential unity of both structure and theme.

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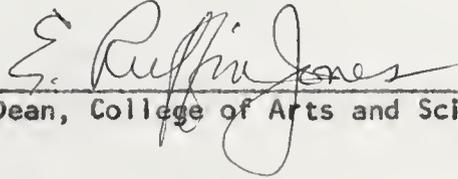
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## VITA

Bobby Joe Leggett was born in Alamo, Tennessee on February 25, 1938. He pursued his undergraduate studies at Lambuth College in Jackson, Tennessee, from which he was graduated in June, 1960. He began graduate work at the University of Florida in September of the same year, receiving his Master of Arts degree in English in February, 1962. While completing work on his doctorate in English, he has served as a graduate assistant in the C-3 Department and as an interim instructor in the Department of English.

This dissertation was prepared under the direction of the chairman of the candidate's supervisory committee and has been approved by all members of that committee. It was submitted to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate Council, and was approved as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

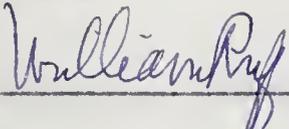
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