

A. E. Housman  
**A Shropshire Lad**

by Peter Cash



English Association Longer Poem Bookmarks  
No 5

**A. E. Housman (1859-1936)**  
**A SHROPSHIRE LAD (1896)**

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**SCOPE OF TOPIC**

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

Housman: **Last Poem XL**

Moreover, the irony of Hardy and Housman alike is in any case quite different from most modern irony; the older poets do not recommend irony as a secure or dignified stance from which to confront reality, rather it is the stance of reality as it confronts us. Their irony is cosmic, where an Auden's is provisional and strategic.

Donald Davie

For the purposes of **A SHROPSHIRE LAD**, A. E. Housman adopts a persona/puts on a mask. The speaker of these sixty-three lyrics is Terence Hearsay: in other words, Housman requires us to imagine that a particular Shropshire lad is to be heard in each of one these poems expressing his feelings in the first person. The theme of this unique collection is the irony of the human condition: namely, that man is a finite creature in an infinite world. What Housman's Terence discovers is that this irony is cruel: namely, that the world is indifferent to human aspirations and values – not least (as **Last Poem XL** indicates) to the value that man places on his own life. Frequently, Housman organises Terence's quatrains so that the lad finds himself looking at 'heartless, witless nature' and concluding that, in spite of his honesty and his sensitivity, it neither cares nor knows about either him or his fellow man.

In 1892, Housman (who was educated at Bromsgrove School and St John's College Oxford) became Professor of Latin at University College London; in 1911, he became Professor of Latin at Cambridge. In 1933, Housman delivered a lecture entitled **The Name and Nature of Poetry**; in this lecture, he explained that the forms of his poems owe much to

"Shakespeare's songs, the Scottish border ballads and Heine". Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) was a German lyric poet whose songs both Schumann and Schubert set to music.

In the same lecture, Housman says that the function of poetry is "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." How he goes about achieving this aim in his own poems is a sign of the times (the 1890s) in which he is writing them: clearly, he believes that he has only to reach into the store-house of nineteenth-century poetic diction for a lexicon to supply his ballad quatrains and induce that emotional 'vibration'. In his best poems, Housman achieves a classical economy of statement – "the economy, the precision, the severity" of Latin poets such as Catullus, Horace and Virgil (Cyril Connolly); in **A SHROPSHIRE LAD**, only 62 words are of more than two syllables. On the other hand, **Poem VII** (to take but one example) happily accommodates such ornate poeticisms as 'blithe afield', 'morning beam', 'hearkened', 'my soul within me', 'strain' and 'dewy lane'.

We return finally to Housman's emotions themselves and to Vivian de Sola Pinto's remark that "his mind never developed beyond the defiant atheism of a Victorian adolescent". Another critic, William Brashear, puts it this way:

Suppose that he is right. Suppose ... that all our elaborate efforts at constructing meanings, significations and values are so much whistling in the dark ... to a degree that they seem to transgress some deeper instinctive rule of sportsmanship. We can perhaps complain that Housman is not playing the game – of human survival ...

Brashear asks us to recognise that the "classic lucidity, brevity and precision" of Housman's verse (A. F. Allison) is at the service of a response to human experience so pessimistic and sullen that it is inadequate and unworthy of mature attention. Christopher Ricks explains that Housman's poems often take up positions which are "adolescent" and "inadequate not as utterly alien to our experience or wilfully thought-up, but in the sense that we ought not to be in one mind about them." This Bookmark will examine fifteen poems from **A SHROPSHIRE LAD** which, with one exception, analysed immediately below, confirm that Housman's response to man's mortal lot is defeatist.

## NOTES

### II Loveliest of trees, the cherry now

In **Poem II**, Housman derives his theme from Horace's imperative *carpe diem*; in this lyric, we can hear Terence exhorting himself to 'seize the day'. In the first quatrain, Housman does little more than describe the cherry tree as it may be seen on 1st May. In this description, his use of the participle 'wearing' invites us to imagine that the tree is either a woman dressed up for Easter or even a bride in her wedding dress; either way, she is in the prime of her life.

The function of the second quatrain is simply to carry out an arithmetical calculation. Housman risks this rudimentary subtraction in order to stress the transience of human life, the brevity of human bliss. It is on this factual basis that he proceeds to his urgent conclusion: that 'fifty springs is little room' to make the most of the beauty which the world can offer a Shropshire lad. Going about the woodland, at this time of year, quite literally adds up: that is, it makes logical sense to gather his cherry blossoms while he may [= maximise his pleasures while he can].

In the third/final quatrain, Housman's snow-metaphor strikes a sombre note: with the final word of the poem, he asks us to entertain the idea that spring blossom is effectively winter snow. Cleanth Brooks observes:

The very description of the springtime beauty is ominous: if 'hung with snow' is a way of stressing the unbelievable whiteness of the blossoms, the phrase also hints of winter and the death to come."

Terence appreciates that, at every moment, he is nearer to death than he has ever been before. In this context, his resolution to go 'about the woodland' is positive and uplifting: here, the jauntiness of the rhythm enacts his heroic determination to make the most of the relatively 'little' time bequeathed to each lad. Cf. W. B. Yeats' contemporary lyric *Girl's Song*.

### **VII When smoke stood up from Ludlow**

In **Poem VII**, Housman strikes the sombre note which is to be heard consistently throughout these poems: namely, that 'rise man a thousand mornings', he will still die in the end. It is this morbid attitude to the daily experience of being human which comes to characterise this collection. Try though he might, twenty-year-old Terence cannot get a blackbird's tune out of his head and comes to the sorry conclusion that his life is not worth living: that death 'will be the best'. He puts upon the song of 'the blackbird in the coppice' a deliberately morbid construction; its pessimistic sentiment – "What use to rise and rise?" – is a projection of his resolutely glum mood. Indeed, we can hear in the answer to this rhetorical question – a gruff "None" – the glumness of tone which characterises much of Housman's verse.

This resolution to hear only a melancholy sound in the blackbird's song is strangely at odds with Terence's earlier resolution in **Poem II**. In that poem, he proposes that the purpose of a man's existence is to 'go about the woodland' for as long as he can: that is, to make the most of a transient existence. Here, in **Poem VII**, there is nothing so positive; in fact, he tells us here that man's mortal condition/his transient existence renders absolutely futile any such heroic attempts to enjoy it. Here, 'the man is wise' only if he perceives the sense in giving up before he starts: in short, the only wisdom is defeatism. Listen to him here and you cannot escape the conclusion that we would all be better off dead: "And that will be the best".

### **XIII When I was one-and-twenty**

In **Poem XIII**, Housman sounds another of his pessimistic notes. At first, it might seem as if the function of this poem is to commend the sagacity of a man of experience ('a wise man') whose advice the callow youth, the hot-headed tyro ("no use to talk to me") refuses to take; unfortunately, the dominant tone of the poem is not so kind. Ultimately, its accents are those of an older man who wants to tell young, enthusiastic men that only the worst ('endless rue') is coming to them: "You'll learn!"/"Give it time!"/"I told you so!"

The one positive way to look at **Poem XIII** is to recognise that it takes full account of the power of time. In this poem, Terence is keen to give us the benefit of his own rueful experience of time: namely, that it took as predicted only a year for the movement of time to sweep away his love-affair and establish the truth ("And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true") of his mentor's statement. Cf. W. H. Auden's later villanelle *If I Could Tell You*: 'Time will say nothing but I told you so ....'

### **XVI It nods and curtseys and recovers**

Not altogether inadvertently, this poem is informed by Thomas Hobbes' view that human life is "poor, solitary, nasty, brutish and short" (*Leviathan*, 1651). For this poem, Housman's recognition of the power of time supplies the background; he notes that, if a love-affair does not end early in suicidal misery, then it will in any case end with the eventual bereavement of one of the partners.

In **Poem XVI**, the rhythm of the first line – in which three verbs are connected by two co-ordinate conjunctions – enacts/monitors the movement of the nettle blowing in the wind; this rhythm – which is functional in the description of the nettle’s flutterings – emphasises for us the ironic fact that, whereas this stinging weed remains capable of graceful movement, the human being buried in the grave underneath it does ‘not move’ at all. Nowhere in all Housman is there a finer example of cosmic irony: of ‘heartless, witless nature’ which ‘will neither care nor know’ (**Last Poem XL**) what becomes of a man.

In **Bookmark No 27**, Sarah Buckley (1996) comments: “Responsible for the power of this epitaph is the logical simplicity with which Housman organises his quatrains: their symmetries, their syntactical parallels, are reinforced by the stately rhymes.” In this poem, ‘the lover of the grave’ exists in two incarnations: first, he/she is a literal ‘lover’ who committed suicide (‘hanged themselves for love’) because like a Romeo or a Juliet he/she could not live without his/her partner; second, he/she is a metaphorical lover of the grave in the sense that he/she inevitably ends up there. On a first reading, it sounds as if Shropshire lads and lasses are such passionate lovers of the grave that they enter into relationships *in order to* bring their lives to premature ends: that is, enter into love-affairs because they have death-wishes. On a second reading, Housman is simply insisting on the sobering fact that men and women must ‘love the grave’ because sooner or later they all lie in one.

### **XXI Bredon Hill**

**Bredon Hill** (one of the few poems to which Housman assigns a title) is a topographical poem in the sense that the location which he describes is a real place which can be visited. More important, Bredon Hill itself supplies Housman with a perspective from which he can survey not only ‘the coloured counties’, but also the contours of human life.

In this poem, Housman’s aim is to dramatise a sharp transition in Terence Hearsay’s life; this transition he marks by changing the significance of the bells which Terence, lying on top of Bredon Hill, can hear ringing from ‘both the shires’: that is, from Shropshire and from neighbouring Worcestershire (Housman’s own county). At the end of the first five-line stanza, the bells calling people to church ‘of a Sunday morning’ contribute to a summer idyll; to Terence, lying with his ‘love’ and listening to ‘the larks so high’, the peal of church-bells is ‘a happy noise to hear’.

Indeed, Terence is so inspired by this campanological confirmation of his happiness that he cannot wait for the day when the same bells ‘peal upon our wedding’. This being Housman’s Shropshire, he should of course have known better than to be so optimistic. Come winter, both the Bredon landscape and the sound of the church bells undergo a solemn change. That Christmas

My love rose up so early  
And stole out unbeknown  
And went to church alone.

It is by means of such euphemistic circumlocution that Housman records the premature death of Terence’s loved one. By the sixth stanza, the bells – once emblems of a romantic contentment – have been transformed into a plangent symbol of grief:

They tolled the one bell only ....  
  
And so to church went she  
And would not wait for me.

As such, they have become cruelly ironic at the expense of his earlier contentment: from Bredon’s steeple rings no longer a ‘happy’ peal, but a sombre knell (‘one bell only’). In the

case of this Shropshire lass, going 'to church' has become an elaborate form of metonymy for attending her own funeral. She was in such a hurry to die that she 'would not wait' for her lad to live out his natural life-span.

This is the way of the Salopian world: if Terence's poems are reliable testaments, then it is a place in which none of its population manages to survive into either old- or even middle-age. Life, if neither 'nasty' nor 'brutish', is still unusually short. In the final stanza, Terence expresses an exasperation with the 'noisy bells' which had previously been music to his ears; in effect, he tells them to cease their fatuous din ('be dumb') because they have no need to summon him 'to church', for – in good time and in due course – he 'will come' to his own funeral.

### **XXV This time of year a twelvemonth past**

"To prove our almost-instinct almost true:  
What will survive of us is love."

Philip Larkin: *An Arundel Tomb* (1964)

In **Poem XXV**, Terence's aim is to tell us a story which illustrates the failure of human love to withstand the power of time. The moral of his story is that human life is so brief and sexual instinct so strong that this earth is no place for any sentiment. Although his Shropshire lads and lasses die prematurely, Housman rarely *expresses* any pity for them.

The story concerns Terence and his rival Fred who one summer used to fight ('jangle') over a girl called Rose Harland until eventually Terence 'was beat' and

Rose Harland on her Sundays out  
Walked with the better man.

The second half of the poem demonstrates what a brutal difference 'a twelvemonth' can make. It transpires that Fred (like many a young man in Housman's Shropshire) has died an early death, but that Rose – rather than mourn him – has reverted to walking out with Terence ('a lad that lives'). Here, Housman plays upon the sardonic epithet 'the better man' – of which he gives us two definitions: first, 'the better man' is Fred who wins the fight; second, 'the better man' is Terence who outlives Fred. The poem, then, comes to rest upon the bitter irony that the man who wins the fight loses both his life and the loyalty of his girl.

Once Fred is dead, his physical prowess (which made him appear 'the better man') counts for nothing in Rose's memory; her original preference for him – not to mention any affection – is fast forgotten. Housman, then, tells this tale lest the more sentimental among us run off with the foolish idea that human love can survive the grave. Ruthlessly, he seeks to contradict 'our almost-instinct': that 'what will survive of us is love'.

### **XXVII Is my team ploughing?**

In effect, **Poem XXVII** is a lengthier re-write of **Poem XXV**. In this ballad, we enter once more the triangle of relationships formed by Terence, Fred and Rose Harland; on this occasion, though, the story is not told by Terence, but takes the form of a question-and-answer session conducted by Fred from the grave. The first voice we hear (framed in speech-marks) is that of the posthumous speaker. The second is the voice of Terence whose part in this eerie dialogue –

No change though you lie under  
The land you used to plough

– is to try to offer his late friend the reassurance he seeks. As Fred expresses an increasingly touching belief in his friend's assurance that there has been 'no change', so Terence's difficulty in this role becomes far more pronounced. This dramatic lyric is not unlike Thomas Hardy's dramatic lyric *Are You Digging On My Grave?* in that it too aims to measure the unsentimental extent to which the living carry on living regardless of the dead. The dramatic climax occurs when the posthumous Fred – having been twice reassured that things are much the same – gains the confidence to ask whether his girl has recovered from her grief at his death. Lest he hurt the dead man's feelings, Terence must at this point choose his words carefully:

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

Fred's girl Rose 'lies down lightly' in two senses: first, in that she is physically at ease with another man; second, in that there is nothing weighing heavily on her conscience: far from having anything 'to weep' about, she is 'well contented' [= sexually satisfied] by her new man. When he extends his solicitousness to his old friend, Fred employs a metaphor ('a better bed' than the grave) which, when taken literally, becomes wickedly ironic at his expense, for it turns out that Terence is now able to 'lie easy' [= both physically and morally] in Rose's bed. Once again, Terence's words ("I lie as lads would choose") are ambiguous and euphemistic enough to spare Fred the fact that both his best friend and his girlfriend have betrayed him. Not of course that Terence sees it that way. His final remark –

I cheer a dead man's sweetheart,  
Never ask me whose

– is designed not to conceal a guilt (which he does not feel) but to placate Fred who seems to believe that Rose will continue to be faithful to him. Housman, however, writes the poem expressly in order to embarrass Fred's naive faith in her by the brutal facts of the matter: rather than foster an indefinite respect for the dead, the living – being mortal lads and lasses – have little time for such sentiment and pitilessly seize the day.

### **XXXI On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble**

One of Housman's strategies in this sequence of sixty-three lyrics is to measure man's mortality against the immortality of the Shropshire landscape, its 'blue remembered hills'. In each lyric, Housman's speaker, his Shropshire lad named Terence, reflects upon the brevity of human life; in this poem, his strategy is to do so by drawing a contrast between 'Wenlock Edge' [= a geological feature of Shropshire] and the men who have dwelt in this region throughout the ages.

For this reason, **Poem XXXI** is a topographical poem: that is, a poem which relies for its effects upon the poet's capacity to evoke the particular spirit of a place. In this poem, Housman's Terence is to be imagined standing 'on Wenlock Edge' and reflecting upon the transience of human life. His exact reflection is upon the force of the autumn gale which

plies the saplings double,  
And thick on Severn snow the leaves.

Unmistakably, 'the gale' – 'the old wind', 'the gale of life' – is a force of dissolution; it is used by Housman to symbolise the forces [eg. the movement of time] which have brought about the destruction of earlier civilisations: eg. Uricon [= the Roman name for 'the city' that once 'stood' on the site. **Poem XXXI** is a form of geological topophilia: it uses the permanence of a geological landmark to dramatise the impermanence of man. Housman's method is to

juxtapose the primaevaeal rocks of the Wrekin with 'the saplings' [a metaphor for frail, young men] which only temporarily stand upright there. In its timelessness, Wenlock Edge becomes an index of man's ephemeral nature. Cf. Thomas Hardy's poems *Beeny Cliff* and *At Castle Boterel* (1913).

In the third quatrain, Terence envisages his Roman predecessor standing in the same wind-swept spot and likewise staring 'at yonder heaving hill'; it is by the non-human permanence of 'yonder heaving hill' that he measures his human impermanence. Housman's declarative statement – 'The tree of man was never quiet' – means not only that 'the old wind' [= the same force of nature] continues to blow through the wood; it also means that man's awareness of his own mortal condition continues through the centuries to disquiet him. It is a disquiet ('the old wind in the old anger') that afflicts every generation/every 'wood'. Terence can well imagine that the Roman 'then' was thinking the same troubled 'thoughts' as he – 'an English yeoman' – is thinking 'now': 'Then 'twas the Roman, now 'tis I.' Feeling the gathering force of the gale, both Roman and yeoman are 'hurt' by painful 'thoughts' of their own frailty: that is, troubled by an increasing consciousness of their inevitable deaths.

In the final quatrain, Housman issues a blunt reminder that man is a finite creature in an infinite world. The cold consolation is that 'the Roman' – foreshadowing the certain fate of the yeoman – is not thinking troubled thoughts anymore: 'today', he has ceased entirely to exist. Indeed, the metonym 'ashes under Uricon' reminds us that even the man-made city beneath which he lies buried has ceased to exist. To 'the gale of life', only Wenlock Edge (the geological landmark itself) is impervious. Sarah Buckley (Bookmark No 27) writes eloquently about this poem.

### XXXII From far, from eve and morning

"We therefore commit his body to the ground: earth to earth.  
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

At the Burial of the Dead  
*The Book of Common Prayer*

The theme of this poem is man's brief life, his insubstantial existence. In three quatrains, Terence's aim is to put the brief duration of this life into cosmic perspective and rationalise a course of action. Given that 'the stuff of life' is no more substantial than ash or dust, it can be only a matter of a moment before cosmic forces ('the twelve-winded sky') 'disperse' it to the twelve points of the compass. Given that a man's life lasts only 'for a breath', making use of it becomes a matter of desperate urgency. As a result, Terence issues three imperatives each of which is an equivalent of *carpe diem*:

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

Speak now, and I will answer ....

The course of a man's life is so short that he cannot afford to dilly-dally on the way. It is therefore imperative that he seize the day: if he wants 'to see the cherry hung with snow', then he must make haste before he is dispersed forever by/to the elements. **Poem XXXII** is deliberately short in order to give the impression that there is very little to be said about man's lot, that he is in effect here today and gone tomorrow.

### XXXV On the idle hill of summer

Despite its subjects, **Poem XXXV** is not a poem about the futility of war. Instead, Housman's aim is to remind us of the fate which awaits the 'lovely lads' who crowd his homosexual imagination: in short, this poem expresses yet again his stubborn preoccupation

with the way of all flesh. His strategy is to forge a contrast between the pastoral idyll of Shropshire life ('on the idle hill of summer') and the grim fate which inevitably awaits even those who live such an unthreatened life.

The occasion for the poem is the stately passage through Hughley of a scarlet file of 'soldiers marching' as to war; hearing the 'steady drummer' at the head of this parade, Terence's idyll is disturbed because in his imagination he can hear instead only the knell of a drummer at the head of a funeral parade. Housman's vision, then, is not of a vigorous generation in the prime of its life, but of a doomed youth –

food for powder,  
Soldiers marching, all to die

– for whom this poem is his anthem. Housman's point is not that these 'comrades' are *all* marching off to die ('dead and rotten') in a military campaign; his point is that the 'lovely lads' who make up these 'gay...files of scarlet' will all inevitably and ultimately die somewhere ('on fields forgotten'). It is this context which explains fully Terence's final sentiment:

Woman bore me, I will rise.

In short, birth – whether you are a 'gay' soldier or not – is nothing more than a prelude to death. No final line of a Housman poem is more gloomy, glum or morose.

In effect, **Last Poem VII** attempts to re-write this poem.

"It was a lover and his lass ...." Shakespeare: *As You Like It*  
Pages' Song Act V Scene 3

Once again, the occasion for the poem is a procession of soldiers through the Shropshire village of Hughley; once again, it is a Shropshire lad and his lass who hear them pass. On this occasion, their vantage-point is not upon 'an idle hill of summer', but in a 'valley green and still' where they are lying together under a greenwood tree from which may flowers. Little else changes: as the lovers listen once more to 'the drum and fife', the route which they imagine for the soldiers – the way of all flesh – remains the same:

Through earth and out of life  
The soldiers follow.

Once more, the military music disturbs the romantic tranquillity of the scene. 'The lover and his lass beneath the hawthorn lying' cannot help 'sighing': not now with sexual ecstasy, but with sorrow for the soldiers who are assuredly marching to their deaths. Once more, the final quatrain –

And down the distance they  
With dying note and swelling  
Walk the resounding way  
To the still dwelling

– achieves by its diction a wistful association between lovers and soldiers. First, there is that ambiguous pronoun: are 'they' still the soldiers or now the lovers on their 'resounding way' to an identical destination/destiny? Second, there is the use of hypallage: is the 'dying note' that of the music fading in the distance or – the epithet having been transferred from music to men – that of the soldiers making their last hurrah on earth? Finally, there is the symmetrical recurrence of that adjective 'still': whereas in the first line it described the literal peace of the valley, in the last line it is recycled into a metonym ('the still dwelling') for the grave.

## **XL Into my heart an air that kills**

The central lament in **A SHROPSHIRE LAD** is for a lost innocence. Nowhere is this lament more powerful than in **Poem XL** in which Terence regrets that he is no longer innocent a) of his sexuality and b) of his mortality. The 'air that kills' – or should that be 'chills'? – is a powerful air of nostalgia. By this breeze, Terence (an adult) is reminded of the distant 'country' of his childhood; together, the two adjectives emphasise how far away it now is. The 'air' that blows into his heart is from 'yon far country': that is, from an earlier time of his life when it was infinitely easier to be alive. The geographical location –

What are those blue remembered hills,  
What spires, what farms are those?

– is a metaphor for his infancy when he was blissfully unaware both of his sexual nature and of his movement through time towards death.

With the context supplied by **Poem XXI Bredon Hill**, it is simple to argue that Terence's yearning is for a psychological 'country' in which he did not have to experience the pain of loss; from the interrogative mood of the three phrases, we can infer that the 'air' is of acute bemusement upon glimpsing again the Malvern Hills among which he [= Housman in Worcestershire] grew up. Given that Housman's own nature was a homosexual nature, which brought with it its own intense anxieties, it is equally simple to say that the poem has a sub-text of personal pain over which his Terence-persona cannot easily throw a lavender-scented veil.

Terence's demonstrative answer to his questions supplies us with a metonym for childhood ('That is the land of lost content') and explains emphatically that the map-references are to a state of mind in which he had no knowledge of the anguish involved in being both a sexual and a mortal creature. The simple language of the lyric –

The happy highways where I went  
And cannot come again

– expresses his recognition that, consequent upon the loss of innocence, comes an experience which brings with it inescapable pain; it is by his monosyllabic use of the past tense ('went') that Terence/Housman faces up to this reality and resigns himself to an acceptance of the fact that this halcyon condition (for which the Malvern landscape becomes an emblem) 'cannot come again'. Ultimately, then, the 'air that kills' is an elegiac air of resignation to the irretrievable loss of time. See also Sarah Buckley's succinct exegesis of this lyric.

## **LII Far in a western brookland**

In **Poem LII**, Terence's aim is to give us a fuller description of 'the land of lost content' to which **Poem XL** alludes. Here, he is to be imagined speaking from William Blake's London and expressing his yearning for the 'western brookland' where he was born and where to this day perfect pastoral conditions (eg. 'poplars .... by pools', 'starlit fences' and 'glimmering weirs') can – so he assures us – still be seen everywhere. In short, this poem expresses Housman's/Terence's home-thoughts from abroad.

Given the nostalgic longing that **Poem XL** expresses, it becomes apparent that the 'western brookland' of the first line is not so much a geographical location in Shropshire as a spiritual condition: innocence. Housman's 'brookland' is a paradisaical place where first 'poplars stand and tremble' and then 'sigh'; this being so, the poem itself is a lament for this paradise/this innocence which has been irretrievably lost.

### LIV With rue my heart is laden

"Golden lads and girls all must,  
As chimney sweepers, come to dust."  
Shakespeare: *Cymbeline* (1610)

Terence's elegy for the 'golden friends' he had borrows its diction from the famous refrain shared between Arviragus and Guiderius in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* Act IV Scene 2: to be precise, Terence's rueful lament is

For many a rose-lipt maiden  
And many a lightfoot lad.

It is these very characters – 'rose-lipt maidens' and 'lightfoot lads' – who populate Housman's Shropshire: namely, fragrant women and athletic men who have died in the primes of their lives. The poem expresses Terence's feeling of bereavement; quite simply, it is an expression of his grief for all the young people of his generation who are no longer alive. The diction is designed to capture this acute sense of loss: the maidens were 'rose-lipt' because they existed in a beautiful state of sexual readiness; the lads were 'lightfoot' [= 'foot-loose and fancy free'] because they were physically fit and promiscuous/correspondingly eager to avail themselves of any maidens who were prepared to open their rose lips.

If the function of the first quatrain is to establish that Shropshire's lads and lasses are fit and fragrant, then the function of the second is to emphasise how ephemeral and evanescent such fitness and such fragrance are; all over Housman's Shropshire, men and women are dying and dying young. It is this with tragic earliness that he seems preoccupied; for him, the common tragedy is of premature death and unfulfilled potential. No matter how light-footed Shropshire lads are, they will sooner rather than later encounter 'brooks too broad' for them to leap: that is, they will fall into their graves. No matter how nubile their girls are, they will sooner rather than later be laid 'in fields where roses fade': that is, in country churchyards. Once again, it is Housman's use of diction – this time, ironic – that makes his point for him: the girls with whom the lads should have been sleeping [= making love] are instead 'sleeping' [= lying dead]. Exquisite though this irony is, its function is merely to point bleakly and insistently at the transience of human perfection/at the vanity of human wishes in a mortal form.

### LXI Hughley Steeple

Throughout **Poem LXI**, Housman's Terence is ironic at the expense of his own mortality. In the first stanza, his strategy is to lull us into a false sense of security. When he informs us that 'the vane on Hughley Steeple' (actually a tower, but 'tower' doesn't rhyme with 'people!') 'veers bright', it sounds as if he is introducing us to a Shropshire village where the people are all good 'friends' of his. It is with the repetition of the verb 'lie that he sounds a sinister note, signalling to us that the 'Hughley people' are 'friends' of his only in the grim sense that they inhabit the churchyard where he too will eventually be buried. Housman is suggesting that there exists between Hughley people an extensive camaraderie; the sardonic snag is that it is a camaraderie in death.

By means of his jingling rhythm, Terence seeks to suggest that this togetherness is very jolly:

And I shall ne'er be lonely  
Asleep with these or those

It is by this rhythmical means that he is additionally ironic at the expense of his mortality; there is a tension between the child-like movement of the language ('sunny mounds') and the glum perception that it records: namely, that – in the history of both Hughley and the world –

there are more people dead than alive ('quick'). A careful study of the language reveals that Hughley's churchyard is populated by many of the fatalities of the earlier poems: for example, 'the slayers of themselves'/'the lover that hanged himself for love' (**Poem XVI**) and 'the lads I used to love'/'many a lightfoot lad' (**Poem LIV**) about whose deaths he was so rueful. The final sentiment –

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

– initially passes itself off as a cheerful antidote to loneliness: after all, he imagines himself to be sleeping beside 'a rose-lipt girl' or (in Housman's own case) 'a lightfoot lad'. In fact, he is offering both himself and us an extremely/literally cold comfort. Cf. Emily Dickinson **Poem 892**.

### **XLIII I hoed and trenched and weeded**

"For you there's rosemary and rue ...."  
Shakespeare: *The Winter's Tale* (1611)  
Perdita Act IV Scene 4

The final poem in **A SHROPSHIRE LAD** is another meditation upon the futility of human endeavour. In this poem, Terence presents himself as a pedlar of flowers who takes his wares to market ('to fair') where he discovers that nobody wants to buy them because the colour is out of fashion. This set-back supplies him with an occasion to explain that he continues to 'sow them'

For lads like me to find,  
When I shall lie below them,  
A dead man out of mind.

For the last time in the collection, but by no means the first, Terence's vision is of the world when he is no longer alive and a noted part of it: 'a dead man out mind'. Preoccupied by his forthcoming extinction, Terence's remaining ambition is to be remembered; for this reason, rue will be foremost among the flowers planted on his grave because it stands – as Perdita tells us – for remembrance. Even then, the 'yearly' flowering of the rue-seed which he has sown will prove scant consolation; even as he imagines each 'light-leaved spring', he cannot shift his focus from the equally 'luckless lads' who will wear 'stars' of it in their button-holes. The poem, then, comes to rest upon the morose thought that these sprigs – although they will be worn – will be worn only by lovely, lightfoot lads who will themselves soon be 'dead and gone'. So why did he bother to hoe and trench and weed in the first place?

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*A Shropshire Lad*, by Peter Cash is Number 5 in the Bookmark Longer Poems series, published by

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