To An Athlete Dying Young: Problematic Of A Poem

All around the world athletes are cheered for as they compete to bring home a win for their community. Unfortunately, an athlete can only achieve for as long as their career lasts. For sports fans, there will always be new players for them to root for.

In the poem, “To an Athlete Dying Young”, the author A. E. Housman writes of this phenomenon and how a runner may have been lucky to pass away before having to witness his victory be forgotten. Alfred Edward Housman was born in 1859 in Fockbury, Worcestershire. His childhood was not a happy one as he was often sick. He did not have a good relationship with his father and latched onto his mother instead. When she died on his twelfth birthday, his family life only worsened. College is where Housman found his interest in literature. He had been the top of his class in primary school which resulted in a scholarship to Oxford where he read the works of Matthew Arnold and Thomas Hardy, contemporaries who influenced a lot of Housman’s future works. It is also where he met his lifelong friend, Moses Jackson, who was his roommate most of his college career. Housman also fell in love with Jackson and was heartbroken by his rejection, but they remained friends, nonetheless. Housman’s life is probably what influenced the theme of most of his poetry, grief and loss. (Carson) This theme is also present in Housman’s poem “To an Athlete Dying Young.”

The poem is about a runner who dies before the glory of his victory is forgotten. He alludes to death being something worth celebrating rather than having to live and be forgotten. The runner’s name will live on in the community since he died a victor. If he had died after being forgotten for his achievements, he would have just been another man who passed away. (Bloom) The first stanza of the poem indicates his victory because in the first line it immediately mentions he won a race. They cheered for him as he was “chaired through the market-place”, a metaphor for holding him in high regards for his victory. The second stanza begins to imply his death by comparing the “road all runners come” to the inevitability of death. In line seven, they set him down at his “threshold”, another way of saying his grave. The third and fourth stanza is where the author indicates that the runner was fortunate to have passed away before being forgotten. He calls the runner a smart lad and compares his eyes to being shut like “the shady night”. This means he is unable to see his record be beat due to death and his eyes literally being shut. In lines eleven in twelve, he states that that glory goes away quick, “quicker than the rose.”

The fifth stanza is about how the runner no longer has to be like the other runners who lived long enough to see their honours wore out. Most athletes are forgotten before they pass away. In the sixth stanza he again mentions how he will never be beaten as he died a champion, unable to be challenged in beaten in a future race due to his death. Lastly, the ending stanza is about how his fame will follow him into the afterlife. His garland, a metaphor for the runner’s crown of victory, will not wither because it will be preserved just as his reputation for being a winner will be since he died as one.

Although Housman has a morbid view on life, he is realistic. In the poem, “To an Athlete Dying Young”, he acknowledges the reality of being an athlete. Though their victory may be something worth celebrating at the time, the joy does not last forever much like life. In the poem,

the author believes the runner was fortunate to have lived his life a victor before passing rather than having to have lost his pride and inevitably lost his life in the future.