

## Acknowledgments

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## Introduction

“Sex and death are the only  
things that can interest a serious mind”

Yeats, William Butler

My epigraph by W.B. Yeats points to the fact that death is one of the major topics of literature. Housman’s poems, most notably *A Shropshire Lad* and his later works, are a road mark on the transition from death being a natural part or an act of life, to becoming oppositional to life. Housman achieves in his poetry to contemplate this change, and manages to foreshadow the modern understanding of death. After World War One, society demanded that death should be delayed, hidden, and ultimately cured (Gorer). Housman’s poetry foreshadows this change in society’s understanding of death. Death in Housman is a realistic death, and there is no attempt to try to establish a “healthy” relationship with death.

My object is to show that Housman discusses mortality in a way that removes any positive aspect of death. The innocent in Housman’s poetry has not yet realized that death means annihilation, and that the previous reasons for contemplating mortality have changed. Housman’s poetry shows a reluctance to grant death any positive aspects, and therefore undermines the instrumental value of contemplating death. This is rooted in the scientific and social progress of the nineteenth-century, which changed life and death into binary oppositions. Classical philosophies did not offer the refuge it might have had for a Classicist, and Housman expresses this in his poetry by using certain Classical and Romantic tropes, such as the Narcissus figure, to reveal the limitations of death in the late nineteenth-century. Historically, death had an instrumental role in society beyond the mere mechanism of

annihilation. Contemplating mortality could function as a memento mori, a reflection on the Self and as a medium of unification. As death changed, our understanding of time and the nature of the Self also changed. Housman's poems show how the combination of these changes in understanding, limited death's instrumental function in society. The naïve will create futile memento moris, or use death as a mirror or try to lessen death's blow by giving a voice to the dead. Housman's poetry refutes these practices, but does not offer an alternative. Instead, he grants the reader an uncompromising look at death.

The reasoning behind Housman's incessant musing on death can be explained by Housman's blend of Conservatism and Cyrenaicism. Housman lost his faith early in his life, but continued to uphold the traditional morality and social conventions of his time. This had ramifications for his poems, as the poems define death without religious sentiment, or an alleviating structure. Death without such a structure becomes "wild", and in modern society one does not discuss it (Aries). Housman, however, obeyed the social conventions of his age, which allowed death ample room in society. Housman strips death down to its core, loss and annihilation of the self. The conclusion of death becomes sorrow and despair, which run counter to society's demand for happiness (Gorer). However, these poems should not be read as rebellious towards the changes, rather they signify the loss that has occurred. Housman, through his Cyrenaic influence, was bound by society's judgment, and therefore these poems become important markers for the change in society's understanding of death, not poems that rebel against the new understanding of death.

The first chapter is a breakdown of the historical death, and the way pessimism influenced the Victorian period. For the reader to understand Housman and death in a modern sense, it is necessary to comprehend the changes of our understanding of death throughout history. In addition, the resignation that lies at the heart of Housman's poetry is grounded in pessimism, and should not be overlooked. The poem "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now"

shows Housman's grasp of mortality, and his understanding of desire and mutability as precursors to the idea of death.<sup>1</sup> Chapter two is an analysis of how Housman elevates the power of time in human society, and how death is not allowed to function as a mirror of the Self. Close readings of the poems "Eight O'Clock", "Bredon Hill" and "On moonlit heath and lonesome bank" shows how death does not unify mankind, but separates it. The poem "Oh fair enough are sky and plain," show how Housman uses the sensations of the body to describe a changing death, a death that cannot be used as a means of self-understanding. The third chapter describes how Housman's Conservatism coupled with his Cyrenaic influences cause certain of his attitudes towards death. This coupling of ideas has the effect that joy in the moment cannot be achieved by contemplating death. It also explains the discrepancy between Housman's atheism and his moral universe. Housman continued throughout his life to uphold the traditional morality of age. The discrepancy lies in the problem of upholding the laws of man which were based on a bedrock of faith, a faith which Housman did not possess. The two ideas of Conservatism and Cyrenaicism with the pessimism of his age, cause Housman to both devalue life and death. Life is not necessarily an ultimate good, but rather a curse. Moreover, seeking death does not cause joy, but sorrow. This sentiment of despair reaches its nadir in the poem "Is my team ploughing", where life becomes useless effort, while death brings salvation only if it means total annihilation of the self. The effect of this is that Housman manages to foreshadow the modern approach to death.

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<sup>1</sup> When referring to specific poems, I use either the given title or the first line of the poem, not the roman numerals numbering them.





## 1. The Historical Death

While death as a phenomenon has, and is a constant facet of life, it is not a-chronic. As the great historian of death, Philippe Ariès, shows, death is subject to different mentalities, and therefore our understanding of it changes. In his book *Western Attitude Toward Death*, he categorizes death into four segments, “Tamed death”, “One’s own death”, “Thy Death and the Forbidden Death”. A crude rendering of these periods or mentalities does not do his work justice, but it is a necessary backdrop to understand death in the late Victorian and *fin-de-siècle* period. Housman uses Romantic and Classical imagery of death in his poetry while showing a modern sentiment towards death. A brief overview of the earlier historical methods of understanding death becomes necessary to understand the peculiarities of Housman’s relationship with death. The death that emerged in the twenty-first-century was foreshadowed in Housman’s poems, and only emerges when in contrast to other western mentalities of death.

“Tamed Death” is the period leading up to and during the Middle Ages, according to Ariès. The act of dying was literally that, an *act* at the end of life. It was a natural part of life, and therefore not alien to life. Death was familiar, and allowed for the co-existence of the living and the dead in the same place. Ariès mentions a decree from 1231, which forbade dancing in the cemeteries, and in 1405 another law stated that among other things, gambling, juggling and theatrical groups were not allowed to do their trade in cemeteries. What follows is that in the early Middle Ages, people “were as familiar with the dead as they were familiarized with their own death”(Ariès figure 11). Ariès presents this way of looking at death as a more natural way for man to understand death.

Throughout the Middle Ages, a new mentality emerged that did not necessarily suppress the “Tamed Death”, but altered it slightly. While in the Tamed Death, death was a collective phenomenon understood in French as *et morieum*, we shall all die; *le mort de soi*,

one's own death, characterised the new mentality. Housman shows an understanding of this distinction, especially in the poems "Bredon Hill" and "Eight O'Clock". In *le mort de soi* lies a new awareness of oneself. Not only were people becoming individuals in life, but also in their death. The mechanism behind this shift was a religious shift to judgment. Before the thirteenth century, the idea was that if one was part of the Church one would awaken and resurrected on the Last Day. A Christian death meant to sleep to the Last Day, and then be admitted into the Kingdom of Heaven. As Ariès puts it, "there was no place for individual responsibility, for a counting of good and bad deed" (Ariès 31). This changed with a new religious doctrine, which contained the Archangel Michael weighing the souls, and Christ being the judge of one's life. Corresponding to this, any individual had a *liber vita*, the book of life. This was a personal bibliography, cataloguing one's life, and was portrayed as hanging from the neck. In addition to signalling the rise of individualism, the idea also shows the time lapse between physical death and the act of entering heaven. The *liber vitae* was not read after one dies, but at the Last Day of Judgment, which shows that there was an afterlife. However, in the fifteenth century, the timespan changed. The deathbed scene, which was very prevalent in Victorian literature, became important. In this familiar scene, the dying man stands trial at the moment of his death, and his *liber vitae* was scrutinized by a deity or demonic figure.

The process of dying was changing, and one of the positive aspects of death, was how death could be an instrument of introspection, through the *liber vitae* or the *speculum mortis*. Ariès's example of this is a woodcut of a death scene where a demon reads the book of life, and the idea was that the actions of the individual, when on trial, would determine his or her fate. "There was a moral importance in the way the dying man behaved himself and in the circumstances surrounding his death" (Ariès 39). Ariès describes this as the emergence of *speculum mortis* – the mirror of death, which indicates a return to classical philosophies and

culture. Not only was every man judged individually, but “in the mirror of his own death each man would discover the secrets of his individuality” (Ariès 51). The importance of mirrors and how the image of mirrors interplay with death and individuality underpins much of Housman’s poetry, as I show in chapter two.

The third period or mentality Ariès describes is *la mort de toi*, the death of the other person. This period has its origins in the seventeenth and eighteenth -century, but its traditions were important to the Victorians. If one accepts the premise that Housman is a product of the Victorian age, one would assume that the poems that deal with death use Victorian tropes or display Victorian sentiments. In some regard, this is true, for instance, in his recurrent theme of death at a young age, (see “To an Athlete Dying Young”). In other ways, the poems do not display typical Victorian attitudes regarding death. In the Victorian period mourning a loved one was an ostentatious event, and the display of mourning was prolonged, for instance in Queen Victoria’s decision to wear to black the rest of her life after the death of Prince Albert. The Victorian age falls in under the mentality that Ariès calls *la mort de toi*, the death of the other person; and as a result, the fear of the of the other person created a cult of death. Instead of focusing on one’s own mortality, the mortality of the other person was in focus. This had the effect of creating rituals after death that were exceedingly filled with grief and emotions than before. The idea of death took on an emotional character, coupled with the eroticisation of death that had become a part of death in the Romantic period. Housman, however, does not exalt in grief, there is not an excess of grief. Rather, there is an excess of sadness which is not contained in a structure of grief. Moreover, the sadness in the poems stems from a feeling of loss, and; this feeling of loss saturates Housman’s poetry to such a degree that it is clear it not just the fear of *la mort de toi*, but an anger, filled with resignation, against life itself that becomes the focus. The causes of this can

be found in the new scientific world view that repudiated traditional religious beliefs, and the new definition of life.

As Ariès points out, up to the sixteenth century, death was a part of life – it was natural. The major change was that death began to be seen as a break, which Ariès calls the “Forbidden Death”. Foucault proposed that at the end of the eighteenth century, a new classification of life was developed. The new scheme was based on the “organic”, meaning that a distinction was made between the living and the dead, the organic and the inorganic (Bryant). This is fundamental to any discussion of death in the nineteenth century because it signals the end of death as a part of a religious and philosophical understanding, and instead becomes a “purely technical and operational functionality” (Bryant 20). In contrast, before this shift, death was a natural part of life. It was the final act in life, not the end of it.

The good life, as depicted in Day’s work on the stages of life, was slowly evolving into the expectations of a bourgeois class nurtured on the positivism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century[sic] life – increased life expectancy, decreased illness, urban growth, and industrialization. The belief in the movement forward in history was perhaps nowhere better expressed in than in the redefinition of life itself, which, given its natural course, had nothing but death to fear. (Bryant 20).

Here Bryant points to the fact that the Victorians believed in progress, and that there was a general optimism concerning material matters. However, this fuelled the importance of death in society. As death was immutable, society’s progress could not overcome it. While the medical sciences became better at delaying death, death obviously still occurred. In the nineteenth century the rise of doctors and hospitals caused a change in death. Death, more than before, happened in hospitals, not in the home; the family did not necessarily see the person dying, or the corpse after death. This meant that the break between life and death

became clearer, supporting the change from organic life to an inorganic death. As Ariès points out, death used to be a gradual event, where life and death intruded on each other. In the Victorian age this changed to become a clear break between life and death. Housman uses the sensations and measurements of time to mark this change in mentality. Importantly, Housman's poems show how the temporality of dying had been reduced to a moment. Housman does not allow an afterlife to exist, nor does he allow the process of dying to become an *act* that have a span of time. Instead, death had become instant oblivion, reducing the process of dying to an instant without meaning. Death in Housman's poems are instances where life and death become instantaneous binary oppositions, not a meaningful individual process on the part of the dying. Instead, time itself becomes the arbiter that dictates when the instant of oblivion occurs. In poems such as "Eight O'Clock", death is marked by the strike of a clock, which demand life and death to become binaries. The nature of this binary is also reflected in his poems as life after death does not exist.

This marked change in the idea of death as something inherently different from life was also fuelled by the loss of faith that people experienced in the nineteenth century. As Ariès shows, death was a religious act, and Christian doctrine specified that death was not the end, but the beginning of an afterlife. With the loss of faith, death changed from becoming the salvation from earthly life and struggle, to annihilation and obliteration of the self. This new world view of rational life, however, did not necessarily bring comfort to the writers of the era as many, Housman included, felt a deep feeling of despair and pessimism.

## 1.2 Pessimism

Housman's poetry is laden with pessimism, and several other poets of his time, Thomas Hardy for instance, shows the same characteristic of a cynical life view. Hardy is interesting to read in conjunction with Housman as they deal with the same subject matter, death, and the despair of living, in similar ways. The thematic matter is enough to warrant the label of pessimism. In addition, the world is described in such a manner that not only are the themes bleak in themselves, the world is in tune with that specific mode of mind that is indicative of pessimism. The poem "The Darkling Thrush" is indicative of how Hardy describes the world in many of his poems. Housman and Hardy often use adjectives such as, "dark", "bleak", "cold", "winter" and "hard". This world view was not specific to Hardy, but was rather a part of the reality of the age. In part, the abundant pessimism in Hardy's and Housman's poems should not be treated as a form of emotional overreaction, which may prompt one to read the poems as adolescent, but as a philosophical system of thought. As Nicholas Shrimpton writes in "'Lane, you are a perfect pessimist'", "It is time... to allow pessimism a more ample presence in our understanding of the English *fin-de-siècle*" (Shrimpton 57). Shrimpton describes pessimism as a "body of contemporary thought – of an intellectual movement or *mentalité*"(42). With regard to this, the particular world view of Housman and Hardy is relevant. Hardy thought himself as a meliorist, a person who believes that progress is possible. Hardy had a bleak view of the world, but he believed it could be improved upon. Housman on the other hand, described himself as a peyorist, in a letter to Maurice Pollet in 1933. He thought the world was becoming steadily worse (Shrimpton 56). In the poem "They say my verse is sad:no wonder" this sentiment of despair is heavily underlined (MP Housman 136). In the same letter, he also wrote that he "respected the Epicureans more than the Stoics, but I am myself a Cyrenaic" (Shrimpton 56). Moreover, the Cyrenaics also held views that give reasons for Housman's conservatism.

I agree that the pessimism found in the poets themselves does appear in their poetry, and it can be traced to specific philosophies. Shrimpton however, focuses on the contemporaries Hartmann and Schopenhauer, but there is also a need to understand the poems with regards to classical philosophies. Not only is Housman's identity latched on to a specific philosophy, but as a classicist he knew the workings of the philosophies enough to judge and compare them. The classical philosophies, such as the Epicurean, Cyrenaism and Stoicism were a framework for Housman, but with the advances in the sciences and the "Forbidden Death" of the twentieth century the philosophies did not necessarily offer a complete refuge from the new death emerging.

The repercussions of Charles Lyell discoveries, elongating the age of the world considerably with his book *Principles in Geology* (1830-33) and Darwin's evolutionary theories dislodged and rattled a belief in an all-mighty deity. The natural order was out of joint. Far from being part of a plan, nature and by default, man, were part of chaos. Kenneth Marsden singles out a passage from G.M Youngs *Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy*:

If I were asked what the total effect of Darwin, Mill, Huxley, and Herbert Spencer had upon their age had been, I should answer somehow thus. They made it difficult, almost to impossibility, for their younger contemporaries to retain the notion of a transcendent governing Providence.... To those who pass that way, the various devices with which believers of another sort reconcile Providence with Evil, or with Pain, will almost necessarily seem servile or sophistical. For them, there is nothing to reconcile: because to them, inherent in It, in the essence and operation of It, abides

“... the intolerable antology

Of Making figments feel”

The injustice of uncompensated pain, the darkening of our hours of happiness, by the thought that they too are passing towards Nothing, round these two themes Pessimism revolves in a closed circle (G.M Young, pp.xviii-xix, qtd.in Marsden (16).

Marsden sets this passage in the context of Hardy's loss of faith, which Marsden claims to occurred between 1862 and 1867 (Marsden 17). Housman also lost his faith in an early age, and might be one of the causes of the sadness in his poems. Norman Marlowe reflects on the inconsistencies of Housman, saying that while Housman saw himself as a Cyrenaic, "his inherited seriousness of outlook, the urge to redeem time e, ta make a name, to work while it is day, these are the mark of the Stoic, and the Christian" (Marlow 152). The poem LXII for instance conveys a Stoical method of living, while blending it with the Cyrenaic's value of pleasure in the moment, by recalling the life of Mithridates while extolling the virtues of drinking. Marlow states that Housman's poetry must be read in conjunction with his loss of faith:

To call Housman a Christian, as some have done, is of course nonsense, but the bitterness at death and oblivion are more natural to one whose anger is because Christianity ought to be true and who can no longer believe in it than to a Cyrenaic in a pursuit of pleasure of the moment. (Marlow 152)

The pessimism in Housman's poems must therefore be understood in the historical context, as the loss of the Christian world view was a discomfort that was not easily remedied, and Housman seems unable to deal with the loss of faith by replacing it with another world view or philosophy.

With regard to this, Nicholas Shrimpton makes a good case for understanding pessimism, as not just an emotional reaction, but also as an intellectual zeitgeist in the nineteenth-century. In addition, any critic of Housman needs to address pessimism as a general



feeling in relation to death, because Housman shows signs of dealing with death in a modern way, what Ariès calls the “Forbidden Death”.

The mentality of the “Forbidden Death” is defined by the unnaturalness of death, and how it has become a failure in society. Death is not a natural end of life, but rather a failure of medicine. As Ariès puts it “Death in the hospital is no longer the occasion of a ritual ceremony, over which the dying person presides amidst his assembled relatives and friends (see Browning’s “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church”). Ariès writes that:

Death is now a technical phenomenon obtained by a cessation of care, a cessation determined in a more or less avowed way by a decision of the doctor and the hospital team....Death has been dissected, cut to bits by a series of little steps.... (Ariès 88).

This passage reminds one of the difference in understanding time. Instead of a fluid time based on acts, time is to be measured in little steps, just as Housman does in “Loveliest of tress, the cherry now” and “Eight O’Clock”. Death is dissected into a small moment, just as life is dissected into smaller and smaller units. The consequences of these changes to understanding life, death, and time itself, are many, and Housman’s poetry foreshadows the “Forbidden Death” which, according to Ariès, was the modern death.

The “Forbidden Death” is unnatural, and the effect of this causes a change in the way one deals with it. One aspect is that the display of sorrow is mitigated. In previous mentalities, rituals were the primary ways of dealing with sorrow. They were a tool for the bereaved to overcome his or her grief through a process, which allowed people to show emotion. For those who did not mourn the death of a loved one, rituals allowed one to show grief without feeling it. Moreover, for the people who felt a deep sorrow, the ceremonies protected them from falling into the despair of grief. Ariès makes the claim that in the modern age “too evident sorrow does not inspire piety but repugnance, it is the sign of mental instability or of bad manners; it is

morbid” (Ariès 90). Ariès further argues that this causes a choking back of emotion which inflates the effects of grief, with negative effects. Housman displays a sensitivity to this issue in the poem “Bredon Hill”, see chapter four.

Another aspect in the mentality of Forbidden Death is society’s pressure to be happy. Geoffrey Gorer made the claim in 1955 that there has been switch from sex being the principal taboo in society, especially for the Victorian, to death becoming the taboo (Gorer). Ariès argues, that the interdict placed on death stems from society’s

need for happiness – the moral duty and the social obligation to contribute to the collective happiness by avoiding any cause for sadness or boredom, by appearing to be always happy, even if in the depths of despair. By showing the least sign of sadness, one sins against happiness, threatens it, and society then risks losing its *raison d’être*. (Ariès 94)

No one would accuse Housman of writing poetry overflowing with happiness. Rather, it is filled with a “sad stoicism and an occasional preference for life to death” (Reedy 52) . Moreover, this sadness can, as Shrimpton argues, stem from a disturbed world view. The sadness expressed in the poems are in conjunction with the sentiments that defined Housman’s time. However, the aspects of diminishing displays of sorrow and society’s demand for happiness can be seen in the poems.

As a starting point for understanding this resignation, the second poem in *ASL*, “Loveliest of trees, the cherry now”, shows the fundamental role mortality, loss and the sensation of time play in Housman’s poetry.

### 1.3 A Leitmotif of Housman's Poetry

The second poem of *ASL*, "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now" incorporates several elements which work together to form a leitmotif of Housman's thematic matter. It is preoccupied with "le mort soi", the passing of time and a feeling of inevitable loss. Importantly, it channels a sense of sadness, pessimism, and death by focusing on the beauty of nature in a season, which in the Christian tradition, heralds the demise of death.

The poem starts with an image of life, the cherry which is beautifully "hung with bloom along the bough, / wearing white for Eastertide". Easter has its own symbolic value, apart from being a season where one can see the cherry hung with snow. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross is the most important symbol in the Christian tradition. It symbolises in itself the value of sacrifice for mankind. Christ, by dying on the cross and resurrecting, is thought to have conquered death. The season of spring symbolizes this. Winter was classically thought of as death, while spring meant resurrection of life. Rebirth, however, is the opposite of what Housman tries to convey here; rather, death becomes the final act in life. Michael Macklem in his article "The Elegiac Theme in Housman" argues that there was a trend from the Romantics to Matthew Arnold and Tennyson to subvert and change the symbolisms of seasons (Macklem). Spring meant in essence that through love, one would transcend death, but following the loss of faith in the Victorian age, both Tennyson and Arnold contested this. Macklem's argument is that Tennyson uses Christmas in *In Memoriam* as the focal point of resurrection, and that Easter is more symbolic of procreation conquering death. Arnold's "Thyrsis", according to Macklem, actually makes the case that "winter is human death, and spring suggests, not resurrection into life, but, by contrast, the finality of death" (Macklem 48). Housman uses this change in the elegiac mode to contrast the desire for life with the ever-pressing finality of death.

In the second stanza, the speaker counts his years lived, and calculates the years he has left and then, the emblem of the cherry makes the looker frame his own life by counting the years he has left:

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. (Housman 5)

In *Land of Lost Content*, B.J Leggett writes that, the cherry and the woodlands “reminds him of his own mortality” (Leggett 16). The speaker is twenty years old, counting down the years till he will die; seventy years was thought to be a normal time span. In the last stanza, the speaker uses the argument of time passing to continue walking *about the woodland*. In this poem, Housman manages to combine time as one normally thinks of it, years passing, with space “room”. Fifty years becomes a claustrophobic space of time for the speaker. Time in Housman’s poetry figures often as sensations of the body, in this case it takes the form of the speaker actually walking in it.

While on the surface the poem is a reminder that life must be lived while one can, Leggett remarks on a greater symbolism here than a simple memento mori. The tree symbolises in Leggett’s opinion the tree of knowledge. By embracing its beauty, the looker loses his innocence of the world, and death enters his mind. In Leggett’s own words, “the ‘loveliest’ aspects of nature are the most melancholy, for they reveal the world in decay” (Leggett 18). Leggett is here pointing to the mechanism of mutability. Jonathan Dollimore, in his book *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, defines mutability as “the sense that all being is governed by a ceaseless process of change inseparable from *an inconsolable sense of loss somehow always in excess of the loss of anything in particular*” (Dollimore xiii ). Housman’s poetry is gluttonous with the feeling of loss, and mutability is at the core of this. Dollimore

argues that the mutability functions as a “tension between the desire for the ultimate reality to exist, and thereby redeem loss, the conviction that, in reality, it does not” (Dollimore xiii). The ultimate reality transcends the human experience, which is thought to be a reality of appearances.

The reality of appearances is crucial to Leggett’s argument considering his use of the word *innocent*. The *innocent* must be understood as someone that has not understood their own mortality, that death is final, and therefore in opposition to a natural death where life and death dovetailed with each other. This has repercussions for the nature of identity with the external world, as the Self struggles with the concept of death as a framework of both a reality of appearances and the ultimate reality. Leggett argues that *ASL* provides a framework of change, “the theme of innocence and experience – the transition from a view of life which sees identity with the external world to one which is characterized by a feeling of alienation” (Leggett 19). In the second poem, the loss of innocence begins. Alienation is not found in this poem, but grows throughout the book. Instead, the poem wishes for a static world, a world that is predictable. The loss of innocence is not complete in the poem, because the persona wishes for a static world, more in tune with the old Christian world view that God was the true ruler of Nature, and that in the end there is an ultimate reality that transcends mutability.

Nature used to be ruled by God, which lent it consistency. After the fall from grace during the nineteenth-century, religion was superseded by a belief in scientific and social progress (Shrimpton 54). In this poem, the consistency of both world views is contested. The speaker is not only realizing his own finite timespan, but also the fact that the world is changing into something different. The law of nature is not consistency, but entropy. Shrimpton states that in the 1870s Comte’s positivism had been established as the rescue after the loss of religion. But the rescue of science was short-lived. Scientific progress did not offer much comfort. Darwinism preached the survival of the fittest in a Malthusian world. From the 1850s to the 1870s the Second Law of Thermodynamics spread the theory of entropy. This had

ramifications which the poem conveys. In the next fifty years, the speaker hopes to be surrounded by nature. However, the speaker in the poem does not desire for change. He clearly wishes to experience *fifty springs*. He hopes for a static future frozen in time, one where nature and energy are preserved. This ties in with the imagery used for the cherry. It is in bloom, but also “hung with snow”. The cherry is not literally frozen, but its flowers are white. Therefore, the word “snow” is ambiguous as it details both the cherry plant in blossom and the symbolism of snow. The cherry is boughing under the weight of snow, in other words – the speaker is looking at the flower as laden with life and death.

Cherries laced with death, or beauty juxtaposed with death also speaks to the way Housman describes time itself. The poem is contrasting the beauty of a moment with the sureness that every moment is but a moment. Macklem calls this the “characteristic irony of Housman’s poetry: the juxtaposition of the fullness of life in the beauty of youth and spring with the certainty of its loss in death” (Macklem 51). The “cherry hung with snow” is an illustration of one of the prominent themes in *ASL*, the loss of youth. This foreshadows the First World War, young men dying at their zenith of their lives.

Clearly, mortality is central to “Loveliest of trees, the cherry now”, and it highlights central aspects of Housman’s relationship with death and time. Housman conveys a sensitivity to the way moments are interlaced with death, and that the desire itself is a questionably feeling, as it ultimately becomes loss. Death becomes the ultimate loss, in a season that is traditionally defined by its reversal of death’s power. Interlaced in this is the way time itself has gained power over man, with its attempt to quantify life, and how this is manifested as a sensation of the body. In addition, the innocent in this poem is transfixed by *le mort de soi*, trying to bind his own self in relation to a death that does not exist in the nineteenth-century. The speaker is attempting a memento mori, by situating death in the far-away future, and has therefore not properly understood death.

## 2. The Sensations of Time and the Limits of *Speculum Mortis*

### 2.1 The Sound of Time

Housman often contemplates mortality by interlocking mortality with an attempt to quantify and sense time. This change in the perception of time needs some further explanation, as the physicality of time itself had changed dramatically throughout the nineteenth century. The innocence in the first part of *ASL* with the certainty of living for seventy years, and the death of the man in “Eight O’Clock” in just one hour are emblematic of a change in the measurement and spread of timekeeping.

The changes in death, from a progress of being a slow continuous movement to a break, are similar to society’s development and progression of the understanding of time. With the emergence of more timekeeping mechanisms, society changed from a more “natural” way of understanding time, to a more technical understanding of it. The difference is best understood as the difference between describing time and measuring time. David Landes writes that “time is continuous, even and unidirectional, but the measurement of it is not” (Landes 8). Measuring time means breaking it up into pieces, but the sensation of time passing was not previously felt in seconds or hours. Before accurate timekeeping mechanisms, time could be measured in work, the sun, seasons or years. For instance, one would not say “I will write for one hour”, but rather “I will write one paragraph”. With more accurate timekeeping mechanisms, time obedience became a factor. For society to function the need for everyone to follow the same universal time became important. Feeling time could no longer be based on what you did, but the passing of seconds on a mechanism that measured it. This is relevant for the discussion of death, because higher precision meant that a more fluid passage from life to death died with the emergence of precision in timekeeping. As mentioned above, Ariès points out that death used to be a process where one slowly went

from living to being dead. There was no solid break, but rather a passage. Conversely, time was no longer based on the sun moving in a continuous manner or how long it would take to plough a field, but rather a solid break caused by an escapement mechanism in a clock.

The importance of this theme in relation to Housman is that time, and the symbols of time are very much present in his poetry. In several poems, temporality is a major theme when discussing mortality. Housman shows a clear tendency to try to quantify life, or to precisely determine when one dies.

In Leggett's analysis, "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now" becomes filled with a *carpe diem* sensation, an absorption of the moment. Miriam B. Mandel, however, writes that Leggett's analysis is too simple. Mandel points out that the speaker in the poem drags it all out. In the second stanza of the poem, the counting of years becomes excessively slow. While the speaker wants to see the "cherry hung with snow", there is no sense that this is actually done (Mandel). The absorption into the moment is not completed. The persona in the poem wants to experience the same over and over again, and the use of years is therefore important. Minutes, hours, days or months would not have had the same effect of supporting both the beauty of the scene and the speaker's sense of mortality. In contrast, the poem "Eight O'Clock" from Housman's *Last Poems* provides a different sense of time:

He stood, and heard the steeple

Sprinkle the quarters on the morning town.

One, two, three, four, to market-place and people

It tossed them down.

Strapped, noosed, nighing his hour,

He stood and counted them and cursed his luck;



And then the clock collected in the tower

Its strength, and struck. (Housman 101)

Here the speaker is literally hearing the seconds before his imminent death. The line “One two three, four” slows down the experience of time, much the same way as in “Loveliest of trees, the cherry now”. While there is a big tone difference in the two poems, with “Eight O’Clock” being much more sombre, the real difference lays in the nature of time itself. In “Loveliest of trees, the cherry now”, the speaker uses a biblical metric for his timespan, the threescore and ten being found among other places in Psalm 90. The importance of this is that it takes the form of a promise given to mankind. It is a deity that gives a lifespan to man, and the speaker uses it to measure out the time left to revel in god’s nature. In contrast, the speaker in “Eight O’Clock” is able to count the clock, but there is a pathetic fallacy at work here. Housman gives the clock itself a character, and a power of action.<sup>2</sup> The reader understands that the clock has a Westminster Chime, with four bells set to ring every fifteen minutes. These are the quarters that are sprinkled on the morning town, creating a sense of alienation between the speaker and the town itself. The clock sprinkles time to the town people, and the importance lies in the two verbs used to denote the action. The town people can revel in that they have much time, it is sprinkled and tossed to them, meaning little for them. But for the speaker, “nighing his hour”, the clock becomes a violent and unfair ruler, sprinkling, and tossing time to the townspeople, while he has to count the few minutes he has left.

In the two last stanzas, this is evident with the use of the word “collected”. There is a delay between “collected” and “its strength” which creates an additional meaning. The clock

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<sup>2</sup> David Landes gives examples of memento mori clocks in the fifteenth and sixteenth-century that were made to remind the owner of the importance of time. These clocks were formed or decorated with symbols of death, which were thought to be “spiritually invigorating”(Landes figure 11)

is not only finding strength to deliver the blow of death, the word “struck” signals this, but the clock is also “collecting” the speaker’s time.

“On moonlit heath and lonesome bank”, the violence of time itself is even more transparent. The poem is situated between the pastoral and the modern, signalling the emergence of a new way to understand time:

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.

And naked to the hangman’s noose

The Morning clocks will ring

A neck God made for other use

Than 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.

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; (Housman 14)

Housman here sets up a classic pastoral elegy with modern elements, with clear references to the naturalness of the countryside and the corruption of city life. The men hear the train whistling and groaning on the rails, while the persona is a shepherd grieving for the men. Housman accomplishes to create a distinction between the modern and the pastoral, by allowing the shepherd to use older, and perhaps more natural ways of timekeeping. The shepherd is waiting for the sun to come up, not for the strike of Eight O'Clock. Moreover, the prisoner hears the trains, which is not accidental. The emergence of the train system created a need for synchronising the measurement of time and establishing a single standard time (Landes). Housman juxtaposes the modern world with the world of tradition through the imagery and sensations of time. This creates a feeling of alienation, with the criminal and the shepherd being out of place in the modern world. There is an opposition between natural ways of keeping time, and natural ways of dying. While the shepherds are using natural ways of timekeeping, the modern world is not, and this reflects back on the manner in which the criminal will die. "And sharp the link of life will snap", a snap is a moment, a modern death of going instantly from organic life to becoming inorganic. It is clear that the shepherd is alienated by the modern world, but also alienated with the new death. The shepherd hopes for the criminal to get as "sound of sleep" as men of the past. However, it is formed as a wish, showing an uncertainty about what comes after death, which makes death unnatural. Vickery has made the same connection in "To an Athlete Dying Young", where the setting of the poem, a market town, reflects the transitional point between a pastoral world and an industrialized city. As Vickery argues,

"the result is an intensification rather than a dissolution of the gap between past and present by underlining the difference between the innocence of the one and the wry awareness of the other".(Vickery 410)

The way Housman reflects on how death has become unnatural in “On moonlit heath and lonesome bank”, is by juxtaposing natural ways and modern ways of timekeeping, and the sounds of time to show how death has lost its potency as unification of the community.

If one considers the personae in Housman’s poetry they often fall into four categories; lovers, soldiers, shepherds, and criminals. By categorizing these personae, one can generalize the poems thematically in relation to death. For instance, when lovers are in the centre, the loss of love is the apparent focus. Or when describing soldiers, the loss of youth and the virtue of duty are of paramount importance to Housman. In contrast, the shepherds and the criminals form sometimes a juxtaposition of ideas. A close reading of the two poems “Eight O’Clock” and “On moonlit heath and lonesome bank”, and their literary allusions support the idea that the death of shepherds and criminals is a method of understanding the value of death in a community and how it used to function.

In Ariès’s study of death, the mentality of the “Tamed Death” could be summed up by the phrase, *et morieum*, we shall all die. Everyone one will die, and in this was a sense of unity. Housman manages to show how death had lost this sense of solidarity by utilising the sensations of time. The sensation of time can be felt in the poems as time’s action through sound, or lack of sound, and their literary allusions.

As I have already established, the poem “Eight O’Clock” is saturated with time. Moreover, the signal of the criminal’s death is not heard, “And then the clock collected in the tower / Its strength, and struck. (101)”. There is an erasure of the sound of the bell. One understands that the sound of the bell does ring out at the end of the poem. Housman is using erasure of the sound of the bell to make a point here. As I have argued above, there is a separation of sensation between the man being hanged and the townspeople. The persona counts the time he has left, while the townspeople are tossed an abundance of time, creating a distance between the crowd and the soon to be hanged man. The poem ends before the bell

makes any sound, but the man is dead at the end of the poem, and the next event is the sound of the bell. And the sound of a bell is intrinsically bound to John Donne's line "For whom the bell tolls":

No man is an Iland, entire of it selfe; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the maine; if a clod be washed away by the Sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a Promontorie were, as well as if a Mannor of thy friends or of thine owne were; any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee. (qtd.in Sansom, 26)

John Donne is here making a claim that death connects mankind, and it is these lines: "Now, this Bell tolling softly for another, says to me, Thou must die" that Housman is alluding to. Jonathan Dollimore writes that these lines have been seen as evidence of a "deep humanistic empathy" (Dollimore 77). The idea is that we all will die, *et morieum*, and that the sound of funeral bells creates a sense of community. Death is not to be feared, but rather to be embraced, which correlates with Aries mentality of the "Tamed Death". Conversely, Housman's erasure of the sound of the bell creates a different effect, a feeling of alienation from other people. The separation between the soon to be dead man and the townspeople is clear, as it is the speaker who hears the clock, and it is he that curses his luck. He is not sharing death with the crowd, he understands his life and death as different from the townspeople. In addition, the sensation of time is different. While John Donne uses the verb "toll", a dull and slow word, to describe the sound of bells, Housman uses the harsh verb "struck" to signalize the creation of the sound, but not the sound itself. By erasing the uniting force of the sound of the bell, and delving into the final moments of the man and the horribleness of it, Housman is quietly rebelling against any positive aspects of death that might have existed. This is intensified even more by using pastoral tropes, shepherds, in a modern setting.

Evidence for the connection between the sensation of sounds and the anger at death is also found in the poem XXI “Bredon Hill”. The sounds of the church steeple are at first described by positive adjectives:

In summertime on Bredon  
The bells they sound so clear;  
Round both the shires they ring them  
In steeples far and near;  
A happy noise to hear. (Housman 28)

The poem describes two lovers who hear the church bells, and desire to get married. However, at Christmas, the lady dies, leaving the man behind. What follows is a change in the sound of the steeple, and afterwards a change in sentiment in the man when he hears the sound:

They tolled the one bell only,  
Groom there was none to see,  
The mourners followed after,  
And so to church went she,  
And would not wait for me.

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.

The words that are used to describe the sounds change dramatically, from the first stanzas, “ring”, “happy noise”, “chime”, to the last ones where these are the sounds “tollled”, “the steeples hum”, “noisy bells, be dumb”. When the lovers were planning to get married the sounds were joyful, but after death, all they remind him of is that he too must die. The critic Archie Burnett notes also that the sound of one bell tolling had a critical meaning in Ludlow, quoting from the *Handbook to Ludlow* (1886 ed.): “In August it was ordered ‘that upon the buryall of any person who received alms from the parish, the fifth bell only shall be tollled’” (Housman and Burnett 336). The sound of one bell therefore signals economic differences, which further the claim that death was not a shared experience of a “deep, humanistic, empathy”. Consequently, the persona who feels the loss of his love does not take part in the mourning ritual that is the funeral. The persona does not attend the funeral of his love, and his grief therefore is allowed no structure.

Housman uses the same mechanism of sensations in the poem “On moonlit heath and lonesome bank”. The persona will die by the hands of the clock, “The morning clocks will ring / A neck...”. In this poem however, the persona is a shepherd who knows someone will die in the morning. This creates the possibility for Housman to show empathy towards a man that will be hanged, but there is a clear sadness to it. However, there still is no mediation or religious structural understanding of death. Housman does not try to use death as a positive force, rather, it is something to cause melancholy. This lack of a positive force of death is also expanded when one tries to understand the force of death in relation to individuality.

## 2.2 Housman as the Poet of Death

Housman was, as I have shown, sensitive to the changing understanding of death and the poems warrant analysis of the intellectual thought in it. However, the intellectual quality of the poetry has in many cases been overlooked by critics. The consequence of this is, for instance, that the poem's reflection of individuality and death has been overlooked. Before delving into the topic of death and the self, I will first discuss the reasons for the oversight, and how one can redeem Housman's poems.

There are many charges brought against Housman's poetry. It is described as adolescent, fraught with contradictions and a preoccupation with the loss of innocence.<sup>3</sup> Much of the criticism also stems from a too harsh extrapolation of Housman's own views of poetry given in his Leslie Stephen Lecture in 1933 titled "The Name and Nature of Poetry". In this lecture, Housman describes the function of poetry being 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..." (Housman 235). These lines have been used to set up a non-sequitur. These critics are in many ways too preoccupied with form over matter, and thereby fail, or choose, to not see the intellectual quality of the poetry itself. While Housman might have argued for "emotional transfusion" over intellectual quality in a poem, it does not necessarily follow that his poems are devoid of intellectual quality. Donna Richardson writes that "not many critics have found enough rhetorical and stylistics complexity in Housman's poems to justify extended close readings of them" (Richardson 268). Moreover, Clarence Lindsay writes in her article "Housman's Silly Lad: The Loss of Romantic Consolation" the critics have failed

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher Ricks does a good job of discussing the stain of adolescence in his A.E. Housman *Collection of Critical Essays* (Ricks)



to describe precisely the intellectual context of these poetic effects, Housman's strongest advocates have contributed to the impression that he is a poet that whose effects are without especial substance or significance"(Lindsay 334).

The critics have therefore found the poems too simplistic in form and in intellectual quality, making them overlook vital aspects of the poetry itself. Housman's intellectual redemption, according to Lindsay, is to be found in the Romantic values his poetry has, but also scrutinizes. Lindsay defines the intellectual tradition of Romanticism as that:

which emphasised and celebrated the imperatives of the individual self: and specifically to the apotheoses of death and art, romantic conventions through which the individual self; and specifically to the apotheoses of death and art, romantic conventions through which the individual self expressed its hunger for perfection and its dissatisfaction with imperfect life. (334)

This definition certainly sets up Housman as a romantic, but Lindsay's analysis of the poem "Oh fair enough are sky and plain" shows the contrast within the poem. The poem starts with a clear romantic opposition between art and real life with the lines "Oh fair enough are sky and plain, / But I know fairer far:". The landscape in the two first stanzas of the poem is so perfect that it reminds the speaker of the "despair of imperfect life and seek death's perfection" (Lindsay 336). This resembles the sentiment found in "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now", where nature's sublimity directs the speaker towards thoughts of death and mortality. The difference lies in that there are two natures at play, in XX it is the imagined nature beyond life while in II it is real nature. The perfection in this imagined nature causes the speaker to ready himself to succumb to the yearning for a perfect life in death.

These are the thoughts I often think

As I stand gazing down

In act upon the cressy brink  
To strip and dive and drown;

Lindsay argues that critics have stopped their judgement of Housman at these lines, supporting a view of Housman as naïve and romanticising death. On the contrary, Lindsay argues that the last stanza actually functions as a volta, flipping the meaning of the poem.

But in the golden sanded-brooks  
And azures meres I spy  
A silly lad that longs and looks  
And wishes he were I. (Housman 27)

Housman's play on the Narcissus is not random here. Housman was very much aware of the allusions in his poems, himself having a "formidable verbal memory" and used to invoke ancient myths into his poems (Burnett 152). Significantly, he creates his own Narcissus, one who does not fall into the water. Rather, the reflection the speaker spies is someone silly, which Lindsay notes has several connotations, and the reflection wishes he could be the real speaker. Lindsay writes that the "'I' of the last stanza is the sensibility that is the essence of Housman's poetry. That sensibility ... is a divided consciousness, an odd double awareness" (Lindsay 336).

This double awareness is very much present in the speaker, but is also a form of technique used by Housman, mixing classical conventions with Romanticism. Gerard Reedy remarks upon this connection, in his article "Housman's Use of Classical Convention" where he writes that

the classic and romantic elements in Housman are carefully joined, and that to examine their conjunction is to find a human complexity unknown to those who only think of Housman as a stereotype of late romantic malaise. (Reedy 52)

The challenge with this technique, combining Classical and Romantic elements, is that Classical and Romantic elements are not necessarily compatible. Reedy states that this is a “planned discrepancy”, and that Housman’s poems are based on the polarity of two world views. The Classical poets, Simonides, Theognis, Sappho and Catullus, wrote with the sentiment of “finitude, rationality and order” (Reedy 60). Housman did not restrict his emotions in the same way, and therefore creates a polarity in the poetry, where the result is a hunger for order that once was. Reedy writes that the “the classical ideals of rationality and order, while singularly beautiful, are catastrophically dead for the modern man” (Reedy 60). However, characterizing Housman’s speaker as just longing for the rationality of the Classical philosophies, without a comprehension of what that loss actually entails, does not take into account the fact that the speaker in XX does not fall into the water. The speaker mentions that he frequents the river regularly, “These are the thoughts I often think / As I stand gazing down”, meaning that the speaker is not just a Narcissus figure who accidentally falls into the river, but that he longs for death, he contemplates suicide on a regular basis.

A categorical distinction should be made between suicide and death. Committing suicide is, naturally, different from a natural death. While death can be seen as a release from life, suicide entails an active subject seeking death, not succumbing to it. Waiting for death is different from planning it. For literary characters, this implies they should provide a rational for the contemplation, or act of suicide. Why is the character or speaker contemplating this action? In her article “Empedocles, Suicide and the order of things”, Linda Ray Pratt analyses the poem “Empedocles on Etna” by Matthew Arnold, and the reasoning of Empedocles before leaping into Etna. The critic’s reading of the poem is that Empedocles’s suicide is a reaction to modern times and the lack of a rational order guiding the world (Pratt 76). Stoic philosophy, with its embrace of suicide as a way out, guides Empedocles into his death. Pratt states that Arnold “predictably aligns himself with the values of the past” (75). The problem

with such an approach is that the world had changed, and while Stoicism was founded on a natural and rational order, the new, modern world order was not. Not only was the modern world based on evolution and entropy, but also a new sense of the self. Classical and Romantic ideas of suicide supported it, because those ideas “justifies ...suicide as the last possible act possible to preserve the integrity of the self – to die before the pressure of living destroys the sense of life” (Pratt 77). This clashed with the Victorian placement of suicide, which Pratt describes as “between insanity and abrogation of one’s moral duty” (Pratt 77). “Empedocles on Etna” was therefore not included in the 1853 volume, because the moral lesson was not sufficient for the Victorian audience. Pratt’s discussion on “Empedocles on Etna” is not only interesting because it reveals the Victorian’s judgement of suicide, but also that the idea of Self and Death is intertwined.

### 2.3 Death and Individuality

A general trend in Housman’s poetry is the loneliness of the dead. Rarely if ever, is there any mention of the dead being a collective entity. A notable exception is the poem “Here dead we lie because we did not choose”. The people who are dying or are dead, are alone. My argument is that Housman is reflecting on the individuality of death, but also that death was presumed to be a mirror into one self, and the fault of this logic. I turn back to the poem XX, and look at the two last stanzas.

These are the thoughts I often think

As I Stand gazing down

In act upon the cressy brink

To strip and dive and drown;

But in the golden sanded-brooks

And azures meres I spy

A silly lad that longs and looks

And wishes he were I.

The play on the Narcissus myth is evident. The speaker often takes trips to the river or brook, sees his own image and contemplates suicide. However, considering the cultural history of death, the poem becomes clearer. Firstly, in line 11, the use of the words *in act* is a clear reference to the act of dying, and it is understood that this is actually a way of dying. This harkens back to Ariès's "One's own death", where the manner of dying reveals the inner nature of the Self. Housman is here relying on the symbolism of the act of dying, that it is a natural part of life to contemplate death or suicide, and that the speaker sees his own death as part of a natural order.

Secondly, *the act* works with the line above, and the verb *gazing down*. The act itself is to look into the river, which works as a mirror, and the speaker is therefore orchestrating a *speculum mortis* – the mirror of death. This follows Philippe Ariès's line of cultural history of death in a Classical or Romantic way of looking at one self. But, the poem is situated in the *fin-de-siècle*, and the idea of the self, had evolved beyond the Romantic idea of the self, and central to this is the symbolism of the mirror. My proposition is that Housman uses the mirror image here to reveal a fragmented self. This is the double consciousness Clarence Lindsay has found, but a further explanation of the mirror image and its relationship to death and the Self, needs elaboration to support the close reading.

If one accepts Housman as a Romantic, one would need to see the meanings and the settings of the Romantic era in Housman's poetry. Margaret Stoljar writes in her article "Mirror and Self in Symbolist and Post-Symbolist Poetry" that the mirror image in Romantic narratives is used to "incorporate elements of magic..., it is used as an instrument of clairvoyance or prophecy" (Stoljar). In XX there are no magical influences, and therefore one

can presume that the speaker is not seeing his future and that this is not a typical Romantic poem. To analyse further, it is more helpful to understand this poem as part of the symbolist movement, and the decadence that is tangent to it.

The speaker says in the poem that he is standing on the “cressy brink”, and is ready “to strip and dive and drown”. Firstly, it is essential that he is looking down into water, bringing the Narcissus myth into play, but the symbolism of running water is also important. Water is fluid, and can change, which speaks to the mutability of life. Moreover, the speaker is standing on a cressy brink, hinting at the fact that the water is filled with plants, water lilies or leaves. In addition, one is reminded of the images by Monet, and his recurrent theme of pools with water lilies. This is reflected in the second stanza where he speaks of a pristine world, supposedly the afterlife, that has rivers “so clean” which it washes the nature surrounding it, hinting that the river the speaker is gazing into is not clean. In the last stanza, he has to spy for the silly lad, suggesting that the water is not pristine, and therefore cannot show his full extent. Moreover, the phrase “golden-sanded brooks” suggests that the silly lad is seen on the bottom of the brook, where the sand is. A reflection seen in the water, is necessarily on the top of the water, but there cannot be plant life obstructing the view. This reflects the idea of the Self that was becoming prevalent at the time. With the emergence of Freud, and his psychoanalytic works, the idea of the self as something rational was fading away. The self was not a fixed entity, it was not necessarily open for objective introspection, and there was a depth to a person (Stoljar 362). The conscious was on the surface, the unconscious hid underneath. Seeing one’s true self mirrored in the water was not possible. The water would not be able to encapsulate one’s identity. With this, Housman is playing with two intellectual notions. The Self is fragmented and filled with depth, and nature is not the salvation for this problem.

Stoljar mentions that “later poets describe the surface of the water or the glass as open or closed to the spectator, according to the way it is regarded and by whom”. To see the mirrored surface is not necessarily easy. As Stoljar writes “often it is veiled, or dark, or inexplicably mendacious” (366). The speaker is aware of this lack of transparency, and regards his mirror image suspiciously or hesitantly, because he needs “to strip”. According to Stoljar, nudity can be regarded as “a metaphor for truth, a shocking truth, . . .” (Stoljar 366). The speaker is contemplating death, but he cannot trust his own mirror image there is therefore a need to show his true self. By stripping he will realize the folly of living and dive and drown.

The man in the poem does not however strip and drown. Housman’s use of the language clearly shows the difficult nature of death in a modern society. In previous mentalities, death could be given the power of *speculum mortis*, the individual’s tool to understand himself. Housman however contests this notion with the veiled language of “cressy brink” and dirty water. Death does not provide a real understanding of the Self. In addition, the modern man does not want to confront death. The persona in the poem does not strip, which means that he fears the possible shocking truth of death, an annihilation of the Self, not a mirror into the true Self. The modern man cannot use death in a positive manner of understanding himself and the true meaning of death, annihilation, instils fear. Housman therefore clearly shows an understanding of the taboo of death in modern society. It is no longer natural, and it is not a method of self-discovery. The modern individual must therefore fear death, and avoid it at all cost.

The changing nature of death and the underlying taboo of death create a conflict in Housman’s poetry. Unlike the modern man who fears death, Housman shows a willingness to describe death, but he does it with a modern sentiment that creates a feeling of uneasiness in

the reader. Not only does Housman show that time and the Self has changed, undermining the instrumental value of death, he also denies the dead a voice from the grave.



### 3. The Silence and Voice of Death

#### 3.1 “Ars Essendi Morti” in Housman’s Corpses

Clarence Lindsay concludes that Housman is “this century’s great poet of death” (343). Her reasoning is that Housman juxtaposes a Romantic world, with the stillness of death. In Lindsay’s opinion, Housman’s poetry does not celebrate death, in fact his poetry does the opposite. *A Shropshire Lad* is not filled with a longing for death, it is not filled with any sentimental images of death as sleep and the presumed life after death is constantly negated. Lindsay writes, that in contrast to Thomas, Yeats and Hopkins, Housman views death without “any sort of ameliorating system” (Lindsay 344). However, Lindsay fails to mention the apparent inconsistency with death being the process of becoming nought, and the presence of corpses with prosopopoeial speech. There is a dislocation between the dead becoming nothing, and them having a voice from, and in, the grave.

An analysis of this issue can be found in Diana Fuss’s article “Corpse Poem”, which examines the body of poetry that constitutes the tradition of giving a voice to cadavers. In this article, Fuss recognises the ontological problem of calling something a corpse poem. It is oxymoronic because “a poem signals presence of voice while a corpse stills it. A poem quickens language while a corpse stills it” (Fuss 1). This is what Fuss calls “ars essendi mortis”, the art of being dead. In Housman, we see this oxymoronic presence in several poems, one of the more famous is “Is my team ploughing”.

‘Is my team ploughing,  
That I was used to drive  
And hear the harness jingle  
When I was man alive?’

Ay, the horses trample,  
The harness jingles now;  
No change though you live under  
The land you used to plough. (Housman 35)

In this poem, there is a conversation between a cadaver, and a living man. Just as a “Corpse Poem”, this conversation is ontologically impossible. An easy way out, is reading the poem as a conversation taking place in the live speaker’s head. He is animating life into his dead friend, and by doing so hopes to lessen his guilt for now sleeping with his friend’s former girlfriend. The speaker says: “Never ask me whose”, suggesting that this sweetheart used to be the corpse’s girlfriend when he was alive. The speaker either suggests that he is feeling guilty, or that he is afraid of how the corpse will take the fact that he is now comforting the dead man’s girlfriend.

Ay, 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

The argument that this is a voluntarily conversation falls flat however when examining the last parts of the poem. The speaker which is alive, says "Be still, my lad, and sleep". The alive speaker does not want to hear the voice of the corpse. Throughout the poem, the alive speaker tries to comfort the corpse, and saying that life has moved on without him. The body in the ground did not make much of a difference while living, such as in this line: "No change though you lie under". The striking feature of this is that it breaks clearly with the elegiac form which dictates a lament of dead. Housman does the opposite. The land is still ploughed, and the girl is "well contented". The dead man therefore had no impact in life, and Housman does not now allow the person any sort of immortality. Notice that the speaker does not elevate his status as living when compared to the dead man. The man ploughs, and he has a girlfriend, but the man expresses no joy in this fact. Michael Macklem makes the point: "that life is not worth living, the moment not worth enjoying informs a large number of the lyrics in *A Shropshire Lad*" (Macklem). In his analysis of "When Smoke Stood up from Ludlow", he shows ploughing is a metaphor for "the uselessness of effort". The speaker in "Is my team ploughing" then knows his life is meaningless and full of pain. Life is futile, and death becomes annihilation. This is what the speaker tries to convey when he urges the man to sleep. The speaker cannot believe in a life after death, because he cannot live knowing that he will continue to exist after dying. Life is pain and dreariness, and therefore death, with its annihilation becomes the salvation.

This attempt at a conversation between a corpse and his living friend speaks to some of the inconsistencies forwarded by the historians regarding the late nineteenth-century. Philippe Ariès, argued that in the Victorian period, people feared death to such a degree that

they stopped talking about it. As Fuss explains, “Science’s commodification of the cadaver... did not lessen the fear of death but actually heightened it, creating a new definition of the human body as spiritually irredeemable” (Fuss 3). However, during the nineteenth-century, corpses figure more in poetry. Fuss makes the argument here that the silencing of the dead actually caused a new “cultural desire to *make* the dead speak”. This follows a Foucauldian logic also put forward by Jonathan Dollimore. As Michel Foucault demonstrated in a *History of Sexuality*, the repression or resignification of sex caused a new need to address it, just as the modern death demands “a never-ending analysis of it” (Dollimore, 126). This logic presumes that the taboo of death sparked a need to analyse death and therefore let the dead speak.

“Is my team ploughing” therefore becomes a clear example how Housman’s poems are situated between the traditional way of addressing death and the modern one. In “Is my team ploughing”, there is a conversation, but the speaker does not want to have it. The dead should sleep. Housman’s use of the corpse therefore becomes a commentary on the practice of making the dead speak. “The Immortal Part” shows Housman’s views that the only immortal part of man, is its bones. Making death alive with speech is therefore futile, and can only show the futility of living. By trying to silence the dead, Housman shows a sensitivity to the mechanisms of death, and the modern taboo, and he effectively foreshadows the “Forbidden Death”.

### 3.1 Housman’s Conservatism

Clarence Lindsay, as already mentioned, argues that Housman has a pragmatic honesty when dealing with death. With this, she means that Housman points to death, and does not try to hide from it. Moreover, the effect of this creates almost an uncanny effect in his poetry.

Philippe Ariès for instance, shows a preference for the natural death, the death that was before the enlightenment period. Dollimore's reflection on this stance is wholly unsympathetic, and when commenting on critics who try to make the case that one should try to find a way to deal with death, he writes this:

This hope for a healthy attitude to death and loss on occasions (is) so trite that it could itself be said to be blatantly symptomatic of the denial of death, being apparently incapable of acknowledging on the personal level just how devastating and unendurable death is or can be for those who survive, and on the more general level how profoundly formative the trauma of death has been in the formation of Western culture. It may be, at least for some, that there is no coming to terms with the loss of death. There is only an adjustment and always at a price: we remain damaged.

(Dollimore 123)

Death in Housman follows this logic. His description of death is realistic, and therefore profoundly hard to read. Housman's poetry revolves around the contrasting impulses of Western attitudes towards death. On the hand, one has the Stoical embrace of death found in Seneca's commandment, "whatever you do, keep death in mind" (Seneca and Fantham 5g). Housman clearly adheres to this rule in his poetry. However, the Stoics' idea of death was based on a different world view, a view that Housman could not uphold. The loss of faith and a rational world view made death realistic, and unbearable, which Housman shows by stripping away the positive aspects of death. However, this realistic death has become a taboo, a taboo which Housman repeatedly breaks.

Housman's poetry shows how a modern man cannot oscillate between a "healthy" attitude towards death and a denial of death. In his poems, death is not something that should function as a *memento mori*. Nor is the concept of "*ars essendi mortis*" given any credence.

Death is annihilation. Looking at it is painful and there is no solace to be found in understanding it. For a modern individual, Housman's approach to death therefore becomes almost unbearable to read, because it does not follow the rules of society. The rules of society dictate that death should be hidden and denied any power, except for when it can be used to give perspectives of life. Housman's response is to fling death into the face of the reader, without purporting to hide the fact that death is "without an afterlife the ultimate end of human beings" (Vickery 404). The reason for Housman's contrasting impulses regarding death can be found in Housman's moral universe, which can be described as a blend between Conservatism and Cyrenaicism. This entails a discussion of Housman's own personal life and beliefs.

Much has been written on Housman's own life, and how it influenced his poetry. His feelings for Moses Jackson are well known, and how the trial of Oscar Wilde made him write *Additional Poems* 18. In addition, critics have relied heavily on his loss of faith in his early twenties as important for describing him as an atheist chipping away at deity. In contrast, E. Christian Koppf takes a different approach by evaluating Housman's conservative beliefs in his article "Conservatism and Creativity in A.E Housman". Reading Housman's poetry with the framework of Conservatism reveals much of Housman's world view, and this world view influences his approach to death. This approach is relevant for this dissertation not only because it highlights some general problems with Housman's poetry, and in the reading and criticism of it, but also because this approach shows how Housman frames the didactic voice of Terence Hearsay when discussing life and death.

Koppf cites two occasions where Housman expressed his conservative world view, a view that was based on a fear of change. "I am a conservative, and do not like changing anything without due reason", and "I am what you may have often heard of but perhaps not seen, a real conservative, who thinks change an evil in itself (Kopff 231). Koppf uses these

two quotations to spearpoint an argument claiming Housman's poetry has been misread as supporting radical and sarcastic views. For instance, the poem "Epitaph on An Army of Mercenaries" should not be read as a mockery of patriotism, but rather a defence of it. Moreover, Koppf shows how Housman's conservative beliefs contributed to the lack of cohesion between a loss of belief and a respect for traditional morality, and which touch on the topic of homosexuality. Without the conservative framework, and indeed the Cyrenaic influences, it is difficult to understand this aspect of Housman. This framework shines a light on the problems of unifying his loss of belief, and his homosexuality, and can also be used to understand his sentiments regarding death.

A loss of belief would have destroyed the moral arguments for viewing homosexuality as a sin, and should therefore lead to an open, homosexual lifestyle (this rests on a logical argumentation, disregarding the historical stigma of being openly homosexual). Koppf gives cohesion to the state of mind in Housman himself by saying that while he had lost his faith, his belief in traditional morality remained strong. Housman's loss of belief does not change his attitude towards the moral universe and the social conventions, which a person need to uphold to negotiate successfully in life. Koppf uses poem XII from *Last poems*, to underline his point.

I, a stranger and afraid  
In a world I never made.  
Keep we must, if keep we can,  
These foreign laws of God and Man. (Housman 97)

Even though the speaker does not believe in any deity, he resigns to the laws of them. This supports the view that Housman was not as radical as many are led to believe. Koppf makes a point out of this, quoting the critic Terence Allan Hoagwood aligning Housman with Friedrich Nietzsche, "moral systems are hollow fictions, often used by the powerful to

repress and oppress deluded people” (qtd. from Koppf 234). While Housman does rebel against the social conventions, he ultimately resigns to their force. A view that Nietzsche did not regard as logical, and explicitly opposed to, writing in *The Antichrist* that

They are rid of the Christian God and now believe all the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality... Christianity is a system, a *whole* view of things thought out together. By breaking one concept out, the faith in God, one breaks the whole: nothing necessary remains in one's hands. (Read in Routledge History of Philosophy Vol. VII, orig. emphasis. Ten 193).

Nietzsche does not allow for both a loss in faith and keeping these foreign laws of God and man. By resigning to the laws of God and man, Housman's poetry is not rebellious, but conservative and ultimately illogical.

Housman's approach to life and death is not intellectually cohesive, but it is however filled with a pragmatic honesty. As I have mentioned earlier, Housman did not think of himself as a Stoic, but as a Cyrenaic. The Cyrenaic, a minor Socratic school, believed that the goal of life was pleasure in the moment. Bodily pleasure stake precedence over the intellectual, as “being more intense and powerful” (Copleston 122). The Cyrenaic's saw pleasure as positive, and the end of life was a positive pleasure. This is opposed to negative pleasure, the absence of pleasure. To successfully follow this line of argument one should not fall into a hedonistic trap, but rather be pragmatic about pleasure:

.. the wise man will, in his choice of pleasure, take cognisance of the future. He will, therefore avoid unrestrained excesses, which would lead to pain, and he will avoid indulgence that would occasion punishment from the State or public condemnation. The wise man, therefore, needs judgement in order to enable him evaluate the different pleasures of life. (Copleston 122)



Housman as a Cyrenaic could therefore not cast away the morals of his time based on a loss of faith, because the morals were the framework for his judgment. By not being a rebel in a social sense, he avoided public condemnation.

Housman's poetry is filled with both resignation, and negating of pleasures. An example of this is found in the poem XLV in *A Shropshire Lad*

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. (Housman 59)

This poem is commonly read within the confines of Housman's homosexuality, and a rebellious streak against the norms of society. Instead, Michael Macklem argues that the sickness is life itself, and that Housman is arguing that the sickness of the soul is "the offence which life commits against man" (Macklem 44). Macklem provides the example of the two poems "Be Still, My Soul, be Still" and "Think no more, lad; laugh be jolly". They are placed in sequence, and shows the world view that emerges from Housman's Cyrenaic influence. Life itself, symbolized by the soul, is a sickness, and pleasure in the moment becomes the only true goal. The moment filled with joy is the only one worth having, and therefore contemplating mortality as a tool for valuing the moment or life itself, becomes void. The innocent speaker in "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now" is innocent because of this. His joy is diminished because of his ruminations on death, and his focus is on the time span he expect

he will have, not the moment he is experiencing. Our understanding of time, death, and the Self has changed, and Housman did not value change, however, they are the new reality or moral view. In essence, Housman understood the changes, did not approve of them, but understood that one must “keep these foreign laws”.

## Conclusion

I have shown how several poems have a thematic structure revolving around death, and that they ultimately cast death in its true negative light. In “Loveliest of trees, the cherry now” and in “Eight O’Clock”, time itself becomes a ruler of loss. The sensations felt in “Eight O’Clock”, “On moonlit heath and lonesome bank” and “Bredon Hill” do not allow for the anachronistic view that death can unify a community. In “Oh fair enough are sky and plain”, the mirror of death as a means of self-discovery is problematized; the modern man is not willing to see the truth of death and the mirror is not able to encapsulate a modern sense of self. The poem “Is my team ploughing” reveals the issue Housman has with giving the dead a voice, and the paradoxicality of the modern attempt to both silence and give voice to death. Finally, an analysis of the Cyrenaic and the Conservative influences on Housman shows how he did not value the alterations in understanding death, time, and the Self, but they were part of society’s judgment and therefore they must be kept.

Housman’s achievement in his poetry is to contemplate a realistic attitude to death. The modern, scientific, world view tries to comfort and hide death away. Housman does not hide death, moreover he does not shrink away from it. The poems problematize the modern man’s relationship with death. Death cannot be used as an instrument for the modern man, but that does not mean that a reflection on death is not prudent. Housman’s speakers are constantly interacting with death, but the Classical and Romantic tools for understanding death have lost their utility. Our understanding of the Self has become more elusive. Time itself has become an artificial ruler which defines and creates loss. In this modern climate, death becomes even more unnatural, and as Ariès points out, it roams free without restraints. However, as Dollimore demonstrates, trying to gain a healthy view of death is in itself a denial of death. The change in death, time and the Self undermines the utility of death to such

a degree that it is only the core of it left, annihilation. To try to mitigate this loss of understanding is futile, but there is no going back.

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## Appendix - Relevance of Dissertation for the Teaching Profession

This dissertation is a study of the historical changes of death in the nineteenth-century, and how these changes are reflected in the poetry of Housman. For a teaching professional the relevance of this dissertation lies mostly in the thematic matter of different subjects, such as English, History and Religion or Philosophy.

In the Norwegian school system, English entails the study of literature, language and historical or cultural changes in English speaking countries. In history, the implications of new ways of timekeeping, the scientific revolution of evolution and the loss of faith experienced in the nineteenth-century is relevant for understanding the mental changes in the nineteenth-century. Lastly, the importance of rituals, and how one looks at life and death would be relevant for philosophy or religion. Housman's poetry would be excellent companion pieces in each subject to properly understand the frame of mind of a person in the nineteenth-century. However, these topics mentioned are in many ways secondary to the thematic matter of the dissertation. Death is the topic which this dissertation deals with mostly.

Death as a topic of conversation or as part of a learning aim in a school setting should be discussed thoroughly, but as Gorer and Ariès argue, death is hidden in modern society. As I have worked on this topic for some time now, I have become more aware of the hidden power of death in society. One cannot escape from the fact that death is a subject which most people will not discuss. Speaking for myself, when asked about the topic of Master-thesis, I have been reluctant to say upfront that I write about death in English poetry. The reason for this is that death is very much a personal issue, and as I deal with the problem analytically, I have feared that it might come across as callous. Speaking about it violates the rule of happiness that society enforces. If one chooses to use Housman's poetry about death in a class room it requires a great deal of sensitivity, from both the teacher and the students. That is not to say it should be shunned, but just as the other big taboo in society, sex, it requires a special didactic or pedagogical method.

With this in mind, one should also be careful when selecting poems. As I have argued, Housman's poetry is not definitive about the value of life itself. In several poems, death becomes preferable to life, and the only reason for living is that it is society's social code that one continues to soldier on. This might be a rational way of looking at death, but it might not

be the healthiest attitude to teach teenagers. The practical use of this dissertation therefore needs a didactical framework to be of use in the educational system.