



**READING 3** Evaluate the changes in sound, form, figurative language, graphics, and dramatic structure in poetry across literary time periods. **RC-12(B)** Make complex inferences about text and use textual evidence to support understanding.

# To an Athlete Dying Young When I Was One-and-Twenty

Poetry by A. E. Housman

## Meet the Author

### A. E. Housman 1859–1936

“In 1920, when I was about 17,” author George Orwell once recalled, “I probably knew the whole of *A Shropshire Lad* by heart.” Poems from *A Shropshire Lad* were carried into battle by British soldiers in World War I and set to music by some of the 20th century’s greatest composers. Yet their author, A. E. Housman, published just one other poetry collection in his lifetime. Instead, he devoted himself to academic pursuits.

**A Difficult Youth** Alfred Edward Housman grew up in the English county of Worcestershire. From there, he could see the hills of neighboring Shropshire that appear so prominently in his verse. His childhood was made difficult by tensions with his father and the death of his mother when he was just 12. Slight and unathletic, he devoted himself to his studies, showing a brilliant mastery of classical Greek and Latin. Despite his talent, personal problems and anxiety soon took hold of the young scholar. He surprised everyone by failing his final tests at Oxford University. He left without a degree.

**Perseverance Pays Off** In 1882, Housman took a low-paying job in the patent office in London and shared lodgings with his close college friend

Moses Jackson and Moses’ brother Adalbert. Working there for ten long years, he pursued his classical studies on his own in the evening. When he began submitting papers to scholarly journals, his scholarship was so impressive that he eventually obtained a professorship at London’s University College.

All this time, Housman had been composing poems that came to him when he was out walking. Some displayed a romantic love of nature, while others told dramatic tales of rural tragedy. Many expressed sorrow brought on by the deaths of his mother and father, the departure of Moses Jackson for India, and the death of Adalbert Jackson. When he decided to publish some of his verse, an old college friend suggested the title *A Shropshire Lad*, since many of the poems used Shropshire place names to represent rural life.

**Later Years** Housman devoted most of the rest of his life to Latin scholarship, moving from University College to Cambridge University in 1911. In 1922, he published a second volume of poetry from his notebooks, much of it written decades before. After his death, his brother Laurence found still more unpublished poetry in the notebooks; Housman’s *Complete Poems* appeared in 1959.

## Author Online

Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com). KEYWORD: HML12-1060



## DID YOU KNOW?

A. E. Housman . . .

- composed most of his poems while in his early 20s.
- had never actually been to Shropshire when he began writing *A Shropshire Lad*, his first and most popular collection of poems.
- turned down various awards and honors, including appointment as England’s poet laureate.

View of  
Shropshire

**LITERARY ANALYSIS: RHYME SCHEME**

A poem's **rhyme scheme**—the pattern of end rhyme in a stanza or the entire work—can help make the poem memorable for readers. Rhyme is often used to emphasize important words, and it helps create a distinct rhythm. Consider these opening lines of “When I Was One-and-Twenty”:

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

In these lines, the rhyme scheme is *abcb*. The first and third lines (*a* and *c*) do not rhyme, but the second and fourth lines (*b* and *b*) do. As you read Housman's poems, note the rhyme scheme of each. Think about the rhythm created by each pattern of rhyme. What overall effect does Housman achieve?

**READING SKILL: MAKE INFERENCES**

Your experiences with poetry have probably taught you that when you read a poem, you usually need to **make inferences** to determine its meaning. An inference, or logical assumption, should be based on information in the text as well as your own knowledge and experience. The two poems you are about to read explore the advantages and disadvantages of youth and aging. As you read each poem, use a chart like the one shown to record the inferences you make about these topics. Be sure to note the textual information that allowed you to make each inference.

| <i>“To an Athlete Dying Young”</i>  |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| <i>Advantages</i>   | <i>Disadvantages</i> |
| Youth:<br>• When you're young, you're often in good physical condition, like the triumphant athlete described in lines 1–4. | Youth:               |
| Aging:  | Aging:               |

## *What STAGE of LIFE is best?*

The Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw once observed, “Youth is wasted on the young.” Do you agree that young people fail to appreciate youth when they are living through it? Or do you think older people sometimes look back with nostalgia on earlier times, imagining them as better than they actually were?

**DISCUSS** Working with a partner, make a timeline charting the different stages of a typical person's life. For each stage, jot down the experiences and emotions, both positive and negative, that you associate with that stage of life. After completing your timeline, discuss which life stage you think is the most exciting or rewarding. Also consider how nostalgia may affect a person's view of earlier stages. For example, do you think you remember your early childhood accurately? Share your ideas with another group.



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.



# TO AN ATHLETE DYING YOUNG

A. E. Housman

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

5 Today, the road all runners come,  
Shoulder-high we bring you home,  
And set you at your threshold down,  
Townsmen of a stiller town.

Smart lad, to slip betimes away  
10 From fields where glory does not stay  
And early though the laurel grows  
It withers quicker than the rose. **A**

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

Now you will not swell the rout  
Of lads that wore their honors out,  
Runners whom renown outran  
20 And the name died before the man.

So set, before its echoes fade,  
The fleet foot on the sill of shade,  
And hold to the low lintel up  
The still-defended challenge-cup.

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

**2 chaired:** carried in public triumph on a chair or seat.

**9 betimes:** early.

**11 laurel:** Wreaths made of leaves of the laurel tree were worn by victorious athletes in ancient times as a token of honor and glory.

## **A MAKE INFERENCES**

Reread lines 9–12 and consider the poem's title. Why does the speaker call the athlete a "smart lad"? Explain what he thinks the athlete has avoided, and how.

**14 cut:** broken.

**17 rout** (rout): crowd.

**22 sill:** threshold.

**23 lintel:** the beam across the top of a door frame.

**28 garland:** a wreath or woven chain of leaves or flowers.





# WHEN I WAS ONE-AND-TWENTY

A. E. Housman

When I was one-and-twenty  
I heard a wise man say,  
“Give crowns and pounds and guineas  
But not your heart away;  
5 Give pearls away and rubies  
But keep your fancy free.”  
But I was one-and-twenty,  
No use to talk to me.

3 crowns . . . guineas (gŭn'ēz): British units of money.

6 fancy: liking; affection.

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

14 rue: sorrow; regret.

**B RHYME SCHEME**  
Identify the rhyme scheme of each stanza. How would you describe the **rhythm** this pattern creates?

## Comprehension

1. **Recall** In “To an Athlete Dying Young,” why did the townspeople “chair” the athlete through the town?
2. **Clarify** What disappointment does the speaker say that the athlete will never know?
3. **Summarize** What advice does the “wise man” give the speaker of “When I Was One-and-Twenty”?
4. **Clarify** What has the speaker realized at the older and wiser age of 22?



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## Literary Analysis

5. **Examine Imagery** In “To an Athlete Dying Young,” compare the image in the second stanza with the image in the first stanza. What is the effect of repeating the image in this way?
6. **Analyze Figurative Language** Only in the title of “To an Athlete Dying Young” does Housman explicitly say that the young runner is dead. In light of this information, how would you interpret the following figurative phrases?
  - “the road all runners come” (line 5)
  - “a stiller town” (line 8)
  - “the shady night” (line 13)
7. **Analyze Speaker** Reread lines 9–16 of “When I Was One-and-Twenty.” What might account for the change in the speaker’s attitude? Give reasons for your answer.
8. **Draw Conclusions** Review the **inferences** you made as you read. On the basis of the details you recorded, what conclusions can you draw about Housman’s view of youth and aging? Judging from these poems, what are the advantages and disadvantages of growing older? Explain your conclusions, citing evidence.
9. **Interpret Rhyme Scheme** Read aloud the first stanza of each poem. What musical quality does the rhyme scheme of each create? What relationship do you see between this musical quality and the subject of each poem?

## Literary Criticism

10. **Critical Interpretations** In 1936, the American poet Conrad Aiken commented that the thoughts expressed in Housman’s poetry have an “adolescent note,” or “boyishness.” Do you think this characterization applies to these poems? Explain why or why not, citing evidence from both poems.

*What **STAGE** of **LIFE** is best?*

After reading Housman’s biography on page 1060, which stage of his life sounds best to you? Why?