

# Colby



## Colby Quarterly

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Volume 7  
Issue 6 June

Article 3

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June 1966

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### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 7, no.6, June 1966, p.257-263

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# Colby Library Quarterly

Series VII

June 1966

No. 6

## A. E. HOUSMAN: IMAGE, ILLOGIC AND ALLUSION

By ROBERT I. STROZIER

THE poems of A. E. Housman are deceptively simple, epigrammatic lyrics characterized by a climactic moral. The moral, however, is usually ironic so that Housman is never guilty of that paradoxical anathema, the didactic lyric. Furthermore, the moral — as it often is in Thomas Hardy and Edwin Arlington Robinson — is implicit rather than blatant, heterodox rather than orthodox, ambiguous but not enigmatic. Many of Housman's poems move toward the last-stanza moral epigram by a narrowing of focus: a handling of narrative and imagery which takes the reader from heaven to earth, from earth to a field, from a field to a tree, from a tree to its fruit, from sight of the fruit to thought about the fruit. The poems are like mental theatres in which the scenes are vividly presented, and in which the poet is an actor inviting us to transcend the limits of physical experience by imagining the "skies that knit the heartstrings right," the "clover clad" sleeper (p. 41),<sup>1</sup> of the poet's visional sleep, or our own.

In this paper, a few of Housman's poems that end in the subtly climactic epigram are examined to show how Housman keeps the epigram from being didactic and platitudinous. Sometimes this end is achieved by taking the reader's attention away from the epigram through imagery similar to or reminiscent of that in an earlier stanza, or by an illogic that sends the mind and eye back through the poem to check the premises. In this act of re-collection the reader discovers structural or

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<sup>1</sup> Pagination refers to *The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1959). Quotations are used by permission of the publisher.

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tonal qualities which make the epigram an undertone or a concomitant, not an essence. In other poems the reader's attention is held to the last stanza to ponder the epigram: illogic, and connection through imagery with earlier stanzas are avoided. The method here is an unexpected *double entendre* and/or a startling shift of focus that leads the reader to ponder the duality, the sheer shock of the shift: the epigram again becomes an undertone. Only stunned by a lightning bolt, one considers his health before moralizing. The trauma of such a physical experience may never wane although the inferred moral may not be clear: so works the sudden shift of focus, the precipitate *double entendre*. All the poems considered in this paper fall into the two groups mentioned above. Let us look at the imagery-illogic group first.

In the poem "When Smoke Stood up from Ludlow" (pp. 18-19) a young man hears a crow whose noise reminds him of death. He is inspired to destroy the bird. The physical act transforms irritation into serious introspection, "Then my soul within me / Took up the blackbird's strain." And the boy sings the blackbird's song, no longer bothered by the physical aspect of death: "The road one treads to labour / Will lead one home to rest, / And that will be the best." The moral here is rather commonplace: death gives spiritual life, heaven is a home, life a rough road that death makes smooth. Since the poem's focus narrows from the fields of stanza one to the man's soul-thoughts in the last stanza, there is an intensification which points obviously to the moral. But the soul-at-peace idea, the becalmed inner spirit, the sun that "moves always west" are compellingly reminiscent of the "smoke" and "mist" (spiritual essences), and of the yeoman "ploughing against the morning beam" of stanza one. There is, therefore, an organic unity between image and idea, effected mainly by the sun's westward moving. The reader's attention is thus drawn to the structure of the poem, and the manner in which it achieves intensity. Ideationally the poem is circular: the last stanza expresses ideas that the first-stanza imagery implies. Thematically the poem is triangular: it moves from the broad base (the field) to the apex (the boy's introspection). Conscious of this dual activity, the reader remembers the moral, but he is

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urged to consider other matters first. Further compelling the reader to consider dualities is the “Lie down, lie down, young yeoman” of the last stanza which contrasts with the same line in stanza three: one depicts physical terror, the other spiritual calm.

The poem “March” (p. 23) has an equally clear, much less subtly expressed moral: “For lovers should be loved again.” Yet here too Housman’s epitomizing de-emphasizes the aphorism itself and emphasizes its implementation. Here again is the intensification of focus; for in stanza one the poet points to “The Sun at noon to higher air, / Unharnessing the silver Pair,” the cosmos. In the last stanza “The eye beholds the heart’s desire.” While the heart’s desire is beheld the moral is given: “lovers should be loved again.” Looking back to see how lovers got into the poem the reader discovers the boys in stanza three who “fetch the daffodils away,” and the girls who seek a “silver-tufted wand.”

Their search, then, takes on erotic overtones not unlike those amorous botanists in “Corinna’s Going A’Maying”: they are lovers. Yet we cannot stop here, for the colors “daffodil” (golden) and “silver” recall stanza one that tells of the sun “Unharnessing the *silver* Pair” and riding “on the *gold* wool of the Ram,” (my italics). So another more universal association is apparent — perhaps not apparent at first because silver and gold of stanza one reappear in reversed order in the later stanzas, and gold is subtly disguised. Yet the association is there; when it is made, however, we are somewhat emotionally and intellectually removed from the last line epigram about lovers.

The real reason for the boy’s and girl’s being afield and awood is that lovers should be, want to be, will be loved again — as surely as the sun’s silver gives way to its gold. The poet wants us to see the moral, but he entices us to see beyond the moral into the more universal, vital human activity from which the moral derives and had its worth.

Other poems like “LII,” (p. 77), “LV,” (p. 81), and “Hughley Steeple,” (p. 87), are variations of this type. Both broad and narrow focus are juxtaposed in each stanza of these poems so that the concentration of linking imagery in the last

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stanza recalls earlier stanzas. The last stanzas reconcile the opposites: for example, in "LII" "starlit fences" and "soul," and in "Hughley Steeple" "tower" and "graves."

Housman does not depend solely on the above-mentioned device to avoid didacticism. He also uses an illogic, or a twist in logic that requires the reader to re-examine earlier stanzas to see if the poet has erred. After a few poems, of course, one knows that Housman's illogic is intentional, that he seeks irony. Still the reader recapitulates, momentarily disregards the last-stanza epigram. "If it chance your eye offend you" (p. 68) illustrates this point quite well.

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.

Here Housman follows the allegorical significance of the Biblical moral argument — seems to be agreeing with it. But he develops the argument to its logical end on the literal level so that the epitomizing of the last two lines creates an ironic moral. Such a sudden reversal entices the reader to reconsider the earlier lines. The reader knows Housman cannot literally believe what the poem's first six lines say. He is not that naive — few fundamentalists are. Yet his concluding moral derives from the literal, not the figurative, application of the moral. So complex are the ironies here that they become the moral. There is little doubt that Housman is interested in the moral, for the focus from the "eye" of stanza one, to the "soul" of stanza two moves from physical to spiritual, from an outwardly moral act to an inwardly moral act, from inspection to introspection. Still further affecting the moral while avoiding didacticism is the ironic twist which achieves a reverse summing up. In a structural sense the last line is the summary but since the real ironic meaning emerges earlier in the poem, there is a meaning summary there. This duality is commonly practiced by Housman to keep his epigrams from being platitudes.

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Other examples of similarly twisted logic or tonally illogical shifts are found in "In the morning" (p. 124) where the happy lovers of stanza one look at each other in stanza two, "And they looked away." A quick look back at stanza one is necessary to see why the idyll is so rudely broken. It is then that the moral emerges. Subtle as it is here, the moral still emerges from the narrowing focus of the poem, from the field of hay to one another's eyes. And the moral is contained, though subtly so, in the final couplet. An equally subtle moral is offered by the final couplet of "It is no gift I tender" (p. 219): "The world will last for longer, / But this will last for long." Here Housman plays down the immortality of love while praising it for what it can be, for what it is — mortal. Here Housman is at his ironic best, for love in the lyric (and elsewhere) usually takes on the cloak of immortality. The earlier stanzas of the poem lead the reader to believe Housman is interested in this point too. His point however, is made surreptitiously by not only reversing the comments about love, but by reversing the usual form of presentation of the adjectives — stronger before strong, longer before long. The comparative leads us to expect the superlative — the second time even more so. But Housman will have his irony, and his structure here develops it superbly well.

In other poems Housman uses another technique. The focus narrows, the epigram is offered, but there is no going back through the poems to ascertain essences, the poet asks the reader to concentrate on the last stanza. The sudden shift of focus (as opposed to the gradual) and/or the precipitate *double entendre* are the means used to insist on this concentration. "This time of year a twelvemonth past" (p. 40) illustrates this method (my italics).

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

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

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

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

Notable here are the suddenly ambiguous italicized words. No other stanza has words so ambivalent. Even when the second line of the stanza explains "house," the *double entendre* is not damaged. In fact it is enhanced, for the explanation brings forth the full irony of the word so clarified. This in itself is irony because explanation usually defeats irony, rarely creates it. Further *double entendre* is found in the phrase "Stock-still." On one level the phrase can be considered a euphemism for the stillness of death. On another level it implies Fred got what he deserved: he has been punished by being put in the stocks. But the living lover cannot be too hard on poor dead Fred: he lets him "sleep" (another ironic euphemism). Therefore the words "house," "stock-still," and "sleeps" dash the reader with the cold ironic, sardonic tone. Such a sudden shift to connotative language tends to hold the reader's attention to the stanza until the ironic overtones make the moral clear: life is transient; lovers do not grieve long; competitors relish revenge.

It is also worth noting that in the last stanza the basic iambic tetrameter has an extra beat in lines one and three; line one tells of Fred's condition; line three tells that the living lover now has Rose. The rather jaunty rhythm is thus violated, purposely slowed for emphasis of Fred's defeat and the other's victory, or death's permanence and life's transience, of the irony of the human condition. All in all the poet seems very determined to hold the reader's attention to this last stanza which is a plethora of "morals." The imagery here is not reminiscent of earlier stanzas; the climax is a logical conclusion of the narrative of the other three stanzas. So, in spite of the actors being switched, we concentrate on the last stanza even though its focus puts us uncomfortably in the grave.

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In the poem "The Lent Lily" (p. 46), the flower pickers are instructed to strip the fields of daffodils — not because of their beauty or fragrance, but because of their transience. This is rather an unusual turn in itself (particularly if the reader thinks about Wordsworth's views on the daffodil); but further still its transience symbolizes death, the death of Christ — who died, *not to arise*, on Easter day. Easter comes to have an ambivalent meaning, an unexpected ironic meaning, and so the moral of the poem emerges from the broadside attack on poetic convention (seek transience not beauty) and on religious convention (even Christ's life is transient). If we look outside the stanza, it is to escape what it says; and ironically we, then, become even more conscious of it, for we realize what we wish to escape and thus cannot escape it.

Actually most of Housman's poems cannot be categorized as easily as is here suggested. For out of Housman's two hundred-odd poems only ten fit into the first category, and only six fit the second. Rigid categorizing is thus difficult, for Housman frequently uses both methods of presentation simultaneously, as in "Terence," for instance. Furthermore his irony and epigram are employed to suit the individual poem. His poetic skill thus gratifyingly defies the often glib standardizations and generalizations that scholars delight in making about writers. As a scholar, Housman's cognizance of this scholarly predilection may have led him to work particularly hard at giving each poem an integrity of its own to protect it from the anonymity of being merely "one of Housman's poems." He seems to have succeeded, for while nearly all of his poems have an ironic twist, the irony is achieved in almost as many ways as there are poems. Among other things, it is such virtuosity that makes Housman's simple epigrammatic lyrics most deceptive — and most appealing.

