

POETIC THOUGHT

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Poetic thought cannot be talked about in complete isolation from the other devices or figures of speech in poetry. There may be no such thing as 'poetic thought' in the abstract; there is only the 'poetic thought' of a particular poem or a particular poet. What is 'poetic thought' then in general? The poetic thought can be determined as the way the poet succeeds in expressing his thought in his poetry. In other words, it is the thought which has successfully been turned into poetry. It can be explained as a technical effect met in the other devices. It is obvious that rhythm, sound, imagery, diction and feeling are inseparably bound up with poetic thought.

The poet's thought is the main idea of what he wants to say. In fact, the poet's main thought consists of what to say as well as how to say it. Neglecting one would be no more than pretention. Obviously, that does mean that the poet must think what he is going to say and then decide how he is going to say it. If form and content are determined simultaneously, if his thoughts are spontaneous and natural, if he can express what he feels at the moment, then the thought will not be regarded 'ready made', trying to teach a lesson of life or a moral attitude.

Under the light of the general statements aforementioned, it will be appropriate to study a particular poem selected from A. E. Housman.

To an Athlete Dying Young

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.

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To-day, 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
From fields where glory does not stay
And early though the laurel grows
It withers quicker than the rose.

Eyes the shady night has shut
Cannot see the record cut,
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 honours out,
Runners whom renown outran
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.

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.

A. E. Housman

What is the object the poet is trying to shape? The idea on which the poem is built up is 'fame never remains behind'. The whole poem is metaphorical. In his poem, Housman suggests that fame never remains but dies before the man dies himself. The whole idea has a universal appeal, but the idea 'fame is finite' may be objected to by some readers. Readers may question how fame ever lives in the names of numerous authors, scientists, statesmen and artists. In Housman's opinion, though, reputation lasts as long as a rose keeps its freshness. Naturally, Housman's point of view may find its supporters among the readers, but it is obviously open to discussion and consideration.

Next we might question in what way the poem is original and valuable. Is the idea original in fact? It sounds that the poet picks

some thoughts and ideas from other writers and he adds them to what he brings from his own experience in life. Although this is a strong claim, it can be regarded acceptable to a certain extent because men of literature have to pick thoughts and ideas from others to stimulate and increase their knowledge. Although the main idea of the poem has long been discussed before, Housman gives life and attractive expression to this well known material. However, it is difficult to say that the idea covers any experience of the poet himself. On the contrary, for example, readers will easily come to the conclusion, if they ever read his poem, that Blake put a lot into his 'A Poison Tree' from his own experience. Although the main idea does not have a living embodiment in Housman's own experience, he is deeply involved in the idea he defends. As a matter of fact, the poetic thought is not dependent on the newness of the idea. The poet supports his idea with vivid descriptions: The once famous athlete will not swell any longer because of the rout of the other lads whose fame he outruns. He states that all will be equal after one dies and fame means nothing. He illustrates his thought with those contradicting lines: 'We chaired you through the market place' and 'And set you at your threshold down'. He imbues a great deal of idea into 'Silence sounds no worse than cheers'.

It is clear that the ideas do not develop by themselves. They are somewhat pre-arranged and stored through years of experience. Housman is not mechanically fluent in his poem. The main obstacle which hinders the fluency is the difficult task of rhyming the first and the second lines of each stanza. There is, in fact, the repetition of the main theme in different places. Some of the stanzas except the first two say almost the same: 'Glory does not stay in the fields', 'the laurel, the symbol of victory, withers quicker than the rose'; 'now you will not swell the rout of lads that wore their honours cut' and 'unwithered curls' nearly repeat the main idea that fame disappears before its echoes fade. Furthermore, the thoughts seem not to have a significant order and they do not develop steadily to the final. The fluent conversational manner, I dare say, is lacking. The idea in the third stanza 'And early though the laurel grows, it withers quicker than the rose' repeats itself in the last stanza but in different words: 'And find unwithered on its curls, the garland briefer than a girl's'.

The language Housman uses is the evidence of the poet's individual grasp of the main thought he is trying to shape. The poet's thought is perceived through the way his words work. If readers

alter the poet's language, that would mean altering his thought. In 'To an Athlete Dying Young' words do not mean exactly what readers may suppose them to mean. Readers can comment on the words as they want them to mean. For instance, they would easily take 'runners' for 'human beings' running for fame and worldly possessions. 'The still defended challenge-cup' is the worldly temptation human beings have all been struggling for. The laurel represents the fame and victory, the rose, the short life.

The opposing words 'cheering' and 'stiller' contribute powerfully to the main idea. Readers will notice the sudden change from 'cheerring' to 'silence' and from 'shoulders' to the 'threshold'. The word 'withers' suggests the ceasing of reputation and 'the fields' imply the fields of life human beings are struggling in. The balancing of 'silence' against 'cheers'; 'echo' against 'fade' occur effortlessly and naturally contribute to the whole. Housman, perhaps, intentionally juxtaposes 'laurel' and 'rose' to strengthen his idea. He says the laurel withers quicker than the rose, but in actual fact it does not. Obviously "laurel" symbolizes fame which, in fact, is contrasted with "rose".

To conclude, Housman's thoughts and ideas are sufficiently convincing and didactic. Although the main idea is not novel, the whole poem succeeds without any shadow of doubt, and makes the reader question the eternity of life and fame.