

The Poetic Theory of A. E. Housman

Dr. Ahmed S. Hamad
Assistant Professor

Alaa A. Abdulla
Assistant Lecturer

ABSTRACT

This study offers an introduction to the writer's life and his works. It also explores the famous lecture about the name and nature of poetry which he delivered in 1933. The lecture forms the foundation for the poetic theory according to which Housman wrote his poems. It also focuses on the essentiality of emotional excitement as a mark for good poetry for Housman.

1. Introduction: Housman's Life and Works

Alfred Edward Housman was born on March, 26, 1859 in Fockbury, a hamlet in Woodchester, England. He was the eldest of seven children. His father Edward Housman was a solicitor. His mother Sarah Jane Williams, the daughter of the Rector of Woodchester, was witty, attractive, and a lover of literature. Her father was something of a poet and a classical scholar. She inherited some of her father's talent of composing verses so she wrote humour verses on the doings of the villagers. She was also a deeply religious woman who was devoted to the Anglican Church.

When Alfred was few months old the family moved to Bromsgrove and lived at the Perry Hall house for most of the time of his childhood. Mrs. Housman centred the life of her family on prayers, Bible reading, and church service. There were weekly visits

to Bromsgrove church. "There were family prayers in the dining-room before breakfast every day At night ... the children said prayers before going to sleep.... On Sunday, there were church services to be attended."¹

In 1870, Alfred started his formal education in Bromsgrove School. During his school days, Alfred was doing well and it was clear that he was intelligent. Meanwhile his mother was found to have breast cancer. Her health began to decline and when she became very sick she started to spend much of her time with her children, particularly, Alfred. Her attachment to him was very strong and she was praying with him for her recovery.

In the last months of her illness, Alfred was sent to the Wise family to spend his twelfth birthday and to lighten the tension of seeing his mother's severe suffering and the rapid deterioration of her health. A week later on the 26th of March 1871, his twelfth birthday, he received a letter from his father telling him of his mother's death. "The young Alfred's sense of loss was so profound and so deeply disturbing."² It was "an event that would forever haunt his life, his poetry and even his views of the universe."³

The Wise family lived in Woodchester and were quite friendly to the Housmans. Mrs. Wise, who was a good friend to Sarah Jane, was Housman's godmother. She and her family's warm-hearted German governess, Sophie Becker, had a life-long relationship of mutual admiration and sympathy with Alfred.

Sophie was "a close friend and one of the few emotional attachments which Alfred [Housman] made in his whole life."⁴ Housman spent enough time with Miss Becker that "he started to

speak German and he even was able to compose verses in the German language for her."⁵

In the period that followed his mother's death Housman was very emotional and started to reconsider Christianity. The devoted prayers for his mother's recovery were fruitless and unavailing. This fact left deep impression on him about religion. Many years later Housman wrote to his sister saying: "I abandoned Christianity at thirteen, but went on believing in God till I was twenty-two."⁶

In 1873 Edward Housman married his cousin Lucy Housman. Lucy was Sarah's best friend. She became responsible for bringing up the young family. Alfred promised her that he would do whatever he could to help her. He was good at school and his poetic interests were very clear for he participated in competitions of verse writing at Bromsgrove School. His first participation was when he was fourteen. He then entered the school verse competition with a poem about Sir Walter Raleigh. The second attempt was in 1874 with a poem entitled "The Death of Socrates" which was chosen for the prize.

Alfred 's success in the school continued and in 1875 he won the second prize with a poem entitled "Paul on Mars Hill". These poems clearly foretold the future of a promising poet. When Housman was sixteen he started filling his notebooks with "copies of poems which were all about sorrow, separation, [and] death."⁷ He copied from many poets such as Matthew Arnold, Milton, Wordsworth, and Shelley. The influence of these poets was later seen in his poetry.

Alfred's interest in the classical studies started when he won a prize at school. The prize was a copy of *Sabrinae Corolla* (a small

garland of the Severn) which was a volume of translations from English, German, and Italian verses into Latin and Greek. This volume turned his mind to classical studies and implanted in him a genuine liking for Greek and Latin. Later the classical studies were the field of his scholarly conduct with which he became an established scholar.⁸

Alfred finished the sixth form of his formal education during the summer of 1877. He was the head boy of Bromsgrove School. He was also the winner of the school prizes of English verses and of French, Latin and Greek verses. In the same year he won an open scholarship to St. John's College, Oxford where he applied to the study of classics. In 1881 he failed to pass the final examination in the Greats although his marks on the Moderations were very high (Greats and Moderation were fundamental syllabus of curriculum of the classical studies). A year later he returned to Oxford to take another exam which he passed with a "pass" degree.

Alfred passed the Civil Service exam in 1882 which was a basic requirement for getting an employment. He was assigned a job as a clerk in the Patent Office where he worked for almost ten years. During his work in the Patent Office, he devoted the evenings to carry on his academic study. He spent much of the evening times at the British Museum writing a series of fine articles for classical journals. He published his first article entitled "Horatiana" in 1882. In the next few years he carried on writing first-class papers on Greek and Latin. His papers were "models of accuracy and thoroughness and exceptionally brilliant critiques"⁹. He was later appointed as a professor of Latin at University College of London.

In 1896, *A Shropshire Lad* was published. It was considered the most important volume of poetry that Housman ever wrote and to which most of Housman's reputation as a poet belonged. *A Shropshire Lad* was a small volume of sixty-three short poems which were characterized for their simplicity, their limited range of diction and themes, and for the highly finished ballad structure. In these poems Housman clearly showed his melancholic and sombre attitudes towards life, his interest in nature and countryside, and his love of and affection for soldiers and their unhappy lot. The poems also reflected Housman's view towards the broken love relations, and the doomed criminals. The inevitability of death, brevity of life and vanity are among the main themes of his poetry in *A Shropshire Lad*.

In addition to his constant scholarly labour, Housman was able to deliver literary papers on Matthew Arnold, Burns, Campbell and other literary figures before the Society of University College. Although Housman had written some literary papers, he totally denied the title of a literary critic. "His opinions of the critic, the real critic, were so high that he once said not more than one in a century could reasonably be expected to criticize adequately his particular branch of arts."¹⁰ In fact, Housman paid much attention to his scholarly tasks in emending the Latin and Greek texts. His passion in life was the accuracy in Latin and in Greek. Poetry for him was the means by which he could reveal the biggest part of his emotional experience which had been hidden for a long time. Much of the melancholy, grief, and the sad views of life were poured into almost all of his poetry in a very subtle and concealed way. Poetry

was an outlet for supreme emotions and personal sorrow which he could not communicate in ordinary life. Through poetry he was able to universalize his melancholic attitudes towards life. The scholarly field, on the other hand, enabled him to reach "the light of complete authority in the classical world."¹¹

In 1911, Housman was appointed as the Kennedy professor of Latin and a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. At Cambridge he published many papers on Juvenal, Lucan and Manilius. The "Astronomica" of Manilius was the focus of Housman's scholarly efforts. It was "a long poem in five books ... mainly concerned with astrology and setting out the belief of the poet in philosophy of the Stoics."¹² He worked on those five books for almost two decades and finished the fifth in 1930.

In 1922, Housman published his second and last volume of poetry which he published during his lifetime ***Last Poems***. There was no much difference between the second volume and ***A Shropshire Lad*** in matters of themes, diction, and structures. However, the volume was a success and gained Housman more reputation.

In 1933, Housman delivered his famous lecture ***The Name and Nature of Poetry***. During the lecture Housman gave his statements on the peculiar function of poetry and revealed his own poetry writing experience. The lecture was a success though it was against the contemporary intellectual doctrine of that time led by T. S. Eliot and famous critics like I. A. Richards. Housman died on the 25th of April, 1936 leaving behind a praiseworthy scholarly outcome and two poetic volumes. Later on Housman's brother Lawrence, who

was also a poet, published two volumes of poetry *More Poems* (1936) and *Additional Poems* (1937). These two volumes were collected by Lawrence from Housman's Notebooks A, B, C, and D which Housman ordered to destroy.

2. *The Name and Nature of Poetry: A Reflection of Housman's Vision of Poetry*

In order to understand the poetry of A. E. Housman the reader should ponder and look closely at Housman's most explicit pronouncement about poetry and his own writing experience. Late in his life Housman delivered in the Senate House at Cambridge University on the 9th of May, 1933 the Leslie Stephen Lecture, *The Name and Nature of Poetry* which aroused a great deal of controversy on the part of the critics of his time. The lecture was considered a direct attack against the scientific and intellectual approach of poetry and criticism. It was reported that the pioneers of the modern criticism I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis were upset and expressed their dissatisfaction with Housman's poetic views articulated in the lecture. They considered these views old fashioned and out of date. They further believed that they hindered the development of poetry. However, the critical reaction towards the lecture was divided into two groups; the detractors of Housman views represented by I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis and the supporters of these views represented by H. W. Garrod, W. H. Auden, and Sir Walter Raleigh who considered Housman one of the greatest English poets.

Housman's detractors received his pronouncements on the art of poetry with general hostility and dismay. They considered the lecture a "throw back to the criticism of Wordsworth and Arnold"¹³ and believed it to be the "rear-guard action fought against the modern enemies of romanticism."¹⁴ Cleanth Brooks illustrated the main reason behind this hostility saying that Housman "had the misfortune to advance an anti-intellectual conception of poetry at a moment when the scientific and intellectual theories were just reaching a clear ascendancy."¹⁵

Housman's anti-intellectual views about poetry are deliberate because he is well-informed and well-acquainted with the purely intellectual and scientific views of poetry and criticism of his contemporaries. Leggett states that "Housman defended a conception of poetry then completely out of fashion precisely because he was aware of the world of his contemporaries."¹⁶ It seems that Housman, through his lecture, is trying to refute the validity of the newly held scientific conception of poetry and criticism that are best represented by I. A. Richards whose main effort is to bring literary criticism to scientific ends:

Although satire is not the proper term to describe the tone of the lecture, it seems clear that the conception of poetry and criticism offered by Housman represented a frontal attack on the scientific criticism of Richards.¹⁷

In the lecture Housman attempts to refute the scientific orientation of modern literary criticism. He focuses on establishing a distinction between literary criticism and textual criticism. He

believes that literary criticism is a matter of possessing the right "organs of appreciation"¹⁸ and hence, it is firmly related to the body and emotions. It is the organic make-up that determines whether the reader or even the critic can truly appreciate and appraise poetry or not and it is also the main factor that enables him to identify pure poetry from other types of verse.

Although Housman believes that the systematic and scientific approach to the appreciation and the apprehension of poetry is limited in scope and most of the time invalid, he admits that there are areas in poetry that can best be assessed by the scientific activities related to criticism. He states this in his lecture saying:

There is indeed one literary subject on which I think I could discourse with profit, because it is also scientific, so that a man of science can handle it ... and indeed is fitter for the task than most men of letters. The Artifice of Versification ... has underlying it a set of facts which are unknown to most of those who practise it; and their success ... is owing to instinctive tact and natural goodness of ear. This latent base, comprising natural laws by which all versification is conditioned ... is little explored by critics.¹⁹

Housman here gives an example of the aspects of criticism that can be fulfilled by the scientific methods. He suggests that the natural rules by which the poetry is formed present a fertile land for the critics to explore. For him the apprehension and the appreciation of poetry are the crucial aspects of criticism that cannot be reached by

either intellect or science because they are related to emotions and physical response.

Housman defines textual criticism as "the science of discovering error in the text and the art of removing it."²⁰ It is scientific in nature; therefore, it requires scientific thinking which is not necessary to appraise poetry. Housman's scientific method is to find out the errors in the texts and once this part is achieved he resorts to his artistic sensitivity to remove them from the literary texts. Poetry, on the other hand, "eludes the kind of intellectual and scientific attitudes that he brought to textual emendations."²¹

Having discoursed on two types of criticism Housman proceeds to differentiate between topics that are apparently related and similar but in their essence they are not in match. He discusses the following major topics through his lecture: **a)** intellect vs. emotions, **b)** poetry vs. non-poetry, and **c)** his poetic experience.

a- Intellect vs. Emotions:

The distinction between intellect and emotion is central to Housman's vision of poetry. He believes that emotions are superior to the intellect in poetry and if there is an intellectual content in the poem it should not be extracted and focused on. He also holds that poetry is essentially emotional and that is why "the intellect is not, in his view, the seat of the aesthetic appreciation."²² One of the aims of his lecture is to direct the attention to the essentiality of emotion in the nature of poetry. He says that

there is a conception of poetry which is not fulfilled by pure language and liquid versification, with the simple and so to speak colourless pleasure which they afford, but involves the presence in them of something which moves and touches in a special and recognizable way.²³

The thing that Housman is describing as moving and touching in a special way is the emotional element that good poetry can provide. He moves on to say what the critics hold to be the function of poetry for Housman:

And I think that to transfuse emotions – not to transmit thought but to set up in the reader's sense a vibration corresponding to what was felt by the writer – is the peculiar function of poetry.²⁴

Poetry addresses the reader's feelings and senses and moves them. It is not meant to be perceived by the intellect. Housman believes that "Meaning is of intellect, poetry is not"²⁵ and even if poetry has intellectual content "it may be inadvisable to draw it out"²⁶ because "the perfect understanding will sometimes almost extinguish pleasure."²⁷

b- Poetry vs. non-poetry:

Another important idea in Housman's poetic vision is the difference, he tries to draw, between what is poetry and what is not poetry. He offers two examples of poetry that do not exhibit the essential transfusion of emotions; therefore, he considers them non-poetry. They are the metaphysical poetry and the poetry of satire or

as Housman calls it "sham poetry". The metaphysical poetry is purely intellectual and it completely depends on wit; therefore, Housman suggests that it should be called wit.

There is a whole age of English in which the place of poetry was usurped by something very different which possessed the proper and specific name wit: wit not in the modern sense, but as defined by Johnson, "a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblance in things apparently unlike."²⁸

Housman considers the method of using wit in metaphysical poetry purely intellectual; therefore, such a usage provides a purely intellectual pleasure to the readers not a poetic one. The pleasure which people acquire from poetry, in Housman's view, is mainly emotional. Since the pleasure gained from metaphysical poetry is purely intellectual "poetry as a label for this particular commodity, is not appropriate."²⁹

The second example of non-poetry is the poetry of satire or sham poetry which Housman defines as "a counterfeit deliberately manufactured and offered as a substitute."³⁰ The major representatives of this type of poetry are Pope and Dryden. Housman attacks this type of verse for two main reasons: first; the deficiency in feeling because the "human faculty which dominated the eighteenth century and informed its literature was the intelligence"³¹ which is why it could not move the readers' emotions. The second reason is the deficiency in language because the language of satirical poetry is dull and circular and serves to inhibit feelings.

The language was poverty – stricken language because it could not express human feelings with a variety and delicacy answering to their own And this deadening of language had a consequence beyond its own sphere: its effect worked inward and deadened perception.³²

In his study of the language of the satirical poetry Housman moves to another crucial sphere offering his opinion, which has been frequently misinterpreted, about the use of simile and metaphor in the language of poetry. He argues that the poets who rely heavily on the use of metaphor and simile in their poetry are at fault because

simile and metaphor, things inessential to poetry, were their great and engrossing preoccupation, and were prized the more in proportion as they were far further fetched Poets who use them do not mean these accessories to be helpful, to make their sense clearer or their conception more vivid. They hardly even meant them for ornament Their object was to startle by novelty and to amuse by ingenuity.³³

Housman believes that the poets of metaphysical and satirical poetry use simile and metaphor to create novelty and to astonish the readers by their poetry. The true poet is the one who can express things directly not through the use of simile and metaphor. The true poet is the one who does not need to show how clever he is in using these accessories because he can say how things are; not how they appear or look.

However, Housman's poetry exhibits many instances of purely artistic use of metaphor. A survey of his poetry will, no doubt, lead the reader to

sense a curious inconsistency between his seemingly disparaging remarks on metaphor and his practice as a poet. Many of Housman's successful poems depend for much of their force on the poet's successful handling of metaphor.³⁴

This contradicts Housman's view of metaphor and his vision of poetry in general. Jebb provides a solution for this apparent contradiction stating that:

What Housman was objecting to was not the presence of metaphor in poetry, but the mistaking of metaphor for poetry. Since simile and metaphor can just as easily be found in prose, they cannot be a factor of the thing that makes poetry different from prose (and from verse): they are therefore inessential to it.... [metaphor] may be part of the thing said, but it is not part of the way of saying it.³⁵

Housman's objection to the use of simile and metaphor is directed against the exaggeration in using them as devices that ought to make poetry more effective. In fact he does not object the mild and proper use of such important poetic devices because they can add to the poetic spirit of the text.

Metaphor, no doubt, is a main ingredient of poetry. This is why Housman consciously uses it in many poems. His usage exhibits both the beauty of metaphor that one finds in his poetry and the appropriate use of it that helps to transfuse emotions. His usage

of metaphor does not inhibit emotions in contrast to that of the poets of metaphysical and satirical poetry. In poem LIV from *A Shropshire Lad* the metaphor of colours helps to accomplish Housman's aim and fills the poem with mild melancholic poetic pleasure:

**With rue my heart is laden
For golden friends I had,
For many a rose-lipt maiden
And many a light-foot lad.**

(LIV:ll,1-4)³⁶

Metaphor is the prevailing element in the above lines. Here Housman dwells on the concept and the meaning of friendship as he compares true friends to gold by using the image of gold. "Golden friend" is used in the poem to stand for true friends who are as precious and valuable as gold. This metaphor is general. It dominates the poem to refer to both; males and females; both are very valuable friends. Housman offers this metaphor to suggest that these friends are as pure and perfect as gold among other metals.

Besides the metaphor of "golden friends" there are other important metaphors in the above lines which describe each sex in precisely the right method through the use of the appropriate adjectives. The girls appear very beautiful and attractive; they have rosy-lips which indicate youth and freshness. The boys, on the other hand, are described as light-foot boys; a description which portrays them active, full of energy, and handsome.

Though Housman admits that he is not very much interested in using metaphor in his poetry yet when he uses it, his usage shows the latent artistic and aesthetic values of this important literary device. Many of his poems are pregnant with the subtle use of metaphor in their structure

such as the footrace-death parallel in "To an Athlete Dying Young", the wedding funeral metaphor in "Bredon Hill", the monetary image of "One-and-Twenty", the drinking metaphor of "Terence", and the metaphors in many other poems.³⁷

In addition, Housman attacks the poets of satire saying that: "to the poets of the eighteenth century high and impassioned poetry did not come spontaneously, because the feeling which fosters its birth were not then abundant and urgent in the inner man...."³⁸ He argues that the emergence of poetry must be accompanied by emotions. For him poetry and emotions must come to existence as interrelated amalgam. This characteristic feature is not present in the satirical poetry; therefore, he considers it non- poetry or mere verse. Verse for Housman is what "can at least be called literature, though it may differ from prose only in its metrical form."³⁹

c- His Poetic Experience:

In the last parts of the lecture Housman offers a valuable record of his poetic experience. He heavily emphasizes on the degree of the emotional and physical responses as the quality of good poetry. His criterion of evaluating poetry is based on two principles: first, the emotional excitement that poetry provokes in the recipient, and

second, the physical response caused by reading poetry. He measures good poetry by the extent to which it moves feelings and generates bodily reactions. These two main principles are to be felt by the learnt readers when reading poetry. However, before Housman exhibits his poetic experience he quotes several examples of poetry, written in different ages, to show the readers what good poetry means for him. His two principles are present in the following quotation:

Whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever will lose his life shall find it."That is the most important truth..., and the greatest discovery ever made in the moral world; but I do not find in it anything which I should call poetical.... "But no man may deliver his brother, nor make agreement unto God for him," that is to me poetry so moving that I can hardly keep my voice steady in reading it. And this is the effect of language that I can ascertain by experiment: the same thought in the Bible version, "None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God ransom for him," I can read without emotion. Poetry is not the thing said but a way of saying it."⁴⁰

Housman here discusses the effect of poetry on the recipient and the kind of physical reaction it evokes in him. He does this by distinguishing between the poetic and the non-poetic feelings. For him ideas, beliefs, philosophy, and the thought of the poem are non-poetic. They do not promote or heighten feelings; therefore, they are not poetic. The soul of the poetic feelings is "the language in which the idea is clothed"⁴¹ and he can ascertain the effect of the language

by experiencing a strain of emotional disturbance and physical reaction. Poetry, for Housman, "is a method of expression, not the thing expressed."⁴² The idea of the poem may be of a little meaning and of a little significance yet the poem can be so moving poetry. The sophistication in the idea or the belief of the poem is in no way a factor of making the verse of the poem poetry. The language in which the idea is expressed is what ranks as poetry for Housman. Housman offers a good example to explain this notion when he compares between Shakespeare and Blake:

For me the most poetical of all poets is Blake. I find his lyrical note as beautiful as Shakespeare's and more beautiful than anyone else's; and I call him more poetical than Shakespeare, even though Shakespeare has so much more poetry, because poetry in him preponderates more than in Shakespeare over everything else, and instead of being confounded in a great river can be drunk pure from a slender channel of its own. Shakespeare is rich in thought, and his meaning has power of itself to move us, even if the poetry were not there: Blake's meaning is often unimportant or virtually non-existent, so that we can listen with all our hearing to his celestial tone.⁴³

Although many critics have misunderstood this passage (as a ranking attempt for the two poets) Housman's aim is not to rank poets. He is attempting to identify in whose poetry the transfusion of emotions can be found in a purer form. He finds it in Blake's more than in that of Shakespeare's. This is because "Blake gives us poetry neat, or unadulterated with so little meaning so that nothing

Take O take those lips away
That so sweetly were forsworn
And those eyes, the break of day,
Light that do mislead the morn;
But my kisses bring again

**Seals of love, but sealed in vain,
sealed in vain.** ⁴⁵

The last example of poetry that Housman quotes and tries to relate to his poetic experience is a line from the third song of Milton's "Arcades". Although the line is composed of six words only Housman argues that this line can provoke sadness and tears in

more than one reader. He quotes the line and then comments on it with his well-known majestic style as follows:

Nymphs and shepherds, dance no more – what is it that can draw tears, as I know it can, to the eyes of more readers than one? What in the world is there to cry about? Why have the mere words the physical effect of pathos when the sense of the passage is blithe and gay? I can only say, because they are poetry, and find their way to something in man which is obscure and latent, something older than the present organisation of his nature Poetry indeed seems to me more physical than intellectual.⁴⁷

The above quotation illustrates and re-emphasizes Housman's preoccupation with the idea of the validity and the essentiality of the emotional excitement and the bodily reaction as the criterion of appreciating and apprehending poetry. He calls these six words poetry because, as he alleges, they can find their way to the thing which is "obscure and latent"⁴⁸ the thing which is "older than the present organisation of his [man's] nature."⁴⁹ The thing that he is describing is emotions.

However, many readers may ponder and question the validity of Housman's allegation that the six words of Milton can draw tears to more than one reader. How can these six words move more than one reader to tears? And why? What is that thing drives the Housman to say that they can draw tears? The answer to all of this is best provided by J. Bronowski in his comment on this passage. He states that:

The reader who will cry will certainly be a learnt reader. If he reads beyond the six words he will meet names which carry all the Miltonic longing, to the learnt reader. If he reads only the six words he must feel deeply the memories which lie in the words Nymphs and Shepherds. These memories are not clear thoughts; they are not part of the blithe and gay meaning. They call back the Arcadias of all poets. They recall the loss of all Arcadias, and the mourning of all poets for their loss.... [They] foreshadowed feelings and memories that we must stare.⁵⁰

This clears the complexity. Housman, here, is not addressing the ordinary simple readers. He is addressing the learnt ones. He even believes that the learnt readers form the minority of the civilized people. It is this minority that "possesses the organ by which poetry is perceived."⁵¹ The probability of being moved by this line, in his view, lies in the "sensibility or insensibility of the recipient."⁵² In fact Housman places a heavy burden on the readers' ability to apprehend poetry but he successfully isolates the learnt readers, who are sensitive to language, as the sort of readers who can be moved by this very short line. They can be moved because they are aware of the magnitude and the depth of the Miltonic emotions and memories which are associated with these six words. These six words project the Miltonic feelings of loss and nostalgia for the innocence and for the past.

Bronowski also states that "Housman's feelings are bodily feelings: 'Poetry indeed seems to me more physical than intellectual'. They grow from the bodily life of the senses."⁵³ In fact

Housman is preoccupied with a single note of feelings in his poetry. This note is a note of melancholic and sad feelings. Almost in all his poems the presence of this note is evident. For him "sadness is poetry and the only poetry."⁵⁴ The purest form of pleasure that the reader gains from poetry stems from the purest sad and melancholic expressions. Sadness, then, is what preserves the soul of poetry. In his pursuit for the sad feelings he even resorts to illness to provoke sadness. In his letter to Maurice Pollet who is one of his French admirers, Housman has written "I have seldom written poetry unless I was rather out of health, and the experience, though pleasurable, was generally agitating and exhausting."⁵⁵ Housman is not the only English poet who believes that sadness is essential to poetry. In support of Housman's view of sadness Bronowski quotes Edgar Allan Poe's account on how he planned "The Raven". Poe states:

Regarding, then, Beauty as my province, my next question referred to the tone of the highest manifestation – and all experience has shown that this tone is one of *sadness*. Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones.⁵⁶

Housman's obsession with melancholy can be ascribed to his life-long interest in the ideas of the English philosopher and critic Matthew Arnold which he has referred to in the lecture. Both of them, Housman and Arnold refer to the tragic nature of the human life and both reflect melancholy and pessimism in their poetry. Arnold has expressed this saying:

In the presence of the most tragic circumstances, represented in a work of Art, the feeling of enjoyment, as it is well known, may still subsist, the representation of the most utter calamity, of the liveliest anguish, is not sufficient to destroy it; the deeper becomes the enjoyment; and the situation is more tragic in proportion as it becomes more terrible.⁵⁷

Such melancholic views are central in Housman's poetry; therefore, he emphasizes them in his lecture.

In an important part of the lecture Housman offers an account of his experience as he remembers poetry. In this part he acclaims the role of a doctor in describing the symptoms that poetry evokes inside him when he comes across a line or two and sometimes a stanza from a poem. He isolates these symptoms and provides an accurate description of them. Describing these symptoms he states that:

Experience has taught me, when I am shaving of a morning, to keep watch over my thoughts, because if a line of poetry strays into my memory, my skin blisters so that the razor ceases to act. This particular symptom is accompanied by a shiver down the spine; there is another which consists in a constriction of the throat and a precipitation of water to the eyes.... The seat of this sensation is the pit of the stomach.⁵⁸

The above quotation offers a purely physical and emotional illustration of how Housman perceives poetry. He specifies certain symptoms resulting from his perception. These symptoms are best

described in terms of the physical reactions that he feels when remembering a line of poetry. In his account the description moves neatly from the external to the internal. He starts with describing the external symptom saying that remembering a line of poetry causes his skin to bristle. This symptom is accompanied by the occurrence of the first internal symptom "a shiver down the spine" and then the coming out of tears in the eyes. Housman has even to borrow a sentence from one of Keats's last letters when he talks about Fanny Browne to describe his sensations when remembering poetry "everything that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear."⁵⁹ This is the kind of emotional disturbance that Housman experiences when he remembers or comes across poetry. In his comment on this part of the lecture Jebb describes it as "bordering between the physical and the emotional. It tends to come out of the blue and has no real connection with memory or anything we intellectually understand about the situation in which it happens."⁶⁰

In another part of the lecture Housman offers a clear description of his own poetry and writing experience. Once again with his majestic style he drives the readers and makes them live the atmosphere of his experience. Going through his description the readers feel as if they were taking a walk with Housman while being invaded by the powerful emotions that form a line or two or sometimes a stanza of his poetry. Describing his experience Housman says:

Having drunk a pint of beer at luncheon – beer is a sedative to the brain, and my afternoons are the least intellectual portion of my life – I would go out for a walk of two or three hours. As I

went along, thinking of nothing in particular, only looking at things around me and following the progress of the seasons, there would flow into my mind, with sudden and unaccountable emotions, sometimes a line or two of verse, sometimes a whole stanza at once, accompanied, not preceded, by a vague notion of the poem which they were... to form part of. Then there would usually be a lull of an hour or so then perhaps the spring would bubble up again. I say bubble up, because ... the source of suggestion thus proffered to the brain was an abyss... the pit of the stomach I took my walks in a receptive and expectant frame of mind: but sometimes the poem had to be taken in hand and completed by the brain....⁶¹

In his description Housman implies that his poetic experience mainly stems from the unconscious. His mind and his intellectual activities are dull and in a sluggish state. They are almost inactive. He is visited by the muse or the poetic inspiration while he is mentally not busy with anything in specific. He generates poetry while looking at the beauty of nature around him or following the cycle of seasons. He remarks that poetry flows to his mind all of a sudden. The thought and the texture of the poem along with the emotional waves flow into his mind in the same span of time. All these three elements emerge in his mind from a pure physical source which is the "pit of the stomach or the abyss".

Haber provides a very valuable account on this part of the lecture. He says that:

One of the most remarkable features of this description of the poetic process ... is the crowding together of idea, language, and emotions into a single ... creative impulse. His poetry did not originate in an un verbalized mood to which the word later gave communicable form. Idea and language arose together out of the subconscious – "the abyss" – and simultaneously with them came the influx of strong emotions. That is, the first stages of the creative act were not designed, not the result of the conscious will but of something deeper. The line, the quatrain, the poem itself arose shaped out of shapelessness; syntax, rhyme, meter all broke surface together and presented themselves at the same moment.⁶²

It appears that Housman's poetic experience, through his description of it, is similar to that of the romantics especially that of Wordsworth. One may infer that Housman has adopted a romantic principle before he even thought of writing the lecture. Earlier in the lecture Housman has quoted Wordsworth's definition of poetry as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"⁶³ but he neglects the other part in which Wordsworth declares that the "origin of poetry [lies] in emotions recollected in tranquillity. For with Housman ... the origin of poetry was not in emotion recollected but in its very onset"⁶⁴ and this is what makes his experience unique.

In the description of the origin of his poetry Housman states that:

I think that the production of poetry ... is less an active than a passive and involuntary process; and if I were obliged ... to name the class of thing to which it belongs, I should call it a secretion, like turpentine in the fir, or a morbid secretion, like the pearl in the oyster. I think my own experience ... is the latter because I have seldom written poetry unless I was out of health.⁶⁵

Now, it is clear that the chief origin of Housman's poetry is the unconscious as he admits. It is a secreted substance stemming from his ill physical condition, like the case of the oyster. Poetry is the juice of Housman's emotions and his physical condition. It is the outlet by which he can communicate his inner feelings and thoughts to the world.

Surprisingly the chief figure of the modern English poetry and of the scientific approach to poetic criticism: T. S. Eliot has approved and praised Housman's account of his poetic experience saying: "Observation leads me to believe that different poets may compose in very different ways; my experience ... leads me to say that Mr. Housman is recounting the authentic process of a real poet."⁶⁶ Even W. H. Auden has praised Housman's lecture and has considered him "the most remarkable man among all the distinguished figures of his time."⁶⁷ Other modern critics argue that Housman is a modern poet and they support this view with evidence from his poetry and his lecture. Terence Allan Hoagwood in his discussion of the lecture argues that "the theme of the unconscious is one of the modernist features of Housman's argument ... and

another modernist feature concerns his representation of poetry as an operation of language as opposed to a conveyance of ideas."⁶⁸

Notes

- 1- Richard Perceval Graves, *A. E. Housman: The Scholar-Poet* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979), p. 9.
- 2- Seymour Adelman, *The Name and Nature of A. E. Housman* (New York: Bryn Maur College Library, 1986), p. 4.
- 3- Ibid., p. viii.
- 4- Keith Jebb, *A. E. Housman* (Wiltshire: The Cromwell Press Limited, 1992), p. 19.
- 5- Graves, p. 106.
- 6- Adelman, p. 4.
- 7- Graves, pp. 32-33.
- 8- Jebb, p. 21.
- 9- Graves, p. 77.
- 10- Maude M. Hawkins, *A.E. Housman: Man Behind a Mask* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1958), p. 132.
- 11- Ibid., p. 133.
- 12- Graves, p. 210.
- 13- B. J. Leggett, *The Poetic Art of A. E. Housman Theory and Practice* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), p. 63.
- 14- Cleanth Brooks, "The Whole of Housman" in *The Kenyon Critics: Studies in Modern Literature from the Kenyon Review* ed. John Crowe Ransom (Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1951), p. 268.
- 15- Leggett, p. 6.

- 16- Ibid., p. 6.
- 17- Ibid., p. 27.
- 18- A. E. Housman, " The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism" in **A. E. Housman: Selected Prose**, ed. John Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 15.
- 19- A. E. Housman, "The Name and Nature of Poetry" in **A. E. Housman: Selected Prose**, ed. John Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 169.
- 20- Ibid., p. 131.
- 21- Leggett, p. 16.
- 22- Ibid., p. 16
- 23- Carter, p. 172.
- 24- Ibid., p 172.
- 25- Ibid., p. 187.
- 26- Ibid., p. 187.
- 27- Ibid., p. 187.
- 28- Ibid., p. 173.
- 29- Ibid., p. 174.
- 30- Ibid., p. 175.
- 31- Ibid., p. 176.
- 32- Ibid., p. 178.
- 33- Ibid., p. 178.
- 34- Leggett, p. 18.
- 35- Jebb, p. 127.
- 36- Alfred Edward Housman, **A Shropshire Lad** (New York: Hartsdale House, 1932), p. 99. Subsequent references to the poems of this volume will be to this edition. It is also important to readers to know that Housman used the Roman numerals as

titles for the poems in his two volumes. Few of the poems have normal titles.

- 37- Leggett, p. 25.
- 38- Carter, p. 175.
- 39- Ibid., p. 194.
- 40- Ibid., pp. 186-187.
- 41- Ibid., p. 187.
- 42- Ibid., p. 178.
- 43- Ibid., p. 189.
- 44- Ibid., p. 189.
- 45- Ibid., p. 190.
- 46- Ibid., p. 190.
- 47- Ibid., p. 172.
- 48- Ibid., p. 172.
- 49- Ibid., p. 173.
- 50- J. Bronowski, *The Poet's Defense* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Ltd., 1939), pp. 214-215.
- 51- Carter, p. 184.
- 52- Ibid., p. 184.
- 53- Bronowski, p. 211.
- 54- Ibid., p. 212.
- 55- Letter to Maurice Pollet, 5 February, 1933, printed in *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Christopher Risks (London: Allan Lane, The Penguin Press, 1989), p. 468.
- 56- Bronowski, p. 212.
- 57- Matthew Arnold, "Preface to Poems (1853)" in *The Portable Matthew Arnold*, ed. Lionel Trilling (New York: The Viking Press, 1949), p. 187.

- 58- Carter, p. 185.
59- Ibid., p. 186.
60- Jebb, p. 133.
61- Carter, p. 194.
62- Tom Burns Haber, *The Making of A Shropshire Lad* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), p. 9.
63- Carter, p. 193.
64- Haber, p. 9.
65- Ricks, p. 468.
66- Ibid., p. 1.
67- Leggett, p. 17.
68- Terence Allan Hoagwood, *A. E. Housman Revisited* (London: Twayne Publishers, 1995), p. 46.

3. Conclusions

A. E. Housman (1859-1936) is one of the controversial poets of English poetry. Critics differ in their views and judgments about him and his poetry. Some consider him a classical poet; others rank him a modern poet. Some critics rank him a writer of the aesthetic movement who writes according to the norms of the school of Art for Art's sake. While Housman himself believes that poetry is the re-creation of his favourite readings of more than one literature.

The current study sheds light on the major premises Housman's poetic vision which can be summed up as follows:

- a) The physical reaction as a major indicator of *true poetry* is a cornerstone in Housman's poetic vision. Housman believes that the

true quality of effective poetry lies in the physical reaction it produces in the reader or the hearer.

b) *True poetry* is the immediate expression of ardent emotions on their on set rather than in tranquillity which is the corner stone of the Romantic poetic doctrine.

c) The belief that poetry is emotional rather than intellectual. Housman views poetry as a secretion or a passive process i.e. a product of an involuntarily response of emotional and physical reactions.

d) For Housman poetry must be an effective medium of transferring emotions. If poetry is void of this quality it is non-poetry as he labels it.

Bibliography

- Adelman, Seymour. *The Name and Nature of A. E. Housman*. New York: Bryn Maur College Library, 1986.
- Bronowski, J. *The Poet's Defense*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Ltd., 1939.
- Carter, John, ed. *A. E. Housman: Selected Prose*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961.
- Graves, Richard Perceval. *A. E. Housman: The Scholar-Poet*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979.
- Haber, Tom Burns. *The Making of A Shropshire Lad*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966.
- Hawkins, Maude M. *A.E. Housman: Man Behind a Mask*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1958.
-

- Hoagwood, Terence Allan. *A. E. Housman Revisited*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1995.
- Housman, A. E. *A Shropshire Lad*. New York: Hartsdale House, 1952.
- Jebb, Keith. *A. E. Housman*. Wiltshire: The Cromwell Press Limited, 1992.
- Leggett, B. J. *The Poetic Art of A. E. Housman Theory and Practice* Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1977.
- Ransom, John Crowe, ed. *The Kenyon Critics: Studies in Modern Literature from the Kenyon Review*. Cleveland: World Pub. Co, 1951.
- Ricks, Christopher, ed. *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*. London: Allan Lane, The Penguin Press, 1989.
- Trilling, Lionel, ed. *The Portable Matthew Arnold*. New York: The Viking Press, 1949.