

The Classical influences in Alfred Edward Housman's poetry A Reading in selected short poems

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Abstract

Alfred Edward Housman (١٨٥٩- ١٩٣٦) is one of the greatest English literary figures. He is a poet, a professor, and a critic at the same time. He reflects a profound interest in the classical philosophers and writers. So he reads for the Greeks, the Romans, Latin and even the early English poets, who are source to develop his views and realizations about poets and significant poetry. The matter that leads his poetry to be simple at the first look, but it underlies tremendous thoughts and important meanings to the learned reader. This paper will deal with a group of poems that are taken from Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*. It is a small volume of poetry that that reflects Housman uses Roman numerals as titles for most Housman's creative artifice. of his poems. "LIV", "XII", " LXII", "Astronomy", "V" will be discussed through this paper to shed light on various themes and aspects related to the poet's classical obsession.

Housman Quest for Knowledge

Alfred finished the sixth form of his formal education during the summer of ١٨٧٧. 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. Alfred's interest in the classical studies started when he won a prize at school. The prize was a copy of *Sabrinæ 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."^١ 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 ١٨٨٢. 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"^٢. He was later appointed as a professor of Latin at University College of London. In ١٨٩٦, *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*. "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."^٣ In fact, Housman paid much attention to his scholarly tasks in absorbing 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. 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."^٤ In ١٩٢٢, 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.

Housman's Concept of Poetry

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."^o

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"[^] and hence, it is firmly related to the body and emotions. 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.^y

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. In doing so he complies to Alexander Pope's classical views about the nature of criticism. 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."[^] 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."^٩ The metaphysical poetry is purely intellectual and it completely depends on wit; therefore, Housman suggests that it should be called wit, that he believes that: 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."^{١٠}

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."^{١١} 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."^{١٢}

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.^{١٣}

His conscious use of metaphor in many poems 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

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to that of the poets of metaphysical and satirical poetry. It is also important to know that Housman used the Roman numerals as titles for the poems in his two volumes. Few of the poems have normal titles. In his 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)¹⁴

Metaphor is the prevailing element in the above lines. Here Housman stresses on the concept and the meaning of friendship as he compares true friends to gold. "Golden friend" stands for loyal friends. Both boys who have light foot indicate of activity and energy. Beautiful girls who have rosy-lips indicate youth and freshness. Housman resorts to the use of the conceit of death as an agent that can stop the decay of the beauty of nature and freeze life at its prime. This sort of conceit is known as logical conceit because it is based on and represents a mental process. Leggett makes this statement very clear when he comments on the use of conceit saying that:

... [Housman's poetry] is ... marked by a search for permanence in a world of change.... The search for an agent to arrest the decay, to halt the flow of life and freeze life at its prime leads to the conceit which is central to the work, a conceit in which death paradoxically becomes the only agent of stability in a life of ceaseless change.¹⁵

This poem also illustrates Housman's use of the conceit to show the image of the death:

Lovers lying two and two
Ask not whom they sleep beside,
And the bridegroom all night through
Never turns him to the bride.
(XII: ll, 13-16)

Housman 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."¹⁶

Poetic Experience:

Alfred Edward Housman has a unique conception about good poetry so he sets his own criterion of evaluating poetry. He relies 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. The soul of the poetic feelings is "the language in which the idea is clothed"^{١٧} 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 In fact Housman places a heavy burden on expression, not the thing expressed." 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 poetry. 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."^{١٨} 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: 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.^{١٩} Housman 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.

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.^{٢٠}

So, it is clear that the chief origin of Housman's poetry is the unconscious as he admits. . It is the outlet by which he can communicate his inner feelings and thoughts to the world. 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

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a conveyance of ideas."^{٢١}

His Classicism

Housman is considered one of the foremost classical scholars of the Twentieth Century. His minute and meticulous scholarly papers qualified him to the position of the Kennedy Professor of Latin at Cambridge. He published many papers on the classical literature and philosophy. He also studied many poets and philosophers and published papers about them. He wrote about Horace, Ovid, Lucan, Virgil, Persius, Manilius and Lucretius. For this reason some of Housman admirers hold the verdict that Housman is a classical poet. No doubt, Housman's scholarly field has left a notable imprint on his poetry. Housman the scholar has brought the fastidiousness of his scholarly methods to his poetry. His Notebooks are full of extensive re-workings such as omissions and additions of words and phrases from each poem. These re-workings provide good evidence of the scholar's obsession of accuracy in his writings. Housman is a master of Latin. The classical knowledge, which he gained through his long scholarly experience of emending classical texts, enabled him to control his emotions in writing poetry.

. His verses are highly finished, deeply pagan: they stand outside the ordinary current of modern poetry, the inheritors. ... of the poignancy and stateliness, the lapidary quality of the poems of Catullus, Horace and Virgil, or the flowers of Greek Anthology. This impression is heightened by the smallness of professor Housman's output and by the years he devoted to finishing and polishing it, and ... by the stem and cryptic hints in the prefaces, with their allusion to profound emotions rigidly controlled."^{٢٢}

The handling of emotions is one of the classical influences that give Housman's poetry a distinction. Housman is totally aware that "a judicious classical restraint in form and phrase could work both psychologically and aesthetically, sublimating emotion and making it sublime."^{٢٣} For Housman poetry is the only escape from emotions that he could not express in his life. This concept is best expressed by Housman who manages to control these emotions by choosing the apt tone for the subject matter of his poems. There are notable and controlled shifts in tone that help to express in more profound way the messages of his poems. Such shifts are even made very effective by the frequent use of the binary structure in the poems. This use helps Housman to make the

contrast vivid between the past and the present as we observe through the experiences of the characters in the poems. Housman was influenced by such classical writers as Horace and Lucretius. He said that "Horace's Ode VII of the Fourth Book is the most beautiful poem in ancient literature."^{٢٤} It was the latter who exerted much influence on Housman. Housman's use of compound words and alliteration reflects the Lucretian influence. Lucretius is the poet from whom Housman "took the methods of using compound words in his poetry such as amber-sanded, far-beholding rainy-sounded, and death-struck."^{٢٥} Alliteration is the second stylistic trait which he borrowed from Lucretius. The following line from the epigraph of *Last Poems* is a good example of Housman's use of alliteration "The bowers are bare of bay"^{٢٦}

The poet in the final stanza of his poem "LXII" in *A Shropshire Lad* alludes to Mithridates Eupator, the king of Pontus who is "an oriental of remarkable force and large ambitions who viewed himself as a leader and patron of an Hellenic world burning to free itself from Roman shackles."^{٢٧} Housman reflects his deep interests in classical history of Asia and the Roman Empire.

There was a king reigned in the East:
There, when kings will sit to feast,
They get their fill before they think
—I tell the tale that I heard told.
Mithridates, he died old.

LXII

Other effects of the classical thought can be revealed in the following aspects: The use of astronomical terms such as nadir, globe, planets, skies and many other terms is evident in the poems. Housman's knowledge of Astronomy stems from his long scholarly excursion with Manilius's "Astronomica" which is a long poem in five books essentially about the principles of astrology.^{٢٨،٢٩} Many of Housman's poems from the two volumes contain astronomical references and echoes such as: "Revolution", "Astronomy", "The night is freezing fast", "Reveille", and "Think no more, lad". "Astronomy" is a poem Housman wrote on the death of his brother Herbert. This poem is full of astronomical concepts and reflects Housman's view of the idea of controlling

fate:

For pay and medals, name and rank,
Things that he has not found,
He hove the Cross to heaven and sank
The pole-star underground.
And now he does not even see
Signs of the nadir roll
At night over the ground where he
Is buried with the pole.^{۲۹}

The form of Housman's poems reflects the classical effect because all of the texts have clear sceneries and clever arguments which is a clear sign of classical poetry. Most of the poems are divided into patterns and stanzas that reflect the classical neatness and the poet's preoccupation with the accuracy of form. One can safely say that Housman is classical in the form of the poems and modern in their ideas. His poetry Notebooks provide ample evidence on his apprenticeship on form. The logical argument which prevails over a great part of Housman's poems is a very clear sign of the classical flavour of his poetry. The poems in Housman's poetry deal with important subjects which come from his record of reality. The poems deal with these subjects by the use of logical argument. Many poems can be divided into two parts. The first part poses the argument while the second part suggests the conclusion. Housman also uses his poetry to convey didactic messages. Many of his poems are heavy with moral lessons. In poem XIII from the first volume the poet advises the reader of his poetry to search for true love because false love will lead to risky ends. In poem V the moral lesson is conveyed through the poet's invitation to the readers to achieve union with the beauty of nature. He invites them to enjoy it. In the following lines the carpe diem theme is very obvious:

Ah, spring was sent for lass and lad,
'Tis now the blood runs gold,
And man and maid had best be glad
Before the world is old.

(V: 11, ۹-۱۲)

In addition to the above mentioned aspects of influence, in Housman's poetry there are many echoes of the classical language. For example Housman's use of "golden friend" goes straight to classical language from Socrates "you are dear, Phaedrus, and golden indeed."^{۳۰} Housman's artistic production is multidimensional; he is classical a poet, romantic poet and modern one too.

This statement seems controversial and illogical yet it can be solved if one has the sensitivity of sound inspection. Housman is a classical poet because in his poetry there are "the qualities of conciseness, lucidity, and restraint, qualities usually associated with the classical manner."^{٢١} He is a romantic poet because he deals with the conditions of loneliness and isolation in which modern man lives. He is unhappy with the material side of modern life. Like most of the romantic poets he escapes to the beauty of nature seeking happiness and rest of mind whenever he feels melancholic and sad. Housman is a modern poet because of two reasons. First his language is everyday language. It is very simple and clear and his expressions are the epitome of directness. His language is also charged with ideas and meanings. Robb describes his language saying that: "His statements are so quite, so transparently comprehensive, that like very clear water they can give an illusory impression of shallowness. Yet their simplicity has a strange way, like water itself changing colour while one looks at it."^{٢٢}

Second, his characters are from average life such as soldiers, lovers, farmers and criminals who feel alienated from their surroundings. These characters give a sense of reality to Housman's poetry. Housman's poetry is considered "the magic triangle bounded by Romanticism, Classicism, and Realism."^{٢٣} Brooks suggests that Housman is all of this because of a "set of terms: (١) his Irony.... (٢) his understatement, ... (٣) his use of symbolism ... and (٤) his use of metaphor."^{٢٤} In addition, Jebb in his defence of the multidimensional Housman says that:

Take classicism and romanticism, however: they are certainly different from one another, but they are basically styles or modes of art with differing historical and social origins. Romanticism could not be called a reaction and opposition to Classicism. In fact the truth is the opposite. Elements of classicism reintroduced into poetry by the early Modernists (particularly by the imagists of the ١٩١٢-١٥ period).^{٢٥}

This leads us to say that Housman manages to fuse these elements and produce a peculiar poetry in a manner that combines classical form, romantic feelings, and modern ideas.

Conclusion

The richness of Housman's poetry arises from his vast knowledge and

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wide readings. Housman was affected by the Greeks, the Romans, The matter for Housman was not only mere affection . He read for those major figures and it was natural that their effect would be reflected in his poetry. They supplied Housman with the power of language which can make the simple words powerful enough to transmit critical emotional depths and convey important messages of art. Housman studies in a deep manner the writings of the classical Greeks and Romans and from these writings he takes the technique of writing his poems which appear simple at the surface, but full of meanings and implications at the same time. The classics thought it must cover the form of the poem. In fact, this technique helped Housman to achieve an emotional intensity in his poems. They also enabled Housman to use language in a creative way in order to make of simple linguistic constructions powerful aesthetic productions. Housman opened his eyes to the evils of the world and to the bad sides in the human nature, so he reflects his sadness and melancholy in the tone of his poetry. Thus, Housman's preoccupation with the idea of death He further believes that the world is unjust to man; therefore, his poetry is fully tinged with pessimism and tragic events. Housman is an epitome of poets in all periods of time for he has unique qualities that combine various aspects.

Notes

¹Keith Jebb, *A. E. Housman* (Wiltshire: The Cromwell Press Limited, 1992), p. 21.

²Richard Perceval Graves, *A. E. Housman: The Scholar-Poet* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979), p. 77.

³Maude M. Hawkins, *A.E. Housman: Man Behind a Mask* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1958), p. 132.

⁴Ibid., p. 133.

⁵Cleanth 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. 7.

⁶A. E. Housman, "The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism" in *A. E. Housman: Selected Prose*, ed. John Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 10.

⁷A. E. Housman, "The Name and Nature of Poetry" in *A. E. Housman: Selected Prose*, ed. John Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 169.

⁸Ibid., p. 131.

⁹Leggett, *The Poetic Art of A. E. Housman Theory and Practice* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), p. 16.

¹⁰John Carter, ed. *A. E. Housman: Selected Prose*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961.) p. 173.

¹¹Ibid., p. 174.

¹²Leggett, p. 18.

¹³Jebb, p. 127.

¹⁴Alfred Edward Housman, *A Shropshire Lad* (New York: Hartsdale House, 1902), p. 99.

Subsequent references to the poems of this volume will be to this edition.

^{١٥} Leggett, *Housman's Land of Lost Content*, p. ٥١-٢

^{١٦} Carter, p. ١٩٤.

^{١٧} Ibid., p. ١٨٧.

^{١٨} Letter to Maurice Pollet, ٥ February, ١٩٣٣, printed in *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Allan Lane, The Penguin Press, ١٩٨٩), p. ٤٦٨.

^{١٩} J. Bronowski, *The Poet's Defense* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Ltd., ١٩٣٩), p. ٢١٢.

^{٢٠} Tom Burns Haber, *The Making of A Shropshire Lad* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, ١٩٦٦), p. ٩.

^{٢١} Terence Allan Hoagwood, *A. E. Housman Revisited* (London: Twayne Publishers, ١٩٩٥), p. ٤٦.

^{٢٢} Cyril Connolly, *The Condemned Playground: Essays* (London: Routledge, ١٩٤٥), p. ٤٧.

^{٢٣} Archie Burnett, "A. E. Housman's 'Level Tones'" in *A. E. Housman: A Reassessment*, ed. Holden & Birch. p. ٢.

^{٢٤} Graves, p. ١٧٢.

^{٢٥} Haber, p. ٦٩.

^{٢٦} Burnett, ed., p. ٧٠.

^{٢٧} H. A. L. Fisher, *A History of Europe* (London: Edward Arnold & co. ١٩٤٦) p. ٦٩.

^{٢٨} Graves, p. ٢١٠.

^{٢٩} Archie Burnett, ed. *The Poems of Housman* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, ١٩٩٧), p. ٨٦.

^{٣٠} Cyril Connolly, p. ٥٦.

^{٣١} Mark Longaker & Edwin C. Bolles, *Contemporary English Literature* (New York: Appleton-Century-crafts, ١٩٥٣), p. ٧٦.

^{٣٢} Nesca A. Robb, *Four In Exile* (Washington: Kennikat Press, ١٩٦٨), p. ١٣.

^{٣٣} 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, ١٩٥١), p. ٢٦٨.

^{٣٤} Ibid., p. ٢٦٩.

^{٣٥} Keith Jebb, "The Land of Lost Content" in *A. E. Housman: A Reassessment*, ed. Holden & Birch. p. ٤١.

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