Is It Better to Go Out in a Blaze of Glory?

"It's better to burn out, than to fade away" (Lange et al, 1983) is a quote from the Def Leppard song "Rock of Ages," asserting that it is better to leave this life at one's peak than to live a life of regret or to be forgotten. The issue of being remembered has vexed humanity since ancient times. The belief that it is better to "go out in a blaze of glory," thus insuring that one is remembered long after death, is first addressed by Homer in *The Iliad* through the character of Achilles. This attitude of Achilles is explored again, in the context of sports, in A.E. Housman's poem "To an Athlete Dying Young." This poem takes the notion of undying fame from the battlefield and expands it to encompass all of life's various endeavors. Both works address the issue of peaking early in life. Is it better to enjoy the fifteen minutes of fame then to fade back into a common existence? Or is it better to live a full, common existence, experiencing all that life into old age has to offer? When Odysseus travels to the underworld in *The Odyssey*, Achilles (now dead) speaks of his regrets concerning not living a long, full life (Homer, *The Odyssey* Book XI).

In *The Iliad*, Achilles is given a choice. This choice is between undying glory and dying young, or, living a long, uneventful life and being forgotten (Homer, *The Iliad* IX ll. 423 - 429 pg. 141). Originally, Achilles chooses to leave Troy and to have a quiet, ordinary life. All of this changes when Achilles learns of Patroclus's death (Homer, *The Iliad* XVIII). Instead of
simply grieving, Achilles lets his rage drown his reason. Achilles makes the choice to stay and fight, thus sealing his fate.

With Housman's "To an Athlete Dying Young," the speaker asserts that it is indeed better to pass away while in one's prime and at the top of his or her game. The lines "And early though the laurel grows / It withers quicker than the rose" (Housman, "To an Athlete Dying Young" ll. 11 - 12) demonstrate that fame and glory are fleeting. How many people can remember the MVP from Super Bowl XXX? Would Buddy Holly still be remembered as well as he is if he had not died in that airplane crash? With only few exceptions, most celebrities from years gone by who lived into old age are not remembered today. Their fame faded "quicker than the rose" (Housman, l. 12).

The speaker in "To an Athlete Dying Young" further stresses that those who die in their prime will be better off. "Now you will not swell the rout / Of lads that wore their honors out," (Housman, ll. 17 - 18) asserts that fading back into common life is demeaning for those who once achieved glory. The speaker's attitude is that those who accomplish great things while young have no challenges left to conquer. All that these people have left to look forward to is seeing their accomplishments surpassed. This attitude implies that people are "one hit wonders."

John Finley takes a different stance in regards to Achilles statement to Odysseus in Book XI of Homer's "The Odyssey." Finley's interpretation of this conversation is that Achilles experiences "No rejection of heroism but the incompleteness of young death [which] speaks in Achilles' wish for even the humblest life on earth" (Finley, Homer's Odyssey, pg 124).

Dennis Dean's interpretation of "To an Athlete Dying Young" is that "... one falls into oblivion even before death — as if it were the law of gravity" (Dean). This explanation of a person's journey through life gives the impression that, when all is said and done, a person's
achievements and struggles ultimately have no value. This pessimistic view of life, Dean asserts, reflects Housman's view of human existence. This view is that "The beauty of dying young is that all the disappointments of adult life can be avoided" (Dean). In "To an Athlete Dying Young," the person in question experiences the best aspects of life (fame and glory) without having to endure the disappointments and setbacks. This sentiment is echoed by Warren Carson in the following manner: "... Housman insists that death, especially for youth, is a victory over the impending difficulties, tragedies, and heartbreak that accompany life" (Carson).

Other literary works do not share this sentiment. In particular, Odysseus' conversation with Achilles in the Underworld (Homer, The Odyssey Book XI) refutes the notion that it is better to die young, at the pinnacle of personal achievement. Specifically, Achilles tells Odysseus that "By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man - / some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive - / than to rule here over all the breathless dead (Homer, The Odyssey XI ll. 556 - 558). This is a rebuttal to Odysseus' previous statement "..., and now down here, I see / you lord it over the dead in all your power. / So grieve no more at dying, great Achilles" (Homer, The Odyssey XI ll. 551 - 553). This exchange between Achilles and Odysseus signifies that someone as revered and honored as Achilles would rather be alive and breathing, no matter what his class in life, than to have died at the peak of his mortal glory. This mind-set is in direct opposition to Housman's position that those who died young and surrounded in glory will thrive upon the accolades from the other deceased, who "Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead / And find unwithered on its curls / The garland briefer than a girl’s (Housman, ll. 26 - 28).

Housman's viewpoint concerning life is that it is better not to experience all that life has to offer. Instead, it is better to experience a moment of glory and then to escape life before hard times and disappointment set in. This escape is the easy way out. It cheats not only the person
in question but those whom the person has influence upon. The "athlete" dies incomplete. With Achilles, he experienced all which life had to offer in his short life. Finley explains Achilles' case as follows, "In the fifteen days between the battle with the river and the night meeting with Priam he comes near repeating Odysseus' ten-year journey" (Finley, Homer's Odyssey, pg 213). Housman does not write of the athlete learning any of life's lessons. The only thing the athlete is shown to experience are the accolades given by the townspeople as "We chaired you through the marketplace" (Housman, l. 2).

It is obvious that most athletes and celebrities are not nearly in the same category as Achilles and other people remembered from history and literature. There are few whose impact upon the world is remembered over the long term. The Jamaican Bobsled team which competed in the 1988 Winter Olympic Games will be remembered not because they won (Harish). Instead, they will be remembered because of their tenacity; their refusal to quit despite of adversity. Housman's position indicates that victory is the key to being remembered. Pessimistically, Housman further adds that these victories and records will eventually be surpassed (Housman, l. 14). Victories and records set are tangible, subject to being surpassed and broken. Attitudes are not tangible. Achilles is not remembered solely for his prowess upon the battlefield. His remembrance is based upon his actions along with his distinct attitude evident in all of his interactions. By dying young, Housman's athlete bypasses all of life's triumphs and tragedies which make people multi-dimensional.

Is it better to die young, enjoying the immediate results of one's accomplishments? Ultimately, the answer is no. The key aspect of life is to experience ALL that life has to offer, both the good and the bad. The true test of a person lies not in how he or she copes with victory. The true test resides in how a person copes with both the highs and the lows of his or her life. A
full life resides in experiencing and overcoming the obstacles encountered. Enduring all the hardship and heartache inspires others more than one single victory can. There is an old saying which applies to both sports and life: "It's not how many times you get knocked down that matters; it is how many times you get back up." It is the getting back up which truly inspires others. Housman’s message in “To an Athlete Dying Young” is clearly defeatist in nature. It is not better to die young, leaving this world in a blaze of glory.
Works Cited


Lange, Robert J. et al "Rock of Ages" *Pyromania* Def Leppard. 1983

http://www.defleppard.com/songs/rock-ages