Differences between Housman and Keats

Is it better for man to die before their name dies or would it be better to die after the name dies? Everyone has different views and opinions on this topic. A.E. Housman talks about this in his poem, “To An Athlete Dying Young.” Scholars compare this poem to John Keats’ “On Fame” because all relate to being famous or the status of an individual in society. Being famous can corrupt an individual, and we see this in our society today. For example, Lindsay Lohan was a child star who everyone loved. Today, she is always in the news for doing drugs, speeding, or breaking other laws. Has fame corrupted her? Personally, fame can and does corrupt people, impacts people’s lives negatively, but can also bring them happiness at the same time. When one is famous, do they get to live a life that is easy and relaxed or is life like having a full time job?

According to A.E. Houseman in his poem “To an Athlete Dying Young,” if an individual dies after the name dies then they live a life that is empty and full of regret. There are many people that agree with Houseman; however, many would say this is not true. Many people would say after their names die they can finally live a normal life, they do not have to be perfect every day, and if they make a small, simple mistake no one is going to judge them and blow it out of proportion. Houseman starts off by saying, “The time you won your town the race/ We chaired you through the market-place” (Housman 11-2). According to The Columbia History of British Poetry, “Housman expresses his recurrent theme that an early death in ones prime- that moment of victory- may be preferable to the loss of one’s powers and the eclipse of one’s achievement”
“Today, the road all runners come,/…And set you at your threshold down,/
Townsman of a stiller town” (Housman l5-8). Housman believes fame loves everyone by saying everyone has gathered and is cheering loudly for this runner even though he is dead. In the book *Running Cultures: Racing in Time and Space* it suggests that “at his threshold he will never experience defeat, never witness his record being eroded, and will never be ignored by those who had once idolized him” (Bale).

Also, this could be viewed as failure being success, “Smart lad, to slip betimes away” (Housman l9). Bale also says that this “spares him the metaphorical death that awaits him when he reaches his peak and begins to decline, seeing modest athletes bettering his times” (Bale).

“From fields where glory does not stay” (Housman l10), according to Ball means “earthly glory is nothing; the glory of eternity is what we should all strive for” (Ball). “Eyes the shady night has shut/ cannot see the record cut” (Housman l13). This is what Bale is referring to when he states “seeing modest athletes bettering his times”. Since the athlete is dead he will not have to sit and watch someone beat is record; therefore, he will not live a disappointed life. “And silence sounds no worse than cheers” (Housman l15) suggests that the athlete has inner peace. It also says nature is the teacher and he has interconnection of all life. “And round that early laurelled head” (Housman l25) tells the reader that the athlete was praised for his victory. “And find unwithered on its curls/ The garland briefer than a girl’s” (Housman l28). This is saying that the unwithered laurel still shows that he died on top. Housman uses many examples to make his point that man should die before his name so he won’t live an empty life that is full of regrets.

One author that has a totally different view than Housman is John Keats. Keats believes fame is fickle and says fame doesn’t love anyone. “Fame is like a wayward girl, will still be coy/to those who woo her with too slavish knee” (Keats l1-2). First Keats starts out by saying
that fame is shy to those who treat her wrong. According to Andrew Bennett, Keats was trying to write about the “impossible integration of the living writer into the eternal category of poet in posterity – and also, more troublingly, popularity” (Bennett). Bennett has brought to many peoples’ attention that Keats was writing against fame; however, the reason he was writing it was due to popularity reasons. It seems as if Keats was contradicting himself or it could be that Bennett has it all wrong. “She is a gipsey, will not speak to those/ Who have not learnt to be content without her” (Keats l5-6). Keats here is stating that fame scorns those who have a need for her but she loves those who do not. Also, Keats writes “…whose ear was never whisper’d close,/ Who thinks the scandal her who talk about her” (Keats l7-8). This is saying some “scandal” fame when they talk about her. According to a writer, Keats “ingeniously borrows Wordsworth’s “gispey” and gives it a use of his own to show the wayward nature of ambition” (Rodriguez). “Sister-in-law to jealous Potiphar” (Keats l10). He is saying that fame is jealous of one if they are on top of the world and everything is going right for them. “Make your best bow to her and bid adieu” (Keats l13). In the last line “Then, if she likes it, she will follow you” (Keats l14). The ending of the poem is to tell fame goodbye, and if she likes you she will follow. Do not expect fame to follow because fame is fickle and does not care about anyone. Rodriguez also says that Keats does not reject fame; he just chooses not to pursue it. Keats was aware of the pressures of fame, and he did not want to have to deal with any of that. Now, one can see how Keats opinion was different from Housman in that he believed fame was fickle and did not like anyone.

How do the language or images between the two poems “On Fame” and “To an Athlete Dying Young” relate or differ from one another? Keats compares fame to a wayward girl, a gipsey, and sister-in-law to jealous Potiphar to show that fame is shy, doesn’t like others, and is
jealous. For the most part Keats uses simple words to make it easier to understand without the reader questioning themselves. In “To an Athlete Dying Young” Houseman is giving advice to the runner about fame by using certain words and phrases that relate to fame. Many scholars say Housman isn’t necessarily talking to an athlete; it can be to anyone that is living. “And early though the laurel grows/it withers quicker than the rose” and “and around that early laurelled head...” (Housman l11-12). The laurel represents athletes who won the game in Ancient Greece and Rome. Everyone applauded athletes who wore a laurel and all were treated like kings and queens. The *Thematic Guide to Biblical Literature* states “still wearing the champion’s garland of laurel on his golden locks, he remains a hero rather than becoming a “has been” (Tischler). This is exactly what Housman is trying to say and by using “laurel” his point is being made that this athlete was famous in his town. Both authors do an excellent job of supporting their thoughts through the use of their language and images in the poems.

How can one relate the ideas of Housman in his poem “To an Athlete Dying Young” to life today? Since Housman’s main point is about fame one could compare it to celebrities of today’s time. An example of a celebrity that this could be compared to is Lindsay Lohan. Many news critics and fans say that being famous has negatively impacted her life and has destroyed her personality. As a young child Lohan was a child star who got a lot of things handed to her, and everyone thought she could do no wrong. In 2007 she was arrested for drunk driving twice and was put on probation. Since that time, Lohan has broken her probation many times by doing drugs, having alcohol, and not doing her classes like she was supposed to. Every time she goes in front of a judge she is given a smack on the hand and let go. Everyone is asking themselves, is she ever going to learn or will a judge finally give her what she deserves?
Well, as of November 29, 2012 she has still not learned. Lohan was arrested once again and was charged with misdemeanor assault on another female at a night club. “Santa Monica police later added three misdemeanor counts of their own: lying to an officer, obstructing an officer in the course of his duties, and reckless driving” (Lucas). Every time Lohan has been arrested she has been charged with multiple offenses. She is either sentenced to jail or probation most of the times. This obviously doesn’t work for her because it always takes her much longer to finish her sentencing than it is supposed to. If the judges or law officials would follow through with their word than she might realize she cannot get by with everything. If Lohan was not a celebrity she would not be able to get by with all of the crimes she has committed. She would have been put on probation after both DUIs, and if she would have broken her probation she would have been thrown in jail with no questions asked. Lohan was also arrested for walking out of a jewelry store with a necklace around her neck and did not pay for it. A normal everyday citizen would have been put in jail, and then released on probation. Lohan can see the pattern that is developing with her and if she does something wrong she will get in trouble; however, her sentencing is not enforced and can do it again without getting a harsher punishment. Fame has completely destroyed the way Lohan views the world. Lohan seems to be living in a fantasy world where she can do no wrong, and if she does something wrong she can get by with it for the most part. With all of the bad, negative attention Lohan has attracted to herself when her name is said everyone thinks of the bad things she has done. Her name will never be remembered when she was at her best. After her name finally dies out she will not be living a life that is empty like Housman suggests a famous person would. On the other hand, Housman is right in saying that they may live a life full of regrets. Once Lohan is older and wiser
she will hopefully realize that her drinking, drugs, and other crimes were horrible mistakes and will regret that she continuously made the mistakes over and over again.

Overall, one can now see how Housman’s and Keats’ opinions are different from one another. Housman believes we should all strive for fame because that is the glorious life. If we do have fame the man should die before the name so they do not live a life that is empty and full of regrets. Keats totally disagrees with Housman and he advises us to stay away from fame because it is fickle and does not love anyone. One can compare both of these poems and relate it to everyday life. The example used was Lindsay Lohan. She commits a lot of crimes but never pays the time. It seems as if Lohan gets a smack on the hand when she goes in front of a judge and this is more than likely due to her being a celebrity. Hopefully one day she will finally realize her mistakes and start to become a better person who makes the right decisions. If you became famous at the age you are today, do you feel that the morals you were raised on would help keep you away from the troubles of fame?
Works Cited


