**To an Athlete Dying Young**

BY [A. E. HOUSMAN](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/a-e-housman)

The time you won your town the race

We chaired you through the market-place;

Man and boy stood cheering by,

And home we brought you shoulder-high.

Today, the road all runners come,

Shoulder-high we bring you home,

And set you at your threshold down,

Townsman of a stiller town.

Smart lad, to slip betimes away

From fields where glory does not stay,

And early though the laurel grows

It withers quicker than the rose.

Eyes the shady night has shut

Cannot see the record cut,

And silence sounds no worse than cheers

After earth has stopped the ears.

Now you will not swell the rout

Of lads that wore their honours out,

Runners whom renown outran

And the name died before the man.

So set, before its echoes fade,

The fleet foot on the sill of shade,

And hold to the low lintel up

The still-defended challenge-cup.

And round that early-laurelled head

Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,

And find unwithered on its curls

The garland briefer than a girl’s.

Source: *The Norton Anthology of Poetry Third Edition* (1983)

SUMMARY courtesy of SCHMOOP:

The poem starts off cheerfully enough, with the speaker remembering when the athlete won a big race and everyone in town celebrated by carrying the winner around the marketplace. Sounds like good times, right?

We don't get to enjoy it very long, because the second stanza puts us at the athlete's funeral. Bummer. The stanza is basically an extended metaphor for death: the road of life, going "home," moving from the land of the living to the land of the dead—that kind of thing.

Things take an unexpected turn starting in stanza 3 and continuing through the poem's last stanza. The speaker starts listing why it's a good thing that the athlete died young. He makes some solid points, but in the end it's tough to argue the merits of a young person dying.

For better or worse, pride and competition often go hand in hand. In "To an Athlete Dying Young," pride plays an important role. The speaker suggests that, by dying young, the athlete will never have to suffer the humiliation and wounded pride that come along with defeat and eventual waning athletic ability. The bottom line: better dead than second best. Boy, our coaches told us it wasn't about winning or losing. Somebody has this all wrong.

## Questions About Pride

1. How do think the athlete would feel about the speaker's position—that he's better off dead than losing face in defeat? Do you think the athlete would agree, or would he tell the speaker to go take a prideful jump in the lake? Why?
2. What are the some good aspects of pride? What are some bad ones? How do the good, the bad, and the ugly aspects of pride show up in the poem?
3. If the poem wasn't about an athlete, but rather a soldier, could it still have had pride as one of its main themes? Is so, how?

**INFORMAL CLASS DEBATE PRACTICE**

AGREE OR DISAGREE OR QUALIFY?

In "To an Athlete Dying Young," Housman attempts to demonstrate this significance of pride and its connection to victory by suggesting that because the young athlete dies with his pride intact, it somehow alleviates the tragedy of his untimely death.

AGREE OR DISAGREE OR QUALIFY?

It doesn't matter whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game.

# Dulce et Decorum Est

BY [WILFRED OWEN](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wilfred-owen)

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,

Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,

Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,

And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,

But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;

Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots

Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,

But someone still was yelling out and stumbling

And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime.—

Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,

He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace

Behind the wagon that we flung him in,

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,

His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood

Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: \*Dulce et decorum est

Pro patria mori.

\*Latin phrase is from the Roman poet Horace: “It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.”

SUMMARY courtesy of SCHMOOP:

It's just another day on the battlefields of [World War I](https://www.shmoop.com/wwi/) . As our speaker lets us know right away, however, "normal" isn't a word that has any meaning for the soldiers anymore. They're all mentally and physically ravaged by the exertions of battle.

And then it gets worse. Just as the men are heading home for the night, gas shells drop beside them. The soldiers scramble for their gas masks in a frantic attempt to save their own lives. Unfortunately, they don't all get to their masks in time. Our speaker watches as a member of his crew chokes and staggers in the toxic fumes, unable to save him from an excruciating certain death.

Now fast-forward. It's some time after the battle, but our speaker just can't get the sight of his dying comrade out of his head. The soldier's image is everywhere: in the speaker's thoughts, in his dreams, in his poetry. Worst of all, our speaker can't do anything to help the dying soldier.

Bitterly, the speaker finally addresses the people at home who rally around the youth of England, and urge them to fight for personal glory and national honor. He wonders how they can continue to call for war. If they could only witness the physical agony war creates – or even experience the emotional trauma that the speaker's going through now – the speaker thinks they might change their views. In the speaker's mind, there's noting glorious or honorable about death. Or, for that matter, war itself.

**INFORMAL CLASS DEBATE PRACTICE**

AGREE OR DISAGREE OR QUALIFY?

“It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.”