Loveliest of Trees

POEM TEXT

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

SUMMARY

The most beautiful tree of all, the cherry is currently covered with blossoms along its branches. It grows along the path through the woods, its white flowers making it look like it has dressed up for Easter.

Now, of my 70 years of life, 20 have already passed. And if you deduct from the 70 years those 20 years I've already lived, I've only got 50 years of life left.

And since 50 springs are hardly enough time to take in nature in bloom, I'll head off into the woods now in order to see the cherry trees covered with their snow-white blossoms.

THEMES

THE FLEETING BEAUTY OF LIFE

The sight of newly blossomed cherry trees pushes the speaker of "Loveliest of Trees" to reflect on both the beauty of nature and the brevity of human life. The speaker knows that the delicate blossoms of spring won't last forever; likewise, the speaker himself will eventually grow old day die. As such, the speaker feels he better get outside and appreciate the "loveliest of trees"—and, implicitly, his own youth—while he still can. In short, he should seize the day!

The speaker's descriptions of the cherry tree relay the fresh, delicate beauty of the natural world. The tree stands "about the woodland ride" (that is, a walkway in the woods) covered with pretty white blossoms. It's as though the tree is dressed in its Easter best, imploring the speaker to come outside and celebrate with it.

The specific color of the cherry tree's flowers connotes youth and purity as well, further linking the trees to the speaker himself: only 20, the speaker is still in the early "bloom" of his own life. And yet, though young, the speaker is keenly aware that life won't last forever—and that he thus has limited time to take in the beauty that surrounds him. The speaker supposes he'll live to be 70 or so, a.k.a. "threescore years and ten." Even though he's only 20, then, he's already experienced almost a third of all the springs he'll ever see! He has only 50 or so springs to go—"little room," or insufficient time, to "look at things in bloom." In other words, even a lifetime is nowhere near long enough to fully appreciate the beauty of the world.

This thought of looming mortality and loss doesn't make the speaker wallow in despair, however. Instead, the speaker decides to squeeze every drop of magic out of life before it's over—and he starts by heading out into the woods. Life is short, but the speaker believes that's all the more reason to open up the front door, take a breath of that cool spring air, and go for a walk among the trees.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,

In the poem's first quatrain (four-line stanza), the speaker makes it clear that spring has officially arrived. The cherry tree, which the speaker believes is the most beautiful tree around, is in bloom, its branches "hung" with pretty white blossoms. That passive verb, "hung," as though nature itself has decorated the tree to celebrate the season.

The poem's syntax (that is, word order) emphasizes the cherry tree's splendor, placing its *loveliness* right up front:

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now

Note, too, how enjambment calls readers' attention to the word "now" and creates immediate anticipation and excitement. This is a poem about seizing the day, and "now" firmly sets it in the

present moment.

Pretty-sounding alliteration ("bloom," "bough") and consonance ("hung," "along"; "loveliest," "bloom," "along") bring the lines' imagery to life. These sounds chime harmoniously, creating *sonic* beauty to mirror the visual beauty of the cherry tree.

These lines also establish the poem's meter. "Loveliest of Trees" uses iambic tetrameter throughout, with some variations. Iambs are metrical feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern (da-DUM), and tetrameter just means there are four of them in each line. Note, though, how the first line immediately breaks this pattern:

> Loveliest | of trees, | the cher- | ry now
> Is hung | with bloom | along | the bough,

The poem starts with a dactyl—a trisyllabic foot that goes stressed-unstressed-unstressed (DUM-da-da). The first line thus starts with a metrical "spring" in its step!

Note, too, that the poem uses rhyming couplets throughout. The clear rhyme of "now" and "bough" adds to the poem's sonic beauty.

LINES 3-4

And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Lines 3 and 4 complete the sentence that began in line 1, providing further description of the cherry tree that "stands about the woodland ride"—that is, along the path through the woods. The speaker personifies the tree in line 4, saying that it is "Wearing white for Eastertide."

The speaker is referring to the fact that the tree is covered in delicate white blossoms. It's as though the tree has gotten dressed up, and in doing so is inviting the speaker to come and revel in the start of spring with it.

Consider the specific occasion the speaker mentions, too. Spring, a season of renewal and rebirth, coincides with Eastertide, the 50-day period that begins with the commemoration of Jesus's resurrection. This reference to Christianity gently confers holiness and spiritual beauty on the tree itself—and, indeed, the speaker sees the blossom on the tree as a kind of spiritual lesson (more on that later). White is a traditional Eastertide color.

As with the first two lines, these use sound patterning to mirror the prettiness of the trees. There is the alliteration of "woodland" and "Wearing white" and the assonance of "ride," "white" and "Eastertide."

LINES 5-8

Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

Note how the stanza starts with "now"—the second time the word has been used. Even though this "now" just means something like "right" or "okay," it subtly reminds the reader that this poem is all about being in the present moment, *in the now*.

The speaker then does some calculations, subtracting his *years lived* from his *total expected lifespan*. In effect, this is like a little math puzzle nestled inside a poem! The math here is pretty simple, though the language might seem unusual to modern readers. A "score" means 20; "threescore" means 60 (3 x 20); "threescore years and ten," then, is 70. The speaker works on the assumption that his life will last 70 years. Now, as "twenty will not come again," this puts the speaker's age at 20 or so. He's still young, then! The emphasis, though, is on the fact that these years "will not come again." That's nearly a third of the speaker's lifetime *already* gone. The speaker's not saying *I've got my whole life ahead of me*, but *life is short*.

Notice how line 6 lacks an unstressed syllable up top (remember, the poem is written in iambic meter, and iambs are supposed to follow a da-DUM beat pattern):

> Twent- | y will | not come | again,

This technique—omitting the first unstressed syllable—is known as catalexis. The line just got a little shorter, just like speaker's life (the poem also uses this trick in lines 4 and 10)!

The speaker continues:

> And take from seventy springs a score,
> It only leaves me fifty more.

Completing the sum, the speaker figures that he'll only see another 50 springs after this one. Life, especially to the young, can sometimes seem slow, as if it might last forever. But reframe one life as 70 or so springs and it all seems much more finite all of a sudden. And that's the speaker's—and the poem's—point: life is too short *not* to make time for appreciating the beauty of the world, particularly nature.

LINES 9-12

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

To the speaker, 50 years—or "springs"—are hardly enough to appreciate the splendors of "things in bloom." Note how, in line 10, the speaker swaps out a measurement of time for a measurement of area: "Fifty springs are little room" (rather than "time"). This subtly presents the world as a space to be explored, and in 50 years one can barely even scratch the

surface.

Note, too, how in this line, like line 6, the first iamb here missing its opening unstressed syllable. This catalexis makes the line pass more quickly, again subtly evoking the brevity of life:

> Fif- | ty springs | are lit- | tle room,

These lines also use assonance to further underline the message that life is short. "Since," "things in," "Fifty springs," "little"—all of these have this jumpy little /i/ sound that seems to accelerate the poem towards its end as though, on some level, time is running out.

The speaker then finishes the poem with a simple statement of intent:

> About the woodlands I will go
> To see the cherry hung with snow.

The simplicity of these lines reflects a certain clarity of mind. Though he's young, the speaker understands that life is short—and he isn't going to make the mistake of wasting his, not when it's a beautiful world out there! The speaker wants to—and will—seize the day, fully aware that neither his life nor the lovely bloom of spring will last forever. The speaker concludes, then, that it's time to go outside.

The "snow" imagery refers to the white blossom on the cherry tree's branches. Sibilant alliteration in "see" and "snow" has a delicate, whispery quality—almost as if a cool spring breeze blows through the poem as the speaker opens the door and steps outside. Modern readers might even feel gently encouraged to put the screens down and go outside themselves!

SYMBOLS

THE CHERRY TREE

The cherry tree symbolizes the majesty of the natural world as well as the fleeting beauty and freshness of youth. Cherry trees bloom in the spring, a season linked with rebirth and renewal. Notice, too, that the speaker says the tree is "Wearing white for Eastertide," a time of year associated with Christ's resurrection. The tree's white blossoms connote purity, as though they're yet to be sullied by the drudgery of the world. And in a way, the tree is also a symbol for the speaker himself: just 20, he, too, is in the "spring" of life.

That life, the speaker knows, won't last forever—nor will the tree's blooms. Those snowy-white blossoms might be adorning its branches right "now," but they won't be there for long; soon enough the petals will fall. Likewise, the speaker will one day grow old and die. The tree thus further represents the brevity of life in general. The sight of it reminds the speaker just how much beauty there is to see in the world, and just how little time he has to take it all in.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now / Is hung with bloom along the bough, / And stands about the woodland ride / Wearing white for Eastertide."
- **Lines 11-12:** "About the woodlands I will go / To see the cherry hung with snow."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Loveliest of Trees" is filled with musical alliteration, which keeps the poem's tone light-hearted and also helps to convey the beauty of the cherry tree itself. One might think of the poem's sound patterning as the poetic equivalent to blossoms on a tree; the shared sounds decorate lines of poetry much like white blossoms decorate the cherry tree's "bough." Take the two /b/ sounds in line 2, for example:

> Is hung with bloom along the bough,

These bouncy sounds add immediate music to the poem, aided by the lush /l/ consonance of "bloom" and "along." The soft, breezy /w/ alliteration of lines 3 and 4 adds yet more sonic loveliness:

> And stands about the woodland ride
> Wearing white for Eastertide.

This alliteration also calls readers' attention to an important image. The speaker is personifying the cherry tree, describing it as though it has gotten dressed up for Easter. The mention of "white" and "Eastertide" links the tree with purity and Jesus's resurrection. The tree seems almost holy as it beckons to the speaker to come outside and celebrate the season.

In the next stanza, the hushed sibilance "seventy springs a score" subtly evokes the swift passage of time, those /s/ sounds smooth and slippery. Similarly, the quiet /s/ sounds of "See" and "snow" in the poem's final line convey the tree's soft, delicate beauty.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "bloom," "bough"
- **Line 3:** "woodland"
- **Line 4:** "Wearing white"

- **Line 5:** "ten"
- **Line 6:** "Twenty"
- **Line 7:** "seventy springs," "score"
- **Line 11:** "woodlands," "will"
- **Line 12:** "see," "snow"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment adds a sense of urgency to the poem. The lines move smoothly and steadily down the page, evoking the swift passage of time and underscoring the speaker's decision to seize the day and squeeze every drop out of life.

Take line 1:

> Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
> Is hung with bloom along the bough,

This enjambment adds emphasizes the word "now." As this is a poem very much about living in the present, it makes sense to stress a word that *relates* to the present! Breaking the line on the word "now" pushes the reader to concentrate on "now," too. Without a main verb to make sense of the sentence, that "now" dangles in the air. This brief moment of suspense makes the arrival of the blossoms in line 2 all the more sudden and surprising. The "bloom" seems to materialize out of nowhere in line 2.

The enjambment between the poem's final two lines is also striking:

> About the woodlands I will go
> To see the cherry hung with snow.

As with line 1, breaking the line on the word "go" calls readers' attention to an important concept in the poem: the idea of taking action, of going out and appreciating the world while you still can. And because there's no punctuation after "go," the line flows swiftly into the next. Knowing there's no time to waste, the speaker acts without delay.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "now / Is"
- **Lines 3-4:** "ride / Wearing"
- **Lines 9-10:** "bloom / Fifty"
- **Lines 11-12:** "go / To"

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery helps readers envision the loveliness of that "loveliest of trees," the cherry.

The speaker says in line 2 that this tree "Is hung with bloom along the bough." The verb construction "Is hung" suggests a kind of deliberate artistry at work; it sounds like someone or something—perhaps nature itself—has decorated the tree's branches, gently draping blossoms all along its "bough." Readers can picture the freshly blooming tree, its flowers making it look as though it has gotten all dolled up "for Eastertide."

There's another example of imagery in the final line of the poem, where the speaker describes his desire to go out and see "the cherry hung with snow." This is also a metaphor: the tree isn't *literally* covered with snow, but its delicate white blossoms remind the speaker of snowflakes. In addition to conveying the tree's beauty, this image subtly implies that such beauty is fragile and fleeting. "Snow" can brighten up a landscape, but also melts away soon if the sun is out. The lovely cherry tree won't be quite so lovely forever—which is why the speaker's so keen to get outside!

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Loveliest of trees, / the cherry now / Is hung with bloom along the bough, / And stands about the woodland ride / Wearing white for Eastertide."
- **Line 12:** "To see the cherry hung with snow."

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker personifies the cherry tree in lines 3 and 4, saying that it "stands about the woodland ride / Wearing white for Eastertide." The tree, covered in white blossoms, looks like it has gotten all dressed up for springtime. The personification makes it sound like the tree knows the season of fresh growth won't last long, and as such is going to celebrate while it has the chance. Saying that the tree "stands" by the side of a path through the woods is another subtle example of personification, this time perhaps suggesting that the tree is proud of its fleeting beauty; it stands tall, eager to show off for the world.

Of course, trees don't actually get dressed up or celebrate. This personification reflects the speaker's own desire to revel in the fresh loveliness of spring, to enjoy being young while he still can. Indeed, the speaker also associates the tree's white flowers with Eastertide, a 50-day festival period that celebrates Jesus's resurrection. The tree (and the speaker) wants to celebrate specifically celebrate simply being *alive*.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "And stands about the woodland ride / Wearing white for Eastertide."

VOCABULARY

The Cherry (Line 1, Line 12) - That is, the cherry tree, which blooms in spring.

Hung with bloom (Line 2) - Covered with white blossoms.

Woodland ride (Line 3) - A path through the woods.

Eastertide (Line 4) - The period from Easter Sunday to Pentecost Sunday that commemorates Christ's resurrection.

Threescore years and ten (Line 5) - "Score" means 20, and "threescore" is 60; plus 10 equals 70. The speaker is estimating that he'll live to be 70 years old.

A score (Line 7) - 20 years.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Loveliest of Trees" consists of three quatrains (four-line stanzas). Those quatrains can also be broken up into six rhyming couplets. Add in a steady iambic meter, and the poem feels bright and bouncy throughout. The poem's simple, musical form also helps to convey the speaker's own clarity of mind. He might be acknowledging his own mortality, but it sure doesn't sound like the thought of death hasn't gotten him down. Instead, he comes across as clear-eyed and sure-footed as he declares his intention to "go / To see the cherry hung with snow."

METER

"Loveliest of Trees" uses iambic tetrameter, with some variations. A line of iambic tetrameter contains four feet poetic feet known as iambs, each of which follows an unstressed-stressed (da-DUM) syllable pattern. Take lines lines 2 and 3:

> Is hung | with bloom | along | the bough,
> And stands | about | the wood- | land ride

Iambs create a steady forward momentum sometimes likened to a heartbeat or footsteps, which seems appropriate for a poem about seizing the day and going for a walk in the woods!

Note, though, that the poem starts with a variation:

> Loveliest | of trees, | the cher- | ry now

The first foot here swaps out an iamb for a dactyl: stressed-unstressed-unstressed (DUM-da-da). This sounds bouncy and energetic, mirroring the speaker's enthusiasm for the cherry tree. The poem starts with a little "spring" in its metrical step.

Elsewhere, the poem sometimes skips the first unstressed syllable altogether. This technique is called catalexis, and it appears in lines 4, 6, and 10:

> Wear- | ing white | for East- | ertide.
> [...]
> Twen- | ty will | not come | again,
> [...]
> Fif- | ty springs | are litt-| le room,

Trimming these lines subtly reflects both the speaker's excitement and his preoccupation with his own mortality. The amount of time he has left on this planet diminishes with every second; like these lines, his future only becomes shorter. Catalexis makes the poem sound all the more urgent in its call to go outside and appreciate the beauty of the world.

RHYME SCHEME

"Loveliest of Trees" uses rhyming couplets throughout, creating a rhyme scheme of AABB CCDD EEFF. These rhymes are all full and satisfying on the ear. Their pleasant chime complements the cherry tree's simple beauty. In filling the poem with music, they also keep its tone feeling light and joyful. The speaker might be thinking about death, but he certainly doesn't *sound* upset!

SPEAKER

"Loveliest of Trees" appears in a collection called *A Shropshire Lad*, so readers can assume that the poem's speaker is a young man from the English county of Shropshire. (The poem itself, however, never reveals any identifying details about the speaker apart from his age.)

The speaker clearly has a zest for life and an appreciation for nature's beauty. Even though the speaker is just 20 years old, he's keenly aware of his own mortality. He reckons he'll live to around 70 (or "threescore years and ten"). To him, 50 years is hardly enough time to appreciate the beauties of the natural world. He thus resolves to seize the day by going outside to "see the cherry hung with snow."

SETTING

"Loveliest of Trees" takes place in the spring, presumably in England (this poem appears in a book called *A Shropshire Lad*, and Shropshire is an English county that borders Wales). The beautiful cherry tree is in bloom, its branches decked out with white blossoms that appear for only a few weeks a year. The speaker also says that it's Eastertide, a period that commemorates Christ's resurrection and adds to the setting's symbolism: this is a time of rebirth and renewal. The cherry tree looks like it's "Wearing white" as part of the Easter celebrations, as though it has dressed up for the occasion.

All these details add to the sense that this is a very special moment in time indeed, one that the speaker would do well to appreciate. The blossoms won't last forever, and the speaker

has a limited number of "springs" left to take in their beauty. The setting reminds the speaker that he's mortal, and that, even though he's young, life itself is short. With that in mind, he ends the poem and goes for a walk.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Loveliest of Trees" was first published in A. E. Housman's 1896 collection *A Shropshire Lad*. The collection's 63 poems revolve around themes of death, time, and the fleeting nature of youth, with many featuring a much more pessimistic outlook than that presented by the speaker of "Loveliest of Trees." Though initially rejected by publishers and not an immediate success, the collection's link to an ideal of "Englishness" ("Shropshire" is an English county) made it a hit a few years after its release. The collection also valorizes soldiers, which eventually helped lead to its popularity throughout Britain during the Boer War as well as World War I.

A Shropshire Lad has inspired both praise and condemnation, and Housman remains a poet whose literary reputation is up for debate. For some, he's a sensitive soul whose poetry captures a particular sense of place. For others, he's a fusty writer with an almost adolescent way of looking at the world. Ezra Pound, the famous modernist, once characterized Housman's poetry as "woe, etc."

In its praise of the beauty of nature, *A Shropshire Lad* continues the tradition of earlier Romantic poets. Housman's use of simple meter and rhyme, meanwhile, echoes that of other Victorian poets like Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Housman published *A Shropshire Lad* in 1896. This places it at the tail-end of the Victorian era, a time during which Britain extended the reach of its empire around the world and made significant developments in transportation and infrastructure. This was also a period of strict morals and religiosity on the one hand and scientific challenges to the accepted dogma on the other; geological discoveries and Darwin's theories of evolution led to a crisis of faith as many questioned the biblical account of the world's creation. The speaker of the poems in *A Shropshire Lad* finds no solace in religion, instead seeing the universe as hostile to humanity.

Housman was in his thirties when he published *A Shropshire Lad* and insisted that the poems were not overtly biographical. "I was born in Worcestershire, not Shropshire, where I have never spent much time," he wrote in a later letter. The poems' outlook, Housman also said, stemmed from his "observation of the world."

Housman reportedly had young male readers in mind when he wrote the collection, which grew in popularity after Britain began fighting the Boer War. This was a conflict that took place in what is now referred to as South Africa from 1899-1902. It was euphemistically called "The Last of the Gentleman's Wars," but it was anything but; casualties amounted to 60,000 people. The collection's themes of Britishness, youth, death, and nostalgia resonated even more strongly at the onset of World War I; the book was taken by many British soldiers into that conflict.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Shropshire Lad — Check out the popular collection in which "Loveliest of Trees" was published. (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5720/5720-h/5720-h.htm)
- Housman's Life and Work — Learn more about Housman in this biography from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/a-e-housman)
- The Invention of Love — Watch a clip from a play by Tom Stoppard, which imagines A. E. Housman visiting the classical underworld. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teg8-iqkYOA)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to "Loveliest of Trees" read aloud by actor Arthur Darvill. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ub_8j9T2pFA&ab_channel=RoseTheatre)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER A. E. HOUSMAN POEMS

- To an Athlete Dying Young
- When I Was One-and-Twenty

HOW TO CITE

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