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Terence, This Is Stupid Stuff
By A. E. Housman
Interpreting Poetry
Revision

E. Housman's (1859-1936, England) poem, "Terence, This is Stupid Stuff," is an intriguing experience for the reader.

The title of the poem reminded me, somehow, of my first reaction that I have when I don't understand something the first time. I am tempted to say, "This is stupid!"—although I don't really mean it. I can sense the same frustration in the title.

After the poet gets your attention, you start to wonder what could be so frustrating for that person. The person who talks to Terence is one of his friends, as we find out at the end of the first stanza:

"Pretty friendship 'tis to rhyme
Your friends to death before their time..." (544).

From this verse, it is obvious that Terence's friend seems to be bored to death by his poems.

What exactly is Terence's friend complaining about? He tells Terence that although nothing's wrong with his health, his poems are "sick" and sad. Terence's poems create a discomfort with

their melancholic tone: "...the verse you make, it gives a chap the belly-ache" (544). He's inviting Terence to join them, and he's asking him to cheer up: "Come pipe a tune to dance to, lad" (544).

In the second stanza, it's Terence's turn to talk. He's amused by his friend's beliefs. We can sense the irony in the tone of his voice:

"Ale, men, ale's the stuff to drink

For fellows whom it hurts to think" (544).

It's a double irony. Why would it hurt to think? Is it because they are not smart enough, or is it because their minds are too intoxicated from too much drinking?

Terence thinks that too many "peer[s] of England" (544) find too much comfort in drinking, and that they look in the pewter pot to "see the world as the world's not" (544). He knows that, by drinking, you only postpone dealing with your problems and lose touch with reality—but only temporarily. Sooner or later, reality will catch up with you; when it does, it's even uglier than before—especially when you wake up in "muck" (544), and all your clothes are wet.

He admits that he used to live the same way his friends do; but when he realized that life is not easy, he changed his ways of living. He wants to be prepared for the bad times to come—since luck is a very rare thing that could happen to anyone. By sharing his life experience and the wisdom of the world—through his poetry—Terence tries to prepare his friends for the bad times they may encounter during their lifetime.

In the last stanza, he tells the story of a king, Mithridates, who beat all the odds and lived a long life—very unusual in the East. Because the king was prepared for bad times, when his enemies tried to poison him, he survived—they didn't.

Terence's message is that if his friends will act wisely, they will be able to live a happy and long life. Poetry is not a stupid thing, but food for the mind and soul. In poetry they could find the wisdom of the world, while in the "pewter pot" (544), they could not.

Works Cited

Housman, A. E. "Terence, This Is Stupid Stuff." *Angles of Vision: Reading, Writing, and the Study of Literature*. Eds. Arthur W. Biddle and Toby Fulwiler. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1992. 544-545.