

# The Binary Opposition of the Themes in Housman's "Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries"

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## ABSTRACT

Binary opposition has been a fundamental conceptual mode in the human mind to interpret the seemingly chaotic world since ancient times. In literary practice, binary opposition is a feasible way to emphasise and integrate meanings in literary works, and above all, a driving force in the mechanism of textual development. This essay attempts to analyse the writing device and the corresponding aesthetic effect in the poem "Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries", composed by Alfred Edward Housman. This poem is one of the most well-known poems in his poetry collection *Last Poems*. Hitherto, much scholarship is attached to the poem's themes, the poet's language and perplexity of homosexual love for Moses Jackson, *etc.*, whereas the writing devices of the poem remain underexplored. This essay argues that in the poem's themes, two corresponding groups of opposite subthemes can be extracted: the contemptible in opposition to the admirable feat; paid death in opposition to the unpaid value of life. In the first group, the contrast between the world's contemptuous attitude towards the mercenaries and the admirable virtues in the mercenaries' valour, upgrades the sympathy into a heart-broken bitterness for the loss of those unfortunate youths. In the second group, the contrast between the dismissed death and the saviour-like role of the mercenaries underpins the personas' subversive defiance against the traditional scorn. The Epitaph, at this moment, evolves into a charge of the cold and unfeeling world. Therefore, the exploration of the binary opposition of the subthemes in this poem can reveal the writing device that produces the tension, and explain the contribution of the binary opposition to the central theme.

**Keywords:** Housman, Epitaph, theme, binary opposition

## 1. Introduction

The poem "Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries"[1] is one of the most well-known poems collected in *Last Poems* composed by Alfred Edward Housman, who taught in Cambridge and was a popular poet and scholar after WWI. George Orwell comments on Housman's reputation as such:

"At the beginning of the period I am speaking of, the years during and immediately after the war (WWI), the writer who had the deepest hold upon the thinking young was almost certainly Housman. Among people who were adolescent in the years 1910-25, Housman had an influence which was enormous and is now not at all easy to understand." [2]

The above quotation reveals the overwhelming influence of Housman on his contemporaries. The poem "Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries" is typical of Housman's depiction of masculinity and his plain language. Hitherto, much scholarship is attached to the poem's themes, the poet's language and perplexity of homosexual love for Moses Jackson, *etc.*, whereas the writing devices of the poem remain underexplored. It is the intention of this essay to explore the binary opposition of the subthemes in

verse which produces the tension, and to explain the contribution of the binary opposition to its central theme.

## 2. BINARY OPPOSITION AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN LITERARY CRITICISM

Binary opposition has been a fundamental conceptual mode in the human mind to interpret the world since ancient times. According to anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, binary opposition is a mytheme by which human outlook sees the nature of the universe as groups of contradictory dyadic images.[3] These structural opposites root in the unconsciousness of the initial human mind, such as good/evil in western Christianity, Yin/Yang in traditional Chinese philosophy. they help mankind to comprehend a seemingly chaotic world.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the concept of binary opposition prevailed as a result of structuralists' research, characterised by that of Ferdinand de Saussure, who played an important role in the formation of contemporary literary theory. He puts forward:

"binary opposition is the means by which the units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined in reciprocal determination with another term, as in binary

code. It is not a contradictory relation but, a structural, complementary one".[4]

This definition conveys the fundamental rule of structuralism: the meaning of a literary work is not structuralists' focus, but how the meaning is established through the structure in the work. For structuralists, literary meanings are not produced in isolation, but in their relation to other concepts, to the larger context inside and outside the literary work.

In literary practice, binary opposition is a feasible way to emphasise and integrate meanings in literary works, and above all, a driving force in the mechanism of textual development. For this reason, this essay will explore the binary-dyadic concepts in Housman's "Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries", and reveal what is meant under its seemingly transparent, simple language.

### **3. BINARY OPPOSITION AS THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN "EPITAPH ON AN ARMY OF MERCENARIES"**

Issued in 1917 to commemorate the first battle of Ypres War, the poem "Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries" is actually composed in the year of 1914, immediately after that first warfare, to commemorate the fatally-attacked British Expeditionary Force. It is labelled an 'Epitaph' as the 100,000 strong armies were mostly either dead or wounded by the time the author wrote the poem. [5] In this sense, this war is almost a massacre. However, in history, the deaths of mercenaries were usually dismissed and considered merely as a loss of the money that hired them. Making the verse a roar of defiance and a bitter lament, the writing device of this poem produces great tension.

The poem is arranged in a logical sequence moving from distance to closeness, from the outside to the inside.

These, in the day when heaven was falling,  
The hour when earth's foundations fled,  
Followed their mercenary calling  
And took their wages and are dead.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;  
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;  
What God abandoned, these defended,  
And saved the sum of things for pay.

The above verses can be divided into two parts. Part I, the former four lines, delineates the outer world's distant observation of the experience of the mercenaries. Part II, the latter four lines, reveals a closer observation of the mercenaries' performance (it is actually a feat) and the inner world of the mercenaries. Hence, a shift of the tone can be perceived in the two parts. By further examining the two parts, two corresponding groups of opposite subthemes can be extracted: the contemptible in opposition to the admirable feat; paid death in opposition to the unpaid value of life. This essay argues the opposite subthemes play a vital role in intensifying

the tension. It is on this binary opposition the author constructs an edifice of bitterness for the loss of the young lives and subverts the outside impersonal view of the lives of mercenaries.

#### ***3.1 The contemptible in opposition to the admirable***

To understand the integrated meaning of the poem, it is necessary to get acquainted with the common conception about the mercenaries. Mercenaries refer to those professional soldiers who live on war. An overwhelming contemporary mentality was that these men were a contemptible mob who fought not for lofty cause but for money.

"Followed their mercenary calling  
And took their wages and are dead."

The above two lines convey the outer world's opinion of the person's mechanical submission without any judgment of the war because they have no sense of patriotism and loyalty and serve only their desire for money. Therefore, the former four lines, by presenting a distant observation, reveal the outer world's contemptuous attitude towards the mercenaries. The emotion of the poem at this moment is still held in check, waiting for an outburst.

However, in Part II, the emphasis of expression shifts to the opposite, to the vested benefit of Britain. In the line: "Their shoulders held the sky suspended", the soldiers are compared to Atlas, the Titans who holds up the sky in Greek legend, and hence, assume a heroic image. "They stood, and earth's foundations stay" refers implicitly to a fact that in the first battle of the Ypres War, the mercenary force, despite the horrible death toll, managed to hold back and even to halt the German advance, and so held the Channel ports. Despite the gruesome killing in the 1914 battle, no escape, no recession were spotted. Brooks interprets their perseverance this way: "the courage to stand and die rather than to run away usually comes from something like esprit de corps or professional pride or even from a kind of instinctive manliness rather than from adherence to the conventional rubrics of patriotism and duty" [6]. This comment reveals that the subconsciously distinctive masculinity, somehow, outweighs the intentionally pursued mission. Therefore, although no lofty political cause is attached to their conduct, the mercenaries can still be hailed as tough Hemingway heroes. Besides, as professional soldiers, their prowess in fighting such as the accuracy and the speediness of their shooting has long been admitted.

"What God abandoned, these defended," carries a biblical connotation. Every time God intended to punish a region, such as Jerusalem, he rendered the city ravaged by war. The stressed syllable in the word "abandon" creates a resounding effect which suggests the powerful impact of God's action on the world. This line, as other Housman's

poems, twists the biblical implication to convey the author's ultra-conventional view on the soldiers' feat. Ahmad Abu Baker comments on the above line: "yet God is not doing anything to stop all this destruction as if He abandoned the world and made it the soldiers responsibility to protect it." [7] Here, the mercenaries, on the one hand, show great dignity and strong personality when they unconventionally defy God by refusing to follow God's stance in order to protect the interest of human being. On the other hand, these soldiers are celebrated as saviours who rescue the humble lives from invasion and destruction. Therefore, part II, in sharp contrast to the former part, is virtually exalting the mercenaries as both valiant heroes and saviours.

The two parts present a vast gap between the two images: the contemptible and the admirable. The contrary and closer observation revealed in Part II demonstrates that the former contempt derives from the ignorance and the indifference of the outer world who, merely by a distant observation, arbitrarily adopts a biased attitude towards the personas. By the contrast between the mercenaries' unjust treatment and admirable virtues, sympathy is upgraded into a heart-broken bitterness for the loss of those unfortunate youths. Meanwhile betrayed is the protest against an impersonal and biased world, probably born of Housman's protest against the outside disdain for his sincere homosexual love for Moses Jackson.

### ***3.2 "paid death" in opposition to the unpaid value of life***

The 1914 battle of Ypres War was virtually a massive massacre: close to 100,000 mercenaries had perished by the time Housman wrote the poem. However, under the eye of the outer world, no bloody scenes, no pains were presented in the first part.

These, in the day when heaven was falling,  
The hour when earth's foundations fled,  
Followed their mercenary calling  
And took their wages and are dead.

The rare omission of the depiction of the bloody war suggests the fight, for the mercenaries, is no longer a lofty cause but merely a way to money, and hence, not worth the trouble of mentioning. Meanwhile, the outer world's dismissal of their death is revealed in the minimised reference to their sacrifice: "are dead". Furthermore, the line "And took their wages and are dead" makes the deaths seem natural and right because the dead are paid. In the case of the mercenary army, its enlisted men derived mainly from Irish lower classes: the younger sons of impoverished farmers and unskilled labourers who were compelled to sell their lives for sustenance. As a matter of fact, their wages were trifling, less than regular armies. However, from the perspective of the outer world, the small wages justify their deaths. This line reflects that the war, when performing its carnage, insensitizes the world to

death, and deprives it of the least respect for life. What is behind "paid death" is a twisted view of the value of life and the deterioration of humanity.

Part II is a close observation of the soldiers. It continues to be the outside depiction of the soldiers' feat with only the last line as a powerful glimpse into the inner soul of the heroes.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;  
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;  
What God abandoned, these defended,  
And saved the sum of things for pay.

The last line "And saved the sum of things for pay." emerges as the only and sole revelation of the inner mind of the dead mercenaries. Hence, the enlightening spark of the poem. It can be paraphrased in two ways. In one sense, "save" can be understood as the meaning of "rescue", "the sum of things" as "the world", "pay" as "the compensation". The line, therefore, means that in mercenaries' seeking for money, they simultaneously save the world. In another sense, "save" can be understood as "store", "the sum of things" maybe as "all that can demonstrate the significance of their life", "pay" as "the real reward for their virtue". The reward may be a spiritual matter, say, a tribute to at least their virtues (such as valour, prowess). The other paraphrase can go like this: the mercenaries save all that can demonstrate the significance of their lives, claiming the worthy respect for their lives and virtues that the world owes to them. It is in the final line that the long-repressed cynicism and agony make themselves heard, and therefore, carry a volcanic power. This line finally denies straightforwardly the former notion of paid death, and intensifies the continuously implied bitterness for the dismissed value of the life of the mercenaries. This opposite point of view remains the primary underpinning of the personas' subversive defiance against the traditional scorn. The Epitaph, at this moment, evolves into a charge of the cold and unfeeling world.

As far as the personal fate of the writer is concerned, the unpaid value of the mercenaries somehow echoes to Housman's unpaid homosexual love for Jackson as neither the society nor Jackson himself accepted homosexual love. Therefore, with this poem, the writer indirectly released his protest against the world's biased attitude towards his deep though untraditional love.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

By juxtaposing the contemptible and the admirable images of the mercenaries, their "paid death" and the unpaid value of life, Housman reinforces the sympathy for the mercenaries' life tortured by both the war and the impersonal world, rendering the indignation all the more powerful. The unpaid, unpitied life of the mercenaries is, as a matter of fact, a mirror of Housman's abjection: a lifetime unpaid, despised homosexual love for Moses Jackson. This poem bears not only witness to the writer's personal protest against the unjust world, but also his deep

sympathy for all marginalised life. For Housman, the “old-contemptible” mercenaries assume the miniature of humble men as depressed, despised but honourable particles in the impersonal universe among historical upheavals.

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