

# Symbolic Landscaping: Housman's *Bredon Hill*

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Structured by a series of juxtaposed images, A.E. Housman's *Bredon Hill* articulates in a tautly symbolic way some of the elemental themes of *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), the book of poems in which it appears.

The poem's "plot" develops in two parts. In the first (stanzas 1-4), a lover and his sweetheart pass their Sundays lying idly on Bredon Hill while other folk attend church down in the surrounding valleys. In the second part (stanzas 5-7), this literal plot evolves into a metaphorical fiction wherein the sweetheart leaves Bredon Hill on a snowy morning not to marry but to die. The narrative structure is that of the standard tragic pyramid, an ascending line of developing hope and a descending line of loss after crisis.

This dual fiction is unified by a tension between a series of juxtaposed images: summertime and Christmas, larks and snow, a wedding and a funeral, bells pealing and tolling, people in love and people at prayer.

But more than by these images, the poem organizes its meaning in terms of its symbolic landscape, for the chief themes accrue under another antithetical pair of richly connotative images, Bredon Hill and the valleys with their churches. While the "good people" dutifully attend church down in the valleys, on Bredon Hill the lovers luxuriate in an idyll. The naturally pleasant is everywhere apparent on the Edenic hill – in the larks' song, the thyme, the sky, the exhilarating panorama of colorful landscape all about them. Life on Bredon Hill is airy, carefree, private and romantic.

In the valleys, however, convention rules. The institutional church, the Sabbath-observing "good" worshippers and their normal society all bespeak another world, a different state of mind from that of the hill. Life there is routine, ritualized and communal. A valley itself suggests a lower mode of being – down-to-earth and humdrum – than that of the romantic heights of a Bredon Hill.

Indeed, the speaker looks down on the valley as youth and time seem endless to him, the days of loving and daydreaming and contentment seeming an eternal summer. But when the sweetheart leaves metaphorically to die at Christmas (emended by Housman from "winter" for the final version), Housman suggests the birth of another way of life. The speaker's exasperated concession in the closing couplet to leave Arcadia for the world emphasizes his recognition that hopes and illusions must eventually come down to reality just as surely as age will nip the bloom of youth.

Not only are the contrapuntal symbols of hill and valley strong enough to govern the structure of the poem, but they are also rich enough to yield its multiple themes: the inexorable laws of mortality, the loss of young love, the futility of hope, the reluctance to surrender youth, the

transience of contentment, the primal tensions between the romantic and realistic states of mind as well as those between two days of life, the intellectual and the practical, the carefree and the workday, the bohemian and the conventional. By its symbolism “Bredon Hill” dramatizes the inevitable death of innocent abandon, old or young, and the succession of pedestrian reality in a rhythm as natural as the seasons that clock youth’s mortality throughout the lyrical-narrative cycle of *A Shropshire Lad*.