Poetry analysis: Is My Team Ploughing, by A. E. Housman

A. E. Housman’s Is My Team Ploughing is a poetic dialogue between the spirit of a recently deceased man and a close friend who is living. It is written in iambic trimeter quatrains rhymed xaxa. The dead person speaks the odd numbered quatrains asking a series of four questions about how life is continuing in his absence.

The first question is stated in the poem’s title.

“Is my team ploughing,

That I was used to drive

And hear the harness jingle

When I was man alive?”

His living friend reassures him that all is as it was when the questioner was alive. The horses trample and the harness jingles as usual even though the questioner lies dead beneath the land he used to plough.

Question two is about football and involves a metonymy—the use of something closely related instead of the thing actually meant. In this case it is “the leather” that stands for a soccer ball.

“Is football playing

Along the river shore,

With lads to chase the leather

Now I stand up no more.

Again the answer is affirmative. No way is the death of an individual person or player going to bring the sport to a halt.

The last two questions are more pointed and directed at persons who are close companions of the deceased. The first asks about a lady friend and her grief for the deceased.

“Is my girl happy,

That I thought hard to leave,

And has she tired of weeping

As she lies down at eve?

The answerer assures the dead man that even with affairs of the heart sadness for a dead loved one does not last long. The girl “lies down lightly” and is not weighed with sorrow for the questioner. He concludes his quatrain with the suggestion that the questioner should “Be still” and “sleep” – the verb being a commonplace substitution for to lie dead in his grave.

The final question is about how his friend is faring in the aftermath of a close acquaintance’s demise.

“Is my friend hearty,
Now I am thin and pine;
And has he found to sleep in
A better bed than mine?”
The answer is what most will have guessed.,

Yes, lad, I lie easy,

I lie as lads would choose;

I cheer a dead man’s sweetheart.

Never ask me whose.

Thus we have some of the usual pessimism and cynicism that are associated with Housman and that can be experienced in his “Eight O’Clock,” “Terence, This Is Stupid Stuff, ‘ ‘The Man He Killed,” and “Into My Heart an Air That Kills.” Here as in “Terence,” the cynicism is muted by the poet’s humorous treatment of the vanity of human wishes.