

**THE CRUSADE AGAINST MATERIALISM:  
A STUDY OF ALIENATION IN  
E.A.ROBINSON'S POETRY**

Thesis Submitted to the University of Calicut  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Award of the Degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** in English

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# Declaration

I, Josepheni Joseph hereby declare that this thesis entitled “The Crusade Against Materialism: A Study of Alienation in E.A. Robinson’s Poetry”, submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** is a bona fide record of the research carried out by me and that no part of it has previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma or any other similar title of any University.

Thrissur

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### *Abbreviations Used*

|    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| CP | - | Collected Poems                             |
| SP | - | Selected Poems                              |
| S  | - | Sonnets                                     |
| BJ | - | Ben Johnson Entertains a Man from Stratford |
| RR | - | Rembrandt to Rembrandt                      |

# CONTENTS

Page No.

Acknowledgement

Abbreviations Used

|           |  |     |
|-----------|--|-----|
| Chapter 1 | INTRODUCTION   | 1   |
| Chapter 2 | ROBINSON THE ANTIMATERIALIST                             | 37  |
| Chapter 3 | ALIENATION OF THE NONCONFORMIST                          | 90  |
| Chapter 4 | OPTIMISTIC DESPERATION                                   | 139 |
| Chapter 5 | THE ESSENTIAL ROBINSON: FUSION OF<br>THEME AND TECHNIQUE | 192 |
| Chapter 6 | CONCLUSION   | 217 |
|           | SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY                                      | 227 |

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The reconstitution of society to suit industrial needs brought about drastic change in the mindset of the Americans in the nineteenth century. The creed of material advancement replaced puritan morality and spirituality. The age named the “Gilded Age” because of its obsession with industrial expansion and economic prosperity paved the way for a capitalist society (Burton 4). Agrarian ideals were swept aside and the American continent became a highly competitive business community, poised for a big leap forward to commercial and material prosperity. This new economic system coincided with disillusionment with traditional Christian theology and brought about rapid dissemination of the philosophy of materialism. Any philosophy, when it becomes the dominant social ideology of a particular period, is modified to suit the desires and aspirations of the majority in a society. The philosophic doctrine of materialism, as it gained widespread acceptance in American society, came to be identified with pursuit of wealth and material comforts. The mass production of industrial goods at the beginning of the twentieth century heralded a new social and cultural era. The United States became a nation of cities with considerable increase in urban population. “This urban growth had wide cultural ramifications. While Americans remained strongly attached to rural and small-town values, the nation in the 1920’s became increasingly urbanized, not only numerically but also...‘in the cast of its mind, in its ideals, and in its folkways’” (Boyer et al. 842).

The new cultural ideology was based on the belief that unlimited production would lead to economic prosperity, which in turn, would contribute to the progress of the human race by promoting absolute freedom and unrestricted happiness. But the euphoria over economic prosperity and unlimited progress did not last long. Western man realized the folly

of his belief that material prosperity would put an end to all human misery. Though materialism paved the way for increased economic prosperity, it was also instrumental in bringing about conformity, automatization and alienation. Instead of absolute freedom and unrestricted happiness modernization paved the way for decreased freedom and happiness. F. Tannenbaum concluded his *Philosophy of Labor* stating that “The major error of the last century has been the assumption that a total society can be organized upon an economic motive, upon profit. The trade union has proved that notion to be false. It has demonstrated once again that men do not live by bread alone” (Fromm 195). Mass production generated an abundance of consumer goods. But it also promoted repetitive labor with a minimum of initiative or variation. This resulted in boredom and lack of involvement. Emile Durkheim observed that boredom and anxiety were not found to such a great extent in pre-modern societies and were indicative of the alienation of man in the modern age. In his third major sociological work entitled *Suicide* he established the direct relationship between suicide and social causes (Morrison 204). From Durkheim’s social theory of suicide evolved the reasoning that high incidence of suicide in modern western societies was linked to the existing social ideology.

This dissertation undertakes a textual analysis of Edwin Arlington Robinson’s poetry and the poetic strategy employed by him to subvert the destructive social ideology prevalent in American society at the beginning of the twentieth century. Industrialization, commercialization and materialism had forged a new social ideology in American society. The salient features of this ideology were an obsession with wealth and material comforts, the submission of individual identity to herd identity, and skepticism towards spiritual and moral values. Deviance from this dominant ideology resulted in social alienation, while submission to the ideology paved the way for self- alienation. Social alienation was the

individual subject's estrangement from its community or society. Self-alienation was characterized by the division of the self into two conflicting parts: "a split between man's real 'nature', or 'essence', and his 'factual' properties or 'existence'" (Edwards1: 79). This alienation from man's real nature resulted in frustration and mental aberration. The self-alienated individual was far from being sane though he performed the routine functions of life. The split in his personality destroyed his capacity for reasoning and rendered him unproductive. The tragedy of the twentieth century western civilization was that society itself was insane as the majority were self-estranged individuals. Erich Fromm in his work, *The Sane Society*, contradicted the common belief that a society was always sane and concluded that in certain situations it was possible for a whole society to be sick. He went on to prove that twentieth century American society was a sick society comprising of a majority of self-alienated individuals and pointed to a close link between the economic prosperity of societies and their mental pathology:

We find that the countries in Europe which are among the most democratic, peaceful and prosperous ones, and the United States, the most prosperous country in the world, show the most severe symptoms of mental disturbance. The aim of the whole socio-economic development of the western world is that of the materially comfortable life, relatively equal distribution of wealth, stable democracy and peace, and the very countries which have come closest to this aim show the most severe signs of mental unbalance. (19)

The mental abnormality of this modern man was unlike the insanity found in psychiatric patients. He could perform the routine tasks of life perfectly. The pathology of this man lay in his inability to experience himself and the world around him in an authentic manner. This fragmentation of experience rendered him inhuman and prompted him to lead



a mechanical life. Since self-alienation was not immediately apparent it was extremely difficult to identify the abnormality afflicting modern man. Robinson was one of the very few who recognized the symptoms of mental pathology tormenting his contemporaries and traced the root cause of their insanity to the dominant materialistic ideology. Hence, he tried to redefine the social ideology of twentieth century America by exposing the evils of materialism through his poetry. Though he exposed the self-alienation of the majority with the objective of revealing the pitfalls of the philosophy of materialism, he was more concerned about the social alienation of the minority in his poetry. Most of his poems are on the social alienation of the nonconformist who refused to conform to the materialistic ideology. He portrays their marginalization and isolation in his poetry. The poet also exposes the stigmatization of this minority as the abnormal and their categorization as the failed. He propounded a philosophy that is a combination of realism and idealism, which he calls “Optimistic Desperation”, as an antidote to materialism (Smith 301).

A critique of Robinson’s crusade against materialism is possible only by placing him in his poetic and social context and revealing the influences which shaped him as one of the greatest of American poets. Robinson was born in 1869, when there prevailed a general dissatisfaction with contemporary American poetry. Bryant, Longfellow, Emerson, Lowell and Whitman were all gone and their place had not been taken by any. Scott Donaldson comments on the poetic climate of Robinson’s age in his biography of the poet. “Poetry had become a parlor game for the wealthy, a suppressed instinct whose chief function was ornament, an avocation unattached to and uninterested in American life” (169). Several critics felt the need for a genuine poet who would fill the lacuna existing in the American poetic scene. The words of a Massachusetts critic of the time reveal the urgent need for a poet, who represented the spirit of the American people:

The country needs a poet. England has her Kipling who fights to keep the pirates from stealing his peaches and Alfred Austin who waives his copyright rights for the benefit of whoever care to use his soft poems. We really have no one who can give tongue in rhyme appropriately when events call for expression, or thought bursts the bounds of prose. (Anderson 5)

Robinson too felt the need for a poet rooted in the American tradition, perhaps unaware at the time that he would play an important role in ushering in a new era in American poetry. In his sonnet "OH, for a poet – for a beacon bright" he called the age, "this barren age of ours" and expressed the need for a good American poet (S 21). But unfortunately in the initial stages of Robinson's poetic career the public as well as critics were not willing to accept the new type of poetry that he wrote. His poems about insignificant butchers, misers and drunkards shocked poetry lovers. Hence his poems written in a terse language with extraordinary psychological insight received lukewarm response from the poetic fraternity who had been used to nature poems and didactic poems. Ellsworth Barnard endorsed the poet's efforts to restore realism to American poetry and stated that he attempted

...to bring poetry back into touch with life; to take it out of the drawing room, out of the realm of hearts and flowers, and onto drab small town streets and dusty country roads; to tell the stories of humdrum and even sordid lives and show that these were after all the lives of human beings; and to tell these stories in 'the real language of men'. (Donaldson 171)

As the twentieth century dawned, a spirit of restlessness and boredom at the existing poetry combined with a sense of expectancy for the arrival of the new age and a new poetry. The new age demanded a different type of poetry and it was soon apparent that twentieth century poetry would be different from the old. From the very beginning of his poetic

career, Robinson started writing a different kind of poetry, though he stuck to the traditional form. Hence his poems were very slow in gaining public approval. Even critics found it difficult to accept the type of subject matter that he dealt with in his poems. But by 1912 the poetic renaissance had swept the American continent and there was plenty of poetry being written in an innovative manner. Robinson's poems began to attract critical and public attention. In 1913 Alfred Noyes named Robinson as "America's foremost poet" (Anderson 18). In 1917 when Amy Lowell undertook the task of analyzing the "new poetry", she considered Robinson as a pioneer of the "new poetry" and devoted the first chapter of her book, *Tendencies in Modern Poetry*, to Robinson (Anderson 19). The smooth blending of traditional and novel techniques in his poetry made Robert Frost remark that "Robinson stayed content with the old-fashioned way to be new" (33). Charles Cestre also endorsed this view and enumerated the traditional as well as modern qualities which make his poems modern classics:

Robinson as a poet deserves to be styled a modern classic, because he combines in harmonious union the old-time qualities of intellectual acumen, broad humanity, universal appeal, decorum, sense of proportion and art of composition, with powers more recently developed as means of literary expression: imaginative coloring, sensuous richness, suggestive foreshortenings and word melody. (5)

Robinson was especially modern in his subject matter which reflected the dichotomy in early twentieth century American life arising from the spiritual degeneration of this economically prosperous period in American history. Wallace L. Anderson compared Robinson with other modern writers and accorded him a pioneering position in bringing about the transition from the old to the new poetry. "Long before Eliot's 'The Waste Land'

and Auden's 'The Age of Anxiety,' Robinson mirrored the spiritual sterility of an age that was to hurl itself into two world wars and go crashing along on a 'blind atomic pilgrimage'" (63).

The circumstances that shaped Robinson's life are an important source of information regarding his poetry as well as his philosophic outlook. He was born in Head Tide, Maine, as the youngest of the three sons of Edward Robinson, a shrewd and practical businessman. Soon after the birth of Robinson, the family moved to Gardiner and it was here that the poet grew up. Gardiner, like other major towns of America of the time, was marching forward at a tremendous pace towards economic prosperity. It was a time when all institutions which make up a society--family, religion, education, industry, and media – conspired to propagate the supremacy of material prosperity. No wonder young men and women of the age internalized this ideology and complied with the demands made by it. Those who did not conform to this ideology were isolated as the abnormal. The two elder sons of the Robinson family showed signs of conforming to the new ideology and were lionized by the materialistic society. Dean, the eldest son studied medicine and became a physician. Herman, the second one, being endowed with the business acumen of his father, took over the family business to the delight of his father. But Robinson, the youngest son, did not fit into this family picture and was destined to be different. While other young men were busy making money and fame, Robinson remained aloof, unable to adjust to the materialist society around him. It was not as if he hated money but he was averse to cut-throat competition in the name of wealth and fame. This barbaric quest for wealth of the so called civilized was repulsive to Robinson's sensitive mind. He wrote to his friend Harry de Forest Smith, "Dollars are convenient things to have but this diabolical dirty race that men are running after them disgusts me" (Burton 4). At a time when people were willing to give up

their innate abilities-- the essence of their individual selves-- for the sake of wealth and fame, Robinson insisted on pursuing the vocation of poetry. At an early age he came under the spell of words and was drawn towards poetry. He began writing when he was eleven, and by the time he was sixteen, he knew fairly well that he was destined to be a poet. But poetry was not a creditable profession at the time and he had fallen from grace because of his decision to pursue poetry. Though his father forced him to take a course in science at high school, as he considered it more practical, Robinson continued to nurture his interest in poetry. He read a lot, enjoyed studying Latin and translated Latin verses into English. While his classmates found Latin tedious he was enthralled by Latin verses. Robinson equipped himself with knowledge of Latin poetry as a prerequisite for his aspiration to become a poet.

Even in a commercial society like Gardiner there were a few people who encouraged Robinson's interest in poetry. He became a member of the Poetry Society of Gardiner through Alanson Tucker Schuman who introduced him to the group. Realizing that young Robinson was a better poet than he would ever be, Dr. Schuman sought to encourage and nurture his poetic talent. Schuman's encouragement and criticism went a long way in shaping Robinson as a poet. Two other Gardiners who influenced Robinson's poetry were Caroline Swan who admired French poetry and Henry Sewall Webster who was a judge by profession and a poet by instinct. They too were members of the Poetry Club. Thus the foundation for Robinson's poetic career was laid in Gardiner in spite of the mercantile culture prevailing in the town.

Though his father never intended Robinson to attend Harvard, he was destined to enjoy the literary atmosphere of Harvard. After he finished school it was discovered that Robinson needed prolonged treatment for his ear and that was available only in Boston. So he was enrolled as a special student at Harvard so that he could receive constant medical

attention. At Harvard he came under the influence of distinguished professors. Though he denied being influenced by any of the faculty, the basis for his idealism could be traced to Professor Royce's interpretation of Schopenhauer's philosophy (Kaplan 28). Robinson's world view, realistic and hopeful at the same time, was derived undoubtedly from Royce. In his work *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* Royce asserted that "The world is, on the whole very nearly as tragic as Schopenhauer represents it to be. Only spirituality consists in being heroic enough to accept the tragedy of existence and to glory in the strength wherewith it is given to the true lords of life to conquer this tragedy, and to make their world after all divine" (Kaplan 28). Robinson's protagonists have this enduring capacity that Royce speaks of, and an optimism rooted in the reality of worldly suffering is pronounced in his poetry.

On the matter of transcendent influence, Robinson's critics are divided. William J. Free speaks of the influence of Emerson on Robinson and states that Robinson was especially attracted by Emerson's Law of compensation. "Just as Emerson believed that wisdom comes from pain, Robinson found hell worth enduring for the compensating knowledge of life's value" (71). But Free admits that, unlike Emerson, Robinson did not find in compensation a remedy for all of man's illness. "... Robinson's mind inherited from its New England soil a Hawthornesque power of blackness as well as Emersonian light. Experience taught him that few men were saints enough to possess the perfect love and wisdom of which Emerson wrote" (82). Free concludes that Robinson modified Emerson's Law of compensation to suit his purposes. But Yvor Winters was skeptical about the transcendentalist influence on Robinson and dismissed it as "fragmentary, occasional and contrary to the main directions of his thought and achievement" (4). Though Robinson's philosophy of life has certain parallels to transcendentalism, his idealism rooted in reality cannot be equated to the unrealistic optimism of Emerson.

Knowing Robinson's family circumstances this is not surprising. Tragedy loomed large over Robinson's family in his youth. He left Harvard without a degree, as the family business declined. His father died and his brother, Dean, was fully under the spell of drugs. The declining family business adversely affected Herman, who took to drinking to forget his misfortunes. Robinson's sensitive nature suffered terribly during those ill fated months. To add to the suffering, just before he published his first collection of poems, *The Torrent and the Night Before*, his mother died of black diphtheria. As the physician, the undertaker and the minister refused to touch her body, the three sons had to bury their mother themselves. These tragic circumstances left an indelible mark on Robinson and enriched his poetry. He learnt at an early age of failure, loneliness, misery, death and poverty. The pessimism in his poetry, for which he was severely criticized, was the product of his early suffering. But these early setbacks were also instrumental in developing a sympathetic approach towards "failures" which attracted readers to his poetry. He knew from personal experience that these "failures" had failed only from the materialist's point of view. He tried to redefine success and expressed disapproval of materialism through the medium of his poetry. Robinson's letter to Edith Brower at the time of the publication of his first volume of poetry articulates his condemnation of materialistic culture. "You may consider the whole thing as a kind of self-defense against the abject materialism of a "down east" community whereof the whole purpose of life is to "get a job" and to vote a straight Republican ticket" (Cary, Letters 16).

In 1897 Robinson left Gardiner for New York since he felt stifled by his family and friends. He published his second volume of poems, *The Children of the Night*, in the same year. At New York he was surrounded by a group of "incomplete genius," who had great talent but had failed in their chosen vocations. It was here that he made the acquaintance of

Alfred Louis, the original for Captain Craig and the Wandering Jew. He was fascinated by this extraordinary man, who had got to the edge of true fame and had then failed miserably. He had lofty connections and dazzled his hearers with his eloquence and learning. The profound effect that this incredible man had on him resulted in his first lengthy poem “Captain Craig”. In 1902 he published the poem along with “Isaac and Archibald” and “Aunt Imogen” in a volume entitled *Captain Craig*. He was happy with his work and expected that the volume would establish him as a poet. But unfortunately the volume did not make any impact and he fell into depression and started drinking excessively. Pessimistic by nature, Robinson did not expect critics to praise his innovative poetry but he had hoped they would at least acknowledge his existence as a poet. *Captain Craig* made very few ripples at the time on the American poetic scene.

Most poets would have quit writing or else would have altered their style and technique to suit the taste of the critics and the public at this juncture. But Robinson did not do either. In spite of the disappointment, with his typical New England tenacity, he remained firm in his conviction that he was born to be a pioneer of the “new” poetry. He continued to write in the same vein not willing to compromise on good writing. Perhaps it is this stubbornness to write only good poetry that prevented him from getting recognition at an early age. Winters points out that Robinson’s style “...is accurate with the conscientiousness of genius, and such accuracy is invariably a major obstacle to success. Nothing baffles the average critic so completely as honesty – he is prepared for everything but that; and I have the impression that this has been true in every period” (5-6).

The period following the publication of *Captain Craig* was indeed difficult for Robinson. Lack of recognition as a poet, loneliness and poverty combined to reduce him to a wreck. Help came to Robinson from an unexpected quarter in this critical period.



President Theodore Roosevelt came to know of Robinson's work through his son Kermit, who was a pupil at Groton. Roosevelt liked the verse and wrote an article in praise of Robinson's poems for the *Outlook* and persuaded Scribner to reissue *The Children of the Night*. Realizing the poet's financial position, the President also got him a job as special agent of the Treasury at \$2000 per year. But whether the charity was distasteful to Robinson or the disappointment of *Captain Craig* had left him despondent, he wrote very little during his employment under Roosevelt. In 1909 Roosevelt had to step down from the presidency and Robinson resigned his job. Though he had not published since the disappointment of *Captain Craig* he had never stopped writing. He was always aware that writing was the only business that he wanted to do and could do well. Hence he continued to write in spite of the lack of critical approval or public acclaim. In 1910 he published a collection of his poems entitled *The Town Down the River*. The title poem reflects the enthusiasm and relief that Robinson felt at leaving Gardiner with its sorrowful memories behind and taking up residence at New York. Just as the Tilbury Town of his poems was Gardiner, "the town down the river" was New York, a city which gave refuge to many aspiring writers and artists.

In 1911 Robinson was introduced to Mac Dowell colony at Peterborough, New Hampshire, an incident which was fortunate for Robinson and American poetry as it provided him with the space and leisure to write good poetry. He was so pleased with his life at the colony that for the rest of his life he returned every summer to the colony. At about this time he gave up alcohol and took to writing verse prolifically. In 1916 he published *The Man against the Sky* which was precipitated by the war and his reputation which had been on the rise since *The Town Down the River* received a great impetus with this publication.

“The Man against the Sky”, the title poem, is Robinson’s most vociferous attack on materialism. In the poem he asserts his faith in the ultimate meaning of life. He resolves the conflict between spirituality and materialism by arguing that the sufferings of the world can be explained only through faith in an ultimate purpose to human life. In a letter to Hermann Hagedorn the poet stated the theme of this philosophic poem. “The world has been made what it is by upheavals, whether we like them or not. I’ve always told you it’s a hell of a place. That’s why I insist that it must mean something. My July work was a poem on this theme and I call it ‘The Man against the Sky’” (Kaplan 63). Robinson objected to art for art’s sake and never wanted to build imaginary castles in his poems. He believed that poetry was a vocation, a calling, which demanded poets to be of service to humanity. He rejected didactic poetry. But he deplored poetry without values even more. He wanted to root his poems in the reality of everyday life and ponder on the important questions of life so as to discover a meaning and purpose for human life. His response to the important questions of life would help his readers groping in the dark to find the light beyond the darkness of this world. Thus Robinson evolved as an intellectual poet with his own philosophy of light with which he combated the mystery shrouding the world. The early setbacks in his life like the failure of his brothers, the tragic death of his mother, poverty and his own failure to be recognized as a poet only strengthened him and helped him to attain mastery over himself and his art. As Anderson points out aptly, “His basic convictions, philosophic and poetic, were forged in fire” (49). These convictions gained force and strength as he grew older.

In 1917 Robinson published the first of his Arthurian trilogy, *Merlin*, which established his reputation as the greatest living poet of America. If in the early part of his poetic career he was totally neglected, in the latter part he attained great popularity. On his fiftieth birthday, the *New York Times Review of Books* devoted its first page to him. Leading

critics paid glowing tributes to his poetic genius and he received what was due to him since his arrival on the American poetic scene. Revitalized by the public patronage, he started writing profusely and published a collection of poems almost every year. In 1920 appeared his second Arthurian poem *Lancelot* followed by *The Three Taverns* and *Avon's Harvest*. 1921 saw the publication of the first collected edition of Robinson's poems by Macmillan which received the Pulitzer Prize.

In the last phase of his poetic career he devoted much of his energy to writing long poems which were not as successful as his short poems or earlier long poems, though patches of brilliance are visible even in them. Once the tide of popularity and success were set rolling there was no end to it. His poetic genius produced a number of classic works of poetry in the latter years and he reaped success and popularity in profusion. *Roman Bartholow* was published in 1923 and in 1924 was published *The Man Who Died Twice* which fetched for him his second Pulitzer Prize. *Dionysus in Doubt* appeared in 1925 and in 1927 came out the third Arthurian trilogy, *Tristram*, which became a national best seller. The public who had neglected him when he needed encouragement and support to pursue his poetic vision now wholeheartedly supported his genius. He was awarded his third Pulitzer Prize. The American public thus made amends for their early neglect of this truly American poet. Robinson the artist had reached his zenith and the drift downwards had begun. *Cavender's House*, *The Glory of the Nightingales*, *Matthias at the Door*, *Nicodemus*, *Talifer*, *Amaranth* and *King Jasper* which belong to the last phase of his poetic career do not bear testimony to the immortal magic of his poetry though they do encompass poetic techniques like psychological penetration, character revelation and philosophic outlook which raised his early poems to artistic perfection. Most of these poems were long and tedious and could not hold the attention of the readers. The final curtain fell on the life of this truly American

poet on 6th April, 1935.

Since this thesis is a study on the paradigm shift in the social ideology of twentieth century America as reflected in the poetry of Robinson, the social and philosophic background of his poetry is as important as the poetic context. Robinson was born in the Gilded Age when the social scenario of America had transformed abruptly to accommodate the rapid changes in the industrial sphere. As David H Burton points out in his work *Edwin Arlington Robinson: Stages in a New England Poet's Search*:

The years marking the life of the poet, Edwin Arlington Robinson, 1869 – 1935, span the American experience from the Gilded Age to the New Deal. These were years replete with material growth on an almost unprecedented scale, yet punctuated by notable failures in both the material and the moral orders. (1)

This unprecedented material growth along with skepticism towards the philosophical idealism of traditional Christian theology brought about a rapid proliferation of the philosophy of materialism into twentieth century American society. Though materialism is an age old philosophy it appealed to the popular imagination only at the dawn of the twentieth century. Numerous factors like industrialization, commercialization and disillusionment with Christian theology paved the way to make materialism the most accepted philosophy of modern America. Hence a critique of the philosophy of materialism is imperative to comprehend the reasons for the rapid dissemination of this philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The philosophic basis of materialism is the fact that matter is the only reality and that everything in the world, including thought, will and feeling, can be explained in terms of matter alone. It repudiates centuries of thought and wisdom by opposing the claim that the

body and mind are distinct. It is also antithetical to philosophical idealism which denies the existence of matter. The Encyclopedia of Philosophy explicates materialism as

... the name given to a family of doctrines concerning the nature of the world which give to matter a primary position and accord to mind (or spirit) a secondary, dependent reality or even none at all. Extreme materialism asserts that the real world consists of material things, varying in their states and relations, and nothing else (Edwards 5: 179).

When materialism became the accepted philosophy of twentieth century America, a paradigm shift took place in its social ideology. The pursuit of wealth replaced the penchant for morals and values, skepticism substituted traditional faith in God, religion and idealism and herd identity ousted individual identity. In the early years of the twentieth century there was great jubilation at the economic success brought about by the new social ideology. The gospel of wealth fostered by the new ideology ushered in unprecedented economic prosperity which in turn brought in numerous material comforts. Industrialization paved the way for mass production and made possible easy access to material comforts for all sections of the people. The American populace, enamored by this new prosperity, became ardent supporters of the new ideology, unaware of the dangerous pitfalls in it as well as the philosophy which had given birth to it.

Gradually the evils inherent in the philosophy and in the new social ideology derived from it became apparent. Industrialization and mass production were responsible for routinization of urban life. The obsession with wealth paved the way for cut-throat competition, selfishness, greed, and devaluation of moral and spiritual values. But the most destructive effect of the new social ideology was the alienation of modern man.

Like materialism, alienation is also a term of varied philosophical insights and

connotations. Hence it is necessary to define the term as it is used in this thesis. F.H. Heinemann's definition of alienation describes aptly modern man's condition:

The facts to which the term alienation refers are, objectively, different kinds of disassociation, break or rupture between beings and their objects, whether the latter be other persons, or the natural world, or their own creations of art, science and society; and, subjectively, the corresponding states of disequilibrium, disturbance, strangeness and anxiety. (Murchland 29)

Though alienation is not a modern phenomenon and stems from the very nature of man's life in an alien world, the alienation typical of modern man which has been portrayed by writers like Ibsen, Osborne and Kafka is to a great extent the product of modern social ideology. According to Bernard Murchland, self-alienation can be traced to the eighteenth century, when Rousseau became aware of the role played by society in shackling human freedom and thus thwarting man's fulfillment:

By alienation Rousseau meant in general the unauthentic condition of man which results from the corrupt and contradictory character of society. Being-appearance, transparency-opacity, autonomy-heteronomy, nature-society, sensibility-reason, the private and public selves --these were some of the main dichotomies he saw that pointed to the pervasiveness of alienation.... Society is an artificial world which militates against human development because it demands certain forms of behavior and imposes uniformity as its chief characteristic. As such, society requires the sacrifice of original individuality and idealism; it forbids genuine self-expression and effective action; it fosters hypocrisy and falsehood and lends to 'total deprivation'. (123)

After Rousseau it was Karl Marx who emphasized the close relationship between

alienation and society. Marx inherited his theory of alienation from Hegel, but he objected to Hegel's belief that alienation is a permanent feature of mankind. He came to consider it as a product of society, and of capitalistic society in particular. He believed that the problem of alienation is essentially the plight of man under given political and economic conditions. Hence he considered political ideology to be responsible for the alienation of man and blamed capitalism for it. Though Marx wanted to free society from alienation he was so obsessed with economic considerations and the emancipation of the laboring class that he could not devote enough time to evolve a comprehensive theory of alienation (Murchland 15).

Fromm too delved deep into the problem of alienation and concluded that the alienation typical of modern man was self-alienation or self-estrangement. He gave a detailed description of self-estrangement:

By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his own acts – but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys or whom he may even worship. The alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person. He, like the others, are experienced as things are experienced, with the senses and with common sense, but at the same time without being related to oneself and to the world outside, productively. (111)

Identification of this self-estrangement is possible through the delineation of certain characteristics like conformity, habitualization, routinization, automatization, reification, atomization and abstractification. Conformity is the tendency of modern man to sacrifice his

individual identity for the sake of belonging to a group or a herd. This urge for herd-identity is so compulsive that “People are willing to risk their lives, to give up their love, to surrender their freedom for the sake of being one of the herd, of conforming, and thus of acquiring a sense of identity, even though it is an illusion” (Fromm 64). Herd identity dominates and controls individual identity in this mode of conformity. Hence modern man conforms to the dictates of the herd or society at all times even when it is destructive to his own personality. This mode of conformity is internalized by modern man at a very young age so that it becomes habitual. This major behavioral change has been instrumental in aggravating self-alienation as his individual identity is suppressed by the herd-identity. Through the perpetuation of the habit of conformity society acquires great power over individuals. Hence society resorts to an important strategy called normalization to foster conformity.

Michele Foucault, in his work *Discipline and Punish*, throws light on this important modern strategy for the imposition of societal ideology which he calls the process of “normalization” (Smart 85). Normalization is the process by which the majority in society conform to the dictates of the society and solely by virtue of this conformity are categorized as the normal members of the society. By the same process, the nonconforming minority are categorized and stigmatized as the abnormal. Normalization is achieved through two important techniques, the first of which is the internalization of the principle of conformity and the second is the normalization of this conforming majority. Society employs subtle methods by which conformity is cultivated in all the members of a society so that it becomes a part of the cultural ideology. This is achieved through religion, art, literature, education and games, all of which encourage and promote conformity. Internalization is very essential in molding future generations to conform thus perpetuating standardization



and uniformity. According to Foucault the normalization process is far from harmless and is a powerful strategy deliberately employed by society to coerce individuals to conform through the marginalization of the nonconforming minority. He reveals the politics operating behind this normalization technique when he states that the normal is defined through the abnormal and when normality and its corresponding norm is defined, the “normal” person has power over the “abnormal” (Smart 85-86). In spite of visible signs of self-alienation which is a form of mental insanity, the conforming majority is accepted as the normal by the herd. Thus there is a reversal by which the insane majority becomes the “normal” and the sane minority is stigmatized as the “abnormal”. This powerful “normal” majority occupies the centre of modern society and the “abnormal” minority is pushed to the margins. Since the majority is insane and suffers from self-alienation, consensual validation which was accepted as a sign of reason and normalcy in the past is no more indicative of rationality or mental health. “The fact that millions of people share the same vices does not make these vices virtues, the fact that they share so many errors does not make the errors to be truths, and the fact that millions of people share the same form of mental pathology does not make these people sane” (Fromm 23).

Habitualization, which is another characteristic of self-alienation, is the process of continuous repetition by which an activity becomes an automatic response to a stimulus. This automatic response is gradually internalized to become a habit. Habitualization plays an important role in the internalization of not only conformity but all the other characteristics like routinization, automatization etc. which are responsible for the alienation of modern man. Routinization, as the very word denotes, is the forceful imposition of routine life which has become an important strategy in imposing modern social ideology. Extreme routinization deprives man of the ability for a balanced perspective and he lives out

of touch with the fundamental realities of life. Another characteristic of modern man's alienation is automatization. Man in the modern world has become mechanized and his decisions are not the products of cognition and rationalization but mechanical and automatic. Reification has also contributed greatly to the alienation of modern man. It deprives man of his humane nature and converts him into an inanimate thing. Marx holds capitalism and the marketing-orientation of capitalist philosophy responsible for depriving man of his essential organic nature and reducing him to the status of a thing. Atomization is another quality that distinguishes alienated man from the normal. Fromm throws light on this malady and states that "Modern society consists of "atoms" (if we use the Greek equivalent of "individual") little particles estranged from each other but held together by selfish interests and by the necessity to make use of each other" (127). Abstractification which is typical of the modern world is another characteristic which contributes to the alienation of man. Modern business which deals with millions of customers, thousands of stockholders, workers and employees and makes personal contact among the members of a business establishment impossible is one example of the modern process of abstractification. But abstractification is not limited to business alone. It has affected every aspect of modern man's life so much so that people are experienced as things to be exchanged for value rather than human beings.

Since modern man's alienation stemmed from the existing social ideology the remedy for alienation lay in the restructuring of society so as to liberate it from the excesses of materialism. Materialism had to be replaced by a philosophy which would reduce the alienation in modern societies. Robinson found an alternative to materialism in idealism. Idealism is the philosophy which propounds that being is determined by thought and is primarily opposed to materialism and realism. The poet's idealism was unique in that it was

opposed to materialism but not altogether antithetical to realism. His idealism which he calls “Optimistic Desperation” is a combination of the optimism derived from an idealistic belief in an ordered universe with the desperation arising from the factual realism of world phenomena (Smith 30). The grimness and sordidness of the material world was cause for despair. But this hopelessness was countered by a belief in the ultimate meaning and purposefulness of life. The poet says that “If a reader doesn’t get from my books an impression that life is very worthwhile, even though it may not seem always to be profitable or desirable, I can only say that he doesn’t see what I’m driving at” (Barnard 204). Thus Robinson’s poetry can be said to comprise of skepticism towards materialism, a reflection of alienation in modern society and a belief in an idealism rooted in realism.

Robinson’s poetry as well as his philosophy has been subjected to scrutiny and analysis by many critics notable among them being Hermann Hagedorn, David H Burton, Ellsworth Barnard, Estelle Kaplan, Wallace L. Anderson, Charles Cestre and Yvor Winters. Hagedorn’s biography of Robinson throws light on the life of the poet and the circumstances that shaped Robinson’s poetry and philosophy. Burton exposes the faulty social ideology of the age which was characterized by the American preoccupation with business and commerce. This obsession with wealth gave the age its name, the Gilded age, in which success was judged according to material standards. The heroes of the age were young men who had succeeded in the commercial, industrial, and financial spheres. Burton emphasizes the internalization of the materialistic culture by the American youth and the consequent paradigm shift in the social ideology of the nation in his work. He states that:

A new generation was being nourished on the belief that the remaining frontiers to occupy were the marketplace, the factory, the counting house. Immigrants mixed with native sons and daughters both groups sharing the

creed of material advancement. The newcomers readily learnt what the old stock had had bred into it, namely, the promise of America was significantly materialistic. (5)

Another critic who analyzed the impact of the philosophy of materialism on American society and Robinson's objection to the philosophy was Barnard. He proved conclusively that Robinson was an antimaterialist. Most critics agree that Robinson was an idealist. Kaplan, Anderson and Cestre have made a detailed study of Robinson's philosophy and all three have proposed that he was an idealist and that his idealism was counter to the materialism of his age. According to Kaplan, "Robinson's disillusionment, fatalism and skepticism are mingled from the start, with his humor, or sense of comedy, and with his idealistic loyalty to truth. Robinson constantly presents this idealistic faith in "light" as a contrast to the realism and mechanistic materialism of the age" (36). But Kaplan asserts that Robinson's idealism was not born of any blind optimism. He throws light on the influence of Schopenhauer as interpreted by Royce in shaping Robinson's philosophy of idealism. She proves undoubtedly that Robinson was greatly influenced by Royce's interpretation of Schopenhauer's philosophy. A quotation from Royce's work *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* will prove this point. "I think that the best man is the one who can see the truth of pessimism, can absorb and transcend that truth and can be nevertheless an optimist, not by virtue of his failure to recognize the evil of life, but by virtue of his readiness to take part in the struggle against evil" (Kaplan 28). This statement reflects almost exactly Robinson's philosophy of life as expressed in his poetry. Anderson in his work, *Robinson: A Critical Introduction* refutes Robinson's pessimism and asserts that his philosophy "was positive, even optimistic.... Robinson could not conceive of a maleficent deity, nor of a chaotic universe reeling through eons of endless time; to him the universe had both order and

purpose, and man's transient life on earth was part of a larger plan" (55). Cestre also agrees with Anderson's assertion of the poet's idealism and observes that "Robinson's poetry, at its highest, overleaps the barriers of realism and expands in the sphere of liberated thought, where reason and faith, transcending the accidents of mortal life, descry the beauty and hopefulness of ultimate values" (22-23). Winters classifies Robinson as a "counter romantic" in his work *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (27). He analyses Robinson's poem "Hillcrest" to prove his argument:

... the poem represents a pretty explicit negation of the essential ideas of the romantic movement, especially as the movement has been represented by the Emersonian tradition: it tells us that life is a very trying experience, to be endured only with pain and to be understood only with difficulty; that easy solutions are misleading; that all solutions must be scrutinized; and that understanding is necessary. (30-31)

There has been a renewed interest in the poetry and philosophy of Robinson in recent years. In 1994 *The Essential Robinson* edited by Donald Hall was published. "In his foreword, Hall argued that Robinson's reputation had been unjustly sacrificed on the altar of modernism.... 'We must restore Robinson to the American pantheon'" (Donaldson 478). 1997 saw the publication of the *Selected Poems* edited by Robert Faggen. This was followed by the 1999 Modern Library edition of *The Poetry of E. A. Robinson* edited by Robert Mezey. The interest in Robinson's poetry and his life long devotion to the cause of antimaterialism gained momentum with the comprehensive biography of the poet written by Scott Donaldson published in 2007.

Thus Robinson's antimaterialism, realism and idealism have been much discussed by critics and scholars. But so far, only one critic has discovered a relation between the concept

of alienation and Robinson's poetry. In his article "The Alienated Self" W.R. Robinson treats the theme of alienation as projected by Robinson in his poetry. "...the twentieth century is the age of alienation and alienated man can be found with ease and in abundance in Robinson's poetry" (128). He also throws light on the conflict between the individual and society as portrayed by Robinson:

... in every poem, regardless of what happens, the initial truth, the given condition of human existence, is the alienation of self from society, a schism between art and social values, the spirit and social forms, the soul and doctrine, the Light and the world. And finally that schism is an irremediable dichotomy in man's being between his personal and his social self. (137)

In his essay W.R. Robinson attempts a generalized study of the problem of alienation in Robinson's poetry. In this thesis an attempt to make a detailed yet specific study of social alienation in relation to the principle of nonconformity has been undertaken. The study asserts that alienation is the direct result of the normalization process propagated by the philosophy of materialism. The process of normalization categorizes people into the "normal" and the "abnormal", not based on the criterion of normalcy but on conformity. The internalization of the conformity creed deprives modern man of his individual identity and fosters herd identity. The imposition of herd identity leads to the complete deprivation of individual identity and results in self-estrangement as portrayed by Robinson. But the poet is not so much interested in the self-alienation of the majority in society. He focuses his attention on the social alienation of the minority since the socially alienated minority is marginalized and voiceless. Robinson becomes the voice of this marginalized group and attempts to subvert the "success myth" propagated by the dominant social ideology. Materialistic America regarded wealth as the basic requirement for success. The poet

shatters this myth by exposing the self-alienation of the so called “successful”, and the self-fulfillment of the marginalized nonconforming minority in American society. The thesis thus attempts to analyze the purpose of Robinson’s poetry, which was the subversion of the dominant social ideology of twentieth century American society.

A hundred years have passed since the publication of Robinson’s first collection of poems, *The Torrent and the Night Before*. It is easier and more accurate now to assign him his rightful place in the poetic tradition. But a major hurdle in doing so lies in the particular period into which he was born--the transition from the old world to the new. But he combines in his poetry innovation and tradition, in a skillful manner to produce some of the greatest poetry written in the English language. Though many critics exclude him from the group of modern poetic innovators because of his persistent use of traditional forms, nobody can deny him his pioneering position regarding the themes. He brought realism into American poetry by making clerks, butchers and misers the heroes of his poems. His originality lay in his spirit and philosophy while his technique remained old fashioned and traditional. His greatest achievement lies in the psychological insight with which he painted a gallery of portraits unequalled in American poetry. He detested experimentation for the sake of being different. Poetry, he affirmed, had to be particular and universal at the same time. And his poetry has the mark of real poetic genius by being particular and universal at the same time. Whether we place him in the nineteenth or the twentieth century, he has a coveted position among the best poets of both these centuries. Anderson makes a comparative assessment of Robinson and states that “he compares more than favorably and in some ways surpassingly well” with the four major American poets of the nineteenth century, Poe, Emerson, Whitman and Emily Dickson. Evaluating twentieth century poetry, he concludes that:

There were of course some fine poets who produced some excellent poems, but of all of those variously regarded as “new poets” – Frost, Sandburg, Masters, Amy Lowell, Fletcher, Lindsay, Williams, Pound, Eliot and a host of lesser figures--only two appear to be of equal stature with Robinson, namely, Frost and Eliot. (153)

The focal point of this dissertation is Robinson’s effort to destabilize the dominant social ideology of the Gilded Age in America. This dominant social ideology was characterized by an obsession with wealth, status and material possessions and neglect of spiritual and moral values. It also propagated the “success myth” according to which success was defined by wealth and status in society. This destructive social ideology, the poet believed, was responsible for the self- alienation of the conforming majority and the social alienation of the nonconforming minority. Robinson considered it his moral responsibility to expose the hazards of materialism and create an awareness of the destructiveness inherent in the social ideology shaped by materialism. With a crusader’s zeal he revealed the discrepancies in the philosophy of materialism. His poems also portray the self-alienation and social alienation prevalent in twentieth century American society as a result of the cultural creed propagated by materialism. Hence a textual analysis of Robinson’s poems have been undertaken to throw light on Robinson’s abhorrence towards the philosophy of materialism on theoretical and cultural grounds. The thesis also analyses the social alienation of the nonconforming minority and their marginalization in twentieth century American society.

This thesis is structured into six chapters including the introduction and the conclusion. The Introduction contextualizes the poet in the Gilded Age in America and attempts a detailed analysis of the social ideology of the age. The chapter also analyses the



concept of alienation from a modern perspective and differentiates between the self-alienation of the conformist and the social alienation of the nonconformist. A brief sketch of Robinson's personal life, adequate to throw light on the influences which shaped his poetry and his philosophy, has also been included in the chapter.

Chapter 2 entitled "Robinson the Antimaterialist" discusses the characteristic features of a materialistic society and Robinson's aversion to the philosophy of materialism which forms the philosophic backbone of his poetry. A textual analysis of ten poems has been undertaken to prove the fallacies inherent in materialistic philosophy and the poet's endeavor to disrupt the dominant social ideology. To expose the fallacies and contradictions inherent in the philosophy of materialism, the poem "The Man against the Sky" has been analyzed. The influence of Hindu philosophy on shaping the poet's philosophy is also explored. The symbolism involved in the creation of the fictional town called Tilbury is next discussed to throw light on the dominant social ideology of American towns and cities at the beginning of the twentieth century. The other aspects of materialism discussed in the chapter are the dichotomy of the artist in a materialistic society, Tilbury hypocrisy, the impact of industrialization on small entrepreneurs, the spiritual and moral degeneration of materialistic society, the probable repercussions of the new social ideology on future generations, the cause of individual freedom and the evils propagated by capitalism.

Chapter 3 is entitled "Alienation of the Nonconformist" and attempts to analyze the characteristics of modern authority and the normalization process which divides society into the normal and the abnormal on the basis of conformity and the modern phenomenon of alienation. Though self-alienation and social alienation have been discussed in the chapter, the focus is on social alienation. Ten poems-- "Richard Cory", "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford", "Rembrandt to Rembrandt", "The Three Taverns", "Flammonde",

“Eben Flood”, “Miniver Cheevy”, “Aunt Imogen”, Matthias at the Door”, and “Dionysus in Doubt” -- have been explicated in the chapter.

Chapter 4 entitled “Optimistic Desperation” proposes Robinson’s alternative to materialism, a unique idealism rooted in realism. Ten poems have been taken up for evaluation in this chapter. The chapter attempts to project Robinson’s idealism which is closely aligned to humanism without losing sight of the basic concept of idealism which is the faith in a benevolent Power which controls the universe.

Chapter 5 entitled “The Essential Robinson: Fusion of Theme and Technique” attempts a detailed assessment of Robinson’s poetic craft with a view to highlighting the deliberate evolution of a poetic style adapted to the exposure of alienation. The characteristics of this unique poetic style like epigrammatic and evocative quality, the use of irony, comparison and contrast and psychological insight are analyzed with reference to his poems.

The Conclusion sums up the various strands of thought explored in the earlier chapters. An attempt has been made to place Robinson and his philosophy in relation to the postmodern scenario. The chapter also outlines the contribution of this thesis to the study of literature and also dwells on the scope for further study.

## Chapter 2

### Robinson the Antimaterialist

Materialism has been the subject of discussion for ages and continues to be discussed in academic as well as nonacademic circles. Over the years it has taken on different dimensions and perspectives and has acquired growing significance. Materialism is no more a western phenomenon and the East is competing with the West in the race for material success. The spread of materialism has brought about economic prosperity and scientific advancement on an unprecedented scale. But it has also resulted in disillusionment and widespread spiritual discontentment. Statistics reveal that suicides, murders, terrorist acts and wars have all escalated since the advent of materialism in the nineteenth century. Though an age old philosophy, it is only in the nineteenth century that materialism paved the way for an American culture obsessed with economic prosperity. Americans started worshipping mammon and became obsessed with the gospel of success. They were so enamored by economic affluence that they were unaware of their gradual spiritual and moral degeneration. An escalation in the number of wars, terrorist acts, suicides and all sorts of unethical acts in the twentieth century point to the degrading influence of materialism on modern man's life. By the time an enlightened few became conscious of the spiritual deprivation of materialistic culture, it had percolated down to modern man to such an extent that it was almost impossible to break away from this debilitating culture. The influence of materialism gradually extended to other parts of the world, so that in the twenty first century, it has come to be the dominant cultural creed of not only America but of the whole world.

Tim Kasser in his work, *The High Price of Materialism*, analyzes the social ideology of twenty first century America and concludes that the discontentment and frustration

representative of postmodern man is the outcome of the materialistic ideology. Kasser endorses the viewpoint of earlier humanistic and existential psychologists that "...a strong focus on materialistic pursuits not only distracts people from experiences conducive to psychological growth and health, but signals a fundamental alienation from what is truly meaningful" (3). Hence, research into the causes and effects of materialism is not merely pertinent but an absolute necessity in the present world scenario. A detailed analysis of Robinson's objection to materialism will go a long way in revealing the influences that shaped the materialistic ideology and the possible remedies for this malady afflicting American society in particular and the world in general. Robinson's poetry prophesied the birth of a mechanized, utilitarian society which would be the downfall of human civilization and his prophecy has come true. The 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center confirm his prophetic utterance. In the context of this barbarous act, Scott Donaldson throws light on the significance of Robinson's crusade against materialism by recording that "On October 1 2001, the *New York Times* printed EAR's villanelle "The House on the Hill" as a poem capable of evoking and in some sense exorcising the terrible sense of loss the nation felt in the weeks after the 9/11 attacks" (479). Americans have now recognized the corrupting influence of the philosophy of materialism but they have internalized the ideology to such an extent that it is an uphill task to redefine the social ideology. But however difficult the enterprise, it is essential that the job is immediately taken up so as to avoid future repercussions of the fraudulent ideology.

The philosophy of materialism gained widespread acceptance in western society in the nineteenth century and resulted in a twofold impact on western culture. On the one hand, spiritualism suffered a set back as materialism denied the existence of spiritual beings or forces. On the other, materialism came to be identified with a pursuit of wealth, material

comforts and pleasure. In the American context, the rapid dissemination of materialist philosophy coincided with industrialization and commercialization. This led to the speedy evolution of an American culture obsessed with economic success unrestrained by moral considerations. Americans believed that material prosperity would provide a solution to all their personal and collective problems. Materialism and the resultant obsession with wealth were instrumental in perpetuating the success myth and utilitarianism. Success at all costs was the guiding principle of the American in the twentieth century. The spread of utilitarianism led to the belief that only things of worldly utility were of value and resulted in the devaluation of spiritual truths and art objects. Thus materialism tilted the balance that man had maintained in matters of the spirit and the world. The shift in focus towards the world gave way to disillusionment and desperation as the world by itself was meaningless even to the most optimistic mechanist.

This chapter deals with Robinson's objection to materialism both as a philosophy and a cultural creed. The chapter also throws light on his battle against this rotten culture which alienated man from God, from himself and from others. Through his poetry he demolished the central tenets of materialism which had become the accepted norm in American society. Robinson, unlike many other artists, objected to art for art's sake and believed in the social function of a writer in making the world a better place to live. He felt a strong sense of mission in delivering the world from the clutches of materialism especially with the onset of the First World War which he regarded as an offshoot of materialism. "Robinson saw the war as an extreme manifestation of materialism – materialism carried to its logical destructive end" (Anderson 95).

From the very beginning Robinson was skeptical of this new philosophy which was taking root in nineteenth century American society. Hyatt H Waggoner explains that

Robinson's name, for this new philosophy was simply materialism. By that word he meant to include both what is sometimes called 'mechanism', the idea that reality, human and non human alike is best compared to a machine, which has neither freedom nor spontaneity; and also what is called in a more limited sense than this 'materialism' which is the view that reality, all that is, consists exclusively of what can be weighed and measured. (74)

Robinson rejected mechanism and materialism, the two doctrines which combined to make up the new philosophy. He rejected the mechanistic assumption that the universe and all life on it was the result of cosmic processes. The insinuation that human beings are mere machines devoid of freedom and spontaneity shocked him. He was certain that the complex phenomenon called "man" could not be the result of an accident even if he could not provide scientific evidence for it. He also objected to mechanism because it questioned the age old belief in God and the spiritual nature of human beings. Mechanism was antithetical to spiritualism, the philosophic doctrine that all reality is in essence spiritual. For the mechanist the material world was the only reality and he objected to the spiritual on scientific grounds. Though Robinson was not an orthodox Christian, his experience of the world had established him as a firm believer of something beyond mechanical reality. He believed that human life would be devoid of meaning and purpose if mechanism was true. "My philosophy is mostly a statement of my inability to accept a mechanistic interpretation of the universe and of life" (Barnard 190).

If Robinson objected to mechanism he was even more emphatic in his rejection of materialism. Barnard analyzed Robinson's distrust of materialism and came to the conclusion that Robinson's rejection of materialism rested upon three arguments. The first of these was that the materialist based his philosophy on the reality revealed by the senses.

But scientists themselves have proved the falsity of the senses and so the materialistic subservience to the senses is ludicrous. The second argument that he raised against materialism was the incongruity in using the mind to deny its own existence. The materialist believed that atoms arranged themselves in a sort of mechanism which may be called “the mind” and that this mechanism then discovered, defined and manipulated atoms themselves of which it was nothing more than an aggregation. Robinson ridiculed the absurdity of this assumption. But his most severe objection to materialism arose from the materialistic interpretation of human life as a meaningless accident in which happiness was overwhelmingly outweighed by pain. He accepted the suggestion that pain outbalanced happiness in human life but unlike the materialist this led him to believe in the ultimate purpose of life (192-93). He believed that life was bearable only if there was some justification for existence that sense and reason did not discern. The fact that sorrow outweighed happiness in human life is itself testimony to some hidden plan or purpose to life though man is not able to understand it. If the materialistic assumption of the meaninglessness of life is true then it is better to put an end to the human race. He wrote to Hagedorn “If materialism is true, then parenthood is assuredly the greatest of all crimes, and the sooner the much advertised ‘race’ is annihilated, the better” (Barnard 194).

Robinson’s most potent assault against materialism as a philosophy is found in his poem “The Man Against the sky” (SP 148). It is a fairly long contemplative poem on the subject of death. The poet reflects in a philosophical vein on the possible confrontations that man has with death. Cestre compares the poem to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and comments that “...there is antique majesty and grandeur in the poem, with an originality of vision and a modernity of thought that remove any suspicion of unconscious imitation” (60). In a letter to Amy Lowell, Robinson wrote that his purpose in writing the poem was “to carry

materialism to its logical end and to indicate its futility as an explanation or a justification of existence” (Anderson 147).

The protagonist is a man without a name, age or distinguishing characteristics who stands for universal man. The absence of concrete characters and situations enables an abstract, detached and objective perspective. The poem opens with a description of a burning hill and the solitary man on it. The man on the hill symbolizes the solitary nature of man’s encounter with death:

Between me and the sunset, like a dome  
Against the glory of a world on fire,  
Now burned a sudden hill,  
Bleak, round and high, by flame- lit height made higher,  
With nothing on it for the flame to kill  
Save one who moved and was alone up there  
To loom before the chaos and the glare  
As if he were the last god going home  
Unto his last desire. (1-9)

David H. Hirsch makes use of biblical parallelism to interpret the fire imagery of the poem. He states that the fire imagery is important as it is a unifying motif linking the narrator as well as the solitary man to the biblical age, when fire was a meaningful force that could be either creative or destructive. Robinson’s poem alludes to three biblical texts: Exodus 3:1-8, Daniel 3 and Revelation 16:8-9 and 20:9-1. The burning hill refers to the Moses and the burning bush episode described in the Exodus. The poet contrasts the communication that takes place between God and Moses with the lack of communication signifying the alienation of modern man. One of the major drawbacks of modernity is this



lack of communion between God and man, between man and man and between man and his inner self. The other two biblical texts that the poem alludes to-- the casting of Shadrach Meshach and Abed-nego into the fiery furnace and the episodes of the fourth angel and of the lake of fire--evoke the destructive aspect of the fire imagery (33). The poet highlights the destructive dimension of the Creator and issues a warning that divine intervention at crucial periods in the Old Testament has taken a destructive form. Unmitigated materialism may provoke such divine intervention. Waggoner interprets the fire from this view point and sees in it the rampant destruction of World War I. "The World on fire against which (the man) is outlined is at once the sunset, the conflagration of World War I, and the universe described by science, with its live stars and dead stars, the electrical nature of matter, and so on" (Hirsch 33).

The sight of the "dark, marvelous and inscrutable man" (10) fills the poet with a "sure music" that gives him insight into spiritual truths which until then he had considered as mere legends. The Divine is not revealed directly to human beings but is made known to them through visions and epiphanies. It is this visionary nature of the spiritual that makes it difficult to prove the existence of the Spirit.

The touch of ages having wrought

An echo and a glimpse of what he thought

A phantom or a legend until then; (16-18)

The inconclusive and mysterious nature of spiritual understanding is underlined through a description of the attitudes of men of different beliefs-- the idealist, the optimist, the cynic, the stoic and the materialist-- to the problem of life and death. The Idealist has "A vision answering a faith unshaken", the optimist has "An easy trust assumed of easy trials", the cynic suffers from "A sick negation born of weak denials", the stoic "A crazed

abhorrence of an old condition” and the materialist “A blind attendance on a brief ambition” (183-87).

The contradiction inherent in the mechanistic assumption is brought out explicitly. The mechanist declares with certitude that the universe and all living and nonliving entities are mere accidents without purpose or meaning. Such a theory which endorses the world as the product of cosmic processes automatically affirms the transient nature of the philosophy itself which will not “outlast an accidental universe” (156). Thus the pride of the mechanist in his philosophic assumptions is unjustified and “airy” (154).

He may have seen with his mechanic eyes  
A world without a meaning, and had room  
Alone amid magnificence and doom,  
To build himself an airy monument.  
That should, or fail him in his vague intent,  
Outlast an accidental universe – .... (151-56)

The negation of idealism reveals the futility of the perpetuation of the human species. If age-old concepts like heaven and hell are shattered, it is better to put an end to the human race. If the ultimate destination of man is nothingness, there is no purpose in begetting children and giving them pain and misery:

If inference and reason shun  
Hell, Heaven, and Oblivion,  
.....  
If robbed of two fond old enormities,  
Our being had no onward auguries,  
What then were this great love of ours to say

For launching other lives to voyage again

A little farther into time and pain, .... (195-96,204-08)

Science fails many a time in explaining the eternal truths and the mechanist is foolish in believing that scientific reasoning is the ultimate. The usage “infant science” is a deliberate attempt on the part of the poet to draw the attention of the reader, who has imbibed the philosophy of materialism, to the infantile inadequacy of science in explaining the mysteries of the universe. The conclusion that he arrives at once again is that the trials and tribulations of earthly life are endurable only if there is compensation after death which will annul the miseries of worldly existence. Otherwise there is no sense in prolonging a life of sorrow:

When infant science makes a pleasant face

And waves again that hollow toy, the race;

No planetary trap where souls are wrought

For nothing but the sake of being caught

And sent again to nothing will attune

Itself to any key of any reason

Why man should hunger through another season .... (253-59)

One of Robinson’s best arguments against materialism is found in the poem. He exposes the contradiction apparent in materialistic philosophy in using the mind to deny its own existence. Scientific reasoning is made possible only with the mind yet materialism denies the existence of the mind. “A living reason out of molecules/Why molecules occurred” (142-43).

After exposing the falsity and ridiculousness of materialistic reasoning, Robinson asserts his faith in the Spirit which is synonymous with the Word in the Old Testament.

Shall we, because Eternity records  
Too vast an answer for the time born words  
We spell, whereof so many are dead that once  
In our capricious lexicons  
Were so alive and final, hear no more  
The Word itself, the living word. (270-75)

Robinson admits of the mystery shrouding human life and the fact that the purpose and meaning of man's life is not explicitly understood by any mortal being. But just because everything is not known to man, it cannot be established that there is nothing beyond material reality. He has faith in something beyond physical reality because he has had visions and those spiritual gleams have given him glimpses of eternity. The "Word" can never be "erased" but the Word is not audible to the materialist as he is engrossed in the world. The alienated man in a materialistic society has lost this visionary perception which gives him faith in the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. Hirsch reveals the spiritual barrenness of modern man when he states that "What once was "vision" has, in the twentieth century, become dream or illusion" (35).

Anderson's evaluation of the poem provides supportive evidence to prove the crucial argument of this thesis that Robinson was an antimaterialist:

In the last two stanzas Robinson attacks the underlying negative assumptions of the materialist and advances his own positive ones.... Both the origin and the destiny of man are unknown and unknowable, but it is more reasonable, Robinson believes, to conclude that the universe is an ordered and purposeful one rather than the reverse. Moreover, man endures, and his continued will to

live is itself an affirmation of belief (148).

The last stanza of the poem is quoted here to illustrate Anderson's evaluation which endorses the argument of the thesis:

Where was he going, this man against the sky?

You know not, nor do I

But this we know, if we know anything;

That we may laugh and fight and sing

And of our transience here make offering

To an orient Word that will not be erased, .... (224-29)

The poem is thus a strong assertion of faith in the immortality of the "Word" as opposed to the transience of the world.

Robinson was influenced by oriental philosophy as is made clear from the titles of his sonnets like "Karma" and "Maya". His letters also provide ample evidence to show his interest in Eastern philosophy. He wrote to Edith Brower that "There is only one religion, one faith, one substance; you may find it in the Gospels, in Emerson, in Sartor Resartus, and if you will take trouble to look for it—in a temple. You will also find it in Davies' essay on "The Upanishads" and "Tao" in the Atlantic Vol. 72-73-particularly in "Tao" (Cary, Letters 22). An evaluation of Robinson's philosophy as reflected in his poems and letters points to the fact that his rejection of materialism could be an offshoot of his acceptance of Oriental philosophy, especially Hindu philosophy. His aversion to materialism can be traced to the concept of "maya", found in the Upanishads. According to the Upanishads, the essential nature of human beings is divine. Our true Self, the Atman, is one with Brahman or God. But the quintessence of the world around us is obfuscated by maya, the veil. Hence, man considers the material world which is merely an illusion as real and wrongly identifies

himself with the body, mind, and ego rather than the Atman, the divine Self (Audi 544). Shankara, the great philosopher-sage of seventh-century India, used the image of the rope and the serpent to illustrate the concept of maya: Walking down a darkened road, a man sees a snake; his heart pounds, his pulse quickens. On closer inspection the “snake” turns out to be a piece of coiled rope. Once the delusion breaks, the snake vanishes forever. Similarly, walking down the darkened road of ignorance, we see ourselves as mortal creatures, and around us, the universe of name and form, the universe conditioned by time, space, and causation. We become aware of our limitations, bondage, and suffering. On “closer inspection” both the mortal creature as well as the universe turns out to be Brahman. Once the delusion breaks, our mortality as well as the universe disappears forever. We see Brahman existing everywhere and in everything (Tiwari 158).

The sonnet “Maya” indicates his belief in the Hindu concept of the world as illusion or maya (S 74). The poet describes the ascent of the human soul to unknown heights which removes the illusion of material reality and unveils the truth. This results in an interface of the Soul and the Will and a revelation of the Divine or the Brahman.

Through the ascending emptiness of night  
Leaving the flesh and the complacent mind  
Together in their sufficiency behind,  
The soul of man went up to a far height;  
And where those others would have had no sight  
Or sense of else than terror for the blind,  
Soul met the Will, and was again consigned  
To the supreme illusion which is right. (1-8)

The Soul makes fun of the complacency of the mind in believing in material reality

which is only an illusion. It is ignorance that accords reality to the material world and denies spirituality. Only a renunciation of the “flesh” and the “complacent mind” will endow man with the spiritual vision that gives a glimpse of the Absolute. The poet accuses the mind of unnecessary pride in its knowledge which prevents it from aspiring for the higher truth. Hence, knowledge of the divine is denied and the darkness of ignorance veils the mind. Only if the mind is prepared to shed its pride and ignorance can it reach the heights of true knowledge and bliss.

Robinson’s poetic life was also a rejection of the philosophy of utilitarianism propagated by materialistic society at the beginning of the twentieth century. The utilitarian philosophy accorded value to an object in proportion to its usefulness in society. But it did not take into account the fact that stability and eternity are mere illusions and human life derived immortality from many objects which defy the utilitarian philosophy. Hannah Arendt revealed this fact in her book *The Human Condition* when she stated that:

Among the things that give the human artifice the stability without which it could never be a reliable home for men are a number of objects which are strictly without any utility whatever and which, moreover, because they defy equalization through a common denominator such as money, if they enter the exchange market they can only be arbitrarily priced. (167)

Art is one such unique entity which imparts to the otherwise transient human world, stability and permanence. Robinson firmly believed in the role of art in providing immortality to human life and it was this belief which inspired him to become a poet in the Gilded Age which was not supportive to art and artists. His opposition to utilitarianism is evident from the following statement. “... the world must have its art or the world will not be a fit place to live in, and the artist must have his opportunity or his art will die” (Kaplan

16).

The dichotomy between artistic creativity and utilitarianism is the subject of his sonnet “Dear Friends” (CP 83). The utilitarian philosophy is contrasted with the artist’s craving for immortality. The materialistic society looks upon literary pursuit as bubbles blown by fools which have no worth or permanence. Robinson is aware of the hostile attitude of a utilitarian culture towards art from his personal life. But he was also conscious of the immortality of art and decided to choose art against the dictates of society.

Dear friends, reproach me not for what I do,  
Nor counsel me, nor pity me; nor say  
That I am wearing half my life away  
For bubble-work that only fools pursue. (1-4)

Materialistic society being a mammonistic society rejected the poetic profession as unprofitable. Robinson contradicted this belief in the transience of art through his poetry. He rejected the momentary pleasures of life and devoted his life to art which he believed bestowed eternity to an otherwise mortal human life. His immortal poems proclaim the truth of this belief. The sonnet expresses the dilemma in the life of all artists in a materialistic society with special reference to his personal life. From a very young age he realized the importance of wealth in American society and his father’s desire to mold his sons to pursue careers which would bring in a lot of wealth. In this desire his father was merely emulating the common trend of the time which demanded the young generation to take up lucrative professions. Robinson, who had an inherent interest in art and literature, found this excessive obsession with wealth and business repulsive. The conflict between his father’s ambition and his personal desire tormented him terribly. He was certain that he would have to suffer social alienation if he did not conform to the dictates of the majority in society. He



was haunted by this fear of alienation but his moral strength and conviction gave him the courage to take a decision in favor of poetic career. He knew very well that society and his family viewed his resolution as foolish and impetuous. But he remained firm in his conviction that he was born to be a poet.

Robinson also emphasizes the role of the Spirit in the sonnet and the fact that human life attains meaning only when man spends his life in “reading” the Spirit. “Good glasses are to read the spirit through” (8). The sonnet illustrates the poet’s nonconformity which distinguished him from the majority. While the majority rejected spiritualism, Robinson advocated the role of the Spirit in enhancing the quality of human life. The price that he paid for his fight against standardization was social alienation.

As already stated, Robinson objected to materialism not only on philosophical but also on cultural grounds. The American culture which had evolved as a result of the amalgamation of industrialization, commercialization and materialism was devoid of spiritual values. It laid emphasis on economic success and only on economic success. All the institutions that constitute a society catered to the economic development of the individual as well as the society. The major casualties in such a culture were humanitarian and spiritual values. Society itself had turned mercenary and encouraged individuals to worship the mammon. All major cities and towns of America were examples of mercenary societies which promoted economic success over all other forms of achievement. As Burton points out “Like numerous other towns Gardiner marched to the new economic drumbeat” (5). Gardiners, like people dwelling in other cities of America, were obsessed with wealth, power and status. Robinson found this excessive obsession with money and the spiritual degradation of Gardiner revolting. His sensitive nature suffered terribly in this mercenary culture and sowed the seeds for his antagonism.

To expose evils of the materialistic society he created a fictional town called “Tilbury” modeled on Gardiner. Tilbury Town forms the backdrop of many of his poems like “John Evereldown”(CP 73), “Flammonde”(CP 3), “Captain Craig”(CP 113), “The Tree in Pamela’s Garden” (CP 576) and “Old King Cole” (CP 17). Even in the other poems in which Tilbury Town is not mentioned, the reader is given to understand that the community referred to is Tilbury Town. In W. R. Robinson’s opinion,

Probably the most frequent “character” to appear in Robinson’s poetry is Tilbury Town, the fictional community that provides the setting for many of his poems and explicitly links him and his poetry with small town New England, the repressive utilitarian social climate customarily designated as the Puritan ethic. For Tilbury Town, more than simply a setting is an antagonistic force in the drama of life as Robinson imagined it. (128)

Tilbury Town symbolizes the spiritual decadence, hypocrisy, inhumanity, moral degeneration and obsession with wealth found in a materialistic society. Robinson dresses Tilbury with all the inhuman qualities he had encountered in Gardiner. He portrays the spiritual decadence of Tilbury Town in “Captain Craig”, its hypocrisy in the sonnet “Karma”(CP 871), inhumanity in “The Mill”(CP 460), moral degeneration in “The Man who Died Twice”(921) and obsession with wealth in “Cassandra”(CP 11). Tilbury Town appears for the first time in his poem “John Evereldown” published in his first collection of poems *The Torrent and the Night Before*. The Town which is merely a place in “John Evereldown” slowly evolves into a community and a collective conscience in his later poems. In “Captain Craig”, for example, Tilbury Town symbolizes the collective conscience of Gardiner community. The poet projects the inhumanity of Gardiner individuals not as the sin of an individual conscience but of a collective conscience.

The spiritual decadence of Tilbury Town is highlighted in the most explicit manner in “Captain Craig”. The poem sketches a thriving commercial town in America at the dawn of the twentieth century. The poet draws the attention of the readers to the spiritual degeneration of these commercial towns which propagated the wealth culture. Captain Craig, the protagonist is an outcaste because of his poverty and leads an alienated existence. The poem opens with an abrupt introduction to the attitude of Tilbury Town to Captain Craig, a pauper philosopher and a humorist like Socrates. The spiritual barrenness of Tilbury Town is juxtaposed with the spiritual awareness of Captain Craig. At the very outset the poet describes the suffocating “Tilbury prudence” (9) which chokes the spark of goodness in men like Captain Craig. This prudence is one of the debilitating characteristics of a materialistic society.

I Doubt if ten men in all Tilbury Town  
Had ever shaken hands with Captain Craig,  
Or called him by his name, or looked at him  
So curiously, or so concernedly  
As they had looked at ashes; but a few –  
Say five or six of us – had found somehow  
The spark in him, and we had fanned it there  
Choked under, like a jest in Holy Writ  
By Tilbury prudence. (1 –9)

The materialistic majority, indifferent to the sufferings of fellow beings, is contrasted with Captain Craig, representative of the isolated minority, who oppose the philosophy of materialism propagated by Western society. Captain Craig is a failure as he has failed to amass wealth and property, the only visible signs of success in a materialistic society. He is

rich in wisdom but the mercenary culture attaches no value to anything other than wealth and material possessions. Instead of fostering the spark of wisdom in Captain Craig, Tilbury townsmen try to choke it through their prudence.

Robinson then throws light on the false music of the town. Tilbury, like other towns and cities of twentieth century America, propagated a spiritually barren culture devoid of humanity and morality. The extreme obsession with wealth resulted in cut-throat competition for wealth and status. Though a spiritually empowered man is distressed by the “false” music of the town, Tilbury townsmen are unaware of the pitfalls in their culture and sing hosannas to this music. The able-bodied, who represent the authority of the powerful in a society, play an important role in perpetuating this “false music”. The dominant culture of modern societies is determined not by the majority but by the powerful minority. In Tilbury Town, as in Gardiner, the majority changed their individual tunes to blend with the false music, as the herd was more important than the individual in a materialistic society and the herd always acted according to the dictates of the powerful in society.

There was just a false note in the Tilbury tune-

A note that able-bodied men might sound

Hosannas on while Captain Craig lay quiet. (41-43)

After exposing the “false note” in Tilbury music and Tilbury prudence which chokes the spark in many a man, the poet highlights the hypocrisy of Tilbury townsmen. They trumpet their “trust in God” but refuse to help the poor and the weak like Captain Craig. Robinson directs his bitter irony at religious institutions which play to the false music of towns like Tilbury and promote the culture of wealth. The fast music of these commercial towns attracts the majority who have imbibed the culture of affluence.

They might have made him sing by feeding him

Till he should work again, but probably  
Such yielding would have jeopardized the rhythm  
They found it more melodious to shout  
Right on with unmolested adoration,  
To keep the tune as it always been,  
To trust in God, and let the Captain starve. (44-50)

Images of light and darkness are used throughout the poem to emphasize the schism that divides society and the Spirit. Anderson analyses the light symbolism in Robinson's poetry and remarks that the poet uses the "Light" as a symbol of God who is also manifest as the "Word" in the Bible:

'Light' with its counterpart 'dark' occurs in one form or another more than five hundred times in his work....The basic opposition is of course a positive-negative, spiritual-material one, 'light' representing, in its broadest sense, wisdom, and 'dark' representing ignorance. In its highest sense, 'Light' has a cosmic signification; it is identified with the Word, the Logos, as in the opening chapter of the Gospel according to Saint John, where Word-God-life-light are linked to express the eternal creative and unifying principle of the universe. (120)

A distinction is drawn between Captain Craig imbued with the sun and Tilbury Town embodying darkness. The faith in the Light provides man with increasing wisdom with the passage of years.

There shines  
The Sun. Behold it. We go round and round,  
And wisdom comes to us with every whirl

We count throughout the circuit. (113-116)

Captain Craig and a few others like him who are opposed to the utilitarian philosophy are rich in the sun and wisdom though they are financially poor. The question that Robinson puts to the readers is whether wealth or wisdom is the criterion for success. Robinson's criterion for success is definitely wisdom and it is this which prompts him to sing about people like Captain Craig. "At the source of Robinson's poetry ... is his belief in the moral superiority of these seemingly worthless characters over their more materially successful neighbors" (Hall 399).

The Captain has no qualms and takes pride in being a pauper philosopher. Poverty does not signify failure and is often the outcome of wisdom in a material world. His role in life is "to pattern love" and he scoops out spoonfuls of love to all around him. While Tilbury people are proud of their wealth and status, the poor Captain is equally proud of his philosophy of love. The Captain does not define success in materialistic terms but in humanitarian terms.

No penitential shame for what had come,

No virtuous regret for what had been,

But rather a joy to find it in his life

To be an outcaste usher of the soul

For such as had good courage of the Sun

To pattern love. (66-71)

Through "Captain Craig", the poet expresses his faith in an immortal God whose justice is contrary to the justice of the world. "The books all count" and all life lived in this world are worthy in God's eyes (103). There is a place for the "successful" as well as the "failed" in the divine plan. Hence Robinson sings about the "failed" in many of his poems.

Though we may not understand God's music we cannot deny the beauty and meaning of this music which is unintelligible to human ears.

Time throws away

Dead thousands of them, but the God that knows

No death denies not one: the books all count,

The songs all count; and yet God's music has

No modes, his language has no adjectives". (101-05)

The poetic perspective is opposed to the majority view. It is from the humanitarian belief in the worth and goodness of the so called "unsuccessful" and "failed" that he judges human life. To elaborate this truth he portrays a man named Count Pretzel von Wurzburger, a pauper, who is a poet, musician and critic. Through the Count's self assessment the poet philosophizes on the worthiness of many an unsuccessful man. It is not the Count who is a beggar but the materialist who receives wisdom and spiritual truths from the Count who is in reality a pauper.

You may believe

That I'm a mendicant, but I am not:

For though it look to you that I go begging,

The truth is I go giving – giving all

My strength and all my personality,

My wisdom and experience – all myself, .... (815-20)

The Count's philosophy is contradictory to utilitarian philosophy which considers wealth and material objects alone as useful. The Count makes it very clear that others benefit from him more than he has benefited from their alms. The same idea is repeated

towards the end of the poem when Captain Craig, realizes that he is dying, and in his final will, bequeaths the entire universe to his friends. While the rich businessmen, the so called “successful” bequeath a few millions to their heirs, the Captain gives his followers, the followers of the humanitarian principles, the entire universe.

“I, Captain Craig, abhorred iconoclast,  
Sage errant, favored of the Mysteries,  
And self-reputed humorist at large,  
Do vow, confessed of my world worshipping,  
Time questioning, sun-fearing, and heart yielding,  
Approve and unreservedly devise  
To you and your assigns for ever more,  
God’s universe and yours. (1214-21)

The Captain advises his friends to have sun-receptive minds; minds that can read the mystery of the universe. Poverty is better than the “sun-shut mind” of the materialist he tells them. The “sun-shut minds” are not receptive to the Spirit and are alienated from the self. They are slaves of the world and live in darkness. The internalization of the mechanist culture has rendered them incapable of confrontation. The herd instinct is so predominant that they refuse to oppose the majority. Lack of resistance is not a sign of wellbeing but rather an indication of passivity:

There is no servitude so fraudulent  
As of a sun-shut mind; for it is the mind  
That makes you craven or invincible  
Diseased or puissant. (1709-12)

Critics find a biographical element in the portrayal of Captain Craig’s character. The



Captain represents Robinson's philosophy of life which combines the antipathy towards utilitarianism with humanism. He inspires his friends to have faith in the Spirit and to relinquish the flesh. He is certain that the spiritual degeneration of the twentieth century is the result of the "flesh" or the extreme importance given to the transient worldly pleasures. The physical self has no immortality unless it is united with the spiritual. The poet traces the ailments of the modern age to the preoccupation with the "flesh". To gain immortality, man has to forsake his obsession with the world and turn to the Spirit. "It is the flesh / That ails us, for the spirit knows no qualm, / No failure, no down-falling: so climb high, .... (1258-60).

The poem is a strong affirmation of faith in a benevolent God. The divine yardstick for measuring success is different and those who are successful from a materialistic point of view may not be the victors of God's Kingdom.

There would have lived, as always it has lived,  
In ruin as in failure, the supreme  
Fulfillment unexpressed, the rhythm of God  
That beats unheard through songs of shattered men  
Who dream but cannot sound it. (1009-14)

In the din and bustle of urban life the rhythm of God is sometimes unheard by man. But this harmonious rhythm is ever present. The only remedy for self-alienation is to live in harmony with God's music.

Robinson concludes the poem with the death of Captain Craig. The poet does not make it a tragedy but imparts comic element by fulfilling the Captain's wish for a brass band and the music of Handel and not Chopin for the funeral. This is appropriate to the

Captain's philosophy which sees the humor behind the miseries of life. Anderson describes "Captain Craig" as a comedy which fuses the form of a Greek comedy with the tragedy of modern life. "Filled with buffoonery and bawdy humor, burlesque and parody, strange and grotesque characters, it pilloried contemporary politics, science, poetry and philosophy in a mixture of coarse and exalted language" (131). This natural blend of comic features with the tragic has elevated the poem to epic dimensions.

The sonnet "Karma" exposes the hypocrisy inherent in Tilbury civilization (CP 871). The materialistic tradition has fostered a competitive culture the ultimate objective of which is the victory of the self. As life is seen as a race for success the individuals of modern society are obsessed with winning at all costs. In the octave, the poet makes a psychological study of a materialist who deceived his friend for business interests. With the arrival of Christmas, the festival of peace and joy, he is reminded of the cruelty that he committed towards his friend:

Because

A friend of his would neither buy nor sell,

Was he to answer for the axe that fell? (3-5).

Robinson emphasizes the hypocrisy of modern man who is extremely religious but does not care for the poor or the downtrodden. The protagonist is torn by mental conflict as he suffers from guilty conscience as he ruined his friend in the competitive business world. There is an indication that the failure of the friend may have caused him to end his life. To rid himself of the guilt he offers a dime in the church and forgets the loss of his friend and enjoys Christmas. This man is not alone in his hypocrisy but has the company of the majority in society. The market-orientation has destroyed the unity of the self in modern commercialized societies. The individual suffers from the conflict between selfishness and

humanitarianism. The dominant commercial self thwarts the humanitarian self which results in self-alienation. The suppressed self asserts its individuality on rare occasions aggravating the alienation. Materialistic ideology covertly manipulates individual consciousness and teaches them to assuage guilt through hypocrisy. The materialist's interest in God is merely self interest and his real God is the "Money God". The sonnet exposes the absurdity in many conventional Christian practices and the hypocrisy of institutionalized religion. The Christianity of the materialist is contrary to the humanitarian ideals of Christ and perhaps more closely aligned to the hypocrisy with which Christ accuses the Pharisees and priests of his time.

He magnified a fancy that he wished  
The friend whom he had wrecked were here again  
Not sure of that, he found a compromise;  
And from the fullness of his heart he fished  
A dime for Jesus who had died for men. (10-14)

One of the most poignant poems on the inhumanity inherent in the philosophy of materialism is "The Mill" (CP 460). The poet compresses the pathos of a family rendered destitute by industrialization and commercialization into this short poem. In just twenty four lines Robinson unfolds the tragic drama of human life through the life of the miller. Commenting on the poem Frost said that "Robinson could make lyric talk like drama" (38). The miller who had been busy all his life had gradually become jobless as more and more people opted for mechanized mills. The disintegration of small business enterprises with the arrival of giant industries and factories was a frequent phenomenon of the twentieth century. The poet condenses the sense of futility and helplessness of these small-time business men in just one line. "There are no millers any more" (5). Industrialization denies them a space

and deprives them of their livelihood. The “dead” fire signifies the effacement of the trade of the miller as well as his suicide. The mill symbolizes the dead past with no future prospects as is the case of the small businessmen. “And in the mill there was a warm / And mealy fragrance of the past” (11-12). In his frustration and despair the miller hangs himself. The wife waits for the miller unaware of the fact that he has ended his life. Industrialization should be held responsible for the death of the miller. She goes in search of her husband and discovers the hanging body in the mill. The haunting description of the miller hanging from the beam of his mill is a deliberate attempt by the poet to shock the readers into an awareness of the inhumanity associated with large business enterprises. And what was hanging from a beam / Would not have heeded where she went (15-16). Desperate and hopeless, she too commits suicide. Materialism destroys not individuals but whole families and ultimately the human race. The miller’s wife follows her husband to the valley of death. The subtle and indirect treatment of her death is a supreme example of Robinson’s compressed and indirect poetic style. The poet describes the suicide of the miller’s wife by drawing the attention of the reader to the fact that water after being ruffled becomes calm again hiding many secrets including the death of the miller’s wife.

Black water, smooth above the weir  
Like starry velvet in the night,  
Though ruffled once, would soon appear  
The same as ever to the sight. (21-24)

The poet brings out the frustration, hopelessness and fear of a whole generation of small businessmen and farmers through the poem. Modern man is so obsessed with wealth that he has lost his humanitarian values and sees no harm in prospering even at the cost of his neighbor. He reminds the new generation that progress should not be founded on

callousness and brutality.

The mercenary culture has evolved a competitive society which believes in the survival of the economically fittest. This philosophy has played havoc with the life of a whole generation of Americans. Arthur Miller and John Updike have dealt with this tragedy perpetuated in the name of progress in their works. Miller's plays like *All my Sons*(1947) and *The Death of a Salesman* (1949) and John Updike's novel *The Coup*(1978) are comparable to "The Mill" in their treatment of the destructive aspects of modernity.

"The Man who Died Twice" (CP 921) portrays the spiritual and moral degeneration of man in a materialistic society. Fernando Nash, the protagonist of this poem, is a musical genius who had shown signs of becoming a master musician in his younger days. But the trappings of modern materialism destroyed his musical talent and led to his estrangement. This promising young musician was feared by other musicians with lesser talent. The rivalry and unhealthy competition that has become part and parcel of art in the modern age is revealed through the story of Fernando Nash.

'They knew I had it – once,'  
He said; and with a scowl said it again  
Like a child trying twice the bitter taste  
Of an unpalatable medicine;  
'They knew I had it – once! Do you remember  
What an upstanding Ajax I was then?  
And what an eye I had? I scorched 'em with it.  
I scared 'em; and they knew I was a giant....' (122-29)

Modern American society is characterized by unhealthy competition and the ideal "the end justifies the means". Wealth and power are the criterion for success and modern

man employs every means at his disposal to achieve this. Hence each man is alone in his struggle for success and considers others as his enemy. Fernando Nash arouses the fear and enmity of other musicians with his exceptional talent. This isolation of the successful is another modern phenomenon which has distressed many successful individuals. The higher you climb the more alienated you become.

If the successful modern man is an isolated being, the fate of the failed man is even more distressing. He is alienated by society and loses faith in himself as well as others. Nash typifies the social alienation of the failed. He falls prey to the temptations of a materialistic society and wastes away his life in debauchery. He loses his musical skill and those who had feared and envied him once have only contempt for him now. He is compared to a “half-hatched” “phoenix” that has no rebirth but is baked “in his own ashes”. This beautiful image condenses the irony in the life of Nash, who in spite of his exceptional musical talent, fails to achieve immortality as a great musician:

You insufficient phoenix

That has to bake at last in his own ashes –

You kicked out, half-hatched bird of paradise

That had to die before you broke your shell, –

Who cares what you would be if you had flown? (348-352)

Nash’s degradation is complete when he decides to starve himself to death. But Robinson’s idealism does not permit him to conclude the poem on a note of despair. Though he has been accused of pessimism, the industrious reader finds a ray of hope in even the darkest of his poems. The hope of salvation is dominant in the poem and it focuses on the rejection of materialism which leads to the spiritual regeneration of Nash. In the state of starvation he sees hallucinations. He witnesses an orchestra of rats and hears the drums of

death. Gradually a change comes over him. His abstinence after long years of being intoxicated clears his wits. The image of the “shining grain” which was long “hidden by chaff” is an example of the superbly accomplished visual imagery.

Like shining grain,  
Long fowled and hidden by chaff and years of dust  
In a dark place, and after many seasons  
Winnowed and cleared, with sunlight falling on it,  
His wits were clear again. (744-48)

He finds peace and tranquility after years of frustration and unrest. It is the beginning of his transition. He tries to rebel but gradually accepts God’s intervention. He feels remorse for his past sinful life. There is no more fear or despair but only strength and hope. Nash gains a balanced view of life after his conversion. He is ready to give up his ambition as well as his evil ways and live for the Lord. He realizes that there is a joy in the small things of life as in big deeds which bring glory and wealth. In fact the joy of worldly ambition fulfilled is transient whereas little deeds done for the Lord bring permanent happiness.

A calm that all his life had been a stranger  
To the confusions that were born with him  
Composed and overpowered him.... (762-764)

Though Nash does not achieve his ambition to compose Symphony Number Three and become a celebrity he is not alienated at the end of the poem. There is no more fragmentation of experience as he has become harmonious with the universe. By freeing himself from the bondage of materialism he has achieved a balanced perspective. Modern social ideology has constructed happiness as the feverish pursuit of pleasures. The search

for happiness in the material world ends in frustration and despair. True happiness is the condition enjoyed by a liberated state of mind and Nash accomplishes this at the end.

But in this new unwillingness not to live,  
No longer forced, there was gratefulness  
Of infinite freedom and humility  
After a bondage of indignant years  
And evil sloth; and there was in this calm  
Which had unlooked for been so long in coming  
A balanced wealth of debts and benefits  
Vaster than all ambition or achievement. (793-800)

He devotes his life to beating drums for the Salvation Army and achieves an inner peace which had evaded him when he was climbing the ladder of success. Robinson shatters the modern materialistic illusion that earthly greatness is the proper goal of man's life. "Glory to God! Mine are the drums of life / After those other drums" (63-64).

The poem also throws light on the poet's belief in the Oriental concept of the material world as maya. Robinson refutes materialism on the basis of Oriental philosophy which asserts that the world "appears to be". It is not the actual reality. The Upanishads consider the world as illusory and states that it is ignorance that leads man to trust the senses and believe in material reality. "All we know about the world / For certain is that it appears to be" (1152-53).

Robinson's most vindictive attack on the American obsession with wealth and power is found in his poem "Cassandra" (CP 11). The poem is a direct expression of his ire towards the mercenary culture which dominates modern American society. He is frustrated by the knowledge that the legacy that the American children of the modern age are going to



inherit is the mammonistic culture. Instead of the Word of God children are taught the word of the dollar.

I Heard one who said: Verily,  
What words have I for children here?  
Your dollar is your only Word,  
The wrath of it your only fear. (1-4)

In the modern American context, the place of God has been taken by money. This craving for wealth has blinded man and deprived him of wisdom. He lacks a balanced perspective which enables him to build on the past while at the same time looking forward to the future. Robinson was shocked by this transition in American culture within a century.

You build it altars tall enough  
To make you see, but you are blind;  
You cannot leave it long enough  
To look before you or behind. (4-8)

The American ideals of freedom, morality and nonconformity have given way to a commercialized society interested only in wealth and power. As Murchland observes:

What we are, therefore, and can do, is not determined by our humanity but by our purchasing power. If we are ugly we can buy beauty; if we are dishonorable, money can make us honorable; we may be stupid “but since money is the real mind of all things, how should its possessor be stupid?”  
Thus does money, transform all things into their opposites. (17)

Robinson felt the need for resisting this American fetish for wealth and status. Being a poet, he used his poetry as a weapon to fight against this new mode of living. The first step in this resistance was to create an awareness of the evils of this wealth culture in society. It is with

this aim that he wrote the poem “Cassandra” in which he expresses his disgust towards modern American culture which worships money and nothing but money. Modern man’s obsession with wealth is such that it is more important to him than his own self. He devotes his whole life to the accumulation of wealth and loses his life in this pursuit.

Your Dollar, Dove and Eagle make  
A Trinity that even you  
Rate higher than you rate yourselves;  
It pays, it flatters, and it’s new. (29-32)

For the modern American the Holy Trinity has been replaced by the new trinity of the Dollar, Dove and Eagle, which stand for wealth, peace and power. Wealth leads to power and these together bring about peace and prosperity. However, it is common knowledge that though wealth may bring economic prosperity it has never been proved that wealth is instrumental in bringing peace. Even the belief that industrial and commercial expansion brings prosperity is not always true as is evident from the economic depression of the 1930’s.

Modern man has lost his vision in the manic quest for affluence so that he does not have the foresight to predict the destructive repercussions of the philosophy of materialism on mankind. This lack of vision would certainly be the downfall of human civilization. The truth of this prophetic utterance has been proved by the two world wars that took place in the first half of the twentieth century.

The power is yours, but not the sight;  
You see not upon what you tread;  
You have the ages for your guide,  
But not the wisdom to be led. (37-40)

Robinson concludes the poem by warning that modern man will have to pay a heavy price for his extreme obsession with wealth. But his realization may come too late and the alienated self would be the result of this greed for money. Modern man worships only the dollar. He has no other religion though he may stick to religious conventions for social acceptance. This unprecedented preoccupation with wealth fostered a culture which was instrumental in engendering the fragmentation of the world.

Are you to pay for what you have

With all you are?" –No other word

We caught, but with a laughing crowd

Moved on. None heeded, and few heard. (45-48)

Materialism suppresses individuality and promotes conformity as thinking individuals are a threat to the materialistic society. As one who encouraged multiplicity of perspectives, Robinson was against the smothering of individuality. It is this penchant for liberty which attracted him to the lives of great men who had fought for individual rights. His subjects include Lincoln, Napoleon, Shakespeare, St. Paul and Rembrandt. He was fascinated by revolutionaries who fought for liberty and equality. It is this fascination which provided the impetus for a poem on the black leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture, who later came to be called Toussaint L'Ouverture meaning "the one who finds an opening". Toussaint L'Ouverture was an educated slave of Haiti, a French colony. He was influenced by French Enlightenment writers like Rousseau and decided to fight for the rights of his people. He fought against the French and succeeded in defeating them. In 1793, the Jacobins who were in control of the French Revolution, decided to end slavery in the French colonies including Haiti. Toussaint became the de facto governor of the colony. But soon the Jacobins lost power and Napoleon became the ruler of France. Though he reintroduced slavery in the

French colonies, realizing the difficulty of keeping Haiti a colony, he signed a peace pact with Toussaint granting independence to Haiti. Toussaint was invited by the French for a negotiation meeting but was betrayed and taken to a prison dungeon in the mountains on Napoleon's orders, where he was isolated and starved to death.

Robinson considers it his duty as a defender of individualism to write a poem on this champion of individual liberty, Toussaint L'Ouverture. He adopts a novel strategy in the poem. He does not write about the glorious side of Toussaint's life but turns his gaze on the last days of this great hero spent in captivity. Pathos mingles with triumph and pride to make it a poignant tale. The poem is in the form of a monologue by the Haitian independence leader in the desolate French prison where Napoleon has confined him. The poem opens with the dismal loneliness of Toussaint who is having an imaginary conversation with a sympathetic listener. He is well aware of the danger awaiting one who befriends him. He has been socially alienated for revolting against an authority which suppressed individual freedom.

Am I alone – or is it you, my friend?  
I call you friend, but let it not be known  
That such a word was uttered in this place.  
You are the first that has forgotten duty  
So far as to be sorry and perilously,  
For you—that I am not so frozen yet,  
Or starved, or blasted, that I cannot feel. (1–7)

The poem is set in the dark, dingy prison symbolizing the darkness in the life of the protagonist and the evil in the social structure. But as in the other poems by Robinson, the darkness in the poem is alleviated by a gray color representing hope. "There is no light, /

But there's a gray place where a window was / Before the sun went down" (9-11).

The poet contrasts the dignity of Toussaint with the institution of slavery which divests slaves of their dignity. He also exposes the hypocrisy of the whites who preach liberty and equality but are inhumane towards the slaves. The discrimination in the name of color is vividly portrayed through the image of the "black earth". In their spirit of conquest the whites desire to possess not only land and water but also the blacks whom they consider as things. Injustice has always a seed of rebellion ingrained in it which has the potential to burst forth at any moment. Napoleon finds in Toussaint a threat to his life and authority. But Toussaint refutes this threat and is surprised that Napoleon is afraid of him. Napoleon's fear arises from his injustice and deceit.

You must be careful,  
Or they will kill you if they hear you asking  
Questions of me as if I were a man  
I did not know that there was anything left  
Alive to see me, or to consider me,  
As more than a transplanted shovelful  
Of black earth, with a seed of danger in it –  
A seed that's not there now, and never was. (19-26)

The obsession with wealth and status which is characteristic of a materialistic society is satirized in the poem. Napoleon represents the materialist's greed for wealth and power. The materialist is blind with greed and the higher he rises the lesser is his wisdom. When he reaches the top he is so self-centered that he is indifferent to the miseries of the lower classes of society and perpetuates injustice and cruelty.

And if God made him,

And made him as he is, and has to be,  
Say who shall answer for a world where men  
Are mostly blind, and they who are the blindest  
Climb to cold heights that others cannot reach,  
And there, with all there is for them to see  
See nothing but themselves. (59-65)

Slavery is undoubtedly the worst social injustice fostered by society. To bring out the inhumanity embedded in this social evil Robinson makes Toussaint express his surprise at the fact that the listener recognizes the human qualities beneath the blackness of a slave.

I shall not forget  
Your seeing in me a remnant of mankind,  
And not a piece of God's peculiar clay  
Shaped as a reptile, or as a black snake. (78-81)

The irony of the poem lies in the fact that through his death Toussaint has achieved immortal fame. "Napoleon cannot starve my name to death, / Or blot it out with his" (109-10). In the conflict between Napoleon and Toussaint, the black slave achieves immortality through his martyrdom while Napoleon's name is tainted forever by this act of betrayal. Robinson adopts the poetic technique of repetition to shock the readers into their senses. Toussaint repeatedly expresses his surprise at the human concern that he receives at the hands of the sympathetic listener. However, the readers are appalled by the treatment meted out to the blacks. The poet exposes the social perception towards the black who are considered as animals or a commodities. Through this reification the poet brings out the inhumanity of society and the humaneness of the slaves.

One dishonored slave,  
One animal owned and valued at a price,  
One black commodity, .... (114-16)

The poet lashes out at the rulers who perpetuate social evils like slavery, out of pride or fear. They are unsympathetic to the sufferings of the slaves and are only concerned about power, glory and wealth. The indifference of the rulers is contrasted with the suffering of the blacks:

On thrones or chairs of state too high for them,  
Where they sit swollen or scared, or both, as may be,  
They watch, unseen, a diligent see-saw  
Played by their privileged and especial slaves  
On slippery planks that shake and smell of blood  
That flows from crushed and quivering backs and arms  
Of slaves that hold them up. (137-43)

Toussaint prophesies that Napoleon's end would be as pitiful and horrible as his own death. "Last night I saw Napoleon in hell" (174). The prophecy came true when Napoleon died a prisoner on the island of St. Helena.

The nonconformist has to pay a dear price for deviance. The listener has deviated from the norm because he has shown sympathy towards Toussaint and does not look upon black people as merchandise to be bought and sold. He will be put to death if his nonconformity is discovered.

I said to you it would be perilous  
Not to remember that I'm not a man,

But an imprudent piece of merchandise

To buy and sell. (221-24)

The poet brings to light the fact that even knowledge is in the hands of the powerful. Knowledge is kept deliberately from the marginalized sections of the society so that they would not become powerful and a threat to the repositories of power. And when a marginalized acquires knowledge and becomes wise, he becomes a threat and is immediately wiped out. “France was a place where they were starving me / To death, because a black man had a brain” (258-59).

The poem ends on a note of hope with Toussaint imagining a grand reception from his black brethren on his native island of Haiti. The “sun” and the “white foam” symbolize the immortality of Toussaint, who in spite of his death will be a symbol of hope for his country men.

I feel the sun! Now we are going faster

Now I see land – I see land and a mountain!

I see white foam along a sunny shore –

And there’s a town. Now there are people inviting

Shouting and singing, waving wild arms at me,

And crowding down together to the water! (260-65)

With his dignity and wisdom Toussaint gains the sympathy of the readers so that they are made aware of the inhumanity of the white community. The evils of materialism like greed for power and wealth, inhumanity and hypocrisy shock the sensibilities of readers provoking them to revolt against this disabling culture.

Towards the end of Robinson’s poetic career there occurred a shift in focus from individual experience to social themes. “King Jasper” (CP 1397) the last poem written by



Robinson is both a social allegory and a symbolic representation of the disintegration of capitalism. He blames capitalism for the alienation and dehumanization of modern American society. King Jasper represents power, Prince Jasper stands for ignorance, and Zoe symbolizes wisdom. King Jasper is portrayed as an ambitious entrepreneur who accumulates wealth and becomes powerful. In the march towards economic prosperity and power, he has no regard for the humane or the spiritual. He has betrayed his best friend Hebron in his overvaulting ambition to become the ruler of the land. Robinson juxtaposes the traditional institution of monarchy with modern democracy to expose the illusion of freedom and equality associated with democracy. Power positions and acquisitions of power are found in democracy as in monarchy.

The poem opens with the predicament of Queen Honoria who suffers in spite of the material comforts that surround her. The queen is haunted by a troubled conscience which has destroyed her happiness.

#### Honoria

Might have been happier had she never felt  
The touch of hidden fingers everywhere,  
On everything, and sometimes all but seen them.  
For they were there, they were all over the house;  
They followed her unseen wherever she went,  
And stayed with her unseen wherever she was, .... (23-29)

The queen typifies the alienation of man in a materialistic society, surrounded by material comforts but unable to find fulfillment or joy. The sense of alienation accompanies the queen wherever she is, and similar is the experience of modern man who is alienated from his own self. As a result of the materialistic culture and obsession with material objects, man is estranged from his own self and from others. The chimneys of King Jasper

are symbols of power, representative not only of his power but the power and wealth of an industrialized society. Queen Honoria acknowledges the power symbolism in the “chimneys”. “Your chimneys are the landmark of your power. / Without them I know best what I should be” (113-14). But Robinson warns the modern generation that these institutions of power when they are built on wickedness and inhumanity will not last forever. King Jasper who embodies the ethics of capitalism attempts to buy happiness. He is shocked by the realization that his wife is unhappy in spite of his wealth and power. He assumes that their wayward son is the cause of her concern and worry:

It's that incalculable only son

Of ours. What are we going to make of him?

Answer me that, and I'll go on my knees

To you, and make you blind with diamonds”. (138-41)

Unfortunately, the king is not able to even surmise the cause of her anxiety:

“Jasper, if diamonds would make me blind

In one direction, or in one respect,

I might be on my knees, imploring you

For baskets of them. (142-45)

The queen's anxiety and restlessness is due to a premonition of some inexplicable threat to their happiness and affluence. Accumulation of wealth and the consequent comforts do not bring her any joy. Her intuition forewarns her of impending doom.

King Jasper's daughter-in-law, Zoe, who symbolizes freedom and wisdom, sees through the king and his power and realizes the shaky foundation on which his kingdom rests. She is aware of his past and ponders on the wicked atrocities committed by man to achieve power. She concludes that wicked deeds of the mighty are the result of blindness

and the lack of a historical sense which would have enabled man to learn from past mistakes:

The mightiest are the blindest; and I wonder  
Why they forget themselves in histories  
They cannot read because they have no sight.  
What useless chronicles of bloody dust  
Their deeds will be sometime! And all because  
They cannot see behind them or before them,  
And cannot see themselves. (532-38)

Though the queen lacks the insight of her daughter- in -law she too is aware of the approaching destruction:

When I'm alone,  
By day or night, I feel mysterious hands  
Doing a silent work of slow destruction. (254-56)

The poet portends the disasters inherent in capitalism which would bring about the gradual disintegration of the system. The aggressive competition which forms the basis of capitalism inculcates inhumanity which would ultimately engineer the annihilation of the capitalist society. The king realizes this truth very late in his life after he has already destroyed his friend. The success of business enterprises in a capitalist society is usually accompanied by callousness and ruthlessness:

“My son, when you are older,” said the King  
Smiling a scowl away, “you will have learned  
That all who have climbed higher than the rest  
Owe the dead more than pictures. (610-13)

The king admits to his inhumanity in his quest for power and the harm that he has wrought on his friend, Hebron. Robinson vehemently attacks institutions like capitalism created by man which are not founded on humanity and love. In the greed for power men become monsters who destroy fellow human beings. But ultimately the fate of these institutions erected on greed and ambition is absolute destruction. Such institutions cannot last forever and are devoured in their self-destructive fire. King Jasper realizes this very late in life when his friend Hebron appears to him in a dream:

When I was gone, men said you were a King;  
But you were more. You were almost a kingdom;  
And you forgot that Kingdoms are not men.  
They are composite and obscure creations  
Of men, and in a manner are comparable  
To Moving and unmanageable machines,  
And somehow are infernally animated  
With a self interest so omnivorous  
That ultimately they must eat themselves. (937-48)

These words spoken by Hebron, sum up Robinson's fears for the future of a democratic society. A democratic government in a capitalist society is prone to fall into the trap of institutionalization and lose its humanitarian ideals. Then it becomes mechanized and brings about the alienation of man.

The lure of material goods blinds the majority in society and they tread the path of alienation unaware of the source or the remedy for this alienation. Robinson projects modern man's greed for wealth by transforming Hebron, who was perched on King Jasper's shoulder, into gold. The dead weight of the gold adds to the sufferings of the already

tortured King:

Yes, I am changing into gold.

I am the gold that you said would be mine--

Before you stole it, and became a King.

Fear not, old friend; you cannot fall or die,

Unless I strangle you with my gold fingers. (1101-05)

This dream sequence is evocative of the story of Midas and his retribution for his obsession with gold. Hebron mercilessly pushes the king to the edge of suffering so that the latter realizes the futility of amassing wealth compromising human values.

Robinson symbolically confers on King Jasper, Zoe's fatherhood, thus endorsing his theory that knowledge is the offspring of folly and arises from its realization. King Jasper realizes the folly of deceiving his friend. This realization gives birth to prudence and wisdom. Thus Zoe who represents wisdom is the offspring of King Jasper's folly. "Yes, I am Zoë's father," Jasper groaned. / My folly and I together, for centuries, / Have been the forebears of her parentage" (1243-45). Unfortunately, this awareness usually comes only when it is too late and the work of destruction is already underway.

The poem ends with the destruction of King Jasper's kingdom and the death of King Jasper, Queen Honoria, Prince Jasper and Hebron. The only one who survives the winds of destruction is the innocent Zoe, symbolizing the perpetuation of wisdom.

The poem presages the destruction of modern civilization unless the philosophy and culture are redefined. Capitalism becomes disabling when it combines with materialism to encourage consumerism and utilitarianism. The poet hints at the perishable nature of material goods and their inability to satisfy the craving for immortality in human beings. Human beings can attain immortality only through enduring acts or deeds which defy death.

As Arendt observes, the task and potential greatness of mortals lie in their ability to produce things--works and deeds and words-- which would deserve to be everlasting, so that through them mortals could find their place in a cosmos where everything is immortal except themselves (19). Robinson attacks the prevailing social ideology and asserts that material wealth and power can only create an illusion of immortality. Modern man becomes aware of this truth only when it is too late. King Jasper's wife Honoria realizes this truth towards the end of their glorious life and reflects on the transience of material happiness:

She and our son together may live to see  
Firmer and higher forms rise out of ashes  
Than all your chimneys, which to you are temples,  
Built high for your false gods of a small heaven  
That is not going to last for you much longer. (2196-200)

Robinson concludes the poem with the destruction of the kingdom and the chimneys that he had built as a symbol of power and wealth. The fate of King Jasper's kingdom is the fate of capitalism and capitalist countries if they build their empires on materialistic philosophy.

But the poem is not without a ray of hope. Zoë remains unharmed at the end of the poem pointing to the immortal nature of wisdom in contrast to the transience of material goods. She explodes the mechanistic interpretation of the universe and ascertains a divine purpose and law in the universe:

“No God,  
No Law, no Purpose, could have hatched for sport  
Out of warm water and slime, a war for life  
That was unnecessary, and far better  
Never had been – if man, as we behold him,

Is all it means. (2328-33)

Zoë exposes the limitations of the materialistic rejection of God and draws attention to the supreme creature man who could not have come into being by his own efforts or by accident:

I don't say what God is, but it's a name

That somehow answers us when we are driven

To feel and think how little we have to do

With what we are. (2377-80)

Though materialism is an age old philosophy, it became the dominant philosophy of western society only in the nineteenth century. It combined with factors like industrialization and urbanization to evolve a new social ideology giving importance to material pursuits. Though initially the ideology seemed to bring about economic prosperity, subsequently it led to the spiritual and moral degeneration of western society. Alienation, conformity and routinization are some of the evils perpetuated by the new social ideology. Robinson considered it his moral obligation to refute materialism and he donned the role of a poet crusader in combating the evils engendered by this philosophy.

## Chapter 3

### **Alienation of the Nonconformist**

Alienation is neither a modern phenomenon nor is it restricted to a particular society. It has been there since prehistoric times. But the nature and impact of alienation has changed according to the age and the society. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines alienation in the following manner:

The term “alienation” (estrangement) has many different meanings in everyday life, in science, and in philosophy: most of them can be regarded as modifications of one broad meaning which is suggested by the etymology and morphology of the word--the meaning in which alienation (or estrangement) is the act, or result of the act, through which something, or somebody, becomes (or has become) alien (or strange) to something, or somebody, else. (Edwards 1: 76)

In the beginning, alienation was to a great extent due to the feelings of helplessness that man felt in combating with the forces of nature. Modern man’s alienation, on the other hand, is the result of societal interference. As Fritz Pappenhiem argued in his article “Alienation in American society”:

Due to the tremendous advance in science and technology, especially in recent decades, man has made great strides toward overcoming alienation as far as it is engendered by the forces of nature. He is no longer at their mercy. By understanding them he has come closer to the realization of the Promethean dream – to shape his own life and to become master of his destiny. Thus, in one way he has greater possibilities than ever before of fulfilling man’s age-old yearning for self-realization. Yet, for us, this possibility cannot become



reality. The reason is that another type of alienation, that engendered by the forces of society, continues unabated and, as I have argued, has even grown stronger. (14)

The new social ideology generated by materialism has been instrumental in bringing about radical dehumanization of life. Mechanization of society has not only made machines perform functions until then done by man; it has also led to the diminishing of humanitarian qualities in man. His actions have become mechanical and automatic. He does not control his products any more and is more or less controlled by them. It is this situation that Marx termed as commodity fetishism. “Commodity fetishism, then, is the inability of human beings to see their own products for what they are, and their unwitting consent to be enslaved by human power instead of wielding it”(Kolakowski 277). Though the revolutions in transport and communication have brought men closer together, individuals have grown more estranged from one another.

In this new social scenario there has been a shift in focus from the individual to the masses and this has led to the transformation of the American society that once respected individual liberty to a “mass society” (Bell 21). The term *mass* implies that standardized material is transmitted to all groups of the population uniformly. This standardization has led to a very important behavioral change in modern man. A tendency to conform to a group or a community or a society at all costs has evolved. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries men had been forced to conform to a class or a tribe and to the authority that controlled the clan or the tribe. There the authority was overt and the individual was aware of the identity of the authority that controlled. The consequence of compliance or rebellion towards this authority was definite and known to everyone. It was easier to defy this overt authority when it stifled individual freedom. But the character of authority has changed

since the twentieth century. Fromm, while analyzing modern form of authority and the conformism resulting from it, arrived at the conclusion that industrialization and commercialization have paved the way for an “anonymous, invisible and alienated authority” (138). It is difficult to resist this modern authority when it curtails individual freedom. Though invisible, this modern authority is much more powerful and intimidating and difficult to defy. The primary stipulation of the modern authority for the masses is conformity, a new mode of conformity which expects individuals to behave uniformly. In such a society virtue consists in adjusting to the herd and vice is to be different. Compliance to the herd is of crucial importance in this new mode of conformity. The individual is trained to adapt to the group or society from an early age so that by the time the child grows into an adult he will have internalized the principle of conformity to such an extent that it is no more an external agency but an internal force. Modern childhood games and education techniques are all tools designed to encourage this process of internalization.

Unlike the authorities of the past who used physical punishment to impose their power, modern anonymous authority imposes its power through the technique of normalization. Normalization is a process whereby behaviors and ideas are made to seem “normal” through repetition, or through ideology, propaganda, etc., often to the point where they appear natural and taken for granted. In effect those who conform to the authority of society are categorized as the normal and those who do not conform are categorized as the abnormal. Michele Foucault throws light on the manipulation of power by the conforming majority. He argues that imposing discipline through precise norms is quite different from the older system of judicial punishment, which merely judges each action as allowed by the law and does not say that those judged are “normal” or “abnormal”:

Discipline is a technique of power which provides procedures for training or

for coercing bodies (individual and collective). The instruments through which disciplinary power achieves its hold are hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and the examination.... Foucault has argued that at the heart of a disciplinary system of power there lies an 'infra-penalty' or an extra-legal penalty which is exercised over a mass of behaviors. In effect what is being punished is non-conformity which the exercise of disciplinary power seeks to correct. (Smart 85-6)

In the process of normalization, the normal is defined through the abnormal and the normal has power over the abnormal. Since the "abnormal" are stigmatized by the society, the majority tend towards normalization. This powerful, normal, majority force the abnormal minority to the periphery of society. Thus there are two factors that incite an individual in modern society to conform – the fear of isolation and the stigma of abnormality. These two powerful factors contribute to the normalization of the majority and the alienation of the minority who do not conform. The normalcy of this majority rests merely on conformity and not on any behavioral normalcy. This normal individual who forms the majority is far from normal and suffers from self-estrangement. Self-estrangement leads to psychological disorders as the need for individual identity stems from the very condition of human existence. It is so intense that man cannot remain sane unless he finds a way of satisfying it. Modern man who lacks individual identity is far from normal. But since the majority in twentieth century American society are the self-estranged their abnormality is overlooked and taken as the normal. The self-alienated individuals are not aware of their mental pathology and remain oblivious of their abnormality. Even when they are aware of their defective personality and can trace it to the social ideology they are passive. So a lack of resistance does not always imply that society plays a nurturing role in molding the

personality of the majority.

Western civilization, from the middle ages, had attempted to develop individuality by making the individual politically and economically free and teaching him to think for himself. During the Renaissance a minority achieved this new experience of individual identity. But before the majority could attain this new found experience, powerful social institutions, realizing the danger to them from thinking individuals, adopted the strategy of normalization. Thus, herd identity replaced individual identity in the twentieth century, paving the way for alienated individuals. With the replacement of individual identity by herd identity the nature of alienation itself has changed. In the modern conformist society, alienation has become an all-pervasive phenomenon with the majority suffering from self-alienation resulting in abnormality and the minority suffering from social alienation. When a few individuals in a society suffer from self-alienation the conclusion to be drawn is that it is due to personal neurosis, but when the majority suffers from it, it is to be concluded with certainty that this is a social phenomenon. Fromm, after analyzing the alienation of individuals in modern society, goes on to prove that modern society itself is sick and hence consensual validation which in the past was indicative of mental health and normalcy is not so in modern western society. The paradox of modern alienation is that since alienated individuals make up the majority they categorize themselves as the normal in spite of their self-estrangement and marginalize the non-conforming sane minority as the abnormal (23). This results in a reversal whereby the normal become the abnormal and the abnormal the normal.

The normal individual of twentieth century western society has certain characteristic features that distinguish him from his “abnormal” contemporary as well as the normal individual of the past. David Riesman in his work, *The Lonely Crowd*, analyses the

character of people in different ages, and divides people into three groups. The first is the “tradition-directed” type who is guided by the established conventions of the society in which he lives. The second is the “inner-directed” type who “has early incorporated a psychic gyroscope which is set going by his parents and can receive signals later on from other authorities who resemble his parents” (24). The inner-directed man is capable of great stability as he internalizes principles and not details of behavior. The third is the “other-directed” type whose craving for approval is so great that he has no fixed personality and varies his personality with each encounter and each situation. Riesman asserts that the majority of Americans in the twentieth century are “other-directed” and “contemporary metropolitan America” is the best illustration for a society “in which other-direction is the dominant mode of insuring conformity” (20). Since he is not aware of the actual or imaginary group he wishes to please, he wears a mask of happiness and gregariousness at all times. But this constant effort to please others takes its toll and leaves him drained and discontented. The obsession for approval from others results in a neglect of the inner self which leads to self-estrangement. As a consequence the majority in American society are self alienated individuals. The happy, healthy, normal western individual is a mere façade that masks the inner discontent and suicidal nature of these individuals. Riesman supports his theory with statistics showing that suicides have increased in the twentieth century western society in spite of material comforts. Materialism has thus failed to materialize the utopia that it prophesied to evolve in the western hemisphere.

Robinson’s poems portray both the self-alienated individual of modern society as well as the socially alienated individual. The term self-alienation suggests some or all of the following points:

- (1) The division of the self into two conflicting parts was not carried out from

the outside but is the result of an action of the self. (2) The division into conflicting parts does not annihilate the unity of the self; despite the split, the self-alienated self is nevertheless a self. (3) Self-alienation is not simply a split into two parts that are equally related to the self as a whole; the implication is that one part of the self has more right to represent the self as a whole, so that by becoming alien to it, the other part becomes alien to the self as a whole.

(Edwards 1: 79)

The split in the self leads to conflict which in turn creates tension in the individual. Thus the self-alienated individual is tortured for two reasons. Firstly his self- alienation leads to alienation from his human essence, and secondly, he is torn by an internal conflict between his two selves. This leads to frustration which may ultimately culminate in suicide.

The prototype for the conforming self-alienated individual of a materialistic society is found in the character of Richard Cory, the protagonist of Robinson's poem by the same name. The dichotomy between being and appearance, the inner self and the projected self, is brought out in a subtle manner in the poem. In just fourteen lines the poet compresses the pathos of the "other- directed" man's life, juxtaposing appearance with reality. Cory, has conformed to the standards of success laid down by society and has shaped his entire life on the materialistic philosophy. The poet portrays him as a gentleman who is accepted by Tilbury town as an epitome of success.

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,

We people on the pavement looked at him:

He was a gentleman from sole to crown,

Clean favored, and imperially slim. (1-4)

The main criterion for his gentlemanliness is his affluence and the graces that he can

buy with his wealth. The materialistic society worships wealthy people like him for two reasons--their conformity and their material prosperity. He personifies the American success myth, according to which success is synonymous with wealth and status.

And he was rich--yes, richer than a king-

And admirably schooled in every grace:

In fine, we thought that he was everything

To make us wish that we were in his place. (9-12)

In the octave Robinson builds up an atmosphere of envy towards Richard Cory, arising from his material success. But in the sestet he abruptly shifts the tone of the poem and concludes the poem with the tragic suicide of Richard Cory. The poem is thus a rebuttal of the American success myth.

And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,

Went home and put a bullet through his head. (15-16)

Tilbury townsmen are confused by the death of Richard Cory as he was the embodiment of material success. But for Robinson there is no confusion as he believed with certitude that the suicide of Cory was the result of an inner conflict arising from his self-alienation. In spite of his wealth and status, Cory was estranged from his human essence. For the conforming majority Richard Cory is the yardstick for success, but for the non-conforming minority Cory is the prototype of the alienated individual of a materialistic society. As materialism rejects spirituality the materialist is solely dependent on the self for reality and meaning. So when the self loses touch with his own inner core he is rendered totally helpless and commits suicide.

Though Robinson portrays the alienation of the conformist, in some of his poems like

‘Richard Cory’ (CP 82), he is more interested in throwing light on the alienation of the nonconformist because of three reasons: The self-alienated individuals form the majority in American society and as a result they occupy the center of the society. The nonconforming minority on the other hand are the marginalized and are pushed to the periphery of society. Power is vested in the self-alienated individuals as they are the majority in the society. The nonconforming minority on the other hand are powerless and voiceless. Self-estrangement is self inflicted and once the majority is aware of its own alienation it has the power to eradicate alienation. Social alienation on the other hand is forced on the nonconforming and results in isolation and stigma. Robinson takes up the cause of the socially alienated as they are the marginalized and voiceless. He becomes their voice and projects their suffering and loneliness through his poems.

Most of his poems are about the internal as well as external struggle undergone by nonconforming individuals in contemporary American society. Robinson exposes the two dimensional alienation to which nonconforming individuals are subjected to – their isolation as well as abnormalization. He denounces the societal alienation of the nonconformist through the portrayal of three distinct types of socially alienated characters – the Artist, the Spiritual leader and the Failed. The poet was very well aware of the societal alienation suffered by artists from his own personal experience. He was isolated by Gardiner society for his antimaterialistic as well as nonconformist ways. Gardiner society like any other materialistic town in twentieth century America demanded conformity from individuals even in the matter of a career or a vocation. Artists and Spiritual leaders were marginalized for two reasons. Firstly, they were isolated on the basis of utilitarian philosophy which considered art and spirituality as unprofitable vocations. Secondly, they were isolated for their nonconformist ways –for being different from the herd. Robinson realized very early



that conformity and art are antithetical by their very nature since an artist cannot thrive unless he has freedom for creativity. The beginning of the twentieth century was not at all conducive to art and artists. “If not quite the best of times or the worst of times, the era was nonetheless inhospitable to the artist in many ways” (Burton 1).

The American obsession with wealth was the first obstacle in the pursuit of art. Unless art degenerated into a commodity it had no value in a commercial society. Robinson strongly objected to commercialization and he expressed his ire against the commodification of art. Robinson’s life as a poet is his most explicit rejection of the conformist society. Robinson grew up in Gardiner aware of the social alienation of artists in a materialistic society. Social institutions, whether family, church or school conspired to isolate art and artists. The conformity creed demanded individuals to conform to careers and vocations acceptable to society. Robinson opposed the conformity principle by opting for the life of a poet. The price that he paid for this act of nonconformity was very dear. He lost out in the race for wealth and status. But more crippling was the alienation that he suffered from society. W.R. Robinson reveals the alienating tendency of materialistic society and remarks that the artist is always an alien in a materialistic society, as there is a schism dividing art and social values (134). The schism dividing art and society is the result of the commercialization of modern society whereby everything, even art objects are viewed as commodities to be sold. Hence an artist is destined for alienation in modern western society. If he is true to art and chooses art over society he will be alienated by society. In the event of his choosing society he will still be doomed, for he will suffer from self-alienation.

Robinson exposes the alienation of an artist in a materialistic society in two of his major poems- “BJ” and “RR”. In “BJ” he examines the inner conflict that tortures an artist

when he is enamored by societal values. The poem is a monologue in which Ben Jonson tells his guest, an alderman of Stratford-on-Avon, what he knows and thinks of Shakespeare. The poet looks at the character of Shakespeare from a different angle. Though Shakespeare's greatness is emphatically revealed throughout the poem, Robinson's objective in the poem is to portray Shakespeare as a materialist who conforms to the standards of success propagated by society. In spite of his unparalleled success as a dramatist, he harbored feelings of inferiority arising out of indigence in his early life. He attempts to enhance his social standing by accumulating wealth and property. He aspires to own the manor at Stratford as it symbolizes success through material prosperity. He suffers terribly because of his need to conform to society. Through his greed for the manor, Shakespeare stoops to the level of the conforming majority who worship mammon. The conflict between individuality and conformity, between art and the world is the theme of the poem. He tries to free himself from the shackles of society and remain true to his self and to his art. But he is so tempted by social success that from time to time he falls prey to conformity. This conflict between the world and art rages in every artist and each one has to choose between the two. The choice of the world entails self-alienation since it stifles art while choice of art brings in social isolation.

The opening lines of the poem bring out the contributions of Shakespeare and his artistic merit. He has proved himself a nonconformist by taking liberties with traditional rules and regulations. He violates the Aristotelian unities and through their violation proves himself a greater dramatist than his predecessors.

You are a friend then, as I make it  
Of our man Shakespeare, who alone of us  
Will put an ass's head in Fairyland

As he would add a shilling to more shillings;  
All most harmonious, --and out of his  
Miraculous inviolable increase  
Fills Ilion, Rome, or any town you like  
Of olden time with timeless Englishmen; .... (1-8)

But this creative genius, who does not conform to conventional rules in his professional capacity, becomes a victim of conformity in his personal life. Shakespeare's ambition for the manor at Stratford symbolizes his desire for material possessions which is a characteristic feature of modern conformist culture. Without too much exposition the poet brings out the conflict tormenting this great artist, the conflict between wealth and art. Shakespeare has the literary genius which makes him the unparalleled monarch of literature; but he has in him also the desire to be a prosperous citizen of his native Stratford. Robinson juxtaposes Shakespeare's literary genius which makes him unique with his greed for the manor to contrast the immortality of literature with the transience of material goods. "And there's the Stratford in him; he denies it, / And there's the Shakespeare in him. So, God help him" (33-34).

The poet expresses his shock at the inconsistency in human nature through the contradiction in the character of Shakespeare. The muses have ordained him monarch of the literary world. In spite of being a classicist, Jonson expresses his admiration for Shakespeare who violates the traditional dramatic conventions without detracting from the beauty of his plays. "I love the man this side idolatry" (354). But Shakespeare is not satisfied with his artistic kingdom since he is a victim of the herd instinct. Like the rest of the herd, this literary genius too stoops to conquer the transient material world. He is not content with his immortal fame as the king of the world of drama and wastes away his talent in search of

spurious pleasures. Shakespeare is thus portrayed as a nonconformist in his vocation but a conformist in his personal life.

He can't be King, not even King of Stratford,  
Though half the world, if not the whole of it,  
May crown him with a crown that fits no King .... (50-52)

Though Shakespeare is aware of the transience of material reality, he is haunted by the desire to become Lord of the material world. There is a three-fold conflict in Robinson's Shakespeare – the conflict between conformity and individuality, the conflict between art and material success and the conflict between the spirit and the world. Shakespeare is alienated and rendered unproductive by this three-fold inner conflict in the last lap of his dramatic career. The conflict between the longing for the manor at Stratford and his artistic aspirations has made this great dramatist a wreck so that he is rendered incapable of artistic creation.

But there's no quickening breath from anywhere  
Shall make of him again the poised young faun  
From Warwickshire, who'd made, it seems, already  
A legend of himself before I came  
To blink before the last of his first lightning. (253-57)

Conformity to a great extent is the outcome of the fear of isolation and even a great artist like Shakespeare who flouted the age old unities has become a victim of this societal evil in his personal life. "Lord! How I see him now, / Pretending, may be trying, to be like us" (182-83).

The incongruity in Shakespeare's belief in the futility of worldly glory which he expresses in many of his dramatic works and the desire for wealth and status in his personal

life is convincingly depicted in the poem. The conflict between materialism and idealism is resolved in favor of materialism in Shakespeare's mind. Since the transience of material goods is a proven fact, materialism which negates spirituality and asserts only the existence of material reality is based on false reasoning. But even a wise man like Shakespeare, who projected the temporality of material reality in his plays, succumbs to the corrupting influence of the material culture in his personal life.

It's Nature, and it's Nothing. It's all Nothing.

It's all a world where bugs and emperors

Go singularly back to the same dust,

Each in his time; and the old, ordered stars

That sang together, Ben, will sing the same

Old stave to-morrow. (300-04)

The poem exemplifies the self-alienation of the conformist in a materialistic society through the character of Shakespeare. Even a great artist like Shakespeare, who was unconventional in his art is a victim of standardization in his personal life.

If "BJ" exposes the crippling effects of materialism and the alienation of the self in an artist who tries to conform to the dictates of society, "RR" (SP 198) depicts the triumph of individuality and art over conformity and material success. Robinson portrays the life of the famous painter, Rembrandt, three years after the death of his wife, Sasika. He had just completed his painting, "The Night Watch" in which he shifts from effects of external brilliance to a world of inner vision painted in golden light and shadow. The great painter fell from public favor for not conforming to the standards set by society. Rembrandt was innovative in his poetic technique and broke the conventions of Dutch group portraits. While Shakespeare succumbed to conformity and is discontented and frustrated, Rembrandt

protests against standardization which is the hallmark of a conformist society. He rejects society as it opposes multiplicity of perspective and encourages uniformity in thought and action.

And Rembrandt knows, it matters not so much  
What Holland knows or cares. If Holland wants  
Its heads all in a row, and all alike,  
There's Franz to do them and to do them well-- .... (54-57)

Rembrandt resents social interference in artistic creation and objects to the commercialization of art. He sacrifices the wealth and fame that Holland can bestow on him for the sake of individual and artistic freedom. He believed that commodification of art destroys the stability and permanence imparted to human life through art. He also denies materialism which denies immortality to art. The poem reveals both sides of the coin--the dear price that the artist who conforms to popular taste pays and the social alienation of the nonconforming artist. Peace eludes the artist who has betrayed art.

The taste of death in life – which is the food  
Of art that has betrayed itself alive  
And is a food of hell. (103-05)

Robinson uses biting sarcasm to voice his ire towards artists who conform to the popular taste of the day. He foretells the downfall of such worthless men of art and affirms the transience of reified art. Immortal art is forever in conflict with the mortality of the creator and his worldly ambition.

An easy fashion – or brief novelty  
That ails even while it grows, and like sick fruit  
Falls down anon to an indifferent earth

To break with inward rot. (146-49)

The price that Rembrandt pays for remaining true to art is alienation. For the sin of nonconformity he has to discard wealth and status, which can be had only if an artist is ready to accept society as his master. According to the narrator, Rembrandt was “Sometime a personage in Amsterdam, / But now not much” (162-63). He had enjoyed the patronage of Dutch society, when he was ready to sacrifice his individual self for the herd or the community. But the moment he asserted his identity as an artist he was ostracized by the same Dutch community. Rembrandt remains fearless in spite of his social alienation and strives for artistic fulfillment. He realizes that social alienation is much better than self-alienation and an artist who succumbs to the pressures of society can never have inner peace. Robinson contrasts the immortality of Rembrandt’s art with the transience of worldly glory, thus imploring artists to travel along the path of immortality. Every artist has to choose between immortality and material reality and the choice decides his future for him. If he chooses immortality it entails social alienation and if he chooses materialism he suffers from self-estrangement.

Your Dutchmen, who are swearing at you still

For your pernicious filching of their florins,

May likely curse you down their generation,

Not having understood there was no malice

Or grinning evil in a golden shadow

That shall outshine their slight identities

And hold their faces when their names are nothing. (246-52)

Robinson also exposes the power manipulations in a materialistic society through the poem. The conformist belongs to the majority in whom power resides while the

nonconformist is marginalized and powerless. But the conformist sacrifices his individual identity for the sake of herd identity while the nonconformist sacrifices power and position for individual identity.

You are the servant, Rembrandt, not the master –

But you are not assigned with other slaves

That in their freedom are the most in fear. (277-79)

The conformist lives in fear of the unknown authority while the nonconformist has earned his freedom by forsaking the herd identity. He asserts that it is better to be a nonconformist and suffer from social alienation rather than sacrifice freedom for the sake of herd identity.

An artist can affirm the immortality of art only if he negates materialism since materialism is a theory which asserts the accidental nature of the origin of the universe. Materialism is in opposition to the immortality of human beings as well as their creations. The permanence of art is a natural corollary of spiritualism which alone imparts immortality to men and their creations. An artist, if he has faith in the immortality of his art, cannot but have faith in the Spirit and in the ultimate meaning of human life. An artist and his art can gain immortality only if he rejects materialism and accepts the Spirit. “That’s how it is your wiser spirit speaks, / Rembrandt. If you believe him, why complain? / If not, why paint?” (302 -04).

Robinson cautions artists against an impetuous decision to make a living out of art, for he may not possess the inner strength to resist societal alienation. Only an artist who has deep faith in the Spirit and the immortality of art can have the necessary courage to face up to the alienation of society and create immortal art. It is better for a materialist to conform to the society and enjoy the transient pleasures of temporary fame and prosperity as his



philosophy rests on the mortality of human beings. Rembrandt derives the strength to resist temporal greatness from his faith in the Spirit. The indifference and scorn of his fellow men do not disturb him as he believed in the ultimate victory of spiritualism over materialism.

If at the first

Of your long turning, which may still be longer  
Than even your faith has measured it, you sigh  
For distant welcome that may not be seen,  
Or wayside shouting that will not be heard,  
You may as well accommodate your greatness  
To the convenience of an easy ditch,  
And anchored there with all your widowed gold,  
Forget your darkness in the dark, and hear  
No longer the cold wash of Holland scorn. (319-28)

The second category of nonconforming individuals making up the world of Robinson's poetry is the spiritual leader or the "empowered person" (W. Robinson 138). The empowered person is torn by inner conflict like the artist but while the conflict in the artist is between art and society, the conflict in the spiritual leader is between the Spirit and the world. According to W.R Robinson:

No where are the effects of alienation more apparent than in one of Robinson's favorite characters, the empowered person who can help others but not himself. Bearer of secret knowledge of the spirit, he can see what others are blind to and work mysterious effects on their lives, but as a bearer of that knowledge he, like Rembrandt, is outlawed from intimate human relations and the human community. His knowledge bars him from worldly position and power, for having broken through to the higher truth, he can

never take any social role seriously, and so can never do anything for himself as a social creature. (138)

If the conflict between art and society is alienating and tormenting, Robinson was certain that the struggle between the spirit and the world would be doubly alienating and painful in a materialistic society. Since materialism denies the reality of spiritual beings, consciousness and mental or psychic states or processes, the “empowered person” would always be an alien in a materialistic society. He is a social outcaste but his spiritual vision provides him with the necessary courage to resist the conformity enforced by society.

In “The Three Taverns” (CP 461) Robinson delineates this conflict between the spirit and the world through the character of St Paul. The choice of St Paul as the “empowered person” who breaks social norms to remain true to spiritual laws comes as no surprise as St Paul’s transition from Judaism to Christianity was miraculous and dramatic. Robinson employs parallelism to bring out the conflict between spiritual freedom and social materialism in contemporary society by recalling St Paul’s assertion of spiritual freedom in convention-ridden Jewish society. St Paul did not stop with his rebellion against Judaism, but served the Spirit in the face of persecution from the established Roman Empire as well. The poem introduces the conflict between the spirit and the world by stating St. Paul’s decision to enter Rome. At the very outset Robinson throws light on the transformation of power in relation to position. When St. Paul had been a prisoner of law he was socially powerful though alienated from his inner self. His freedom in the Lord has rendered him socially powerless. Robinson believes that the empowered person cannot keep away from conflict. He can serve the Spirit and achieve integration only if he meets conflict headlong and voices his protest against materialism. Hence St .Paul who represents the Spirit is ready to come into conflict with Caesar who represents the world.

In Caesarea

There was a legend of Agrippa saying  
In a light way to Festus, having heard  
My deposition, that I might be free,

Had I stayed free of Caesar; but the word  
Of God would have it as you see it is –  
And here I am. (15-21)

Robinson indirectly suggests that alienation from the spirit which leads to self alienation is more tormenting than the loss of social freedom. He interprets St. Paul's revolt against Judaism based on the self-alienation of individuals who are unable to serve the Spirit.

I fed my suffering soul  
Upon the Law till I went famishing,  
Not knowing that I starved. (43-45)

Though St. Paul fed on the Jewish Law, he suffered and starved because it did not provide him with peace and contentment. He was a prisoner of the Law and was deprived of freedom to nurture the Spirit within him.

The poet foregrounds St. Paul's contentment and his sense of fulfillment after his spiritual conversion. "The man that you see not- / The man within the man – is most alive; ..." (60-61). Materialism neglects "the man within the man" thus leading to his self-estrangement. The Spirit on the other hand nurtures the inner man thus leading to fulfillment. All rebellions have begun with a few and Robinson hopes that the revolt against materialism will also begin with a few empowered men who will reveal the Spirit to the multitude. "The few at first / Are fighting for the multitude at last; ..." (257-58). It is

difficult for the Spirit to directly enter the multitude and hence the empowered men are bridges of communication between the Spirit and the multitude. Robinson was fully aware that only if the spirit can enter society through the few chosen men, materialism can be checked from destroying humanity. Hence the conflict between the Spirit and the world is resolved in favor of the Spirit in St. Paul. There is always a glimpse of the Light to elevate the darkness of the spiritually sick world. “And so, through pangs and ills and desperations / There may be light for all” (250-51).

The poem exposes the fallacy in the basic doctrines of the philosophy of materialism. There are many things in the world which are beyond man’s understanding. Materialism fails to provide an explanation for these mysterious happenings of the world.

The best of life, until we see beyond  
The shadows of ourselves (and they are less  
That even the blindest of indignant eyes  
Would have them) is in what we do not know. (277-80)

Robinson mocks at the incredulous nature of the materialist and emphasizes the inability of men to explain the mysteries of the world through mechanism.

Many with eyes  
That are incredulous of the Mystery  
Shall yet be driven to feel, and then to read  
Where language has an end and is a veil,  
Not woven of our words. (304-08)

But he does not want men to revolt against conformity and self- alienation unless they are aware of the dangers involved. He warns men of the social alienation that is a necessary corollary to their rebellion against materialism.

Home, friends, and honors, - I that have lost all else  
For wisdom, and the wealth of it, say now  
To you that out of wisdom has come love  
That measures and is of itself the measure  
Of works and hope and faith. (315-19)

Social alienation is the result of nonconformity but Robinson feels that social alienation is better than the self-alienation of the conformist. Even though the empowered man suffers a lot he attains inner peace. St. Paul emphasizes the peace which is a reward for nonconformity at the end of the poem. "Peace may attend you in all these last days-- / And me, as well as you. Yes, even in Rome" (327-328). Even when the empowered person is in the midst of a society from which he feels alienated, he enjoys peace and contentment. St. Paul will not be dissuaded from entering Rome. The faith in the Spirit gives him the strength to suffer alienation and resist the worldliness preached by materialism. The conflict between the Spirit and the world as portrayed by Robinson in "The Three Taverns" is a symbolic representation of the dichotomy between man and society in a materialistic society.

If in "The Three Taverns" Robinson portrays the spiritually empowered person through St Paul a representative of Christian orthodoxy, in "Flammonde" (CP 3) the empowered person is placed in the modern context and is devoid of any conventional Christian connotation. Robinson is distrustful of institutionalized Christianity and always believes that spirituality resides in those who are willing to help the distressed. In Flammonde Robinson finds a true Christian who in spite of his poverty is willing to help those in need. He discovers a Christ-like nonconformity in Flammonde's moral courage in keeping the company of prostitutes and helping the needy. His nonconformity elevates him to the position of the empowered person who penetrates the indifference of materialistic

society and imparts the Spirit to a minority in society. Flammonde's humanitarianism is contrasted with the narrowness of vision of the conventional Christian who has deviated from the revolutionary teachings of Christ. In his desire to conform, the traditional Christian upholds the outward manifestations of the law and disregards the essence of the law.

There was a woman in our town  
On whom the fashion was to frown:  
But while our talk renewed the tinge  
Of a long faded scarlet fringe,  
The man Flammonde saw none of that,  
And what he saw was wondered at –  
That none of us, in her distress  
Could hide or find our littleness. (41-48)

Robinson provides us with many illustrations of Flammonde's spirituality in the poem. Since he was too poor to provide for the education of a poor boy, he sought the help of a few people and brightened the future of the boy. The Spirit within Flammonde also made him an arbiter between two citizens who had been fighting for many years so that they became friends. Flammonde, unlike the self- alienated majority who were indifferent to other people's sufferings, considered it his duty to set right what was wrong with the world. This is true spirituality be believed.

There were two citizens who fought  
For years and years, and over nought;  
They made life awkward for their friends,  
And shortened their own dividends.  
The man Flammonde said what was wrong

Should be made right; nor was it long  
Before they were again in line,  
And had each other in to dine. (57-64)

The spiritual awareness of Flammonde is juxtaposed with the crass materialism of Tilbury townsmen so as to provide an insight into the degenerative culture of the urban centers in America. Mechanistic societies like Tilbury needed the presence of the spiritually aware such as Flammonde to withstand the onslaught of materialism and conformity. The poet also throws light on the necessity of spirituality in times of sorrow when men have dark hills to climb. Belief in the Spirit is the only remedy for alienation and isolation. Material success brings prosperity but fails to provide contentment and happiness.

We cannot know how much we learn  
From those who never will return,  
Until a flash of unforeseen  
Remembrance falls on what has been  
We've each a darkening till to climb;  
And this is why, from time to time  
In Tilbury Town, we look beyond  
Horizons for the man Flammonde. (89-96)

Robinson shatters the American success myth through the third type of nonconformist character in his poems the "failed". Robinson's failed is a person who has not internalized the materialistic philosophy and as a result has failed to achieve economic prosperity. Since success has become synonymous with economic prosperity in American society and the majority struggle to adhere to this norm laid by society, those who cannot conform to this standardized success are marginalized as the failed by the society. The poet

contradicts this myth which provides space only for the rich, the powerful and the famous in American society. He redefines success through his poems, and sings of the worth of many men who are unsuccessful in amassing wealth and status. Their success is often a spiritual success rather than material success. Material prosperity can be the criterion for success only in a materialistic society which believes in a mechanistic interpretation of the universe. Neither spiritualism nor idealism prioritizes material success. Both the spiritualist and the idealist recognize immortality and the transcendent. Success to them is a consciousness of the Spirit and not a physical realization. Robinson's best poems are on the failed in modern society. He casts them in the role of protagonists and imparts dignity and grandeur to them. Cestre comments on this distinguishing characteristic of Robinson's poetry and remarks that "His greatness resides in having brought into vivid light the nobleness of man's endeavor, even when the results stop short of the intentions. In fact, his best philosophical lyrics bear on what has been called 'the success of failure'" (55). Their failure is from a materialistic point of view and they are most of the time better human beings than the successes of commercialized society.

The theme of many of Robinson's poems is the alienation of the failed in a materialistic society. Through their material failure they have deviated from the norm laid by American society. This deviation is reciprocated by exclusion and accompanied by stigmatization. As Suzanne Gordon asserts in her book *Lonely in America* "In a society whose financial and social coffers are always supposed to be full, loneliness or emotional emptiness is more than emotionally distressing – it's socially stigmatic" (33). The social alienation of the failed is two dimensional in that they suffered from loneliness and are considered abnormal for being lonely.

One of the best poems that Robinson has written on the alienation of "failed" in a



materialistic society is “Mr. Flood’s Party”. Old Eben Flood through his poverty has deviated from the norm laid by American society. His poverty has categorized him as a nonconformist and the punishment that he gets for this is social alienation. His sins were not those which would deny him salvation but which estranged him from society. Robinson pictures the pathetic loneliness of Eben Flood, a typical representative of the “Failed” in the poem.

Alone as if enduring to the end  
A valiant armor of scared hopes outworn,  
He stood there in the middle of the road

Like Roland’s ghost winding a silent horn. (17-20)

Thomas L Brasher is of the opinion that the Roland of the poem has a better chance of being Browning’s Roland than Charlemagne’s Roland. Browning’s hero when he blows his horn is truly alone and there is no one left to mourn Childe Roland’s approaching death (45). The same is the case with Eben Flood whose old age and loneliness has segregated and alienated him.

Eben Flood has been alienated by materialistic society for the sin of being poor and unsuccessful in the poem. The social bond between Eben Flood and Tilbury townsmen has broken down and there is no communication between them. The unknown authority punishes the unsuccessful with social alienation and propagates the feeling that loneliness is an abnormality. The fear of segregation and stigmatization force the majority to conform to the norms of success propagated by society. The alienation and isolation are so debilitating that Eben Flood resorts to delusion and conjures up an imaginary friend who gives him company in his drinking spree.

“The bird is on the wing, the poet says,

And you and I have said it here before.  
Drink to the bird.” He raised up to the light  
The jug that he had gone so far to fill,  
And answered huskily: “Well, Mr. Flood,  
Since you propose it, I believe I will” (11-16).

The poem is set in the night as there is no compulsion to conform and there is no need for role play in the night. In a materialistic society the nonconformist has only the nights; the days are taken up by the conformist majority. Flood is so lonely that he sings alone in the night with only the “two moons listening.”

For soon amid the silver loneliness  
Of night he lifted up his voice and sang  
Secure, with only two moons listening,  
Until the whole harmonious landscape rang – ....(45-48)

In the last stanza of the poem the poet exposes the fickleness of Tilbury society which worships the successful and excludes them the moment they are unsuccessful. Since poverty is a stigma in modern urban culture they are socially alienated.

There was not much that was ahead of him,  
And there was nothing in the town below –  
Where strangers would have shut the many doors  
That many friends had opened long ago. (53-56)

The second poem from the large collection of Robinson’s poems on the failed analyzed to substantiate the alienation of the nonconformist in modern materialistic society

is “Miniver Cheevy”. According to Hyatt H. Waggoner “Miniver is the archetypal frustrated romantic idealist, born in the wrong time for idealism” (91). The poem is a deliberate attack on the utilitarian philosophy propagated by materialistic society. Anybody who does not conform to the majority opinion is ostracized and anything which is of no use to society is considered worthless in the twentieth century western society. Robinson’s excellent poetic craft is revealed from the ironic way in which he presents the predicament of Miniver Cheevy without resorting to sentimentalism. Miniver is a nonconformist who “loved the days of old / When swords were bright and steeds were prancing” (5-6). Miniver’s only sin lies in his inability to adjust to the standardization imposed by contemporary society. He tries to destabilize the existing social system with his fascination for the past. The unknown authority punishes him with the stigma of abnormality for his nonconformity.

The poem symbolically represents the dilemma of the artist in a utilitarian society and the dilemma derives authenticity from the fact that Robinson himself had suffered from this dilemma. The mechanistic society rejects art on the basis of utilitarian philosophy.

Miniver mourned the ripe renown  
That made so many a name so fragrant  
He mourned, Romance, now on the town  
And Art, a vagrant. (13-16)

Conformity through compulsion has become the strategy of society to subjugate the masses. The minority who revolt against this “normalization” are alienated as the “abnormal.” Robinson objects to standardization and mediocrity that have become common place in post-industrial western society.

Miniver cursed the commonplace  
And eyed a khaki suit with loathing

He missed the medieval grace

Of iron clothing. (21-24)

The abnormality of the nonconformist is magnified in the eyes of the conformist and the poet employs hyperbole to expose the discrimination of the deviant. Miniver wanted to wear “iron clothing” instead of a “khaki suit” and “loved the Medici.” “He dreamed of Thebes and Camelot, / And Priam’s neighbors” (11-12). The medieval world with its traditional values and customs fascinated him. For such acts of nonconformity he is isolated by modern western society. Unlike the artist and the spiritual leader who understand that their alienation is the result of their non conformity, the failed like Miniver Cheevy blame fate for their alienation. They are unaware that it is the struggle for power which has resulted in their isolation and blame themselves for their “abnormality”. Hence they are doubly unhappy and resort to drinking or some other method of self destruction.

Miniver Cheevy born too late,

Scratched his head and kept on thinking;

Miniver coughed, and called it fate,

And kept on drinking. (27-30)

Though the artist and the empowered man suffer from alienation their devotion to a great cause gives them the strength to adhere to their principles. Hence they derive at least a muted respect from society. In the case of the failed they are treated as worthless though their stoic endurance is cause enough for respect and admiration.

Gordon describes loneliness as a mass social problem in urban and suburban America. According to Gordon, American life styles create isolation and make it more difficult to cope with such isolation. She also throws light on the stigma attached to loneliness and states that loneliness equals failure in American society (33). Long before

Gordon's book, Robinson was aware of the stigma attached to loneliness through personal experience and the lives of others. Many of his best poems are on the intense loneliness of his contemporaries where loneliness equals failure and failure begets loneliness. One of the most poignant poems ever written by an American on loneliness is Robinson's "Aunt Imogen". In it he portrays the isolation of yet another type of nonconformist--the spinster who for some reason has forsaken marital bliss. She may have rejected the convention of marriage because of an unconventional approach to life or she may have been unable to find a husband according to the "normal" convention. For this sin of nonconformity she is discredited by society as a failure. Robinson knew very well the isolation of a spinster since he was a lifelong bachelor who had lost out in the race for love to his brother, Herman. The setbacks in the early part of his life prompted him to tread the less traveled road of a bachelor. This must have been torture for him who attached so much of importance to human relationships.

Aunt Imogen's bond with her sister's children parallels Robinson's relation with his sister-in-law and nieces. She was fated to a life of loneliness except for one month every year which she spent in her sister's house. Her sister's children loved her intensely and in their presence she enjoyed the motherhood she had forsaken. Her unique position as a well loved Aunt is brought out by the poet.

Aunt Imogen was coming, and therefore  
The children-Jane, Sylvester young George-  
Were eyes and ears; for there was only one  
Aunt Imogen to them in the whole world, (1-4)

But in spite of her uniqueness the poet reminds his readers at the very outset that her sojourn at her sister's house is only temporary. He compares her unfavorably with her sister,

the mother of the children. She was there for only one month in a year, while the mother was always there. Robinson evokes the loneliness and monotony of a spinster's routine life in the poem. But the poet does not make her an object of sympathy but a subject of envy. She is not portrayed as ill-tempered but warm and cheerful providing love and laughter to everyone around her.

And there she sat and talked and looked and laughed

And made the mother and the children laugh

Aunt Imogen made everybody laugh. (45-47)

The most poignant lines of the poem are where Robinson reveals the paradox of the aunt's character. She is capable of giving love and happiness to others but is not fated to have joy or love in her life. The incompleteness in the life of a spinster is projected very subtly by the poet, whether the incompleteness is natural or forced upon the lonely self. The character of the aunt gains in depth by her efforts to conceal her frustration rather than reveal it. The poem reaches its climax when Young George whom she is holding tells her in his baby language that the world is a good place when she is part of it. The unsophisticated love of the baby wrenches her heart with grief. But the poem reminds the readers that a lonely self is accustomed to grief and people like Aunt Imogen accept it gracefully. It is this graceful acceptance of a painful situation that elevates her to the position of the heroine of the poem.

There was the feminine paradox-that she

Who had so little sunshine for herself

Should have so much for others. How it was

That she could make, and feel for making it,

So much of joy for them, and all along

Be covering, like a scar, and while she smiled,  
That hungering incompleteness and regret-  
That passionate ache for something of her own,  
For something of herself-she never knew. (48-56)

The poem does not descend to sentimentalism. Rather he portrays Imogen as full of sunshine and laughter, with subtle pathos here and there in the poem. No one can remain unmoved when Robinson says “there was no love / Save borrowed love” in Imogen’s life (121-122). The redeeming factors in the pessimistic tales of Robinson’s poems lie in the wisdom that his characters attain through their suffering.

Some grief, like some delight,  
Stings hard but once; to custom after that  
The rapture or the pain submits itself,  
And we are wiser than we were before. (102-105)

His tales of failure usually end in acceptance and reconciliation. His failed do not become skeptical because of their misery but with their stoic endurance they suffer their miserable plights.

For she was born to be Aunt Imogen.  
Now she could see the truth and look at it;  
Now she could make stars out where once had palled  
A future’s emptiness; ....(131-134)

*Matthias at the Door* is a study in contrast between the conformist and the nonconformist. Matthias, the protagonist of the poem is the typical conformist who is complacent in his material prosperity. He is proud of the fact that he represents the “successful” and is an object of envy to others. Being the privileged member of society he

has no complaints against the scheme of society or God.

He had done well,  
Wherefore he was a good and faithful servant.  
God asked of him no more; and he would ask  
No more of God than was already given. (31-34)

In his smugness he believes that his success is the result of his merit, and according to Garth, he behaves like the omnipotent God.

You are not God, but you are more like God,  
In a few ways, than anyone else I know. (54-55)

Garth, his friend, is a contrast to Matthias in every way. He is not a success and he is far from being complacent. He realizes that if he had followed the path of conformity with Matthias, he too would have tasted success and wealth. But at the same time Garth is aware that Matthias is complacent because he is ignorant. A “cataract” impairs his vision and he is blind to truth.

Your God, if you may still believe in him,  
Created you so wrapped in rectitude  
That even your eyes are filmed a little with it.  
Like a benignant sort of cataract,  
It spares your vision many distances  
That you have not explored. (237-242)

Robinson explores the mystery of human life and feels that man is not always answerable for his life. There is a controlling agency which shapes man’s life according to some purpose unknown to man. To prove this point he asks some rhetorical questions. Human beings cannot answer these questions. Many of the mysteries of human life are



known only to God.

Why does a bat

Fly in the night, Matthias? Why is a fish

Ungrateful if you catch him? Why does a bird

Wear feathers and not fur? (291-294)

Robinson moves the story forward by introducing a third character, Timberlake. Timberlake owed a great debt to Matthias, as Matthias had saved his life from a fire. Timberlake had paid his debt back a thousand times by giving up his love for Natalie so that Matthias could marry her. It was his idealism which had prompted him to repay his friend with his own life. Robinson unfolds the paradox in the situation. Matthias had saved Timberlake's life only to send him into lifelong loneliness. Timberlake had forsaken his love and life for the debt that he owed his friend. He stands distinctive from the seekers of material pleasures in his unselfish love towards his friend.

The plot involves a complex triangular relationship among Matthias, his wife Natalie and their friend Timberlake. Matthias has realized his love for Natalie through marriage but she is unable to reciprocate his love because she loves Timberlake. Timberlake had to abandon his love for Natalie as a token of gratitude. Matthias who represents material success has no sympathy for the failed and frees himself of any responsibility towards them. He is the typical self-centered materialist who shuts his eyes on the sufferings of the other. But Robinson shatters this success myth and makes Timberlake remark that the successful need not always be honorable and the failed may be honorable.

Accomplishment and honor are not the same,

Matthias; and one may live without the other. (572-573)

The poet also makes a spirited appeal to the so called successful not to judge the

failed. They do not have the knowledge to judge their brethren. No one can know what painful circumstances have brought about their failure and what we would have become in such situations. There is nothing dishonorable about failure. Natalie defends Garth's act of suicide and tells Matthias.

I doubt, if it's as easy  
To write his life in saying he was a fool  
As you imagine. I can find other names  
For one who did much good, and did no harm.  
I find a sort of bravery, if you like,  
In his way out. (634-39)

The poem reaches its climax when Natalie meets Timberlake at the Gorge. They are unable to control their feeling and express their love for each other. It is here that we realize the extremity of Timberlake's sacrifice. For saving his life he repays Matthias with his love. Natalie accuses Matthias of self-centeredness and contrasts it with Timberlake's selflessness.

There was a man I would have married once,  
And likely to my sorrow, but you saved him  
Out of fire-and only saved yourself .... (1103-05)

The turning point of the action is the moment of revelation when Natalie confesses her love for Timberlake to her husband. Matthias' complacency arising out of ignorance gives way to frustration and despair. The harmony of their life is shattered and Natalie commits suicide. Matthias descends to greater depths of loneliness after her death.

Matthias, when he saw that Natalie  
Was dead, saw nothing else. For a long time

His world, which once had been so properly  
And admiringly filled with his ambitions,  
With Natalie, with his faith, and with himself,  
Was only an incredible loneliness,

The lonelier for defeat and recognition. (1585-91)

But being a conformist, he wears a mask of happiness. The modern conformist is afraid to be himself. He acts out many roles according to different situations. He hides his alienation and unhappiness beneath a mask of indifference. “Yet he was on an eminence, and would stay there / Until it fell, and carried him down with it” (1621-22). Robinson advocates the interdependence of human beings and the fact that no man is an island and all of us have to co-exist and help each other. “We are like stairs / For one another’s climbing...” (1961-62). On a silent evening, in late March, Matthias heard the door bell ring and found Timberlake at his doorstep. He was so pleased to see him that for a moment he was inarticulate. Robinson proves the necessity of communion and comradeship in human life. Wealth and status cannot fulfill a man’s craving for companionship.

You are the only friend that I have left;

And if you die, I shall be here alone.

Here in this world – alone. (1776-78)

But unfortunately Matthias was not fated to enjoy Timberlake’s camaraderie for long. His personal failure opens his eyes to the pathos in being a failed. He becomes sympathetic towards the less privileged and realizes the importance of spirituality. He is made aware of the worth of Timberlake who was opposed to the materialistic culture. Timberlake’s idealism sustained him in his disappointment in love. To him human suffering is never futile and he has optimism in the ultimate purpose of human life. The materialist is “short-

sighted” and finds no compensation for earthly suffering, until tragedy forces him to see the truth beyond material reality.

To a short-sighted and earth-hindered vision  
It would seem rather a waste, but not to mine.  
I have found gold, Matthias, where you found gravel,  
And I can't give it to you. I feel and see it,  
But you must find it somehow for yourself. (1934-38)

With Timberlake's death Matthias realizes that his friend's life was richer and more fulfilling than his own. He had only accumulated material wealth whereas his friend had cultivated friendship and love.

With all his waste,  
And his uncounted losses, Timberlake  
Had died the richer man, having found gold  
Where there was only gravel for Matthias; .... (2238-41)

Robinson strongly refutes materialism and the absolute faith in science. Spiritualism answers the mysteries of life better than science. Scientific knowledge is only a tool in realizing the truth. It is not the truth and the mechanist is foolish to believe in its infallibility.

There's more of you for you to find, Matthias,  
Than science has found yet, or may find soon.  
Science that blinds its eyes incessantly  
With a new light that fades and leaves them aching,  
Whatever it sees, will be a long time showing  
To you, Matthias, what you have striven so hard

To see in the dark. (2391-2397)

Robinson's most stinging attack on conformism which almost stoops to propaganda is to be found in his poem "Dionysus in Doubt". Unlike most of his other poems which are case studies of individual characters "Dionysus in Doubt" is a poem of social protest. Anderson reveals the circumstances which lead to the composition of this poem.

The enactment of the eighteenth amendment to the Constitution, Robinson took as an affront to personal liberty, the first step that might lead to further restrictions of individual freedom. He took a sharp look at the country and the people. The tendency toward conformity, with the consequent loss of individuality, the power of the big business and the machine to control the lives of people, the equating of equality and mediocrity with democracy, filled him with dismay. (97)

The poem reveals his intense frustration at the way in which modern democracy, the so called government of the people, hinders individual freedom and fosters uniformity. He propounds his theoretical stand on individual freedom and conformity without resorting to specific persons or situations. The evils of a democratic form of government, which has degenerated into totalitarianism, is projected through the eyes of the outsider, Dionysus, the God of wine and revelry, who alone can make an objective assessment. Dionysus is shocked by the tyrannical nature of modern democracy and expresses his horror and disbelief. Irony and humor are employed to expose the pitfalls of a democratic form of government. The poet believes that democracy has failed because of the proliferation of the materialistic philosophy into American society. He makes fun of the sure confidence that American people have in materialistic philosophy and their hope of a utopia born of materialism.

I mention them that are so confident

In their abrupt and arbitrary ways  
Of capturing and harnessing salvations  
With nets and ropes of words that never meant  
Before so little as in these tiresome days  
Of tireless legislation; (55-60)

Estelle Kaplan commenting on Robinson's attack on democracy in the poem says that "Freedom misdirected becomes a thing to fear rather than to desire. What most men consider freedom is beguiling convention that really limits self expression" (123-24).

Robinson exposes the role of "miscalled democracy" in enforcing conformity and curtailing individual liberty.

Freedom, familiar and at ease meanwhile  
With your perennial smile  
Goes on with her old guile:  
Having enjoined your conscience and your diet,  
She spreads again her claws,  
Preparatory, one infers,  
From energy like hers,  
For the infliction of more liberty; .... (87-94)

Twentieth Century democracy prospers by sacrificing the genius of a few for the mediocrity of the millions. The democratic strategy is to "moronize a million for a few" (106). Thus democracy fosters conformity and conformity perpetuates uniformity and mediocrity. Everyone has a "niche", or a place in a democracy and standardization levels down people to uniformity.

When all are niched and ticketed and all  
Are standardized and unexceptional,

To perpetrate complacency and joy

Of uniform size and strength;.... (185-88)

Democracy thus curtails vision and creativity by imposing uniformity but thrives on deception by claiming that it fosters freedom. The ultimate result is the loss of individual identity and self alienation.

For all I know

An ultimate uniformity enthroned

May trim your vision very well;

And the poor cringing self, disowned,

May call it freedom and efficiency. (199-203)

Robinson, with a crusader's zeal, calls upon modern man to open his eyes to the evils propagated by the conformity creed. But soon the poet realizes that the normal majority would rather "sleep" than understand the perils of conformity. He warns them with prophetic insight on the destructive nature of democracy when it is midirected.

If you are still too drowsy now to keep

The vigil of at least a glance

On that which reinforced intolerance

May next of yours be stealing,

From now to then you had all better sleep. (214-18)

Modern man is a prisoner of conformity in a democratic society, but since conformity is hailed as liberty by the manipulators of democracy, modern man is unaware of his lack of freedom.

You may look down again from here to see

How eagerly the prisoners will agree

In liberty's illimitable name,

All to be made the same. (228-31)

Robinson inspires his contemporaries to shape the state machinery to work for individual identity rather than herd-identity. He warns the people that they should not wait too long to act. If they act immediately they will no more be blind and they will have a clear vision of their identity. But if they delay action it will be impossible for them to extricate individual man from the conforming herd.

Better prepare the state that you possess

More to the focus of your sightlessness.

So doing, you may achieve to see,

With eyes not then afraid to look at me,

How even the blind, having resumed their senses,

May seize again their few lost evidences

Of an identity. (270-76)

Robinson's citizen in a democratic society is the actualization of Auden's "Unknown Citizen" (1940). His individual identity has been completely submerged in his herd identity so that his self alienation is absolute.

The ten poems evaluated in this chapter throw light on Robinson's views regarding alienation. He traces modern man's alienation to the existing social ideology which has been shaped by the philosophy of materialism. The materialistic culture has been instrumental in fostering conformity through the strategy of normalization. Those who conform to the herd are categorized as the normal and those oppose conformity are categorized as the abnormal. The fear of social alienation compels the majority in western society to conform. Their normalcy is characterized by their conformity to the herd and does not allude to mental



health. In effect they are victims of self-alienation which results in a divided personality and a lack of realization of the self. In the long run symptoms of mental abnormality are visible and they are incapable of meaningful relationships. The plight of the nonconforming minority is worse as they are socially alienated. Their nonconformity makes them a threat to the authority who wields power and hence they are marginalized and deprived of their voice. Robinson took up the cause of the voiceless nonconformist and exposed the power manipulations in society which resulted in the suppression of individual freedom and the nurturing of a herd identity.

## Chapter 4

### Optimistic Desperation

In the preceding chapters an attempt has been made to analyze the evils in the dominant social ideology of America which led to self- alienation of the majority and social alienation of the minority. The conclusion drawn from it is that the philosophy of materialism was responsible for the corrupt social ideology and the alienation resulting from it. But it is not enough to understand and analyze a problem. To overcome the evil, it is imperative to seek and systematize a remedy. Robinson found an alternative to the philosophy of materialism in idealism, a unique idealism which he believed would reduce the alienation in modern society.

Though an idealist Robinson did not equate idealism with an ideal world. He had too much of the scientific temper in him to ignore facts or material reality. This scientific temper gave him a glimpse of reality which was tainted by suffering and misery. The world was dark, mysterious and inscrutable. It is this perception of the dark side of life that compelled him to sing of darkness and misery. But he was aware of the sunshine too, and it is this consciousness that complicated his poems with a paradoxical coexistence of good and evil. This conflict between good and evil, light and darkness, joy and sorrow is reflected in his poems and renders them mysterious. He sought an explanation for the paradoxical nature of life and formulated a philosophy that explicated the contradiction. He discovered that most of the time sorrow outweighed happiness in human life. But this did not prevent him from having an optimistic view of life since he believed in a benevolent Architect who created the universe. His idealism was thus a combination of realism and transcendentalism, pessimism and optimism. Robinson's philosophy of idealism or "Optimistic Desperation" resolved the conflict between optimism in the ultimate fruitfulness of life and desperation arising from

the sufferings of the world (Smith 301). He asserted that the world is far from being a heaven, but that life is still worth living. It is this belief that prompted him to write to Hagedorn, "The world has been made what it is by upheavals, whether we like them or not. I've always told you it's a hell of a place. That's why I insist that it must mean something" (Kaplan 63). The very fact that the world is hell is reason enough to suppose that human life has some ultimate purpose that is incomprehensible to human mind. Each creation is the wish fulfillment of the creator and as such no creator would want his creation to suffer. The Divine Architect would not have created the Universe with a transient objective.

The first step in establishing Robinson as an idealist would be to remove the stigma of pessimism surrounding him. There has been a lot of debate among critics and scholars on whether Robinson was a pessimist or not. This debate has raged since the publication of his first collection of poems *The Torrent and the Night Before*. B.R. Redman, reviewing this first volume remarked that "His humor is of a grim sort and the world is not beautiful to him, but a prison house". Robinson retorted with a statement which has since been quoted by Robinson lovers as his philosophy of life. "The world is not a prison house but a spiritual kindergarten where bewildered infants spell God with the wrong blocks" (Kaplan 20). Human beings lack knowledge of the Architect who has shaped them and His plans regarding His creation. But human ignorance does not negate the Architect or His benign nature. This idea forms the basis of Robinson's philosophy-- the belief that there is a benevolent power that controls the universe though he could not name it or describe it.

Robinson's pessimism was the product of the twentieth century obsession for realism. His adherence to reality revealed to him a very grim and miserable world which he portrayed faithfully in his poems. Hence, the initial response to Robinson's poems is usually that of gloom and pessimism. This is not surprising considering the fact that he presented a

realistic picture of the miseries and sorrows of life. The evil atmosphere has put off many a reader from reading them. But to say that Robinson was a pessimist is far from the truth. He was often shocked by this label of pessimism attached to his poems since he thought of himself as an incurable optimist. He tried to clarify his outlook and said, "I've been called a fatalist, a pessimist and an optimist so many times that I am beginning to believe that I must be all three....If a reader doesn't get from my books an impression that life is very much worth while, even though it may not seem always to be profitable or desirable, I can only say that he doesn't see what I am driving at" (Kaplan 63). It is apparent from this statement that he was an optimist who believed in the worthiness of human life. But his optimism was not the blind optimism based on illusion and deceit. He expressed his contempt for such blind optimism. "Most people are afraid of life that when they see it coming their first impulse is to get behind a tree and shut their eyes. And for some odd reason they call this impulse optimism" (Barnard 205).

Robinson's optimism, on the other hand, was firmly rooted in material reality. He would not deny material reality. What he denied as unnecessary was materialism and not material reality. Material reality did not prevent him from having a deep conviction in the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. He gave expression to this conviction quite frequently in his writings: "I am inclined to be a trifle solemn in my verses, but I intend that there shall always be at least a suggestion of something wiser than hatred and something better than despair" (Barnard 207). He describes his unique optimism in a letter to Edith Brower, "When a kind mother wallops her only child does she not do so for the supposed wisdom of the thing. And when the Eternal Wisdom of the Universe makes life hell for us poor devils cannot the spiritual age perceive a living principle of compensation..." (Cary, letters 55). There is always a redeeming light that softens the darkness of his grim world. There is

always a flicker of hope in his poems that imparts strength and courage to human beings. His poems usually end on this note of hope in the worthiness of human life. In Octave XXII (CP 107) he affirms this faith in a benign God:

He sees beyond the groaning borough lines  
Of Hell, God's highways gleaming, and he knows  
That Love's complete communion is the end  
Of anguish to the liberated man.

Most critics agree that he was an idealist. Smith in *Where the Light Falls* remarks that Robinson believed idealism to be the only satisfactory interpretation of life and that his idealism had certain fundamental beliefs like "...first, that there was some central Meaning which was working itself out in the Scheme, second, that human or natural reason cannot fathom it, and, third, that man is helpless before its omnipotence" (312-13). Another critic who believed in Robinson's idealism was Kaplan who asserts that, "Robinson's disillusionment, fatalism and skepticism are mingled from the start, with his humor, or sense of comedy, and with his idealistic loyalty to truth. Robinson constantly presents this idealistic faith in 'light' as a contrast to the realism and mechanistic materialism of the age" (36). Anderson also throws light on Robinson's idealism when he remarks that "Robinson could not conceive of a maleficent deity nor of a chaotic universe reeling through eons of endless time; to him the universe had both order and purpose, and man's transient life on earth was part of a larger plan" (55). Further analyzing Robinson's idealism, Anderson states that "Since philosophical idealism manifested itself in a variety of forms during the nineteenth century, it is more meaningful to define Robinson's idealism as modified transcendentalism, a composite of Carlyle, Emerson and Sweden Borg filtered through the mind and temperament of the poet" (56). Cestre also endorses the poet's idealism and is of

the opinion that "Robinson's poetry, at its highest overleaps the barriers of realism and expands in the sphere of liberated thought, where reason and faith transcending the accidents of moral life, descry the beauty and hopefulness of ultimate values" (22-23).

Robinson's idealism has certain distinctive qualities that make it typically Robinsonian. It is an amalgamation of contradictory states like pessimism and optimism, hope and desperation, good and evil, realism and spiritualism and light and darkness. The reconciliation of these antithetical qualities is justified as it mirrors the harmony arising out of the fusion of discordant principles which is found in nature. The trials and tribulations of life do not make him a cynic because he realizes that God has some purpose in making man suffer in the world. Cynicism arises from ignorance, and wisdom enables man to recognize the humor that God sees and enjoys in human follies. This would result in "resignation" and not "lamentation" (Kaplan 44). His poems reflect his unique idealism through the delineation of themes like hope and optimism rooted in realism, peace and contentment through repentance, opposition to materialism, belief in predestination, necessity of stoic endurance and self-knowledge, belief in the role of the Spirit in human life and recognition of Christ as Savior.

Many of Robinson's poems portray his optimism arising from a belief in the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. Three poems "L'envoi"(CP 108), "Credo" (CP 94), and "Isaac and Archibald"(SP 23) are analyzed to illustrate that Robinson was basically an optimist and not a pessimist. The three poems treat the poet's varying shades of optimism. "L'envoi" is a simple sonnet descrying the harmony of the universe. In "Credo" too the poet expresses his belief in a purposeful universe though there is greater complication and concentration effected through the use of the light imagery. In "Isaac and Archibald" the poet portrays two ideal people with "sun-receptive" minds who in their simplicity and innocence are imbued

with spiritual values.

“L’envoi” is a beautiful sonnet in which Robinson affirms his faith in a God who is kind and benevolent. The usual gloom and grimness found in Robinson’s poems are absent and the whole sonnet resounds with the harmonious music of the universe. The rationale behind this faith in the beauty and purpose of nature is not the romantic creed but a far more factual and realistic idealism. The apparent contradiction between realism and idealism is resolved in the poet’s philosophy of “optimistic desperation” which fuses together discordant strands like transcendentalism and realism. Though Robinson’s philosophy is of the scientific age because of its realism, it looks beyond scientific realism towards immortality.

Now in a thought, now in a shadowed word,

Now in a voice that thrills eternity,

Ever there comes an onward phrase to me

Of some transcendent music I have heard; .... (1– 4)

The greatest problem of the modern age is the conflict between science and faith, the question of the supremacy of scientific reality over spirituality. Since the age was fertile for the growth of the scientific temperament it led to the gradual ascendancy of science and a consequent devaluation of spirituality. Scientific reality came to be regarded as the ultimate reality. The majority, who in the past were ardent supporters of religious faith since it accorded immortality to man, became vociferous advocates of scientific truth. The minority who questioned the infallibility of science were isolated and stigmatized as the abnormal. Robinson belonged to the alienated minority who were unable to accept scientific reality as the ultimate and only reality. The mysterious nature of the universe was evidence enough for a transcendent presence which though not explicitly understood was beyond doubt a reality.

The poet is so thrilled by the harmonious music of the universe that he finds in it evidence for the belief that this music is not of the world. He is certain that no musical instrument can play this music. The only instrument which can produce this celestial music is man and the only musician who can compose this divine music is God. If the world is a mere material reality, chaos and confusion would be the outcome. The beauty and harmony of the universe point to the validity of the theory of creation and the divine and benevolent nature of this Creator. Time and space are significant concepts only in a material world and are antithetical to eternity. The poem ends on a note of hope by affirming the eternal nature of divine music and the immortality of man.

No kind of instrument? Ah, yes, there is;

And after time and place are overthrown,

God's touch will keep its one chord quivering. (12 – 14)

Unlike “L’envoi” the sonnet “Credo” is about the grimness and sordidness of the world and the human predicament arising from this life in a miserable world. The pessimism attributed to Robinson is apparent in the octave where the poet describes the pathetic condition of man who is groping in the darkness and fails to find his way because of the lack of a guiding star to show the way. The use of the adjective “shrouded” in the second line to qualify the “heavens” is evocative of death and loss of faith. The octave has an audio-visual effect as a result of the three striking images used. The first is the already stated one of the shrouded heavens and the star. The second imagery is from music. The poet laments the lack of a “living voice” nearby to guide human beings in their journey of life. He adds to the mystery by describing the remoteness of this “living voice” which is heard as a part of a “lost” “imperial music” (4-6). The third image presents a grim and unnatural scene where angels weave flowerless garlands out of dead leaves. All three images reinforce



the darkness and mystery of the world. Though the sestet also begins with a lamentation of the “black and awful chaos of the night” there is a shift of tone towards the end of the sestet and the poem ends in the hope of redemption (11). Spirituality imparts the vision to see the light beyond the darkness and chaos of human misery. The poet inspires men to endure the sufferings of life with courage and to look with hope on the glory that is to come in the future. The Light though not visible at all times, is ever present.

No, there is not a glimmer, nor a call,  
For one that welcomes, welcomes when he fears,  
The black and awful chaos of the night,  
For through it all - above, beyond it all  
I know the far sent messages of the years  
I feel the coming glory of the Light. (9-14)

The symbolic use of light and darkness is a special poetic device that Robinson uses to resolve the conflict between hope and despair. He makes use of varying degrees of white and black, from bright white sunlight to different shades of gray. Light represents the Spirit and has the redeeming power to alleviate the darkness and evils of the world. But this light is visible only to those who have their eyes and minds open to truth. This light was denied to the "sun-shut mind" of the materialist (Captain Craig 1710). But those minds which are receptive to the sun are aware of the Light that redeems human life.

In his poem "Isaac and Archibald" Robinson portrays two “sun- receptive” minds in the two men, Isaac and Archibald. The poem is set in a pastoral atmosphere and the two characters Isaac and Archibald are infused with a pastoral simplicity and innocence. This poem is very different from Robinson’s other poems as he has excluded darkness and

grimness entirely from the poem. Hope and faith are ever present and alleviates the sufferings of the world. There is a romantic beauty and peace in the poem which is in contrast to the turmoil and frustration of modern urban civilization. The simplicity of diction and narration is in accordance to the theme and setting. The poem narrates the story of two old men Isaac and Archibald who in their pastoral simplicity are contrasted with Tilbury townsmen who represent material culture. The poem opens with a journey undertaken by Isaac along with the narrator to Archibald's cottage. The purpose of the journey is to ascertain Archibald's good health since Isaac has a premonition that Archibald is growing old and showing signs of infirmity.

Isaac and Archibald were two old men.

I knew them, and I may have laughed at them

A little, but I must have honored them

For they were old, and they were good to me. (1-4)

To bring out the innocence and simplicity of the rural setting Robinson uses a twelve year old boy as the narrator of the story. The world is viewed objectively through the nonconformist eyes of a twelve year old, to bring out the spiritual hollowness of the material world as opposed to the spiritual fulfillment of a life lived in accordance to the laws of nature. The poem is full of contrasts-youth against experience, rusticity versus urbanity, the Spirit against the world and modernity versus tradition. The narrator recalls with nostalgia the long walk he took with Isaac when he was a boy. The poet juxtaposes the boy with old Isaac with the objective of contrasting youth with experience. The day was hot and the narrator was tired and complained of the scorching heat after a mile. But Isaac enjoyed the walk and said that "the day was like a dream, / And praised the Lord, and talked about the breeze" (36-37). Isaac's overwhelming gratitude and contentment over the little

things of life is contrasted with youthful and urban frustration. Spirituality imparts men with a positive attitude that recognizes the good in human life, while materialism fosters a negative attitude that sees only the evil in the world. The materialist derives happiness from material success alone. But since material success is transient it cannot bestow peace and tranquility.

The poem also exposes the "sun-shut mind" of the materialist. They are not bestowed with spirituality and hence they find no sense to life. Spiritual vision is denied to the materialist since his inner eye lacks sight. He has only a worldly vision which gives him sensory perception and helps him to enjoy the beauty of the material world. But he is denied a balanced vision which combines sensory perception with spiritual insight.

You have the eyes –

Oh, Yes - but you have not the other things:

The sight within that never will deceive, .... (58-60)

The passage of time brings old age accompanied by physical and mental changes. The poet hints at the frailties of old age which make the last stage of human life miserable. The worst affliction of old age is loneliness. But loneliness would be worse for the self-alienated materialist than the isolated rustic as he does not have faith in the Light which guides men through the darkness of old age. True friendship is a blessing of the sun-receptive minds, and Isaac and Archibald are blessed with true friendship which provides consolation to them in old age and provides them courage in the face of death.

It comes without your knowing when it comes;

You know that he is changing, and you know

That he is going - just as I know now

That Archibald is going, and that I

Am staying. (97-101)

Old age and death are less severe for the ‘sun-receptive minds’ and they are optimistic about their life even in old age. There is still sunshine in their lives. Isaac and Archibald are representatives of two ideal human beings who are kind and unselfish. They are children of the sun and the Light guides them in their journey through life.

The sunshine lights

A good road yet before us if we look,

And we are doing that when least we know it;

For both of us were children of the sun, .... (262-265)

The poet affirms the presence of the Light that illumines the darkness of the world. Archibald tells the boy the role that the Light plays in providing certitude to an uncertain life. Though old age brings frailty and suffering, men with spiritual vision are always conscious of the Spirit. It is this faith in the Spirit, the faith in the Light that gives them the courage to face the shadow of death. |

But I am old and I must think of them;

I'm in the shadow, but I don't forget

The light, my boy - the Light behind the stars. (300-302)

The poem shatters the myth of pessimism surrounding Robinson's poetry with its forward looking stance. There is no despair but a firm faith in the glory yet to come. The presence of the “white sun” dispels the darkness of the world and fills it with a fragrance and vital warmth which are signs of a glorious future. But glory and happiness lie beyond the forest which is a metaphor the poet uses for the evil lurking in the world:

I felt

Within the mightiness of the white sun  
That smote the land around us and wrought out  
A fragrance from the trees, a vital warmth  
And fullness for the time that was to come,  
And a glory for the world beyond the forest. (340-45)

The poem puts forward an alternative world of idealism as opposed to the world of materialism represented by Tilbury town. The qualities that characterize this community are sun-receptiveness, care and concern for others and being true to one's inner self. Isaac and Archibald possess these qualities which allow them to inhabit the world of idealism. Though Robinson uses pastoral setting for his ideal world, he does not prescribe a return to rusticity as the answer to modern man's dilemma. If there is a solution to man's problems it lies in a rejection of materialism rather than a return to tradition. The poem depicts Isaac and the narrator as walking away from Tilbury town symbolizing their rejection of materialism. They walk towards Archibald's cottage, an ideal world in which hardships of the material world are fused with spiritual strength and fortitude.

The only other poem written by Robinson with a happy ending is "Talifer"(CP 1231). But unlike "Isaac and Archibald" which symbolizes rusticity, innocence and simplicity, Talifer is a love poem embodying one of his favorite themes —sin and punishment and the joy that comes from rectifying one's mistakes at the right time. The poem begins in gloom and despair with Talifer's decision to reject Althea's love and marry Karen who he thinks would give him peace and happiness. Dr. Quick, a common friend of Talifer and Althea, does not merely treat physical illnesses but is also a doctor for mental maladies. He comforts Althea with his prophetic remarks about the disintegration of a marriage of convenience. He wisely advises her to remain patient and believe in the healing touch of

Time. The poem teaches the importance of patience when sufferings and miseries overwhelm human beings:

Believe in time - which holds for many, I fear,  
Only itself and emptiness. For you,  
You know not what it holds. But you must wait,  
And save yourself to wait. Patience will help  
To save, but will not come if not invited; .... (370-74)

Althea's burning love for Talifer is contrasted with the cold beauty of Karen. Karen is portrayed as a "trout" lacking in human qualities. She is incapable of love and has a cold inhuman composure at all times. The poet uses words like "cool", "unimpassioned" and "refrigerated" to bring out her lack of passion and sensitivity:

In a land burning certainly to ashes,  
You are as cool and lovely as a trout  
Of just what unimpassioned particles  
Are you composed, I wonder. In this weather,  
How do you show yourself so heinously  
Refrigerated, and so heavenly clean? (418-23)

The poem reveals Robinson's contempt for marriages of convenience rather than true love. He has portrayed such loveless marital situations which destroy the happiness of both husband and wife in several poems like "Eros Turannos"(CP 32)and "The Whip"(CP 338). The conflict arising out of a loveless marriage is a favorite theme of Robinson and this theme is the focal point of "Talifer" too. However the protagonist realizes his mistake and resolves to make amends. Hence the poem ends in love and happiness. There is an inference that Talifer was able to make amends, and joy was restored because it was fated to

be so. But Talifer suffers for his misdeed before peace is restored. The conclusion drawn is that suffering is a requisite for wisdom.

It is because Talifer suffered in his marriage to Karen that he understood the real worth of Althea. The poet describes in poignant words the sufferings of Talifer when he realizes his blunder in rejecting Althea's true love and marrying the "cold" Karen. Karen lived in a world of books and was incapable of love. Karen had never loved Talifer and the only reason she married him was because she "wanted what Althea wanted" (1653). So it was not love but rather envy that drove her to marry him. Hence Talifer is deprived of marital bliss and home is no more a place of joy for him. "It did not look like home / And felt less like it as he entered it" (1358-59).

The Church in collaboration with the State plays an important role in perpetuating the material creed. Though in theory the Church proclaims the need for spirituality, in practice it encourages materialism. This contradiction was unacceptable to the poet. He rejected the conventions and dogmas of the church since he could not identify his God with the God of institutionalized religion. As Burton opines, "In his poetry God is not so much a person as a force, a Divine Force for Good, which motivates men and turns them in the direction of God" (279). The church forces upon individuals customs that shatter their peace and happiness. As the institution of marriage is regarded as sacred and binding by the church it does not free individuals trapped in an unhappy marriage.

And he had bound himself by church and state,  
In a blind lapse of pagan turbulence,  
To a soul-frozen disillusionment  
That was not woman and was not for man. (1365-68)

Talifer is luckier than most men bonded in an unhappy marriage as fate intervenes on

his behalf and frees him from his destructive marriage. His frigid wife is so frightened by his overtures of love that she takes refuge in Dr. Quick's house. Realizing her incapacity to love a man, Dr.Quick dissuades Karen from going back to Talifer. Unlike the church which perpetuates discordant marriages for the sake of convention, Dr. Quick persuades Karen to go away from Talifer's life and free him from the bonds of an unhappy marriage. Talifer realizes he is very fortunate to have a second chance to make the right choice and marry Althea who loves him fervently. He does not waste this second chance and rectifies the mistake that he made in marrying Karen. Most people are not given a second chance and suffer to the end of their days. Talifer is fortunate to be given a second chance. The moment Karen leaves his life, he asks Althea's forgiveness and takes her as his wife. This time the choice is wise and Talifer reaps peace and joy from his union with Althea. It is a mutually satisfying relationship which brings happiness to both of them. The birth of a son enhances their joy.

Talifer, smiling,

With eyes that were no longer terrifying

Saw now around him only quiet and rest,

And realization; and with grateful ears

That were attuned again to pleasant music,

Heard nothing but the mellow bells of peace. (2312-17)

Thus the harmony which had been disrupted for a while is reestablished. Man can attain peace not by conforming to convention and tradition but by living in harmony with the natural laws of the universe. "And there is a law stronger / Than all the suns that has you in its keeping" (1704-05).

Idealism is the notion that material reality is transient and only spiritual fulfillment



can ensure immortality to man. Since Robinson had shaped his ideology on this belief he objected to the materialistic way of life. In his poem "Ponce De Leon"(CP 1187), he probes into the life of the Spanish explorer Ponce De Leon and proves that the wealth that Ponce De Leon has made by exploiting the natives of Puerto Rica is futile in saving his life or in giving him a peaceful and contented death. The poem exposes the limitations of scientific knowledge in saving his life and advocates a rejection of materialism. Ponce De Leon has amassed a lot of wealth from his voyages to the American continent, but he remains dissatisfied with what he has achieved. One of the greatest disadvantages of a desire for worldly wealth and glory is that man is never satisfied. It only begets in him avarice for more wealth and fame. This was the case with Ponce De Leon too. In spite of the wealth that he had plundered from the natives his greed is not satiated and once more he undertakes a journey to America for acquiring more wealth. This voyage had one more objective-- that of discovering the "fountain of youth" rumored to be present in the continent. On coming across an island filled with foliage and blossoms he names it Florida and goes in search of the "fountain of youth". But unfortunately an arrow from one of the natives pierces his thigh. There is irony in the fact that the very same island where he had gone in search of the fountain of youth furnishes him his fatal wound. His men take him to Havana where lives a sage and physician who might be able to cure his wound. Robinson presents the character of the physician as a contrast to Ponce De Leon. The physician has devoted his whole life to the study of the human body and mind, while Ponce De Leon has wasted away his life in mortal acts of exploitation, conquest and acquisition.

There is a man of learning in Havana

A sage and a physician, an old man,

Whose ways are famous. Men have said of him

That he reads all that we have written on us  
Of what we are within, and has a genius  
In all obscured things that are physical,  
To make them right and well. (25-31)

The old sage emphasizes the importance of spiritual quest over worldly quest and how spiritual search results in peace and happiness, whereas exploitation of the earth and nature may end in punishment and depletion of the resources of the world. Like Wordsworth, Robinson too regards nature as a friend, philosopher and guide. Those who tread the path of nature are more content and peaceful than those who pursue material pleasures.

Be a child again

In spirit, and our Savior will reward you,  
But if you be a child again in deeds,  
He may be overtaxed, and leave to nature  
Those who offend it. He left nature with us  
That we should recognize it and observe it,  
And through it find a wiser way to grace  
Than we are finding yet. (56-63)

De Leon realizes from the words of the old sage that there is no cure for his malady. This leads him to think of his past life and the transience of all worldly wealth and pleasure. He feels sorry for the unjust acts of exploitation that he has committed towards the innocent natives of America. The old physician asks De Leon to recall his valorous deeds as a conqueror to boost him up. But De Leon is aware that death is fast approaching and feels no glory in his past deeds but only shame and regret. The poet brings out the futility of a

materialist's life by describing the despair, disillusionment, and lack of contentment that De Leon feels at the hour of his imminent death.

There are no valorous pictures of myself  
That will inspire me, as you will have it,  
And there are few of my performances  
That are good memories, or good food for souls. (91-94)

The poem exposes the limitations of scientific knowledge as well as the foolishness of the materialist in putting his faith in science which is not always the ultimate word in knowledge or wisdom. Scientific knowledge is powerless to cure De Leon's wound thus throwing light on the inability of science to give final solutions. De Leon realizes the inability of science to help him. He is certain of his death and it is then that he comes face to face with man's mortality. Neither science nor his glorious conquests can provide him immortality. He realizes that man has an innate craving for immortality which cannot be satisfied by material pleasures. Spirituality alone can give him visions of the transcendent.

There was more of it  
In one small arrow than there was in me.  
You know; and all your skill and all your science  
Will give me only words to make me well. (131-134)

De Leon acknowledges the wisdom of divine intervention which had inflicted him with the fatal wound that prevented him from discovering the fountain of youth. Had he discovered the fountain of youth he would have perpetuated his wickedness towards the natives for eternity. So he acknowledges the wisdom of God and the role of fate in bringing about his death.

Now I can see,

And read the wisdom of a wiser God  
Who hid from me that fountain I was after,  
In a lost island that I never found,  
That I might flourish always. Had I found it,  
I might have walked with iron feet for ever

Over the maimed or slaughtered flesh and faces  
Of those who trusted me. (157-64)

At the hour of death, De Leon has clarity of vision which he lacked throughout his glorious life. He understands that the Spirit is more important than all the glory and wealth of the world. He is conscious of the presence of the Spirit in the old sage and is drawn towards him. After confessing to the old sage the cruelty and inhumanity of his past life he is at peace with himself. He does not feel sorry for his impending death or his inability to discover the fountain.

I never found it;  
And while you look at me, I am not sorry,  
For there is peace and wisdom in your eyes,  
And no fear for the end which is worth more  
To me now than all fountain. (312-316)

The meeting with the sage has given him the courage to face certain death. The old physician is one of the “empowered men” who sees truth and tries to impart truth to others. He is able to bring men to the Spirit and give them light and hope. De Leon is drawn towards the Spirit through the old sage and he becomes much more peaceful than he had been for years. The “empowered men” are bestowed with visions and voices which guide

them through the path of wisdom. Those who follow them are also blessed with wisdom.

That hidden voices are in some of us,  
And, when we least would hear them, whisper to us  
That we had better go the other way.  
And other voices are in some of us,  
Telling us to go on as we are going-  
So long as we go sensibly and fairly,  
And with a vigilance. (319-325)

The old sage questions the materialistic assumption that the universe is an accident and not the fulfillment of a Divine plan. He warns humanity of false philosophies that may seem very attractive but are really worthless. He exposes the absurdity of materialistic philosophy which teaches that human life is merely mechanical.

There are voices also,  
Saying that if this world is only this,  
We are remarkable animate accidents,  
And are all generated for a most  
Remorseless and extravagant sacrifice  
To an insatiate God of nothing at all-  
Who is not mine, or yours. (325-31)

Fear is the result of ignorance and doubt perpetuated by materialism. By rejecting the Spirit materialism deprives man of his faith in immortality. And once immortality is denied death becomes final and fearsome. A man with the Spirit on the other hand has nothing to fear. He does not fear death as it is only a passage for heavenly bliss. So the old sage advices

De Leon to have faith and confess his sins to God, who will definitely forgive him.

Yet when you have revealed your memories  
To your confessor and have made your peace  
With God, you will be wiser, and be done  
With fear, which I see written on you still. (375-78)

Peace and wisdom are the reward of faith and De Leon is blessed with both peace and wisdom at the end of his life. Robinson ends the poem on a note of hope for De Leon and for the whole of humanity. De Leon dies peacefully having confessed his sins to his Maker. He has faith in the wisdom of the old sage who directed him to the Spirit.

De Leon sighed, and felt the old man's hand  
Cool on his forehead, as it was before,  
And closed his eyes to be alone with pain.  
Yet he was not alone for the same eyes  
Were there. He smiled, knowing them to be there,  
And opened his to say that he was ready. (401-06)

One unique characteristic of Robinson's idealism is his belief in predestination. He believed that man is destined for a certain kind of life even before his birth. Some are born to be poets, others to be businessmen. Some are called to be successful, others to be failures. This is the only explanation that he could find for the miseries and sufferings of the world. Man cannot alter his destiny. His greatness lies in his ability to accept fate, not to despair and to go forward in the hope of ultimate justice and happiness.

Hence Robinson never passes judgment on anyone, not even the wicked, as he believed that they were all victims of fate. Smith makes a note of this in his biography of Robinson and asserts that "The basic reason Robinson never passed judgment on anyone

even the comfort-anesthetized rich, even the 'victims of good luck' was his instinctive addiction to another central Puritan tenet; that of Predestination" (312). But Smith comments that Robinson's belief in Predestination was unique because it was modified by his notion of "Universal Salvation" (315). Since all men are fated to be saved he accepts all people whether they are sinners or saints with love and sympathy. He is never critical of sinners or failures as human beings do not have the power to alter their destiny. Human success lies in enduring sufferings with courage and fortitude. This is the only way man can accept the evil and mystery of the world and attain peace.

"The Prodigal Son" (CP 1209) is a poem which explicates the theory of predestination. The poet treats the parable of the prodigal son in a new light and looks at the conflict between the two sons from a new angle. The elder son's anger and jealousy towards the prodigal son has been a subject of discussion among theologians and has puzzled many lay people too. Robinson interprets the elder son's anger on the basis of ignorance. The elder son believes that men are always masters of their life and hence holds his younger brother accountable for his misdeeds. But human life does not always substantiate this theory. Fate plays a decisive role in shaping man's life. The Prodigal son is fated to play the role of the black sheep while it is the fortunate destiny of the elder one to be a contrast to his wayward brother. Neither the elder brother's virtue nor the younger one's degradation is the result of volition. Fate is responsible for the events and incidents that shape a man's life. The elder son was fortunate enough to learn from the example of his younger brother and is forever indebted to his brother and destiny for his virtuous life. He should rejoice at the grand welcome his father has given his brother because he too has profited from the act.

You are not merry, brother, why not laugh,

As I do, and acclaim the fatted calf?

For, unless ways are changing here at home,

You might not have it if I had not come. (1- 4)

The role of destiny in shaping human life is the focal point of the poem. It is not our merit that we are good neither is it our fault that we are sinners. We are predestined for our roles and can only act out the parts that destiny has given us. Robinson's theory of predestination echoes the Shakespearean image of the world as a stage and men and women as actors fated to play their predestined roles. Destiny had played the villain in the life of the prodigal son while the elder brother was fated to become wiser through the experience of his younger brother. Human will is merely a myth and makes very little difference in reality. The Prodigal son's degradation as well as the elder son's obedience is an act of destiny and hence neither can the prodigal son be judged for his transgression nor can the elder son claim credit for his virtuous life. The elder brother should rejoice in his younger brother's return to the ancestral house as it was fate's way of educating him.

And having hated me till you are tired

You will begin to see, as if inspired,

It was fates way of educating us. (17- 19)

The contradiction implicit in human life is that death ends worldly life but it is death which imparts immortality to man. From the materialistic point of view death is final as it results in the destruction of the body. By endorsing the finality of death, materialism exposes the transience of material reality and supports the theory of the futility of human life. To transcend death and attain immortality man should reject materialism and have faith in either the laws of nature or spirituality. The cyclic nature of birth and death gives significance to human life and imparts immortality to man. In the spiritual vision earthly existence has little significance as life is a brief interlude before eternity. Death is a passage



of transition through which human beings pass into eternity. Death transforms both the living and the dead. Death deprives the deceased of their material and temporal reality and inspires the living to aspire towards spirituality. The fear and despair instilled by death in the living change to faith and hope once they resort to spirituality.

We are so different when we are dead,  
That you alive, may weep for who you said,  
And I, the ghost of one you could not save,  
May find you planting lentils on my grave. (25 – 28)

Since Robinson believes that men are predestined in their lives and his experience has taught him that life is painful for most people most of the time, he recognizes the need for stoic endurance. Spirituality consists in being heroic enough to endure the tragedies of life and not lose hope completely. Success defies definition as it is relative and is different for different people. Material success is often antagonistic to contentment and happiness. Hence the only yardstick by which the poet measured success was the courage with which human beings faced the trials and tribulations of life. Barnard confirms this. "Robinson's innate temperament, his New England background, his admiration of the great Victorians, in most of whom there is a strong Stoic trend, his own long wanderings in the Valley of the Shadow-- all these led him to the conclusion that for most men and women the only way to a good life is through fortitude" (238). Since Robinson was obsessed with the "failure of success and the success of failure" he has written a number of poems on the subject of stoic endurance which for him is a sure sign of success. One of the finest poems by Robinson on the theme of stoic endurance is "Eros Turannos". Though a short poem, it has compressed into its few lines the substance of a tragic novel. The brevity has only contributed to the depth to the poem by a concentration of meaning. Winters observes that "This is a universal tragedy in a Maine setting" (32). The uniqueness of the tragedy lies in the fortitude shown

by the protagonist in surrendering to her fate. The woman regrets having married a worthless man but considers it her duty to make the best of her situation. “She fears him; and will always ask / What fated her to choose him; ....” (1-2). Though she feels regret there is a graceful dignity in the way in which she becomes resigned to her fate. She chooses to isolate herself as this is the only way she can endure the foolish marriage that she has made. Her isolation helps her to escape from the prying eyes of her neighbors. She prefers isolation to social alienation. As she does not conform to the social convention of a deceptive life wearing the mask of happiness she is alienated by society. She counters social alienation by her self inflicted isolation.

And home, where passion lived and died,  
Becomes a place where she can hide,  
While all the tower and harbor side  
Vibrate with her seclusion. (29-32)

The only way we can accept the miseries of life gracefully is through endurance especially an endurance based on faith in a benevolent Power that controls us. Suffering leaves its mark on human beings and the signs of suffering are recognizable on those who have suffered. Yet the fortitude to face suffering brings with it peace which is lacking in those without endurance.

Meanwhile we do no harm; for they  
That with a god have striven,  
Not hearing much of what we say,  
Take what God has given; .... (41-44)

The dream narrative ‘Amaranth’ treats the subject of self-knowledge. Self-delusion is destructive while true knowledge of the self leads to self realization as well as peace and contentment. The poem tells the story of Fargo, a painter, who realizes that he is no genius and decides to burn all his paintings except one which he puts on the wall. He gives up his

artistic career and starts making a living by installing water pumps. He comes to realize that he is fated to be a plumber and not a painter and this self realization brings peace and freedom. There is no regret in the decision, only a sense of freedom. A friendly voice whose identity he did not know at the time urged him to give up his artistic career. He obeyed the voice and the decision made him happy as it emanated from the realization that he was not fated to be an artist.

They were all gone now, and the last faint ghost  
Of an unreal regret had followed them.  
A voice like one of an undying friend  
Whom he had always known and never seen  
Had pierced and avoided him till he was warned  
Of only one escape; and he was free. (8-13)

Ten years after he had made his decision to destroy his paintings he has a dream in which the events and the choices of his life come around a second time. A second time Fargo stands at the wharf contemplating suicide and a second time he confronts the figure Amaranth, "the flower that never fades" (214). He recognizes that it was Amaranth who had prompted him to forego his artistic aspirations. Amaranth being the flower that never fades is symbolic of immortality. Robinson attaches additional significance of an agent of reason and self-knowledge to the figure. It is his duty to reveal the truth about the self to human beings. People react to self-revelation in two contradictory ways. A minority accept the truth about the revelation and change their life accordingly. Fargo belongs to this group. The majority do not heed the voice and lead lives of self deception as they are unwilling to come out of their illusions. Amaranth being self-knowledge is forced to destroy their illusions. The shock of the self-revelation is fatal and forces many of them to commit suicide.

Amaranth takes Fargo to the Tavern of the Vanquished because he has come back a second time to the wrong world. The Tavern of the Vanquished is inhabited by people who have made their lives miserable because of wrong choices. Amaranth brings Fargo here so that he can see for himself the misery of these people and take a decision. Fargo is forced to follow Amaranth as this is the only path before him. Amaranth explicates that the laws of nature are universal and only by living according to these laws can man have peace and happiness. The harmony of the universe is the result of obedience to natural laws.

Only, I say that you will follow me  
Because no other road is left for you  
For the same law that holds the stars apart  
Holds you and me together. (190-193)

Ignorance gives way to knowledge on Fargo's second visit and he has a clear insight into the lives of the people inhabiting the Tavern. On his first visit his zeal and ignorance had stood in the way of his vision and he was deprived of the truth. Robinson understands that vision is given only to a few and at certain moments in life, when they are ready to understand the truth of the vision.

You were here before,  
But you had then your zeal and ignorance  
Between you and your vision of it now. (248-50)

Robinson analyses the importance of knowledge and concludes that it is a prerequisite for inner peace. Materialism fosters deception, and this ultimately leads to frustration and alienation. The preponderance of alienation in the modern world is the result of this deception practiced in society. Self-knowledge as opposed to self-deception is an important theme in Robinson's poetry. The Tavern of the Vanquished is populated by

numerous people who have come to the wrong world because they are ignorant of their destiny. Their ignorance arises from their aversion to self-knowledge which would shatter their illusions about themselves. People react to self-knowledge differently. Some accept the bitter truth embedded in the self-revelation and end the self-deception. Some are unwilling to face the truth and continue with the deception. But at some point in their lives they have to accept the truth and are disillusioned or forced to commit suicide.

You see the place

Is filled now, and you mourn to see so many  
In the wrong world -- some young and unsubdued,  
Some older and untold, some very old,  
And mercifully not to be disturbed  
Or undeceived. (262-67)

At the Tavern, Fargo meets Evensong, a musician who is a representative of eternal failure. He is not destined to be a musician but continues to make music because of habit rather than talent. His failure is not in becoming a successful musician as Robinson did not believe in conventional success. His failure is in his inability to accept the truth that he is not equipped to be a great musician. Evensong is given a flute "suggestive of piping and the plaintive" as his instrument so that he symbolizes failure (Kaplan 73).

I am Evensong, a resident  
For life in the wrong world, where I made music,  
And make it still. It is not necessary,  
But habit that has out lived revelation  
May pipe on to the end. (287-91)

Evensong introduces Fargo to the other inhabitants of the tavern who are all cases of maladjustment. There is Edward Figg, an honest man who should not have been a lawyer, Doctor Styx who should have been a ventriloquist, Reverend Pascal Flax who lacks faith, and Pink the poet and Atlas the painter who are misfits in their chosen vocations. Robinson analyses the attitude of each character towards self-knowledge. Edward Figg, Doctor Styx, Reverend Flax and Evensong have accepted their fate and remain tranquil in the wrong world but the poet Pink on realizing his mistake prefers death to eternal life in the wrong world. Hence he hangs himself. This prompts Doctor Styx to make his observations on time. There is no future time for the men in the wrong world. They cannot rectify their mistakes nor have a new beginning. Regret is futile since there is no tomorrow for these men. "Time here is all today and yesterday, / For in the wrong world there is no tomorrow" (566-67).

The poem gives a graphic description of maladjustment in the modern world. The long list of misfits shocks and stuns the readers to an awareness of the dire consequences of the myth of success nurtured by western society. In a materialistic world certain occupations and privileged positions are symbols of success. People are forced to take up these occupations and posts in their race for success sometimes contrary to personal desires and inclinations. They are unable to attain self-realization and this results in discontentment and alienation.

There are physicians here who cannot hold them,

Or cure themselves of an incessant wound

That now no retrospect of their tuition

In a wrong school shall heal, there are divines

Who long ago lost their divinity,

And are still feeling for a solid station,  
There are philosophers who delve and starve  
To say again what others have said better; .... (683-90)

The list of the self alienated is long and includes moralists, economists, lawyers, inventors, gardeners and many others who are in the wrong profession and who can never find peace unless they accept their fate. Fargo was one of the few who listened to Amaranth's advice and gave up his artistic career at the self-realization that he would never be a great artist. He willingly surrenders himself to divine intervention and finds peace and contentment. The price of self-deception is self-alienation. Fargo does not suffer from alienation as he is true to his self. He puts God's plan for him above his own ambition to become a great painter. His success is his absolute trust in God.

This other fellow,  
Who's not here to be happy, is one Fargo,  
Who made himself believe he was a painter  
Till Amaranth murmured one day in his ear  
And he escaped. In his right world he learned  
That God's good purpose was to make of him  
A spring clean unimpeachable pump-builder— .... (1009-15)

Fargo becomes resigned to his destiny and is rewarded with peace and tranquility. But there are many who do not listen to the murmurings of Amaranth. They have traveled along the wrong path for too long and cannot change like Ipswich the inventor. As a young man, Ipswich had dreamt of inventions that would change the destiny of the world. But in spite of his deep desire he never invented anything as he was not fated for that role in life. He had devoted his life for the wrong pursuit and wasted away his own and his wife's life.

He went against his destiny by neglecting his loving wife and devoting his time for science.

But since fate is undefeatable he lost both science and love.

I loved her more than life but less than science.

She knew the last; the first I never told her. (1425-26)

The life of Ipswich teaches the importance of self-knowledge in leading a happy life.

It is because Ipswich never listened to Amaranth that he has been doomed.

For the long years

It followed me, I stifled it with lies,

Trying to tell myself there was no voice

But there it was. (1455-58)

The poem exposes the deception practiced by man to escape self-knowledge until it is too late. There is the voice that murmurs to each and everyone, but in the din and bustle of the material world man refuses to listen to these murmurs and remains maladjusted throughout his life. Those who escape from maladjustment are the few like Fargo who are ready to accept the sometimes painful knowledge about the self and act accordingly. A man needs a lot of courage to face the truth and only very few have it. Maladjustment is especially on the rise as the materialistic creed forces wrong choices on people.

Even when dealing with such a somber topic as fate, Robinson is not without his humor. He takes a humorous dig at modern art in the poem. Lawyer Figg looks at the latest painting by Atlas and is perplexed by the experimental art before him.

You say it is a horse,

And I have never called it a volcano,

You say the sky is blue, and so it is,

And a horse has a right to some of it,



But when you make him indigo all over,  
And then forget that you leave out of him  
Everything that I've always called a horse,  
A lawyer wonders why it is a horse,  
Whatever the sky may be. (1727-35)

Robinson expresses his objection towards innovation for the sake of modernity very explicitly. Most poets who lived at the time of the transition from tradition to modernity in the beginning of the twentieth century were anxious to exhibit their originality. But Robinson remained content with old forms though his psychological penetration into the lives of his characters accords novelty to his poems. Unlike many of the new generation poets he never sacrificed poetic beauty for the sake of innovation.

Like my contemporaries, Flax and Figg,  
I lean to less rebellious innovations;  
And like them, I've an antiquated eye  
For change too savage, or for cataclysms  
That would shake out of me an old suspicion  
That art has roots. (1788-93)

Atlas looks into Amaranth's eyes and sees the truth that he shall never be a great painter. Though Amaranth pleads with him to escape, the knowledge is too painful for him and he kills himself. Atlas symbolizes modern man, who in his feverish pursuit of success, loses touch with his inner self and is subjected to self-alienation.

The finality of human destiny is emphasized in the poem. By introducing into the poem Ampersand, a cat that can talk and philosophize like man, the poet shatters the illusion

of human freedom. Ampersand makes fun of the human belief that he is master of his destiny. The cat convinces the readers of the role of fate in human life, by throwing light on the fact that even animal behavior is governed by fate. There is an echo of William Blake's philosophy which attributes the gentleness of the lamb and the ferocity of the tiger to the same God. It is unjust to ascribe cruelty to the cat as the cat's nature is also a work of God.

#### Nature in us

Is more intractable and peremptory;  
Wherefore you call us feral and ferocious,  
Which is unfair to us; for the same God  
Who sees a sparrow on the ground shows us  
The way to catch him, and we cannot choose. (2475-80)

Ampersand teaches modern man to accept his fate and make the best of what is given to him. He makes fun of the human characteristic of blaming Providence for all his misfortunes. Man must learn to be independent like cats and face life bravely. He cannot choose the circumstances of life. He can only accept the life situations given to him and make the best of it.

#### There's a lesson

In him, and for us all, of independence,  
If there's not one of courtesy. He's not saying  
That all cats who have no one to call Father  
Should therefore curse their birth and drown themselves.

(2718-22)

Robinson clearly reveals his concept of God through Flax, the clergyman. Reverend Flax was a kindred soul of Robinson as both had lost their faith in conventional religion but

not in God. Both the clergyman and the poet believe that God was not fearsome, as traditional religion painted him to be. He is a benevolent God who guides people and gives them strength and courage. The secular nature of his faith is manifested by the fact that he does not attach any importance to the name of the Almighty.

There is no God,  
For me to fear, or none that I may find,  
Or feel, except a living one within me,  
Who tells me clearly, when I question him,  
That he is there. There is no name for him,  
For names are only words. (2777-82)

Fargo is given the chance to leave the wrong world as he has accepted Amaranth's advice. Those who are unwilling to change even after Amaranth reveals the truth about them have to spend the rest of their days in the Wrong World. They lead a self-alienated life with no future promise of glory awaiting them. Fargo on the other hand has gained wisdom and strength from his visit to the Wrong World. He need not fear Amaranth anymore as he has accepted Amaranth's advice and has foregone his ambition to be an artist. By accepting fate he has fulfilled God's plan for his life. He finds peace and joy in leading his life according to divine intervention.

Fargo, the time has come  
For you to tell me that my eyes have in them  
Nothing for you to fear; for now you know  
That once having heard my voice and heeded it,  
Henceforth you are the stronger of the two. (2865-69)

“Amaranth” propounds the necessity of self-knowledge in human life. Knowledge of

the self equips men with a correct self-estimate and a proper understanding of the role that they have to play in life. It destroys misconceptions and illusions about the self. It is better that these illusions are shattered early enough, for then, the pain arising from the truth is much lesser. Self-knowledge leads to self-realization and self-fulfillment and prevents alienation. Thus self-knowledge gives one the strength to face any adversity in life.

“John Brown” (CP 486) is a poem on spiritual salvation through martyrdom. The protagonist of the poem, John Brown, is a character from American history. He was an ardent supporter of the abolition of slavery and devoted his whole life to the cause. On October 16, 1859 he led twenty one men on a raid of the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, with a plan to arm slaves with weapons. But he was wounded, caught and hanged on December 2, 1859. Though initially many people were shocked by Brown’s cruelty towards the whites in his efforts to get justice for the blacks, gradually many Northerners began to recognize the nobility of the cause for which he fought and his selfless devotion.

The poem is in the form of a letter written by John Brown to his wife on the eve of his execution. John Brown exemplifies idealism and nonconformism in the poem. He is alienated by the white community for not conforming to their acts of atrocity towards the blacks. The poet accentuates the loneliness of Brown who had to spend his last night alone in a prison. But he is more concerned about the loneliness of his wife than his own isolation. The Poem explores the different forms of isolation and alienation found in society. John Brown is an example of the nonconformist who is alienated by the society. His wife suffers from isolation on account of her husband’s nonconformity. The poet also throws light on the isolation of men even in a crowd.

And you, poor woman that I made my wife,

You have had more of loneliness, I fear,

Than I – though I have been the most alone,  
Even when the most attended. (5–8)

Since he believed it was divine instigation that prompted him to undertake the mission of freeing the slaves, he was calm and peaceful even when facing death. Spiritualism is the only philosophy that provides men with courage in the face of death as it is based on something more than material reality. This is exemplified by three of Robinson's poems "John Brown" "Ponce de Leon" and "Toussaint L'Ouverture". Materialism fails miserably in strengthening men at the hour of death as the philosophy is opposed to the spiritual and the transcendent.

God set the mark of his inscrutable  
Necessity on one that was to grope,  
And serve, and suffer, and withal be glad  
For what was his, .... (9–12)

Robinson ascertains the immortality of deeds of goodness and is certain that Brown's name will live forever in American history. The Northerners can only destroy his body; his deeds will always remain unconquered. Brown compares his immortality with the transient triumph of his enemies. The sun imagery in the following lines reinforces spirituality as an antagonistic force to materialism. In a spiritual vision Brown emerges triumphant and immortal while his executioners degenerate into mortal beings needed for his triumph.

There is no death  
For me in what they do. Their death it is  
They should heed most when the sun comes again  
To make them solemn. (23–26)

Brown is aware of the fact that the whites consider him a traitor but comforts himself

with the thought that at least a few of them even if they do not openly support him sympathize with him in their hearts. He is esteemed even by his enemies for his immortal deeds of selflessness. He stands apart from the crowd for the sympathy that he has shown towards the blacks who have been persecuted for centuries. Brown derives his uncommon strength and humanity from spirituality.

For some of them will pity this old man,  
Who took upon himself the work of God  
Because he pitied millions. (29-31)

The whites cannot suppress the rebellion by killing Brown. For each death of a revolutionary there will be hundreds of followers to take up the cause and fight for it. Hence Brown is fearless to die as he is aware that the abolition of slavery will become a reality in the near future. “And there are many men to give their blood, / As I gave mine for them” (38-39). It is not fear that he feels on the eve of his death but peace and contentment because he was chosen by God to take up the fight against discrimination. Brown is a nonconformist who is indifferent to other people’s opinion. Robinson contrasts the “inner-directed” Brown with the majority in American society who are “other- directed” and act according to the dictates of society. Being “inner-directed” he does his duty without expecting approval or appreciation. It was God who inspired him to fight for the rights of the slaves and he is indifferent to the world outside.

Meanwhile, I’ve a strange content,  
A patience, and a vast indifference  
To what men say of me and what men fear  
To say. There was a work to be begun,  
And when the voice, that I have heard so long,

Announced as in a thousand silences

An end of preparation, I began

The coming work of death which is to be,

That life may be. (45-53)

The majority in a society do not have the vision or spiritual awareness to see the truth. That is why from time to time divine intervention becomes necessary and a prophet is sent to the world. His role in life is to expose the ignorance, apathy and wickedness of society. He is often stigmatized as abnormal as he does not conform. Brown derives satisfaction from the fact that all great men including Christ were persecuted by society.

For men are children, waiting to be told,

And most of them are children all their lives

The good God in his wisdom had them so,

That now and then a mad man or a seer

May shake them out of their complacency

And shame them into deeds. (60–65)

Robinson portrays John Brown as a typical antimaterialist who attaches no importance to worldly glory. The materialist goes after glory and is reciprocated with transient worldly fame, while the antimaterialist rejects fame and is rewarded with immortality. “I was not after glory / But there was glory with me, like a friend” (118 -19).

Brown dies with the satisfaction that he has done justice to the task for which he was chosen. Though incapable of completing his mission there was no frustration as he knew for certain that his followers inspired by his sacrifice would finish the mission that he had begun. Hence he feels that he has gained much more than he has lost. “Few are alive to day

with less to lose / Than I who tell you this, or more to gain;” (190-91). Robinson concludes the poem on the note of hope that prophets and seers make their presence felt after their death. During their life time they are regarded as traitors and madmen. “I shall have more to say when I am dead” (199). John Brown dies with the surety that posterity will judge his deeds in a better light than his contemporaries.

The poem “Nicodemus” (CP 1159) is an affirmation of the poet’s faith in Christ as the Savior of mankind. Though he was against institutionalized Christianity, Robinson saw in Christ’s teaching the redeeming light for humanity. He brings out the essential Christ in ‘Nicodemus’. The poem begins with a meeting between Nicodemus and Caiaphas. Caiaphas epitomizes law and tradition while Nicodemus stands for spiritual rebirth. For Caiaphas, Christ is merely a carpenter, who through his sophistry has attracted some followers. But for Nicodemus Christ is the Son of God who has the power to give spiritual rebirth.

He was a carpenter;  
But there are men who were dead yesterday,  
And are alive today, who do not care  
Profoundly about that. What the man is,  
Not what he was to unawakened eyes,  
Engages these who have acknowledged him  
And are alive today. (40–46)

Caiaphas represents the power and glory of the materialist, which according to Nicodemus is transient and cannot give man lasting peace and happiness. Nicodemus refutes materialism and preaches the spirituality propagated by Christ. Christian philosophy promises its followers the cross in this world and immortality in the next. Neither



Christianity nor spirituality promises a heaven in this world. It is materialism that judges a man's worth depending on his wealth and status. For the idealist these are transient values with little importance. The man who indulges in the selfish pursuit of material pleasures ends up by forsaking redemption. The antimaterialist endures social alienation in order to attain immortality.

High men, like you and me, whether by worth,  
Or birth, or other worldly circumstances  
Have risen to shining heights, and there may still  
Rise higher, where they shall be no higher than earth.  
Men who are braver may forgo their shining,  
Leaving it all above them, and go down  
To loneliness and peace, and there find life. (60 – 66)

Since social and religious customs demand absolute conformity and those who do not conform are alienated the majority in a society live a life of pretension. This kills their energy and initiative and they are like "painted shells" lacking in vitality. They wear masks to cover up their true selves. Only a nonconformist who can break out of the shackles of dead customs and traditions can achieve immortality through a spiritual rebirth. The spiritual rebirth advocated by Christ gives eternal life. Materialism, by denying spirituality, has denied immortality to human beings.

Caiaphas, you and I are not alive,  
We are two painted shells of eminence  
Carried by two dead men. Because we move  
And breathe, and say a few complacent words  
With tongues that are afraid to say our thoughts,

We think we are alive. But we are dead. (67–72)

In the spiritual vision the human body has no worth except as an instrument for the spirit to reside. Robinson endorses the superiority of the spirit over the body. It is the Spirit which imparts immortality to humans. Materialism, by negating spirituality deprives men of eternal life.

You may destroy his body,

Which is an instrument whereon the spirit

Plays for a time – and not for a long time,

He tells me. (113–16)

Man sticks to age-old rules because he is afraid of change. Christ is a revolutionary figure who has brought drastic changes in the existing social system. Traditionalists like Caiaphas oppose change as they would lose their privileged position in society if they accept change. They are not aware of the transience of worldly glory and oppose spirituality.

And your fond warning now that I may save him

Is like a child's unwillingness to read

A book of easy letters that are life,

Because they are new letters, and not death. (159–62)

The poem proclaims the death of old beliefs which have become outdated and the need for a new philosophy of life which can give meaning to life. Christ's teachings are revolutionary as he was a realist who did not promise heaven on earth. Christ asks his follower to take up the cross and follow him. Thus Christ accepts the sufferings of the world and teaches man that only spirituality, a belief in the transcendent, can save man. "There is no life in those old laws of ours, / Caiaphas, they are forms and rules and fears, ...." (164-165). The poet affirms his belief in a life after death which will compensate

for the miseries of this world. Only a faith in after-life, can give meaning to man's existence in the world. A materialist fears death as it is final and irrevocable in the light of materialistic philosophy. But a spiritualist has no fear of death as it is only a passage for transition from worldly life to eternity. "They are the dead who are afraid of dying" (170).

Through Nicodemus Robinson affirms Christ as the Savior of mankind. But people who are blinded by tradition and convention do not see the light in Christ. They love the dark as the light would reveal their ignorance. Hence they murder great thinkers and philosophers. They make plans to kill Christ, thinking that it would be the end of his revolutionary teachings. But as history has proved Christ conquered death and attained immortality while those who plotted to kill him have an existence only as antagonists of Christ.

He is the light; and we, who love the dark  
Because our fathers were at home in it,  
Would hound him off alone into the hills  
And laugh to see that we were rid of him. (189-92)

The poem exposes the dynamics of power in a society. The powerful are afraid of revolutions and change as they fear the loss of their power. The lower classes always welcome change as they have nothing to lose. It was the fishermen, the lepers and the blind who became the followers of Christ. The Pharisees and the High Priests only persecuted and killed him. They rejected Christ because they gave importance to materialistic values.

The lowly are the first inheritors  
Of his report, the first acknowledgers  
Of his reward – having no fame to lose,  
No brief and tinsel prerequisite of pomp,

Or profitable Office, to renounce. (205–06)

The poem throws light on the normalization strategy adopted by the powerful majority to subjugate the minority. The minority who do not conform to standardization are categorized as the abnormal by the society. Caiaphas casts the stigma of the ‘abnormal’ on Nicodemus who does not conform to Jewish laws. But Nicodemus retorts that he is not abnormal but has the spiritual vision which distinguishes him from the conforming majority.

I am not mad,

Unless a man is mad who brings a light

For eyes that will not open. (285-87)

Like Nicodemus the poet too believed that Christ’s teaching combines spirituality with humanism and is a better philosophy than materialism. Christian faith is based on life after death as worldly life is temporary. Thus Christianity in truth is opposed to materialism which admits only material reality. But institutionalized Christianity is allied to materialism and Robinson clearly rejects it.

An evaluation of Robinson’s poetry reveals the fact that he pictured life as he saw and understood it, analytically and impartially. This truthful and objective assessment of life revealed a dark and mysterious universe in which human beings struggled to survive. Misery and pathos outweighed happiness and tranquility. Robinson groped in the darkness and mystery of the world searching for a meaning in human existence. Though nineteenth century materialism arose from scientific realism and Robinson was a realist, he rejected materialism on three grounds. Firstly he objected to the theoretical frame work of the philosophy which asserted the reality of matter alone and rejected spiritualism altogether. Material reality failed to explain many human and natural phenomena. Secondly he rejected materialism because it could not provide a meaning and purpose to human life. Finally he

rejected the philosophy because by the very fact that it emphasized material reality it paved the way for a twentieth century culture based on consumerism. Twentieth century man under the influence of materialism became so obsessed with wealth and status that it was instrumental in bringing about the two fold alienation of modern man – self-alienation and societal alienation. Robinson's search for meaning found fruition in idealism, not the traditional idealism grounded in an unrealistic and baseless optimism but an amalgamation of idealism and realism which he called "optimistic desperation". Robinson did not portray an ideal world but a dark, miserable and mysterious world that was cause enough for despair. But he did not stop with this pessimistic view of life. Along with his belief that human life was miserable, he had a firm faith in a supernatural Architect who governs the world. It is this belief that imparts a meaning and purpose to human life. Many of the mysterious aspects of the universe can be explained only by this belief in the transcendent. In an age of scientific realism and materialism, he was a nonconformist who subscribed to spiritualism. In his spiritualism too he was a nonconformist. He rejected conventional Christianity which had become institutionalized and conformed to social norms. Spirituality for him was a belief in a benevolent Power that has created man and the universe and governs it according to a plan which will be beneficial to mankind. The evils and miseries of the world are puzzling to a man who does not know the nature or plan of Providence.

To clinch the argument that Robinson was an idealist, but an idealist rooted in realism, a comment made by Cestre is quoted here. "As a cultured man and a well balanced thinker, he is neither a mystic nor a sceptic, neither a romantic dreamer nor a morose pessimist, but an observer of the facts of the spirit as well as of physical realities, who knows man's limitations and weaknesses and yet believes in man's destiny and in life's ideal completion. He is an idealist, who remains attached to Christian feelings, without being

hampered by Christian dogma” (55).

## Chapter 5

### The Essential Robinson: Fusion of Theme and Technique

Robinson's greatness as a poet lies in his ability to fuse poetic technique with the subject matter of his poems. The main theme that he treats in the majority of his poems is the alienation arising out of a materialistic way of life. He uses a unique and innovative poetic style to project the fragmented nature of the modern world and the alienated existence of modern man. Unlike his contemporaries who wrote romantic poetry, Robinson wrote about the lives of people he saw around him. There is no idealization in his poetry; only a truthful and realistic account of human life. He is the first American poet to apply psychological principles to poetry. Ben Ray Redman considers him "as a biographer of souls ... bound to humanity by the dual bond of sympathy and humor" (Donaldson 415). He does not write from a pedestal but as one among the humanity, suffering from alienation and disillusionment. He believed that a poet is expected to play a double role – that of a brilliant artist who aspires to perfect his poetic technique and a social reformer who exposes the evils in society which curtail the development of human personality. His poetry thus is a balancing act in which he tries to bring together artistic excellence and social commitment. He needed a unique poetic style to achieve this rare balance. He succeeded in gradually evolving an individual style which was perfectly suited to his intentions.

Four important objectives guided him while pursuing poetry as his vocation. He wanted his poetry to be the vehicle for expressing his contempt for materialism as a philosophy and a cultural creed. Secondly, he strived to expose the alienation of modern society and the dichotomy in modern man's life. Thirdly he proposed an alternative to materialism in his unique idealism, an idealism tempered by realism. But above all he wanted his poetry to be an art, fulfilling the purpose of all art, which is to delight. Though

he believed in social commitment he did not compromise on poetic aesthetics and write didactic or pedantic poetry. The first and foremost aim of all poetry is to impart pleasure. All other objectives are subordinate to this main purpose. From the beginning of his poetic career he worked painstakingly to create a style that would fulfill this primary objective, while at the same time bringing about social reformation. With meticulous care and effort he developed a style that suited his unique mission and bore the stamp of his personality.

The age into which Robinson was born was a period of transition from the old world to the new in every way. The rapid advances in the field of science and technology had redefined drastically the social ideology giving birth to a new generation, skeptical of spirituality and obsessed with material values. In the literary field too it was a period in which the extreme passivity in creativity had suddenly given way to innovation and experiment. Robinson's position in this changing scenario was that of a pioneer rooted in tradition. He adhered to the traditional forms of poetry like the sonnet, the lyric and the blank verse narratives. His innovation lay in the psychological treatment of his characters and the oblique poetic technique which projects the fragmented experience of modern man.

Since Robinson realized the importance of the mind in determining the course of man's life, he evinced great interest in understanding the complexities of human nature. Many of his poems are character sketches that bring to light the motives behind human actions. He has a fascination for deviant behavior as is illustrated by his protagonists like Aaron Stark, Richard Cory, Reuben Bright, Miniver Cheevy, Mr. Eben Flood etc. through whom is revealed the complex psychology of a miser, a rich man who commits suicide, a butcher who is prostrate with grief at the death of his wife, a man who dreams of medieval glory and is a misfit in the modern age, a drunkard, and so forth. Cestre asserts that:

Robinson is keenly alive to the possibilities which pathological psychology



opens to the painter of characters or the teller of dramatic tales. He has explored this field, not in search of cheap horrors, but with a sure sense of the relations of the abnormal to the normal, the former being often the emphatic demonstration of what morbidity may lurk in the state of unstable mental equilibrium which is not infrequent in our time.... Some of his most arresting characters, like the greatest Shakespearian figures, totter on the verge of madness, near enough the abyss to make us shudder, yet keeping that shaky firmness of tread which saves the night-walker from immediate destruction.

(198-99)

As an artist who has the acumen to portray the psychological dimension of characters, he has given American literature an entire gallery of memorable portraits like Richard Cory, who “glittered when he walked,” Aaron Stark, the miser with eyes “like little dollars in the dark,” Reuben Bright, the butcher and the tipsy Eben Flood. The dramatic monologues of Robinson have the makings of a full fledged drama with plot, setting, characters, dialogues and script, and include the potential of a mini theatre.

Robinson’ poems may be roughly categorized into the short poems of his early period, the medium-length poems and the long narratives of his later period. This is a very broad classification which encompasses diverse poetic forms like octaves, sonnets, lyrics, dramatic monologues and blank verse narratives. His short poems are superior in poetic technique to the other two categories. Some of his best short poems are “Eros Turannos”, “The Mill”, “Reuben Bright”(CP 92), “Aaron Stark”(CP 86) “Richard Cory”, “Miniver Cheevy” and “Mr.Flood’s Party”. Of the medium length poems, the best are “The Three Taverns”, “RR”, “Aunt Imogen” and “BJ”. Some of his better known long poems are “The Man who Died Twice”, “Cavender’s House” (CP 961), “The Glory of the Nightingales”(CP

1011), "Matthias at the Door", "King Jasper", "Amaranth" and the three Arthurian poems. The long narrative poems are generally inferior to the other two types though there are numerous instances of poetic brilliance visible in them. He uses the same techniques in all three types of poems and the difference in the poetic quality is perhaps due to the fact that his unique poetic style is better adapted to the compactness of the short poems.

The octaves were written by Robinson in the early part of his poetic career. There was a penchant for short poems in the early period as revealed by the octaves and the large number of sonnets and short lyrics written during the period. His twenty-three octaves condense into their brief space the conflict between the misery and beauty of the material world.

Robinson's CP contains eighty-nine sonnets. Though the sonnet is a traditional form, Robinson's sonnets are appealing and effective due to the thematic range explored in the short compass of fourteen lines. Within the frame work of this old fashioned form he writes about a variety of themes and subjects. Sonnets like "Reuben Bright", "Aaron Stark" and "The Clerks" (CP 90) are character studies. To attempt a psychological analysis in fourteen lines is a daunting task for an average poet. But Robinson achieves this through his intuitive knowledge of human nature and keen interest in the working of the mind. The slow movement of the Petrarchan sonnet was better suited to his tangential approach and he adopts it rather than the Shakespearean form. Its adaptability suited the expression of complex emotions and thoughts.

The poet has written a large number of lyrics like "Eros Turannos" which reveal a perfect balance arising from the proportionate use of pathos and humor, comparison and contrast, condensation and elaboration and evocation and concreteness. He also revived the art of dramatic monologues and like Browning revels in a psychological study of the

character of the speaker. In the latter half of his poetic career he turned to the creation of long narrative poems in blank verse. Though these poems reveal the technical brilliance of the poet they do not always succeed in their overall structure and unity.

Robinson achieves a high level of objectivity in his poems. It was as if he was unfolding the plot from a distance with no trace of personal involvement. Always averse to the direct expression of personal feelings, he deals “with his neighbor’s experience rather than his own” (Winters 19). The technique of detachment was especially suited to his character studies as he examined these abnormal minds analytically. “Reuben Bright,” “Aaron Stark,” “Bewick Finzer,” “Richard Cory” and “Eros Turannos” are a few among the vast collection of poems written in his typical objective style. The objective approach is especially suited to the task of exposing the alienation of modern man. Perhaps this is why he adopts an impersonal style in all forms of his poems whether the sonnet, lyric or long narratives. Like the short poems already mentioned, the long narrative poems like “Cavender’s House”, “The Glory of the Nightingales” and “Matthias at the Door” are also written from a detached perspective. The intention is not expression of feelings but a probing into the characters that gives an insight into the complexities of the human mind.

The distinctive quality of Robinson’s poetic style which gives it its uniqueness is the extreme condensation that he achieves through compression. Verbal economy characterized by the use of carefully chosen words is found in the description of characters and situations. There is no elaboration, elucidation, or ornamentation, but the use of the barest facts needed for an understanding of the context. This condensation does not in any way hamper poetic beauty or mar clarity of expression, but enhances poetic delight. Only a master craftsman can achieve this, as brevity requires great accuracy and precision in the use of diction and imagery. His precise diction and accurate imagery have helped him to chisel out an

epigrammatic style that conveys what he has to say in a concise and succinct manner. Complex life situations and full-length stories unfold within a short compass.

The chief function of his imagery is verbal economy. "...whereas in the work of most poets the function of imagery is to clarify and beautify, to illuminate and adorn, so that it leads often to verbal opulence and expansiveness, Robinson seems bent on making it serve first of all the end of economy, in helping to bring together all essential details within the smallest possible compass (Barnard 30). The packed lines, full of passion and meaning, reveal the complexity and stark reality of modern life. Examples of verbal economy are found in abundance in his poems. In "The Mill" the poet uses this poetic strategy to expose the frustration of the small entrepreneurs in a capitalist society. Short, cryptic statements like "The miller's wife had waited long" and "There are no millers any more" convey with great force the tragic death of the miller. "Eros Turannos" is another example of condensation, which, according to Winters, has the "substance of a short novel or a tragic drama" compressed into forty eight lines. He adds that the "brevity" of the poem has not resulted in "poverty" but has enhanced the "concentration of meaning and power" (33). The first three words not only set the tone of the poem by stating "She fears him", it also sums up the tragic circumstances of her life arising out of marital discord. The imagery at the end of the poem is equally compressed and brings the action to a tragic end, pointing to the change wrought by sorrow in human beings.

Though like waves breaking it may be,  
Or like a changed familiar tree,  
Or like a stairway to the sea  
Where down the blind are driven. (45-48)

This verbal economy is a deliberate poetic device that Robinson uses to give poignant and

passionate expression to the existence of modern man imprisoned in his own self, with little ability to communicate and create coherent meaning.

“The Three Taverns” is another great poem by Robinson which shows the poet’s skill in compression accompanied by precision. “The poem is bare of all decoration, and is written in a blank verse which is compact and well organized” (Winters 150-151). The poem opens at a critical juncture in St. Paul’s life as he prepares to go to Rome. He is aware of the hostility that he will have to face from the material forces of the Roman Empire. But he is not deterred by social alienation and proceeds with his plan to enter Rome. Though St Paul is a man of great energy and eloquence, who toppled the established laws of Judaism, Robinson’s treatment of his character is restrained. The poem involves a conflict between social alienation and self-alienation. Since St Paul prefers social alienation to self-alienation he rejects material pleasures for the sake of the Spirit.

But I say only, now, that I am Paul –  
A prisoner of the Law, and of the Lord  
A voice made free. (9-11)

He has been freed from the shackles of Jewish laws by his faith in the Lord. The antagonism between law and faith is brought out through words denoting contradictory ideas like “prisoner” and “free”, “fed” and “starved”, “life” and “death”, “mortal and “immortal”, “mortal and eternal”, “light” and “fading”, “kills” and “alive” “eyes” and “blind”, “pleasure” and pain and “hate” and “love”. There are also repetitions of words throughout the poem. The names Paul, Caesar, Rome and Damascus are repeated again and again in the poem. So also are the words “Law”, “father”, “man” “live”, “mortal”, “feel” etc repeated to reinforce the evil effects of alienation.

I fed my suffering soul

Upon the Law till I went famishing,

Not knowing that I starved. (43-45)

The antithesis here between feeding and starvation brings out vividly the conflict between Law and faith.

“Flammonde” is one of the most successful of Robinson’s medium length poems. W.R. Robinson considers the poem as “Robinson’s most felicitous treatment of alienation” where he describes and analyses the self’s journey towards truth (143). Even before the reader becomes aware of the subject matter presented he is enamored by the musical and rhythmical quality of the poem. The poem has a definite structure and a uniform rhyme scheme. The stanzas are of eight lines each and the rhyme scheme is aa, bb, cc, dd. The first stanza of the poem is quoted here to illustrate the regular stanza pattern, the uniform rhyme scheme and the abundant use of alliteration.

The man Flammonde, from God knows where,

With firm address and foreign air,

With news of nations in his talk

And something royal in his walk,

With glint of iron in his eyes,

But never doubt, nor yet surprise,

Appeared, and stayed, and held his head

As one by kings accredited. (1-8)

The poet creates an atmosphere of mystery in the very first line of the poem by stating that Flammonde’s whereabouts are unknown. The name “Flammonde” imparts romantic charm and mystery to the poem. As Barnard comments “Flammonde could be the name of no ordinary mortal; it strikes the ear with overtones of the remote and heroic,

irreconcilably alien to the life of Main Street—yet undisturbedly superior to any material environment”. (57). By making Flammonde a mysterious character the poet creates an atmosphere conducive to the exposure of alienation in modern society. The alliterative adjectives “firm” and “foreign” and the phrases “news of nations in his talk” and “something royal in his walk” describe perfectly the mystery surrounding this strange character. Robinson addresses him as “the Prince of Castaways” foregrounding the regal manner of this pauper.

The poem derives its strength and virility from the vivid and colorful diction. The diction helps in highlighting the unique qualities of the man, Flammonde. Words like “erect”, “alert”, “graciously”, “surpassing”, “munificent” and “distinguished” together project the uniqueness of the man.

While describing the prostitute whom Flammonde befriended the poet uses imaginative and powerful imagery.

There was a woman in our town  
On whom the fashion was to frown;  
But while our talk renewed the tinge  
Of a long-faded scarlet fringe, (41-44)

The image of the “long-faded scarlet fringe” is so rich in evocative detail that it brings out powerfully the fate of the social outcasts.

In poems like “The Mill,” “Reuben Bright,” “Richard Cory,” and “Eros Turannos” he instills poignancy and pathos through the use of visual and dramatic imagery. In “The Mill” he projects the horror of suicide through the line “And what was hanging from a beam” (15). “Reuben Bright” brings out the dangers of stereotyping by portraying the grief of the brutal butcher through the line “And cried like a great baby half the night” (7). The last line

of “Richard Cory” stuns the readers with the news of how Cory “Went home and put a bullet through his head” (16). The language and diction of “Eros Turannos” is unsurpassed for its visual quality. Four lines are quoted to give a feel of his picturesque language at its best:

And home, where passion lived and died,  
Becomes a place where she can hide,  
While all the town and harbor-side  
Vibrate with her seclusion. (29-32)

The language of “Dionysus in Doubt” is direct and the rhythm is brisk and commanding. The tone is harsh and critical to suit the theme though it is subdued a little by the undertone of irony that pervades throughout the poem. The poet’s strong disapproval of democracy when it curtails individual freedom is expressed in harsh language:

“Wherefore your freedom, given a time to pause,  
Vindictively and unbecomingly  
Becomes a prodigy for men to fear – (68 – 70)

The imagery is equally brutal and grim making the poem a relentless attack on democracy that restricts individual liberty and aggravates the alienation of modern man. Democracy deceives people by offering sugar-coated liberty which has within it the bitter pill of conformity.

She spreads again her claws,  
Preparatory, one infers,  
From energy like hers,  
For the infliction of more liberty; .... (91–94)

The comparison of democracy to a predatory bird that spreads its claws to catch its



prey reflects the anger that the poet feels at the infringement of liberty. He stretches the image further and in two brief lines projects the mechanical ease with which laws devour the integrity and freedom of the individual. “She clamps again her jaws / And makes a few more laws, ....” (98-99). Symbols and archetypes of evil are used throughout the poem to represent the evil and cruelty of the world. The two significant archetypes used in the poem are the eagle and the serpent. The eagle symbolism has already been explained. He compares misdirected democracy to a serpent that stings and injects its venom into the masses:

An inward venom of a slow mistrust,  
May never tell you by a word or look  
By what less pleasant serpent they are bitten  
Than any in the book. (241-249)

The harsh tone and diction is deliberately employed by the poet to rouse the masses from their ennui and lethargy and warn them of the dangers of conformity. It is modern man’s indifference, timidity and lack of sight which has brought about a totalitarian regime in the guise of freedom. “Hypocrisy, Timidity and sloth / Are there and are all thriving” (136 -137). The poet warns humanity that if they do not wake up from their sleep and act immediately they might become enslaved forever. The tone of threat and warning are loud and clear in the lines.

If you are still too drowsy now to keep  
The vigil at least a glance  
Or that which reinforced intolerance  
May next of yours be stealing,

From now to then you had all better sleep. (214 – 218)

He pleads with the masses to recover their sight, and with a clear vision, understand the evils of conformity and redeem the freedom and identity they have forfeited. “How even the blind, having resumed their senses; / May seize again their few lost evidences / Of an identity” (274 – 276).

Robinson chooses words with great care and organizes them so that meaning and rhythm fuse to emphasize the gravity of thought. The rhythm in the lines from “Toussaint L’Ouverture” quoted below strongly suggest sense, movement and energy.

I feel the sun! Now we are going faster  
Now I see land – I see land and a mountain!  
I see white foam along a sunny shore –  
And there’s a town. Now there are people inviting  
Shouting and singing, waving wild arms at me,  
And crowding down together to the water! (260-265)

Robinson’s poems are also distinctive in their muted tonal quality and subdued atmosphere. Denis Donoghue points out that “Robinson’s favorite color was gray...” and not even black or white (31). This somber tone is the outcome of the poet’s philosophy that human actions do not fall into strict contradictions of black and white or good and evil but lie somewhere in between. He also points out how Robinson resorts to the techniques used by writers of Absurd plays like Samuel Beckett to project the fragmentation of the modern world. Analyzing the husband and wife in “The Unforgiven” (CP 37) Donoghue states that “these people are not only beyond praise or blame, they are beyond speech itself, like Krapp at the end of *Krapp’s Last Tape* (35). In the matter of imagery also Robinson’s approach is subdued and sober. Anderson is of the opinion that “Robinson’s use of imagery and figurative language is highly selective and functional. He does not paint with a broad brush, nor is his palette highly colorful. Subtle tonal values prevail rather than striking

contrasts” (118). “Mr. Flood’s Party” illustrates this subdued atmosphere and subtle tonal values that he creates in his poems. In “Mr. Flood’s Party” his language creates a mood of extreme pathos bringing out the alienation of the failed in a society. The tone of the poem is grand and imitates the elaborate form and ceremonious style of the epic genre and applies it to the narration of failure. This paradoxical tone introduces the contradiction between illusion and reality. The subtle and subdued atmosphere of “Mr. Flood’s Party” is reflected in the lines quoted below:

For soon amid the silver loneliness  
Of night he lifted up his voice and sang,  
Secure, with only two moons listening,  
Until the whole harmonious landscape rang—  
“for auld lang syne.” (45-48)

Another important aspect of Robinson’s poetic technique is the obscurity for which he is criticized. Louis Coxe, in his study of obscurity in literature, states that there are two kinds of obscurity. The first is the obscurity arising from “bad writing” and the other is the obscurity arising from “really original, difficult, complex ideas, conceptions, attitudes, of necessity expressed in unusual, perhaps repellent, language, rhythms, tropes. Poetry of this kind seems to emerge at transitional times; we might take Eliot’s “The Waste Land” as an example” (The Life of Poetry 115). Robinson’s obscurity most of the time belongs to the second category. The originality of his subjects as well as language appeared “unpoetic” to his contemporaries. Though the poet had no intention of deliberately confusing the readers, perhaps, the complexity of the situations and characters that he presented created obscurity.

An exploration of the obscurity in his poems point to certain features of style and technique which have contributed to it. The first of these is the strategy of suggestiveness or evocation as opposed to concreteness. There is no direct expression of feeling or situation

but a suggestion. The rest is left to the imagination so that the beauty of a poem is not destroyed through elucidation. The last stanza of “The Mill” illustrates the intensity of the evocative imagery. The gradual revelation of the suicide of the miller is followed by a suggestive imagery which provides readers with just sufficient clues to guess at the desperate act of suicide committed by his wife.

Black water, smooth above the weir  
Like starry velvet in the night,  
Though ruffled once, would soon appear  
The same as ever to the sight. (17-24)

This is also called the inferential method as the reader infers from the situation since enough data is not made available for a concrete understanding. But this sort of inference leads to vagueness and abstraction and results in obscurity. In “Lost Anchors” he talks of a legend and the mystery of stolen anchors without elucidating the legend or the mystery. This vagueness has contributed to the obscurity of the poem. Though not all of Robinson’s poems are as vague as “Lost Anchors”, in several of his poems the full meaning eludes us. This elusiveness is the result of Robinson’s belief that poetry is a mirror of life and hence must reflect elusiveness which is an essential quality of life itself (Barnard 50).

The second characteristic which contributes to the obscurity of his poems is the abundant use of historical, literary and scientific allusions. He uses oriental concepts like maya and karma which are unknown to most westerners as the titles of his sonnets. Biblical allusions and references to Greek mythology abound in his poems. The “three in Dura” in “The Man against the Sky” is an allusion to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Old Testament. The poems “Demos and Dionysus” and “Dionysus in Doubt” draw from Greek

mythology.

The frequent use of negative statements is also instrumental in making his poems obscure. The use of negatives is an important modern literary technique to defamiliarize objects and situations so that they are perceived and not ignored. Barnard remarks on Robinson's "habitual use of a negative statement or suggestion, even when his aim is to communicate a positive fact. Instead of saying what a thing is or is like, or what a person does or says or thinks, he tells what the thing is not or is unlike, or what a person does not do or say or think. The reader must then formulate for himself the affirmative statement that is implied" (36). In "Matthias at the door" he adopts this strategy to reveal the contradiction in human life. "Half the grief / Of living is our not seeing what's not to be / Before we see too well" (1043-45). The technique of using a negative statement or suggestion is a conscious attempt to draw attention to the positive in the apparently negative. It reflects the theme that the socially alienated are those who have actually listened to the inner voice and attained freedom of spirit and have not compromised individuality to herd instinct. The poet exhorts the reader to read beyond what is apparent and seek the courage to stand alone.

Yet another feature of Robinson's style that deserves mention is the technique by which he restrains pathos through humor. Without this poetic quality his poems would have degenerated into sentimentalism. In the poem "Karma" through the use of humor and irony he brings out the hypocrisy of the materialist who tries to cover up his guilt by giving a dime as offering for the church.

Acknowledging an improvident surprise,  
He magnified a fancy that he wished  
The friend whom he had wrecked were here again.  
Not sure of that, he found a compromise;

And from the fullness of his heart he fished

A dime for Jesus who had died for man. (9-14)

“Miniver Cheevy” is a poem that has delighted poetry lovers of all times through the balancing of pathos and humor. The poem combines mockery with truth to reveal the strategy of normalization adopted by modern society. The name “Miniver Cheevy” with its evocation of the middle ages is humorous and arresting so that the poem gets the immediate attention of the readers. The poet makes use of short, cryptic sentences to describe the character of Miniver Cheevy. Anderson points out that the poem has a “tipsy rhythm” as each stanza ends with a “short last line” which has a “feminine ending” (107-108).

Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn,

Grew lean while he assailed the seasons;

He wept that he was ever born,

And he had reasons. (1-4)

The poet introduces a nostalgic tone and describes Miniver Cheevy’s love for the past. He succeeds in doing so by bringing in images of the middle ages like “bright swords”, “prancing steeds”, “warrior bold” and “iron clothing”. Miniver “dreamed of Thebes and Camelot, / And Priam’s neighbors” (11-12). There is great humor and irony in this mixing of the past and the present, illusion and reality. The description of “Romance” and “Art” as destitute and vagrant is also humorous. “He mourned Romance, now on the town / And Art, a vagrant” (15-16). According to Anderson “on the town” means “to be supported by the town, a charity case” and the humor of the poem arises to a great extent out of this usage (107). “Miniver thought, and thought, and thought, / And thought about it” (27-28). The repetition of the word “thought” four times makes the whole situation absurd and comic rather than serious. The poet also takes a dig at the character of Miniver who

attached very little importance to wealth but “sore annoyed was he without it” (26). Only at the very end of the poem does the poet reveal the fact that Miniver is a drunkard and these are the fantasies that he has in a fit of stupor, as he does not want to detract from the gravity of the situation visualized.

Irony is used for the sake of emphasis and also to startle the reader into realization. The poet uses both verbal and dramatic irony for the purpose. For instance, the poem “King Jasper” brings out the ironic contrast between the insignificance of an individual human being and his automatic assumption of his unparalleled and immortal value in the universal economy. The chimneys of King Jasper are symbols of power, not only of King Jasper’s power but the power and wealth of industrialized societies. “Your chimneys are the landmark of your power. / Without them I know best what I should be”, says the queen (113-14). It is ironical that chimneys through which the waste smoke is sent out are used as symbols to represent power.

The poem “B.J.” unveils the alienation of the artist in a materialistic society. The poet resorts to the use of irony to portray the self-alienation of Shakespeare who conforms to the materialistic tradition in his personal life. The poem is in the form of a dramatic monologue in which Ben Jonson speaks to an alder man at Stratford about Shakespeare. An under current of irony runs through the whole poem, contrasting the character of Shakespeare with his dramatic exploits.

Humor and irony are blended to bring out the innovative dramatic techniques introduced by Shakespeare disregarding classical rules. The allusion to the “ass’s head in Fairyland” though comic is intended to reveal the irony in the situation, where a man ignorant of the classics has surpassed classical dramatists to become the greatest dramatist of all times. The light and casual tone is a deliberate technique to foreground the irony

arising from the dichotomy in the character of a great artist like Shakespeare. The use of colloquialism brings in the comic element which is a ploy to expose Shakespeare's ignorance of the classics while at the same time portraying ironically his success as a dramatist. "I have your word that Aristotle knows, / And you mine that I don't know Aristotle" (86-87).

The technique of comparison and contrast is employed repeatedly to bring out the dichotomy in Shakespeare's character. The conflict between his inner self and his social self is projected through a contradiction innate in his personality. The playwright who broke away from the shackles of tradition is also the man Shakespeare who is fond of material wealth and glory. "And there's the Stratford in him; he denies it, / And there's the Shakespeare in him. So, God help him" (33-4). Ben Jonson exposes the split in Shakespeare's personality through a string of contradictory adjectives "Like this mad, careful, proud, indifferent Shakespeare!" (397).

Since Robinson prefers the tangential approach to the direct one he employs symbolism to evoke the desired ambience or context. The "manor at Stratford" symbolizes at once the material creed, the capitalist culture and conformity. Shakespeare's obsession for the manor is symbolic of the materialistic obsession for with wealth and status.

The vivid and powerful imagery of the poem reinforces Shakespeare's nonconformity in the practice of his art. The comparison of Shakespeare to a "tramp of all centuries" who "treads along through "Time's old wilderness" brings out with great clarity the individual identity of Shakespeare the dramatist, who deviated from the herd instinct and attained artistic perfection (90-92).

Robinson, a master craftsman, delights readers with a variety of metrical and stanza forms, ranging from the commonly used iambic pentameter to blank verse. In the early part



of his literary career he rarely used blank verse and was more at home with the stanza forms. In *The Torrent and the Night Before* only the poem on Walt Whitman is written in blank verse and in *The Children of the Night* only the “Octaves” are in blank verse. But Robinson shows a preference for blank verse with the passage of years. In the *Captain Craig* volume four poems including the title poem are in blank verse. He reverts to stanza forms following the harsh comments on the poetic style of “Captain Craig”, so that there are no blank verses in *The Town Down the River* and only one blank verse in *The Man against the Sky*. The success of *The Man against the Sky* inspires him to write in blank verse once again and he wrote a long blank verse narrative every year until his death beginning with *Merlin* and ending with *King Jasper*. Barnard justifies this transition and states that “This is doubtless a natural change, for the lyric impulse, and perhaps also the dramatic power, yield almost inevitably, as age advances, to reflection and analysis, which can find freer and fuller expression in blank verse” (63). But it should be mentioned that Robinson excelled in his rhymed verses and “packs more drama into the fourteen lines of a sonnet than into forty pages of blank verse” (Barnard 64).

Robinson’s skill in rhyme is better illustrated by his lyrics and narratives. Generally the meter is regular, simple iambic tetrameter and the lines are short and of uniform length. Though the light, quick movement of the iambic tetrameter seems unsuitable for the psychological probing and ironic reflections of the poet, it has not diminished the beauty or understanding of the poems. The typical stanza structure is a simple stanza of four or eight lines. The rhyme scheme of the eight lined stanzas are either ababcdcd as in “The Mill” and “The Gift of God” or abcddefe as in “Calverly’s” and “The Wandering Jew”. In “Richard Cory”, “Veteran Sirens” and “Old Trails” he uses pentameter quatrains.

In certain poems, stanza form plays a decisive role in getting the desired effect as in

“Miniver Cheevy”. The last line of each stanza is shorter than the others and has a feminine ending which is a technique to contrast illusion and reality. “Eros Turannos” also has the same structure but with the difference that the preceding three lines make use of a single rhyme bringing the action to a climax in the fourth line. “The Man against the Sky” also reveals convincingly the vital role of meter in shaping the theme. The poem makes use of iambic meter though the lines vary in length and there is no regular rhyme scheme. The poem is a reflection on the comparative merits of materialism and idealism. Barnard illustrates effectively the role of the slow movement of the meter of the poem in suggesting the ebb and flow of faith in modern society:

The lines... neither march nor flow, but advance, pause, recede, pause, and advance, like waves upon a shore. One is reminded of *Dover Beach*, with its finely calculated wavelike rhythm; but in Robinson’s poem the movement is swifter and stronger. Long lines slide down to a trough of doubt or despair, sweep up to a crest of defiance or confidence. (78)

Robinson’s blank verses are as individualistic as his rhymed poems. They are astringent, personal and packed with emotion. The most distinctive quality of his blank verse is the use of feminine endings. The best example of Robinson’s blank verse is to be found in “Captain Craig”. The verse has a variety and vitality which is lacking in the later blank verse narratives. One of the methods by which Robinson achieves unity is the repetition of some key word or phrase. In “Captain Craig” the name of the captain is repeatedly used to highlight the protagonist as a leader, and at the same bring out the irony that he has but few followers.

Though the early blank verse narratives of Robinson were highly successful, his later blank verse narratives suffer from verbosity, dullness and monotony. James Dickey

attributes the failure of Robinson's long poems to the slow movement of his verse in contrast to the fast pace of modern life:

The pedestrian movement of much of his work has made him unpopular in an era when the piling on of startling effects, the cramming of the poetic line with all the spoils it can carry, is regarded not so much as a criterion of good or superior verse of a certain kind, but as poetry itself, other kinds being relegated to inferior categories yet to be defined. (67)

An extensive study of Robinson's poetic technique is beyond the scope of this thesis. Yet, the study will be far from complete without including a chapter on this aspect as Robinson is a master craftsman who fuses theme with technique to create memorable poems. As Barnard says, the world is a vast jigsaw puzzle and some of the crucial pieces are missing and some that we have do not fit. And the poet's function is not to tell the story as it should be but to tell it as it seems to him (49).

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

The concluding chapter attempts to recapitulate Robinson's contribution to the poetic renaissance that swept across America at the beginning of the twentieth century and his life long crusade against the philosophy of materialism. He was a great poet and a staunch advocate of antimaterialism. Though he believed in the primacy of delight over instruction in a work of art, he was also conscious of the social commitment of a poet. While preparing his first volume of poems *The Torrent and the Night Before* for publication, he wrote to his friend Harry de Forest Smith, "If printed lines are good for anything, they are bound to be picked up sometimes and then, if some poor devil of a man or woman feels any better or any stronger for anything that I have said, I shall have no fault to find with the scheme or anything in it" (Barnard 21). Robinson's success as a poet lies in his ability to fuse his brilliant poetic technique with his philosophy. Winters provides an objective assessment of Robinson's poetic strategy:

The artist creating lives at a point of intensity, and whether the material is consciously digested before that point is reached, and is simply organized and set down at the time of creation; or whether the point of intensity is first reached and the material then drawn out of the subconscious, doubtless depends a good deal on the individual poet, perhaps on the individual poem... The best of Mr. Robinson's poems appear to have come into being very much in this second fashion. He has spun his images out of a world of sense and thought that have been a part of him so long that he seems to have forgot their beginning – has spun these images out as the movement of his lines, the recurrence of his rhymes, have demanded them. A basic philosophy and

emotional view point have provided the necessary unity. (11-12)

Robinson lived and wrote in a period of shifting values when it was difficult to find a strong foothold rooted in tradition while at the same time looking forward to the future. But he succeeded in doing just that. Using conventional forms he brought about an innovation in American poetry by the directness and honesty of his style and his realistic outlook. He rejected the idea that only certain subjects were appropriate for poetry. The function of the poet is to deal truthfully with human experience as he sees it. He found poetic material in all types of humanity whether they were clerks, butchers or misers and he made a psychological probing into their lives in a simple, plain and condensed language that imparted depth and complexity to his poems. Irving Howe credits Robinson with a pioneering position and states that he “was the first American poet of stature to bring common place people and commonplace experience to our poetry” (Donaldson 113).

It has been proved beyond doubt that Robinson was a master craftsman who could carve out poems of perfect balance and poise. But he was not satisfied with mere brilliance of technique and believed that only a suitable union of content and form could give a poem its organic unity. He gave considerable importance to the subject matter of his poems and insisted on their contemporary significance as well as social relevance. He is never guilty of triviality of thought and his poems embody his philosophical insights. It is this combination of matter and manner, thought and technique that make his poems worthy of perennial interest.

The twentieth century marked the beginning of a new age in all aspects of human life. Mass production and mass communication were instrumental in evolving a mass culture which aimed at standardization. Scientific knowledge brought about rapid proliferation of the philosophy of materialism and forged a new social ideology in the west.

This new ideology was founded on wealth and status rather than morals or spiritual values. The preponderance of this wealth culture led to gradual dehumanization of society and paved the way for the alienation of man. The majority in American society suffered from self-alienation while a minority was alienated by the society for their nonconformity. Robinson held that the dominant social ideology shaped by the philosophy of materialism was responsible for the alienation of modern man. The evolution of a mass society based on ruthless competition and survival of the wealthiest aggravated the alienation of man in modern society. Thus a conflict ensued between man as a commercial being and a social being. The new social ideology promoted the development of the commercial being and the stifling of the social being. This resulted in discontentment and frustration as the social instinct is innate and compulsive in human beings. As a consequence there was a rapid increase in the rate of mental abnormality as well as suicides. Robinson traced the source of this rapid increase in mental abnormality and suicide to the alienated existence of man in modern society. And alienation was a consequence of the social ideology of twentieth century America which was shaped by the philosophy of materialism.

Though Robinson deals with self-alienation and social alienation in his poems, he is more concerned about the plight of the socially alienated in a society because of three reasons. Firstly, the self-alienated majority belongs to the center of society and their problems are the focus of attention of the society. Secondly, the socially alienated, being in the minority, are marginalized and voiceless. Thirdly, being an artist, he had personal experience of social alienation. Hence he decided to champion the cause of the socially alienated in his poems.

Robinson associates self-alienation with conformity and social alienation with nonconformity. Conformity is a modern behavioral strategy by which the individuals in a

society agree to the dictates of the majority. Conformity arises from fear of isolation but the irony is that conformity ultimately leads to the self-alienation of modern man. On the contrary, social alienation is the price for nonconformity. Artists, spiritual leaders and other nonconformists who refuse to sacrifice their individuality have to suffer from social alienation. But the nonconformists are in the minority and are marginalized and persecuted by the majority. Robinson portrays these outcasts of society in the majority of his poems. He also shatters the American success myth which propagates the theory that the rich, the beautiful and the influential are the successful in society. This criterion for success disregards humanitarian and spiritual qualities. Robinson discredits this theory of success and glorifies the failed in his poems.

Robinson holds the philosophy of materialism responsible for the discontentment prevailing in modern society. He ascertains that self- alienation of the majority and the social alienation of the nonconforming minority are the result of the contemporary social ideology forged by the materialistic philosophy. He exposes the theoretical as well as cultural drawbacks of this philosophy in his poems. He argues that the theoretical basis of the materialistic philosophy is unsound since scientific knowledge is still incomplete. Culturally, the philosophy has molded a fraudulent social ideology giving undue importance to wealth and material possessions. The poet was certain that such a social ideology would ultimately destroy human civilization itself. So he registered his protest against this ideology and philosophy in his poetry.

He also proposed an alternative to this philosophy in one of his own, “Optimistic Desperation”. Though his humility never allowed him to consider himself a philosopher, his poems propound a humanitarian philosophy grounded in realism. A realistic outlook made him aware of the sufferings of human life which makes life miserable. But his realism did

not make him a pessimist or a materialist as he always believed that there is an ultimate meaning and purpose to human life. As W.R. Robinson opined: “Robinson abandoned the inadequate attitudes deriving from materialism and emerged not an antirealist but a realist of a more profound kind” (Coxe, *The Life of Poetry* 129).

Robinson’s prophetic vision of the destructive aspect of materialism was realized in his life time itself. He regarded the First World War as an offshoot of the new social ideology shaped by the philosophy of materialism. He believed that the increase in suicides and mental abnormality, the routinization of modern life, and the devaluation of spiritual and moral values were all consequences of the materialistic philosophy.

Materialism has been the dominant ideology of western society for more than a hundred years now. It is no more the West alone which is in the grip of this philosophy, but the whole world is governed by materialism. The destructive potential of this philosophy on human civilization has only accentuated with the passing years. A major drawback of this philosophy has been the alienation of man from himself, from others and from nature. There has been a lot of discussion among academicians and non-academicians regarding the causes and effects of alienation and the probable solutions for this problem.

Pappenheim at a student conference on “Socialism in America” held at Yale University in 1964 delivered a lecture on “Alienation in American Society”. To draw attention to alienation in American society he quoted the example of a young amateur photographer who won the prize in a picture contest sponsored by a popular magazine. He won the prize for the photograph of a traffic accident which showed the anguished expression of one of the victims in the throes of death. Pappenheim argues that this action of the photographer symbolizes the attitude of the alienated man who turns every experience into a tool for attaining his ends (Pappenheim 2). Pappenheim, who based his views on



Marx's theory of alienation, believed that a socialist society would solve the problem of alienation. But Robinson had little faith in either socialism or capitalism since he distrusted any political system that threatened to impose conformity. Donaldson throws light on the poet's views on political systems and comments that "Throughout the 1920s, he regarded communism as the most dangerous of these systems. 'The socialistic dark ages' were coming, and he expected the individual to 'wither' as a consequence. At the same time, though, Robinson repeatedly depicted in his long poems the disastrous consequences of unchecked competition in the capitalistic market place. Henry Ford and his assembly line came in for particular abuse. 'In his way', EAR observed, '(Ford) is greater than Napoleon, and far more terrible'" (452- 453). The poet's derisive views about socialism and capitalism have turned out to be prophetic. Both these political systems have only augmented alienation. He believed that the need of the age is not a new political system but a new social ideology.

The turn of the century has only augmented the characteristic features of alienation existing in society. The September 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre in America, the spurt of terrorist activities all over the world, the increase in psychological disorders and suicides, all point to the enhanced alienation of man in the twenty first century. Kasser analyses the world scenario and says that "Most of the world's population is now growing up in winner-take-all economies, where the main goal of individuals is to get whatever they can for themselves to each according to his greed. Within this economic landscape, selfishness and materialism are no longer being seen as moral problems, but as cardinal goals of life" (ix). Kasser goes on to say that the most insidious aspect of this modern measure of success is that it is not simply about having enough, but about having more than others do. But his most important finding is that people with strong materialistic values and

desires report more symptoms of anxiety and are at a greater risk of depression. Barry Schwartz also endorses Kasser's view and states that too much of choice emanating from materialism actually results in frustration and discontentment rather than increased happiness (Schwartz 100). Alienation has become so all pervasive that it has affected every aspect of human life. It has evolved a self-centered culture which is indifferent to everything other than the immediate benefit of the self. Social responsibility is almost lacking in modern man so that he destroys the environment through pollution, demolishes forests, annihilates animal species, and causes global warming. Thomas L. Friedman reports in *The New York Times* that "The loss of global biological diversity is advancing at an unprecedented pace.... Up to 150 species are becoming extinct every day...The web of life that sustains our global society is getting weaker and weaker" (2). Thus materialism has been instrumental in bringing about not only the alienation of man but a global disaster from which it is extremely difficult to save the planet.

Two incidents from the twenty first century are quoted here to clinch the argument of this thesis that materialism has shaped a social ideology which has brought about the alienation of man. On 16 April 2007, Seung-Hui Cho, a student, killed 33 people and wounded 15 in the deadliest shooting rampage in American history at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia (Virginia Tech Shooting 1). In another incident a 73 years old man in Austria held his daughter captive in his cellar for two decades and fathered at least six children with her, according to police and state-run news reports (Austrian Hid Daughter in Cellar 1). These gruesome incidents point to the fact that alienation has reached its zenith in the twenty first century. Though these are extreme cases of alienation, such incidents are on the rise and are no more uncommon. Self-alienation of modern man has reached a point where atrocities are committed with great

ease. This is no time for apathy. Discussions and deliberations must continue until a binding solution emerges.

The recent crisis in the financial sector of capitalist countries points to the truth of Robinson's assertions on the destructive nature of capitalism. The disillusionment with capitalism is so intense that there is renewed interest in Karl Marx and his theories (Marx is back 24). The alienation of modern man arising from the philosophy of materialism is still an unresolved problem for mankind and hence the relevance of the sociological dimension of this thesis.

This thesis is an attempt to make a meaningful contribution to the study of social alienation with reference to Robinson's poetry. There is scope for further study and research in this area. An interdisciplinary approach linking sociology, psychology and literature can yield more theories and data on the subject. It is hoped that the work done in this thesis will motivate research in Robinson and introspection on social evils like alienation. The study also aims at renewing interest in poets like Robinson who should not be condemned to oblivion simply because of the modern craving for novelty.

Several poets have come after Robinson but most of them were mere meteors that glowed for a short while but died thereafter and were forgotten. On the contrary, Robinson's brilliant light has illuminated generations of poetic lovers all over the world. As William Vaughn Moody, poet and friend, prophesied, "When we're all dead and buried, E.A. will go thundering down the ages" (Anderson 154). This study is evidence to it.

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