E. A. Robinson's Narrative Poetry

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PREFACE

Edwin Arlington Robinson was an essential American poet during the 1920s. Critics believe he is a poet who wrote in all poetic forms of his day. However, this book tries approaching one of the critical poetic features in Robinson's poetry, which is his method of narration.

Narration is one of the crucial points in Robinson's poetry that puzzles his critics. Robinson's poems show this aspect as they are portraits that include characters, setting, a method of narration and all other points that fit any narrative piece. This book takes as its point of departure the idea that unless Robinson's narrative method is discussed, no proper understanding of the poems will be achieved. The book includes five chapters:

The first chapter shows the importance of writing about this poet's art. It offers a view of his life related to his works and the influence of New England and Puritanism on his life and, consequently, on his poetry. It discusses the features of Robinson's art, and it surveys materials about his poetry and the criticism written about his art. It also sheds light on the importance of narration in Robinson's poetry.

The second chapter gives a discussion of dramatic poetry. It exhibits types of narrative poetry and kinds of narration. It also discusses the meaning of narration in general and the function of omniscient narration in particular, with unique references to Robinson's narrative methods.

The third chapter is practical and textual. It studies Robinson's narrative approach in the shorter poems showing how those short portraits need a narrative method that reveals to the readers the characters of the figures drawn in them. The shorter poems which are to be studied are "Richard Cory," "The Gift of God," "Mr Flood's Party," "Miniver Cheevy," "The Whip," "Flammonde," and "When Annandale Went Out."

The fourth chapter is devoted to Robinson's major work, "The Man Against the Sky." The poem is dealt with as a complete narrative, in which the whole human drama is discussed, and human nature is revealed as the poet supplies his poem with a setting, characterisation, plot, theme, and denouement.

The fifth chapter studies the narrative method in the longer texts. It shows how the characters develop in longer texts and how readers know more about them than in the shorter texts. The chosen long poem in this chapter is "Captain Craig."

Many methodological approaches were applied in this book regarding the analytical and cultural. Some other approaches were used wherever needed, including political, social, historical, biographical, and psychological.

The Author

CHAPTER ONE

E. A. ROBINSON

I.1. Robinson's Biography

Edwin Arlington Robinson was born on December 22, 1869, in the village of Head Tide, Maine, in America. He was the son of Edward Robinson, a somewhat wealthy lumber merchant, and Mary Elizabeth Palmer, a former school teacher. In September 1870, shortly after Robinson's birth, the family moved to a nearby small New England town, Gardiner, in Maine, a deserted port on the Kennebec River where Robinson grew up, and the town inspired him to portray its people in his poetry under the name of Tilbury Town. Robinson was the third son and resembled a disappointment to his mother, who hoped for a daughter after two sons, Dean and Herman. Robinson was not a healthy child "and grew up around the taunts of the other children, who played harder and didn't tire as easily as he did,"[1] so that "he spent a great deal of time by himself, reading and writing."[2]

Robinson's grammar school teacher said that "he was a highly sensitive child."[3] His friend, Harry Swanton, also said Robinson was "a rather large, awkward boy, not particularly good at any of the boys' sports."[4] Dean, the oldest brother, who was working as a practising physician in the countryside of Maine, in an open cold area, led him to return home sickly, and became addicted to morphine, then died in 1899. Robinson's father did not prefer higher education and considered it useless. So Robinson was affected by his father's attitude and "might study not only the indifference and hostility to art and intellect but also the failure that overtook all sorts and conditions of men, including those who had smugly put their trust in material success."[5]

As a child, Robinson was always fond of books, the quality his father tried to break; as Mrs Herman Robinson said, "[Edwin was] always in the background …. His father thought he ought to be out with the other boys and would try to induce him to go, but he always wanted to curl up with a book."[6] Robinson's father opposed higher education, so he built an extensive library in his house containing the works of prominent old and

new writers, especially in poetry. The library was food for Robinson from age five when he read *The Raven* aloud to his family. Robinson was reading Shakespeare at the age of seven, and he indulged with his father in reading Bryant's *A Library of Poetry and Song*. Robinson started writing poetry at the age of eleven, and he used to attend the local society of poetry. That society was a little poetry club founded by Caroline Davenport Swan, to whom Robinson was introduced by his neighbour and family doctor, Alanson Tucker Schumann. At seventeen, Robinson made a blank verse translation of Cicero's: "First Oration Against Catiline." His first essay, "Bores," was published in *The Amateur* school literary journal. His first poem, "Thalia," was published on March 29, 1890, in *The Reporter Monthly*, issued in Gardiner, Maine, and his metrical translation, "The Galley Race," from book V of the *Aeneid*, was also published in the same journal on May 31.

Robinson graduated from Gardiner high school in 1880, when he met Emma Sheppard, the great love of his life, in a dancing school; he introduced her to his oldest brother Herman. Herman convinced her to marry him. Some sources said that Herman wasted the family fortune in a weak-designed business, but the loss resulted from the economic panic of 1893. This matter affected Herman's marriage and made him indulge in alcoholic drinking; he contracted tuberculosis and died in 1909.

Robinson remained unmarried though he had undergone two love experiences. The first and most authentic experience was with Emma Sheppard, who married his brother Herman. She appreciated Robinson's poetry and encouraged him but preferred Herman, the successful and brilliant businessman. Chard Powers Smith stated two points of view about that case. One idea was that Emma looked sisterly to Edwin. This view was consolidated by the evidence that Edwin had proposed several times to Emma after Herman's death, at least in 1909, 1918 and 1928, without any result.[7] These proposals might interpret why Robinson did not marry at all. As in one of his poems, his tongue might say: "what is it in me that you like so much, / and love so little?"[8]

The second view is that Emma loved Robinson, but she loved Herman superficially.[9] This view might be reasoned by the fact that Herman was a successful businessman, and she loved the prosperity Herman might offer. The second experience was with Mabel Moore, whom he taught French. The envious tone was evident in a letter to his friend Harry De Forest Smith on the occasion of the latter engagement. The regression to the past was attributed to his unmarried state:

> You are engaged to be married, you are happy, and the world and the future look bright in your eyes; I am not (now) engaged to be married, I am

> not happy, and the world and the future look so dark and gloomy that I look mostly into the past.[10]

There is no decisive evidence for Robinson's disinclination of marriage. However, he once said he could write poetry and devote his life to it or make a family.[11] Robinson studied literature, French, and philosophy at Harvard University for two years, 1891-1893. He found an opportunity to publish five poems in *The Harvard Advocate*. However, he could not issue any poems in *The Harvard Monthly*, the famous periodical of Harvard University. In one of his letters to his friend H. D. F. Smith, Robinson described his feelings at Harvard after two weeks had passed:

> I have been feeling by turns hopeful and blue for the past two weeks; it is the change, more than anything else, I suppose. But the fact is, I am not fixed upon the firmest footing possible; I am where I have no business.[12]

Amid studying at Harvard, his father died in 1892, and he did not return home until the panic in 1893 when the family's fortune faded away. Robinson worked briefly between January and June 1899 as a secretary at Harvard University in the office of its president Charles W. Eliot. In 1896, Robinson's mother was infected by "black diphtheria" and soon died. These tragedies, death, addiction, failure, and financial catastrophe, were reflected in his early poems, which he published in 1896, with the assistance of his friends under the title *The Torrent and The Night Before*.[13] In 1897, Robinson published the book again under the new title *The Children of the Night*, where two poems were deleted from the first and sixteen poems were added to the second, with his friends' support. In 1902, *Captain Craig* was also published by the payments of Robinson's friends, though five publishers had rejected it. Ignorance was practised by the critics of Robinson's earlier works except for Trumbull Stickney in *The Harvard Monthly* and Edmund Clarence Stedman in his anthology, who praised his poetry, while other critics caused Robinson's depression and alcoholic indulgence.[14]

Although the deterioration of social relationships had reached high levels, the assistance of Robinson's friends, either in publishing books or in proceeding with life, was remarkable. Robinson moved from job to job; in New York (1903-4), he worked as a timekeeper in a subway construction for cheap wages and lived in Manhattan in the "meanest little house on a mean street."[15] Van Wyck Brooks described Robinson's coming to New York: "Abandoning New England, he had carried to New York an aura of blight, desolation, decay, and defeat."[16] Shortly after this most profound point of poverty, the "glimmer of light" rose in Robinson's life. In 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt became acquainted with

Robinson's *The Children of the Night* by his son Kermit who had acknowledged the book, in turn, by his teacher at the Gorton School, Henn Richards. Roosevelt admired Robinson's work, so he granted him a sinecure at the United States Customs House in New York as a special agent of the Treasury Department. He recommended that the Scribner's republish *The Children of the Night*.

I.1.1. Puritan Influence

Robinson was one of the descendent of Anne Bradstreet (1612-72), the poet of the first generation of New Englanders. She was closely related to the governors of the colony of Massachusetts and her other famous descendants: the Channings, the Danas, and the Holmes. New England was the colony of the first immigrants, pilgrims, and Puritans when they came to America in the seventeenth century to build the city of God. New England was anointed by some New England writers, such as Cotton Mather, who wrote that "a man of sense might almost statistically infer New England to be specially favoured by God."[17]

The first reference to the Puritans was during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) to denote those "who wished to 'purify' the forms and rituals which they felt too closely resembled those of the church of Rome."[18] Puritanism evolved from the conflict between Protestant reformers and the Catholic Church. The Puritans had seized power in England during Cromwell's revolution (1649-1660), but they suffered later from oppression during the Restoration, which brought about their fleeing to New England. In 1628, the Puritans established in America the "Massachusetts Bay Colony," and their religious purposes were intermingled with their economic drives to form their new world. However, the Puritans' dream of a theocratic state gradually vanished.

New England expressed its individuality which was demonstrated in many churches. Gardiner, the town where Robinson spent his youth, was an example of this variety. It consisted of churches as: "Episcopal, Congregational, Free Will Baptist, Universalist, and Roman Catholic," as well as the Methodist and the Swedenborgian. Puritanism may be regarded as "a set of theological doctrines known as Calvinism or [...] a cluster of negative attitudes about morality which are outgrowths of the dogma itself."[19] Its doctrines might be "summed up in the ideas of original sin, predestination, grace and election."[20] Calvinism in New England had undergone several dissents, "most of which had attacked the authority of the clergy and had stressed the need for individual practicality and self-reliance."[21] One of the important dissenting trends was Unitarianism. Dr

Freeman, the Bostonian Minister and William Ellery Channing started this religious movement which denied the dogma of the Trinity, the divine nature of Jesus, and the creed of Christianity, considering it a particular way of life. In this respect, there were several similarities between Unitarianism and Deism. The worship of Robinson's family was Unitarianism, like most of the wealthiest families in Boston. Unitarianism had a significant effect on New England that "impelled the following generation [the 1840s] to that outbreak of intellectual and spiritual anarchy which is generally called Transcendentalism."[22] The literary background of New England intellectuals was "either a Unitarian or closely associated with Unitarian influences."[23] Unitarian liberal doctrines had affected Robinson's mind. They made him religious "but without dogmatism of any particular sect or creed. Robinson had already rejected Calvinism and the Orthodox conception of heaven and hell."[24]

Transcendentalism swept Europe at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. In that period, the old structure of society was to be undermined and "the feudal and ecclesiastical tyrannies and customs" were to be turned up by new liberal institutions.[25] Transcendentalism concentrated "on the intuition and the conscience, a form of idealism; a philosophical romanticism reaching America a generation or two after it developed in Europe."[26] It had deep roots in the "ancient and modern European philosophers (particularly Emanuel Kant) and sponsored in America chiefly by Emerson after he had absorbed it from Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Johann Goethe, and others."[27]

The evolutionary philosophy divides knowledge into two branches: the knowable, which can be tested or experimented and the unknowable, which cannot be experimented on. The unknowable knowledge is related to Transcendentalism, where it lurks beyond the senses as a supernatural force. The central theme of Transcendentalism was "the conviction that the individual has a natural right to believe for himself and free to express his belief."[28]

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82), the poet and philosopher, was an eminent figure of Transcendentalism. Emerson believed in the special relationship between human beings and God without intermediation. He reconciled between the law of Nature and the law of God or between the realist and the idealist. In a letter to his friend H. D. F. Smith, Robinson admits that he is an idealist; he says: "I am very glad to be able to stand up and say that I am an idealist. Perhaps idealism is the philosophy of desperation, but I do not think so."[29] The admittance affirmed his choice between "materialism and some neo-romantic alternative," therefore; "he

looked back into his new England heritage and found Emerson."[30] The New England heritage was too heavy that Robinson and the other new Englanders wished to overthrow it, as Van Wyck Brooks and Otto L. Bettman said:

> The Yankees were writing again with talent and vigour, and the new writers, Appearances not-with-standing, remained in the New England tradition, which they seemed to flout. They sometimes thought they were outside it, they sometimes wished to be outside it, but unconsciously they were within it, which was more important; and was it not part of their tradition, that they should flout tradition, even as the greatest of the Yankees had flouted it before them? That one should flout tradition was the first of laws for Emerson's heirs.[31]

Robinson inherited from New England "a Hawthornesque power of blackness as well as Emersonian light."[32] Hawthorne's theme of human solitude affected Robinson and was demonstrated in many poems, especially in his earlier work.[33] Robinson, a New England poet, had several similarities with Hawthorne. They were fewer transcendentalists, "skeptical, solitary, profoundly aware of the ambiguities that forever link self-reliance and solitude."[34]

Not only was it "the religious toughness" that characterised the New Englanders, as Brooks said in his introduction to *A New England Reader*, but also the affirmation of "the old world of New England, faith in the individual, a passion for justice, a love of life and a clear belief in its ultimate goodness."[35] In this statement, Brooks showed that "faith in the individual" was a positive quality which was associated with the "love of life" and "goodness," but Roy Harvey Pearce had a different idea. In his analysis of Robinson's "Eros Turannos," Pearce saw "individualism" as traditionally related to the New England town, a quality of failure to communicate in American society.[36] New England literature was distinguished in the proceeding of American literature so that "the New England segment of American literature remained for a hundred years more powerful and more interesting than any other."[37]

As William Cullen Bryant, Emerson, and Nathaniel Hawthorne exemplified, the Puritan tradition was "a strong sense of moral integrity, a highly developed conscience, a concern with the inner man, and strength of character."[38] To Robinson, the Puritan tradition was a central characteristic element in his personality, not as a poisonous factor nor an outworn tradition as Amy Lowell accused Robinson.[39] But as Anderson said, this poison "resulted, not from decadent Puritanism alone, but from congeries of forces that piled up increasingly during Robinson's lifetime."[40] Emerson and other transcendentalists ran away from the

austerity of Puritanism to the spiritual individuality where everyone could practice his rituals freely. Transcendentalism dominated "the New England authors as to become a literary movement as well as a philosophic conception."[41] Robinson, in his strain of solitude, was responsive to the individuality in Unitarianism and consequently in Transcendentalism,

> as an heir to the New England traditions of Puritanism and Transcendentalism, with their emphasis upon the individual, Robinson has been termed a sober transcendentalist who dealt primarily with the ethical conflicts within the individual, and measured the value of the isolated person by his truth to himself.[42]

Robinson was "the last of the old New England poets who was also the first of the new."[43] Louise Bogan stated, "Robinson's reaction to events and his conclusions concerning human life and destiny continued to be based on the idealism of his youth, to which was added a simple variety of agnosticism and stoicism."[44] Robinson was an inheritor to the "idealism of Emerson and the skepticism of Dickinson,"[45] and the moral and scientific change of the age resembled "an end product of New England town civilization."[46]

Emily Dickinson (1830-86) was the last New Englander who left her prints in the 1890s "although Miss Dickinson's New England strain had advanced straight from Puritan mores, untouched, and even repelled, by Unitarian reform."[47] Bogan saw in Robinson "the dry sense of humor of the New England townsman, and his bent was toward realism."[48] But this was one side of Robinson's personality that Bogan had seen. The other side was idealism, which accompanied him all of his life. The dualism in Robinson's character might be one element of Emerson's legacy. It was formed because Robinson lived in the strong current of change due to many variables in the 1890s and the turn of the twentieth century.

Robinson's philosophical idealism was said to come through his instructor Josiah Royce when he taught him the philosophy of German idealists.[49] Robinson's sketches of characters in the imaginary Tilbury Town were idealised that "few men were saints enough to possess the perfect love and wisdom of which Emerson wrote."[50] Emerson's ideas were essential to Robinson's idealism and his endless search "to find spiritual meaning in a mechanistic world."[51] Emerson's influence on Robinson is evident in the latter's belief "in the unknowable constants that govern the human being from within; in addition, he had the sort of mind that sees history as a unity in which these human constants appear in dramatic form."[52]

The unknowable constants that Robinson believed in were related to Transcendentalism. It can be said that "the core of transcendentalism that runs through Robinson's poetry derives from his reading of Carlyle and Emerson."[53] Robinson had read Emerson's "The Over-Soul" and Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*.[54] Robinson highly esteemed Emerson as an essayist and a poet. The latter's influence pervaded his early works, especially some poems in *The Children of the Night*, "Kosmos," "Supremacy," and "Octaves," and it was also seen in "Captain Craig."[55] But as Williams J. Free said, asserting Edwin S. Fussell's idea that "no one has been able to point with certainty to specific Emersonian ideas in specific Robinson's poems."[56] Robinson had read Emerson's "Compensation" as he told his friend Smith and he could understand Emerson's theory of compensation.[57]

The inferiority of man towards God suggests the law of compensation. Presumably, man can not arrive at the integrity or the absolute truth identified with God, so man needs compensation to achieve equilibrium. Emerson believed that a man had to endure painful experiences to get wisdom, and this idea was closely related to Robinson's poetry and statements.[58] One of them was that "there's a good deal to live for, but a man had to go through hell really to find it out,"[59] or in Free's words, "Robinson found hell worth enduring for the compensating knowledge of life's value."[60]

Another source of Robinson's mystical experience and his "early transcendentalism was grounded in the teachings of Swedenborg."[61] Robinson's mystical experience was beyond humanity and more extensive. It was intellectual so that he might be considered "half a transcendentalist,"[62] or as Anderson said, "it is more meaningful to define Robinson's idealism as modified transcendentalism."[63] He was unlike Emerson or Whitman, whom he greatly admired because his destroyed life prevented him from finding "the exuberance, the *Joie de vivre* [joy of living], that was given to them by their confidence in humanity's capacity to discover that stupendous entity and merge with it."[64] This opinion coincides with Charles T. Davis' interpretation of Robinson's "own constitutional unreadiness to accept transcendental definitions of man and the world, definitions which he found attractive and satisfying in many ways."[65] Davis saw that Robinson's philosophical idealism was related to Emerson's transcendentalism, "but by *King Jasper* (1935), Robinson's last extended narrative, his idealism had been reduced to a stubborn faith in the power of the human mind and spirit to survive, despite the catastrophe which seemed to follow inevitably man's blind pursuit of the material."[66] His evident New England qualities were "his austerity and his horror of

the exuberance of expression," and "his violent and controlled passion."[67] Robinson described his state as an "optimistic desperation" and himself as a "transcendental optimist," though he was not identical with the typical transcendental opinion of nature the third column of the transcendental Trinity; God, man, and nature.[68]

Richard Cary saw Robinson as a pessimistic poet, especially in his earlier works. He attributed this quality to the age in which the change from agriculture to industry was accelerated and the appearance of Darwinism and the scientific or material way of thinking.[69] Robinson, as one of the traditionalists in America as the late Victorians at the end of the nineteenth century, was "troubled rather than shattered by the impact of science on faith and by the disintegration of values that had stood the test of centuries."[70] In fact, the case of traditionalism was related to the aristocratic South rather than the austere but somewhat democratic New England.[71] New England had changed, and its "standards had deteriorated in the period after the civil war, and [Henry] Adams, Henry James, and Robinson could no longer live there."[72] In his poetry, Robinson, as Edmund Wilson stated: "was preoccupied with New England in decay."[73] As Robinson was constituted of "a traditionally New England mind, he was generally regarded as a herald of the poetic awakening of the pre-world war America."[74]

New England's influence is seen in most of his poems and is very clear in "New England," "Boston," "The House on the Hill," and "The Gift of God." Robinson's roots in New England granted him a deep look at the past and the present and nourished him with the ability to probe the future. Robinson, "in his reticent, slightly morbid, profoundly contemplative, and stoical personality,"[75] could transcend his perplexity towards the heavy atrocities of life. Robinson did not discover that he lived in a prison-house as Harry Thurston Peck, the reviewer in *The Bookman*, said. However, his perplexity and the absorbed scepticism of the age drove him to say, "the world is not 'prison-house,' but a kind of spiritual kindergarten, where millions of the bewildered infants are trying to spell God with wrong blocks."[76] Yet, in the last line of his poem "Credo," Robinson referred to the remains of his faith in "the coming glory of the light."[77]

I.1.2 Works

Robinson was a prolific poet, and his production was more extensive than any influential American poet, as well as that "the range of his philosophy was broader, his emotion deeper, his imagination richer, than that of any other poet of his age."[78] As it was said before, Robinson's earlier work,

The Children of the Night, was published in 1897, and *Captain Craig* in 1902. In 1910, Robinson published *The Town Down the River*, which was received in some critics' favour, such as in the *New York Times* and *Boston Transcript*, where the editor of the latter, William Stanley Braithwaite, was too enthusiastic; he declared that Robinson was "America's Foremost Poet."[79] For some years, Robinson devoted himself to writing unsuccessful prose plays; *Van Zoren* was published in 1914 and faced failure at the stage; *Porcupine* was published in 1915 and never presented.[80] From 1911 until the end of his life, Robinson spent every summer at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, where the artists and writers met and practised their creative works.[81]

The first real success which brought an excellent reputation, especially among the critics, was the publication of Robinson's *The Man Against the Sky* in 1916.[82] Arthurian Trilogy appeared as *Merlin* in 1917, *Lancelot* in 1920, and *Tristam* in 1927, which won Robinson third Pulitzer Prize. The first Pulitzer Prize was for his *Collected Poems* in 1924. His works; *The Three Taverns* (1920), *Avon's Harvest* (1921), *Roman Bartholow* (1923), *Dionysius in Doubt* (1925), *Sonnets: 1889-1927* (1928), *Cavender's House* (1929), *The Glory of the Nightingale* (1930), *Matthias at the Door* (1931), *Nicodemus* (1932), *Talifer* (1933), *Amaranth* (1934), and *King Jasper* (1935), were published consequently.

Robinson received two honorary Litt—doctoral degrees from Yale and Bowdoin Universities in 1922 and 1925, respectively. In 1929, Robinson received the gold medal from the American Institute of Art and Letters for his whole works of poetry. He still needed to deliver a lecture or show any public reading of his poetry and only travelled abroad once to England in April-July 1923. He died of cancer on April 6, 1935, shortly after he had finished the last proofreading of his last work *King Jasper*.

I.2 Robinson's Art

William Vaughn Moody says, "when we're all dead and buried, E.A. Robinson will go thundering down the ages."[83] Robinson's immortality has been proved through his unintermittent occurrence along the literary parade in the twentieth century.

After the death of the most prominent poets of the nineteenth century, Bryant, Longfellow, Emerson, Lowell, Whitman, and Whittier in America and Tennyson in England, the need for a new poet was asserted.[84] The rivalry with England evoked this need, especially with the appearance of two great English poets: Rudyard Kipling and Stephen Phillips.[85]

Robinson's first book, *The Children of the Night*, marked a new era in writing poetry and pointed out the appearance of a contemporary poet who filled the vacuum made by the death of the great American poets.[86] The following items demonstrate the significant characteristics of Robinson's art.

I.2.1 Modernism and "New Poetry"

In America, modernism appeared shortly after the civil war. Society started to change towards more "industrialism, materialism, and skepticism."[87] Besides a literary change towards realism in the novel, the short story and drama also started to impose themselves upon the literary scene. Poetry remained unchanged until 1912 when the "poetic renaissance" began.[88]

Literary magazines enhanced the rise of the "New Poetry"; one of them was *Poetry*, a magazine which was founded by Harriet Monroe, who started to publish poems of the new poets: Ezra Pound, Vachel Lindsay, Amy Lowell, Edgar Lee Masters, Hilda Doo Little (H. D.), Carl Sandburg, William Carols Williams, T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Conrad Aiken, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, E. A. Robinson, and others.[89] Those poets resembled different schools of poetic styles, such as "Imagists, Vorticists, and Symbolists," and wrote in "free verse, cadenced verse, and polyphonic prose."[90] The "New Poetry" movement was "no single, unified movement but a multi-faceted one with complex interrelationships."[91] In her book, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, Amy Lowell chose six poets as the foremost figures of the "New Poetry." Robinson and Frost wrote in traditional forms; Masters and Sandburg wrote free verse, and Fletcher and H. D. were Imagist poets.[92]

In his evaluation of Robinson's *King Jasper*, Frost argued that: "Robinson stayed content with the old-fashioned way to be new,"[93] implying that Robinson is traditional in his poetic method and style. Henry Steele Commager mentioned Robinson among the traditional poets in his book, *The American Mind*. At the same time, in his introduction, Charles T. Davis considered that the starting point of modern American poetry was with Robinson.[94] Robinson could be considered a semi-modernist or a half-traditionalist poet according to the previous acceptable statement of Frost. Robinson's traditionalism emerged from his use of traditional forms such as the sonnet and traditional French forms such as the villanelle, ballade, etc. Robinson himself was "never identified with any critical school or avant-garde group."[95] He preceded "by more than a decade the

writing, the talking, the organizing of energetic pioneers and front-runners like Harriet Monroe, Ezra Pound, and Amy Lowell."[96]

Robinson stood on the point of change between the nineteenth-century traditions, ascending to the classics and the modernism of the twentieth century. This position obliged him to keep up the traditional forms of poetry mingled in his poems with new subject matters relevant to the new age. Therefore, the self-centred or "egocentric poem" of the nineteenth century seemed irrelevant to Robinson's poems in some respects, so he tried to mould his poems in shape marked by "depersonalization, mechanism, and bureaucratization."[97] Robinson understood the previous trends in American poetry and comprehended the imitated attempts of some contemporaries in those trends. That process was not enough for him; he did not admire imitation.[98] Robinson's modernity revealed itself through his attempts "to break away from those worn-out symbols of expression which have lost the power to transmit thought and emotion to the modern mind."[99]

In his sonnet "Oh For a Poet," Robinson attacked the "Ultra-Conservatives" and those "little sonnet-men" whose poems were "put together in such a way as to fulfil the external requirements of form, but empty of spirit and significance, incapable of satisfying the inner requirements of meaning."[100] Robinson said:

> To put these little sonnet-men to flight
> Who fashion, in a shrewd, mechanic way,
> Songs without souls that flicker for a day,
> To vanish in irrevocable night.[101]
>
> (Oh For a Poet, ll: 5-8)

Practically, Robinson disagreed with the "ultra-modernists" who rejected the past to be used in the present through his composition of the Arthurian Trilogy. Yet, Rosenthal called Robinson's modernity an old-fashioned modernity.[102]

As a genuine poet, Robinson created his unique style in its mature language, rich imagination, and lucid presentation of ideas. As a significant poet, his style is not a mixture of irrelevant streams. Instead, he has a distinguished style that any other poet cannot match during his day.

As regards modernism, every aspect of Robinson's style is modern. Nevertheless, he did not believe in the modernism that breaks up with all the traditions because, like T. S. Eliot, he thinks that a great poet must not cut himself off from the past, the classics, and traditions. Robinson's modernity is characterised by his treatment of a character's inner life, his

method of generalising his personal experience, and his grand language, which appears simple. However, it is rich and pregnant with meaning.

I.2.2 Form and Style

Robinson was a craftsman in French forms: villanelles; ballades; rondeaus; and triolets, which he had studied during his early life.[103] He preferred open-form poems, especially in the middle and later period of his literary career; such poems are different from the closed-form poems which traditional poets wrote.[104]

He confessed that he was a "classicist in his poetic composition." He thought there was "room for infinite variety, manipulation and invention within the limits of traditional forms and meters."[105] Robinson used the villanelle for serious subjects, while it was used before him to express humorous or light topics.[106] Robinson also achieved a “modern modification of the ballad form.”[107] As Edwin Fussell said, Robinson used to “mold the forms he found into a fresh way of saying,”[108] or to accommodate “old forms of poetry to new forms of thought.”[109] Robinson used dramatic monologue and was skilful in sonnet and blank verse forms. He gave “to the anemic sonnet of his time a blood transfusion that restored it to its former vigor.”[110] The conflict between the old and the new was reflected in his poetry in a way that “afforded him opportunities to thematize the excruciated relations between the traditionally elite genre of poetry and the forms and practices of contemporary material culture.”[111] His conservative personality was reflected in his attitude towards the form and the content of poetry. His contradictive attitude was revealed in the traditional form and modern content. The flexibility of Robinson's blank verse enabled him to escape the strict requirements of the old-fashioned forms. Blank verse became his favourite form, especially in his long narrative poems.[112]

Robinson wrote in all types of poetry: lyric, narrative, dramatic, and didactic or philosophical. According to the length of his poems, his poetry could be classified into three types: the short dramatic lyrics which dealt with character portraits; the medium poems such as; “Issac and Archibald,” “Rembrandt to Rembrandt,” and “The Book of Annandale,” which reflected a deep psychological opinion of life. Furthermore, the lengthy narrative poems revealed Robinson's point of view and his philosophical attitudes towards man and his destiny. Robinson's plain style was deeply rooted in Puritan heritage, especially the Puritan sermon. Robinson was “the poet who introduced the preoccupations and plain style of naturalism into American poetry in the early 20th century.”[113] Robinson

wrote his poems “in the colloquial speech of the townsmen he so memorably described.”[114] Robinson's line was simple, and his sentence was declarative.[115] His line was “characterized by hard objectivity and tense restriction.”[116] He was in contrast with the poetic conventions of his age in repudiating sentimentalism and selecting subjects of ordinary people.[117] Morton Zabel says, “Robinson's art, at its best, derives from his sense of the plainest use of speech.”[118]

Robinson's poetry, as Coxe also believes, “anticipates both the modern colloquial style and the beginning of a new psychological and rhetorical approach to poetry.”[119] Murphy summarises the main qualities of Robinson's art as dealing with “the rational statement, the psychological insight, the subdued irony, the high seriousness, and the stubborn persistence.”[120] But the ordinary reader kept in his mind Robinson's vices of “prolixity, irresolution, and occasional dullness,” especially for his later poems.[121] Robinson's style varies from a highly brilliant one in such poems as “Eros Turannos,” “Richard Cory,” and “The Mill” to an everyday commonplace in other poems as “Cliff Klingenhagen,” “The House on the Hill,” and “The Octaves.” This quality of inconsistent style is determined by the kind of poetry he writes; lyric, narrative, or dramatic. His style becomes prosaic in his narrative poems though there are variations in the degree of that style due to the point of view or the type of narration. The everyday language reveals itself in Robinson's “Cliff Klingenhagen.” It is devoid of images or any poetic devices except narration. The meter and rhyme of the poem do not add any poetic significance. The poem remains commonplace in poetic prose, similar to any short story.

I.2.3 Characterisation

The character is a vital element in any narrative process. Moreover, since Robinson was a narrative poet, he was interested in revealing the psychological conflicts inside his characters to apply them to society.

In the short poems (the portraits), he pictured certain characters from Tilbury Town, an imaginary town in Gardiner, Maine, which stands for his real town. His characters were puzzled, unfulfilled and disappointed because of their hollowness, disability to know reality or blindness to search for truth.[122] He was frightened by the bare human truth that no one could ever reach, so he stayed far from society and let his characters be dramatised according to his knowledge of New England and situations, which were moulded like Shakespeare’s method of drawing characters from the English life to represent human beings everywhere.[123] The reader could take Robinson’s characters as symbols that embody Robinson’s

opinion of life. James Dickey said that Robinson used mostly "the speculative or conjectural approach to the writing of poetry."[124] But though Robinson knew this approach was close to the art of poetry, he sometimes broke this speculative approach and revealed himself in direct statements. His mysterious and obsessed characters were left to face their fate because he could not do anything to prevent their disastrous ends.[125] Robinson indulged in portraying human characters more than anything else.[126] He was interested in the human being as a centre of the cosmos though he was disappointed by man's tragic fate. Harriet Monroe criticised Robinson's characterisation and said she found his characters "abstractions, mind-conjured rather than living figures."[127] Clarence A. Brown agreed with Monroe's judgment in some respect and noted that "Robinson denied that he ever transcribed from life, and although models for his characters existed, it is true that the mood of the portraits is his own creation."[128]

At the beginning of his career as a poet, Robinson wrote fifteen prose sketches entitled *Scattered Lives*.[129] These sketches revealed Robinson's ability to portray characters and to study "personal relationships drawn from a philosophical and psychological point of view."[130] C. A. Brown described Robinson as "an expert craftsman and a skillful psychological portrait painter; because he used the dramatic monologue as successfully as any poet since Browning."[131]

Robinson's failure in prose was a complete success in poetry, especially in the brilliant embodiment of his characters. For example, Robinson's "The Night Before" was originally one of his prose sketches in which "he had shifted from narrative prose to narrative poetry."[132] W. L. Anderson denotes the strangeness of the names of Robinson's characters. He refers that they are distinguished to prevent any identification with real people or to symbolise them and "to give a sense of universality to the characters."[133] Most of Robinson's characters share a characteristic point that they are "misfits or outcasts."[134] The length of Robinson's poems may allow him to create characters in the poems. This length gives him the ability to narrate. In the medium and long poems, Robinson's characters, such as Rembrandt, Captain Craig etc., have a complete chance to be drawn. In Arthurian Trilogy, the rounded characters reach their upper climax. Some of Robinson's short poems are "miniature drama with hints and suggestions of the past." Their tone is "a blend of irony, humor, and pathos."[135]

I.2.4 Imagery and Symbolism

Robinson read some books about Symbolism as a movement and as an art.[136] He read Arthur Symons, Paul Verlaine and Max Nordau, especially his book *Degeneration* which was considered "a primer for the writing of a Symbolist poem."[137] Though Robinson wrote some poems in a Symbolist style, like "Luke Havergal," "The Pity of the Leaves," "The Dead Village," and "The Wilderness," he made contradicting ideas about it.[138] In his poem "Verlaine," Robinson criticised the complicated style of the Symbolist poet Verlaine and called for clarity and evenness of style. He admitted that the Symbolist style "was not to be his mode," though he could not eliminate it.[139] He is unequivocal and direct and uses everyday language in some medium poems, such as "Rembrandt to Rembrandt." Robinson refers to his enduring ignorance during most of his early life, but the more bitter case is "the death in life" when the artist betrays his art if he submits to the public taste:

> The taste of death in life—which is the food
> Of art that has betrayed itself alive
> And is a food of hell. She might have heard
>
> (ll: 103-5)

His statement "death in life" is written in a reporting style, void of a vivid image. In the same poem, he uses the word "dark" as an image to stand for death or death-in-life when the artist is ignored or forgotten, but the reporting style-which has just been mentioned-destroys his images:

> And here's a fellow painting in the dark
> A loon who cannot see that he is dead
> Before God lets him die. He paints away
>
> (ll: 48-50)

The artist's freedom is a crucial problem; he will face oblivion if he makes his pictures as he wishes. Otherwise, if he submits to the public taste, he will be a servant, not a master:

> 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.
>
> (ll: 277-79)

Robinson's dramatic-monologue technique in the poem "Rembrandt to Rembrandt" does not advocate or justify his everyday style. In contrast to

the previous flattened images, Robinson elevates to a high style of detailed images at the end of his poem “Eros Turannos”:

> 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.
>
> (ll: 45-48)

The last two lines of “Eros Turannos” reveal Robinson’s attitude towards existence. The sea symbolises the unknown or the labyrinth to which the blind—the man—is driven. The man has lost his freedom, and the poem's title refers to the tyranny of fate and love. The symbolist poem “Luke Havergal,” as Cady says, is a “store of imagery.”[140] W. L. Anderson argues that Robinson uses a wide range of imagery in his poetry, and his “figurative language is highly selective and functional.”[141] In Robinson's "Credo," the symbol of light does not certainly refer to the poet's faith.[142] The light imagery in this poem is obtrusive and artificial. Robinson's poetry's prominent imagery and symbolism concentrated on "light-dark" opposition.[143] In Robinson’s “Lost Anchors,” anchors stand for faith and the wrecked ship for an old sailor.[144] Light and its varieties represent faith, wisdom, word, God, and self-knowledge.[145] One can add spirit and hope in contrast with material and desperation in the "light-dark" imagery and symbolism circle. In “Rembrandt to Rembrandt,” Robinson uses the “light-dark” imagery to symbolise life or fame in contrast with oblivion, ignorance, or even death. However, he mentions “oblivion” frankly many times in the poem like this: "You’ll sleep as easy in oblivion/ As any sacred monk or parricide” (ll: 209-10).

In “Eros Turannos,” the narrative elements coincide and “the imagery is woven through a poem like an unobtrusive thread against a subdued background.”[146] In some of his poems, Robinson changes the conventional meaning of light to be private. For instance, “light” in his poem “En Passant” is switched to “the wrong light”:

> “I’ve watched on highways for so long,” said he
> “That I’ll go down there to be sure of it.”
> And all at once his famished eyes were lit
> With a wrong light-or, so it was to me.
>
> (ll: 5-8)

The dramatic monologue in "Captain Craig" reveals a psychological conflict through the symbolic "barren light." This image coincides with another embodiment in which someone is blinded by the light or the

sunshine “has a devil of its own.” However, in another place of the poem, the Captain relates “light” with the ascending movement and “darkness” with the descending one:

> ..? Is this the way for us
> To lead these creatures up to find the light,
> Or the way to be drawn down to find the dark
>
> (Captain Craig, ll. 524-26)

In Robinson’s “Supremacy,” as Davis says, “light” is a symbol which represents “the perception of spiritual truth.”[147] Davis puts “music” as a symbol which stands for “the essential truth itself,” and he mentions an example from Robinson’s “Credo,” “the lost, imperial music.” Then he continues his interpretation as “the harmonious thought or the fruitful life made possible by the acceptance of the truth.”[148] Strauch considers “the burning bush” in Robinson’s “Issac and Archibald” as “light imagery,” which represents “a symbol of the immanence of divinity in the universe.”[149] Strauch mentioned that Robinson had gotten information that “the word ‘divine’ had its origin in the Sanskrit word meaning ‘light.’”[150]

In “John Evereldown,” there is a reference to the cloud that is to come and the rainfalls. This allusion reflects the character's need to renew life in a setting of the dead town. Both rain and light resemble life. The town of the dead in this poem is Tilbury Town. He refers to his decayed region in New England in his poem “The House on the Hill.” Tilbury Town became a universally symbolic town as Faulkner’s “Yoknapatawpha.”[151] Symbolically, Robinson refers to the fall of the American dream through the fall of characters in Tilbury Town.[152]

Sometimes, suicide in Robinson’s poems seems to be symbolic of denoting the imagery of death, such as the death of the Miller’s profession represented by the Miller’s suicide in “The Mill”; the end of love expressed by the husband’s suicide in the “Whip”; and the death of worldly life represented by Cory’s suicide in “Richard Cory.”

Many critics such as Yvor Winters, Louise Coxe, and James Dickey see a mixture of realism and "a complex symbolic technique" in Robinson's poetry.[153] Like Robert Frost, Robinson uses natural symbolism. He uses natural symbols, light, roses, sea, sun, moon, cloud, rain, wave, twilight etc., to deepen his ideas and to sharpen his world. Nevertheless, Robinson uses abstract symbols, God, faith, frame, fate, love, wisdom etc., to enhance his conceptions and expose his ideas in the poems. Robinson found a symbolic depth in the Bible, myth, literary figures, and history, and he exploited this wealth of imagery to strengthen his themes. Unlike

Eliot, Robinson uses “no esoteric symbols, nor does he have a mythical world of his own that requires exegesis.”[154]