

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 Wurzbürger, 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.