

Chapter 5

The Essential Robinson: Fusion of Theme and Technique

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

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

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

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

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

Robinson is keenly alive to the possibilities which pathological psychology

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

(198-99)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I fed my suffering soul

Upon the Law till I went famishing,

Not knowing that I starved. (43-45)

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

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

The man Flammonde, from God knows where,

With firm address and foreign air,

With news of nations in his talk

And something royal in his walk,

With glint of iron in his eyes,

But never doubt, nor yet surprise,

Appeared, and stayed, and held his head

As one by kings accredited. (1-8)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

mythology.

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

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

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

And from the fullness of his heart he fished

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

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

Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn,

Grew lean while he assailed the seasons;

He wept that he was ever born,

And he had reasons. (1-4)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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