Chapter VI

ROBINSON AND MASTERS—ALIKE YET DIFFERENT

When we compare two writers, we must consider both their similarities and their divergences in order to place them in the right perspective in relation to each other. Similarities might exist between any two authors but it is only when the similarities are conspicuously extensive that two authors invite comparison with each other. However, whatever be the extent of the common elements, there are no identical twins in literature. Everything about major writers is distinctive and to be called a ‘comparative study’ a comparison has got to demonstrate how two or more authors manage to remain distinctively themselves despite their disposition towards common themes and concerns. The following discussion of the common elements in the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson and Edgar Lee Masters attempts a comparison of the two authors and arrives at the conclusion that, in spite of common views and shared attitudes, each author has his own distinctive way, that even their poems on common themes are not indistinguishable from each other and that there is little chance of a Robinson poem being mistaken for one by Masters even when the two poems are on the same subject.

An important appellation that the two authors have in common is that they are both creators of mythical communities. Robinson disguised his own home town Gardiner as Tilbury, which is the background of as many as seventy poems though the word ‘Tilbury’
occurs in only twenty-five poems. Masters brought into existence in his *Spoon River* poems a mythical community called Spoon River which is identifiable with any Midwestern village in America. In placing their characters in a mythical community these poets were influenced by the most obvious advantage that a mythical community offers, namely, that it imparts a regional identity to the characters. Hardy’s Wessex, Anderson’s Winesburg, Lewis’s Gopher Prairie and Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha, to cite a few examples, serve as a social background to the stories providing to the characters a fresh regional identity which is totally free from all prejudiced associations. The creation of an imaginary locale has the additional advantage of enabling the writers “to achieve particularisation without any possibility of identification with actual people” (Anderson 79). For example, the adoption of the Tilbury milieu enabled Robinson to invest his characters with a trans-Gardiner identity. Further, the mythical community is totally devoid of particularising associations and so it insulates the characters against prejudiced or inhibited reactions from the reader. It was these considerations that weighed with Robinson and Masters to place their characters against a mythical background rather than against a background that is real and lends itself to be easily identified.

Several of Robinson’s Tilbury poems possess a factual basis in that they present thumbnail sketches of people whom he knew in Gardiner. He gave them outlandish names and transplanted them into Tilbury and gave them the regional identity of an economically depressed town. Giving them a false regional identity was a practical necessity for
Robinson, since he wanted to present his characters as original ones, free of all identifiable local or temporal associations.

Robinson chose his characters from all strata of the society and several of them were men and women he had come to know or hear about in social life.

A good number of Tilbury men are people Robinson had known in real life in Gardiner. Aaron Stark, for instance, has his prototype in "Southwest" Tarbox, the town miser who lived on Water Street. Robinson's John Evereldown, as Hagedorn suggests (53), is modelled on another Tarbox, a "skirt-crazy" reprobate. "Richard Cory" was inspired by the poet's memory of Sedgwick Plummer, who chose to go the way to ruin in spite of his great wealth and education. The original of Captain Craig is Alfred Louis, a Jewish pauper of great erudition (Joseph 261).

In Spoon River Anthology Masters does the same thing as Robinson does in his Tilbury poems. It is the social panorama of their hometown that these poets concern themselves with in their poems. Stanley T. William remarks about the genesis of the Spoon River poems: "as they (Masters and his mother) gossiped about Petersburg and Lewistown, he determined to make a book out of the stories they knew of "Spoon River people," "characters interlocked by fate," misjudged souls who should be given a chance to be justly weighed" (LHUS 1179).
Among the characters with whom Masters has peopled his Spoon River, quite a few are real life men and women who belong mostly to Lewistown, Masters' hometown. Ann Rutledge, for example, is a historical character; she is Lincoln's youthful love "wedded to him not through union/But through separation" and Masters presents her as the inspiration of Lincoln's humanity. Hannah Armstrong, who speaks appreciatively about how Lincoln granted the discharge of her sick son, was Lincoln's landlady in Menard. Fiddler Jones of the poem of that name is Hannah Armstrong's brother and a friend of Masters' grandmother. William H. Herndon, who reminisces about Lincoln, is a business partner of Lincoln and a friend of Masters' father. Theodore the Poet, who learned to observe human beings by observing the crawfishes in the turbid Spoon, is Theodore Dreiser. Characters like Emily Sparks, Davis Matlock and Lucinda Matlock, as we will see later, are people closely associated with Masters' own life. The reference in Jefferson Howard is certainly to Thomas Jefferson. Caroline Branson and Amelia Garrick are also real life characters, possibly the daughters of a Presbyterian minister of Lewistown.

Both Robinson and Masters evince an interest in the monologue but while Robinson makes effective use of the dramatic monologue, Masters is content to use the simple monologue form without exploiting its dramatic possibilities. Their choice of the monologue mode is rooted in their conviction that it is better suited than any other medium for revealing the innermost recesses of the soul. Robinson has written about
twenty-five dramatic monologues. Robinson had tried his hands at drama but his plays flopped because of his lack of skill in plot management. It was then that he turned to the dramatic monologue which, he discovered, required no skill in plot management but allowed enough freedom to his dramatic genius. Robinson’s dramatic monologues show great versatility and variety and they range from sonnet monologues like “How Annandale Went Out” to complex ones like “Captain Craig” and “Sainte Nitouche.” In the latter poem, the monologues of the speaker, as in Tennyson’s “Lucretius,” is framed in by introductory and explanatory passages. “Captain Craig,” which is his longest dramatic monologue with 2016 lines, is a super monologue like Arthur Hugh Clough’s “Amours de Voyage” and here, as in Clough’s poem, the story is told, at least in part, through letters. Robinson’s dramatic monologues can be classified into two groups: those in which the speaker tells his own story and those in which our attention is caught not by the speaker so much as by a second character. “The Three Taverns” is a good example of a dramatic monologue of the first type. Here St. Paul speaks to his converts on his last mission and the poem lets us peep into the soul of St. Paul and see the urges, the impulses and the convictions that shaped his moral being. “Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford” illustrates the second type and here it is Shakespeare, the subject, rather than Ben Jonson, the speaker, that engages our attention.

An important difference between the monologues of Robinson and those of Masters is that most of Robinson’s dramatic monologues are on
historical characters like Ben Jonson, Napoleon, John Brown, Loussaint L'Ouverture, Rembrandt and St. Paul. Except for a few portraits which are based on real people, Masters' men and women are his own creations. While Robinson uses a variety of verse forms such as blank verse, stanza forms etc, Masters chooses free verse for his Spoon River poems probably under the influence of Sandburg whose free verse poems had become a great success.

Masters' poems are just monologues not dramatic monologues but they are far more dramatic than Robinson's portrait poems. It is true that poems like "Richard Cory" take a sudden dramatic turn but generally Robinson's 'blighted lives' poems are not dramatic in the ordinary sense of the term. On the contrary, the Spoon river cemetery can be described as a vast stage on which the unquiet dead appear and reappear to present a drama of great amplitude; the characters reappear in the sense that the Spoon River poems are interrelated and there are nineteen families interlocked in this way. Individual confessions reveal not only the speakers' inner self but also the secret lives of the other people. "Benjamin Pantier" and "Mrs Benjamin Pantier," for instance, show the two sides of a domestic tragedy. Benjamin Pantier complains that Mrs Pantier "snared my soul with a snare that bled me to death." Forsaken by everyone, she lived in a room 'back of a dingy office' and found solace in drink (very much like Robinson's Mr Flood) and in the company of Nig, the dog. In the Mrs Pantier epitaph Pantiers' wife answers the charges. She says she was a woman of delicate tastes and so could not tolerate the clumsy Mr Pantier.
He smelt whisky and onion and was constantly repeating bits of Wordsworth’s odes. While the Pantier poems interlock only two members of the same family, poems like “Mrs Charles Bliss” interlock more families. In Mrs Charles Bliss the speaker tells how she and her husband were persuaded to desist from seeking divorce by Rev. Wiley and Judge Somers. She says that they did the couple a great disservice in that compliance with their suggestion resulted in their family life turning into a veritable hell. She complains that the judge and the priest were really urging her to raise souls “where there is no sunlight but only, twilight.” The epitaph by Wiley betrays Wiley’s superficial understanding of human relations. It is ironic that what the preacher claims to be his greatest achievement is that he prevented the divorce of the Charles Bliss couple. In his epitaph Judge Somers expresses his bafflement that while fate had him sink into an unmarked grave, Chase Henry, the town drunkard, had a marble tomb erected over him. In his epitaph Chase Henry attributes his posthumous honour to the cross currents of history “which bring honor to the dead who lived in shame.” The fact is that while the priest refused to bury him in the holy ground, the protestants bought up the lot and buried him honourably there. We learn from Jeduthan Hawley that Chase died on the same day as Edith Constance died. Further, “Jeduthan Hawley” contains references to seventeen Spoon River characters. There is no need to multiply examples. Almost every other speaker makes a reference to another character and these interlocking references serve to unfold the social drama much more vividly than otherwise. As has already been
noticed, Robinson does not make use of the interlocking technique in the Tilbury poems. He prefers to keep his characters in isolation so that he can portray the inner drama. Needless to say, this affects the dramatic possibilities even of his dramatic monologues.

A classification of the characters of Robinson and Masters is an important part of the comparative study because a classification necessitates comparison and reveals, besides, many significant facts relating to the poets' techniques and world-view. A superficial reading of Robinson and Masters might cause one to gather the impression that both the Tilbury poems and the Spoon River poems present a random sample of the town's population. Tilbury as well as Spoon River is a normal American town and one should not get the impression that in these poems Robinson and Masters have presented a representative collection of men and women. Only the bizarre, the freakish, the deluded, the grotesque and the unhappy appear to have caught the poet's attention. At least that is what Hertz argues in the following passage:

Most of them live at the outskirts of the conventional social world: purposely ignored, wilfully isolated, too flagrantly conspicuous, or almost wholly unknown (nearly all of them are men). They are endowed with a personal identity and a measure of significance only by the poet-observer: his poetic presentation of them quite literally breathes into them a vitality they never before had. That is to say, a visitor to a little New England village such as Tilbury Town would hardly have a
feeling after reading Robinson's poetry that he was at all familiar with the place. Most of Robinson’s people exist in a single, often private revelatory act, or in a state of being imaginatively conjectured. (348)

In the *Spoon River* poems the people we meet are not the representative collection but people, to use the phrase by Hertz, who “live at the outskirts of the conventional social world.” But it is remarkable that despite being a non-representative sample comprising men and women at the outskirts of the conventional social world, the characters of both Robinson and Masters are carefully differentiated specimens of humanity in that they are not moulded figures and no two characters are alike. Chase Henry and Miniver Cheevy are both failures and are addicted to the bottle but each in his own way. The circumstances that blighted their lives are not even broadly alike.

The very fact that critics have classified the characters of Robinson and Masters fairly elaborately demonstrates the variety and range with which each poet has endowed his characters. It is generally agreed that Robinson’s characters fall into four broad groups. First there are the social and economic failures like Miniver Cheevy, Mr. Flood, Aaron Stark, Levi, Vickery and Finzer. Some of them have only themselves to blame for being destitute while some like Finzer got ruined in the downswing of a declining economy. The second group of characters consists of men whose lives, as Hertz says, “present a striking, incongruity or disparity between outward aspect and secret spiritual reality” (346).
Richard Cory who “glittered when he walked” but put a bullet through his head one calm summer morning, is typical of this group. Cliff Klingenhagen, who offers wine to his guests but pours worm-wood for himself, is another prominent example of the second group. They are paradoxes; they elude our comprehension and they play tricks with themselves. The third group consists of men like Charles Carville, John Evereldown and Uncle Ananias—men whose lives are absolutely devoid of any achievement. They may be called non-entities. Lastly there is a group of characters like King Cole and the woman in Eros Turannos who are “victims of life (and) who suffer and endure” (Hertz 347).

It would be interesting to categorize the characters of Robinson and Masters based on their attitude to the town and to one another. Lawrence Thompson points out in his introduction to the Tilbury poems that there are three kinds of tensions operating in Tilbury and this view is shared by other critics.

In some poems there is an obvious conflict within or between the characters, like the conflicting feelings of the woman towards her husband in “Eros Turannos.” In another group of poems the characters are represented as being in conflict with the moral ethos of the Tilbury town. In a third group of poems the poet as observer shows an open hostility to the social outlook of the townspeople. In the second and the third group of poems Robinson’s purpose is obviously social criticism. It may be noted that settings of some of the non-Tilbury poems
like "Rembrandt to Rembrandt," "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," and "The Three Taverns" are not unlike Tilbury, looked at from the standpoint of social criticism. (Joseph 11-12)

The opening poem of the *Spoon River Anthology* hints at the variety of the characters.

WHERE are Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley

The weak of will, the strong of arm, the clown, the boozer, the fighter?

All, all, are sleeping on the hill.

Considering that the Anthology does not purport to give a representative sample, the variety of the assemblage of men and women is really impressive. As Dryden speaks of Chaucer, here is God's plenty. It is remarkable that Masters was able to conceive of so many different people. There are dullards and geniuses, atheists and ardent believers; there are men and women who fell out with life; there are also men and women who took avidly to life; the ideal, the corrupt; the weak the strong; the cruel, the compassionate; the wicked, the saintly; the affluent the poor, the prominent, the marginalised—everybody appears and utters their epitaphs. There are murderers like Jack McGuire, dissenters like Julius Scott, suicides like Julia Miller, scholars like Imanuel Ehrenhardt, astronomers like Alfonso Churchill, questers like William Booth, sensualists like Sarah Brown, poets like Minerva Jones, victims of accidents like Mickey M'grew, doctors like Meyers and Doc Hill, tragic
children like Johnnie Sayre, war victims like Knowlt Hoheimer, victims of love like Louise Smith, boozers like Fiddler Jones, masochists like McGee, victims of filial ingratitude like Josaiah Tompkin—in short we find every sort of men and women in Spoon River.

One result of the proliferation of types is that Masters’ Spoon River characters are not as easily categorised as those of Robinson. However a rough and ready classification can be attempted dividing the Spoon River characters into doers, sufferers and those who stand and watch. The first category includes those who murder, exploit, cheat or thwart the processes of law. Rosie Roberts who shoots the son of the merchant prince, Thomas Rhodes, who calls himself one of “the seekers of earth’s treasures,” George Trimble who turns a prohibitionist to please his wife, the Town Marshal whose misplaced enthusiasm gets him into trouble, Jack McGuire who shoots the town Marshal and John M. Church, the corrupt attorney, to mention only a few examples, belong to this group. The victims group consists of people who have fared badly in the race of life or who have had to suffer at the hands of fate for no fault of theirs. All those who are cut off by or caught in accidents—Mickey M’grew, Bert Kessler, Peleg Pague, Percy Bysshe Shelley, men and women who get ruined by love—Louise Smith, Herbert Marshal, Hon. Henry Bennet; people who received a devastating blow at the hands of fate—Franklin James, Thomas Ross Jr., Rev. Abner Peet, Washington McNeely; men and women who are denied justice—Felix Schmidt, Thomas Rhodes’ employees, Carl Hamblin, Mrs. George Reese; helpless people who are
driven to suicide—Clarence Fawcett, Julia Miller—we have every type of victims in Spoon River Anthology. The bystander types who do not get involved in the social life of Spoon River are a minority—Alexander Throckmorton who could not make his mark in Spoon River life in any way, and Trainor the Druggist, to mention just two examples, are true representatives of this category.

The above classification is far too general but we can classify Masters' characters in other ways also. For example, Hertz suggests a classification which is based on what each character contributed to Spoon River or received from there. First there are those characters who criticise the Spoon River way of life. In some cases the criticism is implicit but in a good number of poems it is quite open and forceful. Nellie Clark is an example of implicit or veiled criticism. Nellie says she was raped by a boy of fifteen when she was only eight. Years later when her husband comes to know about it, he makes a scene and deserts her. She says complainingly: "and the village agreed that I was not a virgin." The prudery of Spoon River is not very different from the prudery of Tilbury and as in the Tilbury poems we hear occasional strictures against the moral ethos of Spoon River. As Hertz comments, because "she speaks so obtusely from the static finality of death, the devastating simplicity and insignificance of her life becomes shocking (sic) evident" (352). As was already observed, the criticism becomes pronounced and forceful as in Mrs. Charles Bliss where preachers and judges are severely attacked. Roy Butler is also typical of this group of vociferous critics:
If the learned Supreme Court of Illinois
Got at the secret of every case
As well as it does a case of rape
It would be the greatest court in the world.

The second category consists of people whom death has provided with an opportunity to reveal some hideous secret which has been pressing at their hearts throughout their life. Russian Sonia never told the Spoon River people that she and Patrick Hummer were not legally married. Searcy Foote reveals without many remarks that Aunt Percy was done to death by him so that he could inherit his aunt’s money. Silas Dement confesses to having burnt down the Court House. Amanda Barker also has a secret. She did not kill anybody but “he (her husband) slew me to gratify his hatred.” Ollie McGee, too, tells us a similar story—a secret that is not known to others. She accuses her husband of having robbed her by secret cruelty of her youth and beauty. There are quite a good number of characters of this kind in Spoon River.

There are also those Spoon River citizens who are possessed of “remarkable insight into the psychological forces that governed them from within” (Hertz 353). In most of these psychological poems the speaker reveals a kind of self-knowledge which nobody suspected he ever possessed while alive. Walter Simmons is typical of this group. He said his parents thought he would be as great as Edison or one greater than Edison. It is true that he made little engines and ‘wondrous kites.’ He was good at arts too. He was so engrossed in the thought of engines that he
could not properly supervise the running of the jewellery store he kept. Most people in Spoon River thought that the scientist in him was ruined by his concern for jewellery. Simmons diagnoses the complaint aright “It wasn’t true. The truth was this: I didn’t have the brains.” Abel Melveny says from the vantage point of immortality that what went wrong with him was that he who was a great collector of machines was himself a machine. Yet another is the philosopher group of whom Robert Southey Burke and George Grey are typical. Hertz comments on Grey:

George Grey is a man who shrank from life: love was offered to him and he retreated from it out of fear of disillusionment; sorrow knocked at his door, but he was afraid, ambition called, but he dreaded the chances. To put meaning into one’s life may end in madness he says;

    But life without meaning is the torture

    Of restlessness and vague desire –

    It is a boat longing for the sea and yet afraid. (354)

In his study on Edgar Lee Masters, Wrenn makes the following valid classification of the Spoon Riverites:

Thomas Rhodes from almost the center of the book (this is epitaph number 103 of 244) presents the division of the town into two groups, liberals and conservatives. Himself a proud conservative, banker, industrialist, churchgoer, and prohibitionist, Rhodes gibes at the liberals, poets and intellectuals who, he assumes, have divided souls. Three epitaphs later, Jim Brown
the stable boy, at the other end of the social ladder, discovers the same division—between those who prefer a good fiddle tune and those who intone hymns, those who are “for the people” and those who are “for money.” He also discovers that the secret of the difference is in the people’s attitudes toward sex—when the Reverend Peet and “the Social Purity Club” try to make him take the stallion Dom Pedro outside of town because it corrupts ‘public morals.” (49)

The classification suggested above could have revealed that both Robinson and Masters deal with:

“the slow tragedy of haunted men,” those whose “eyes are lit with the wrong light,” those who believe that some earthly occurrence in the past (and now for ever impossible) could have made all the difference, that some person dead or otherwise beyond the reach, some life unlived and now unliveable could have been the answer to everything.

(James Dickey xx)

Either poet makes his characters look inward often to examine the mess that they have made of themselves. As is normal for all human beings, both the Tilbury and the Spoon River characters start out on life’s journey buoyed up with high hopes and full of confidence that they would be able to actualize all their dreams. But most of them do not fare well in life though there is no convincing reason why they should fall short of their goals. A few of them turn to themselves, more bewildered than curious,
determined to elicit from themselves the reason for the spiritual mess they have made of themselves. It is relevant and very useful for this study to compare a few such cases of self confrontation in Robinson and Masters. It should be noted that the two poets handled the theme of self confrontation differently and yet in more or less the same manner.

In both Robinson and Masters the focus of the poems is the blighted lives and we see quite a good number of such lives there. A blighted life is one that has fallen short of its rightful destiny though it is possessed of the potential for a great career. Often it might happen that a person who feels that he has failed to develop his potentialities so as to make his mark in life might confront himself and demand an explanation of himself for what has happened. It may take the form of the soul having a session with itself, examining the causes for failure and apportioning blame. An interesting parallel between Robinson and Masters is that both of them dramatize this self confrontation by making the characters confront their mirror image. The situation of a bewildered or frustrated individual speaking to his mirror image is a recurrent one in Robinson. However, Masters uses this technique in only one of his poems though the theme of self confrontation is present in different ways in several other poems.

In Robinson self confrontation is often an occasion for spiritual stock taking. The situation of the character confronting his mirror image takes on a symbolic significance in Robinson because it derives from the traditional concept of mirror as a symbol of truth. Rembrandt in
"Rembrandt to Rembrandt" and Fernando Nash in "The Man Who Died Twice" each confronts his reflection in the mirror.

In "Rembrandt to Rembrandt" Rembrandt is discovered in his studio alternately looking at his reflection in the mirror and at his self portrait near him. The self portrait which belongs to his days of glory shows him in velvet and feathers and this reminds him of the days when he was riding the wave of popularity. The reflection in the mirror shows his present state and he is debating with himself whether like Franz and others he also should compromise with his artistic integrity or uphold it with all the unpleasant consequences it might cause him to face. Whether to go by popular tastes or to preserve his artistic integrity, which means caring only for art—that is the question he has to face. He recollects that in the portrait "Civic Guard" he had pictured the city fathers as a dynamic group issuing out of the council chamber, in defiance of the conventional concept of portrait painting. This ruined his reputation and now he is arguing with himself whether he can make amends and thereby remedy the situation.

Yes, I could wonder long, and with a reason,
If all but everything achievable
In me were not achieved and lost already,
Like a fool's gold. But you there in the glass,
And you there in the canvas, have a sort
Of solemn doubt: about it.
"The self portrait and the mirror image may be taken to symbolize between them the sumptuousness of his past ascendancy and the gauntness of his present state of affairs" (Joseph 188).

Fernando Nash in "The Man Who Died Twice" has been living a life of self indulgence and wakes up one morning to the bitter realization that he would never be able to redeem his ambition. The picture of Bach appears to stare at him from the wall.

Under the sick gleam of one gas-flame,
That had for years to shadowy lodgers given
More noise than light, he sat before a glass
That was more like a round malevolent eye
Filmed with too many derelict reflections,
Appraising there a bleared and heavy face,
Where sodden evil should have been a stranger (CP 927)

In both “Rembrandt to Rembrandt” and “The Man Who Died Twice” we see the same situation but the outcome is different as the following comment shows:

In the Rembrandt poem the artist triumphs by force of his character while in “The Man Who Died Twice” the composer Fernando Nash crumbles under the weight of his lusts. Further, Fernando Nash’s address to the mirror image is not an exposition of his artistic creed but only a vicious self-flagellation. The tragedy of Nash’s life is subtly outlined in the fiery fulmination against his mirror-image, which represents
the sad non-fulfilment of his ambition. The portrait of Bach above symbolizes the ambition itself, the high ideal in whose pursuit he had more than miserably failed. The mirror with the 'derelict reflections' may be said to represent the truth as applied to Fernando Nash and the whole episode may be viewed as a dramatization of Nash's awakening to the truth about himself. (Joseph 189)

Masters does not use the mirror image as frequently as Robinson does but he resorts to it in one or two poems. Masters' Eugene Carman is the closest approximation to Robinson's Fernando Nash. Far shorter than *The Man Who Died Twice*, "Eugene Carman" is much more forceful and Carman's outbursts are made more passionate. Carman is an employee of Thomas Rhodes, the most pernicious blood-sucker in Spoon River. Twenty years of hard work under Thomas Rhodes, who pays him only a pittance, has reduced him to such a state that he feels contempt for himself.

So while I was tying my neck-tie that morning
I suddenly saw myself in the glass:
My hair all gray, my face like a sudden pie.
So I cursed and cursed: You damned old thing!
You cowardly dog! You rotten pauper!
You Rhodes' slave! Till Roger Baughman
Thought I was having a fight with some one,
And looked through the transom just in time
To see me fall on the floor in a heap

From a broken vein in my head (150)

A similar situation can be found in “Margaret Fuller Slack.” Margaret Fuller Slack complains that but for an untoward fate she would have been as great as George Eliot. She asks the passerby to look at her photograph made by Penniwit. She thinks that this portrait is the picture of her unrealized potentialities. Her deep set eyes and the chin resting on hand would convince anyone of her artistic temper. She blames herself for having married John Slack the druggist thereby tying herself down to a tedious domestic routine and smothering the writer in her. There are besides those characters who have been confronting themselves all the time and this confrontation leads them inexorably to suicide. Richard Cory’s case is typical. It is an example of the spiritual void that some people feel eating into them. In “Albert Schirding” we have a parallel to “Richard Cory.” In his epitaph Jonas Keene asks:

Why did Albert Schirding kill himself

Trying to be county Superintendent of Schools,

Blest as he was with the means of life

And wonderful children, bringing him honour

Ere he was sixty? (119)

From Schirding’s own epitaph we come to learn that his suicide was the result of his alienation from his own family. One is not certain what ‘complex’ one should call this feeling; it is as Schirding says, the hard luck, “To be a failure while your children are successes.” His suicide occurred
soon after his daughter won the first prize for her painting of the old water mill. "The feeling that I was not worthy of her finished me;" possibly Schirding saw in the old water mill a symbol of all that was outdated and past use, including himself.

Both Robinson and Masters show remarkable social concern and nowhere else is it better seen than in their treatment of the theme of mismatched marriages. Either of them expresses his unhappiness that, as the freshness of marriage wears off, familial lies turn into veritable strangleholds. The social institution of marriage figures prominently in both poets and both of them have highlighted those causes, personal or social, that lead to marriages getting wrecked. We find in either author all types of ill-assorted marriages—marriages which are on the rocks, marriages which are breaking, marriages which have broken. The majority of the marriages in Tilbury and Spoon River might have proved happy ones but it is the 'wrong-knot-tied' that catches these poets' attention. Marital disharmony accounts for the single largest group of blighted lives both in Robinson and in Masters. A comparison of their treatment of the theme of marital disharmony would further reveal their individually distinctive approach even while dealing with common themes.

In depicting the complexities of marital relationship Robinson is more realistic than romantic though more cynical than realistic. It is only very rarely that we see harmonious marital relationship in Robinson: the course of marital love, so to speak, never runs smooth in Robinson and incompatibility accounts for most instances of marital wreckage.
In the "Book of Annandale" we have a passage describing the nearly ideal relationship between Annandale and his wife.

He had loved and married his wife Miriam
They had lived a little while in paradise
And she was gone; and that was all of it.

The marital paradise which rarely occurs in Robinson ends abruptly leaving the surviving partner disconsolate with grief.

The 'lost love theme' appears in a few poems of Robinson but it is by no means a prominent theme. While the theme of lost love is the single most important concern in Edgar Allan Poe, it is no more than a poetic whiff in Robinson. Two representative poems that deal with the 'lost love theme' are "Luke Havergal" and "Her Eyes."

"Luke Havergal" is among the best known of Robinson's poems. Carl Strauch calls it "an impressionist mood study" (510). It illustrates most of the characteristics of the symbolist style of poetry such as the use of evocative expression, a turn towards music, the obliqueness of reference, a concern with vague moods and the creation of emotion through the use of unexplained symbols. There is no narrative in "Luke Havergal." We see Luke Havergal presumably in a cemetery where he has come to mourn his wife. When he lost his wife, we do not know, but he is still in the grip of despair. A voice tells him to go to the western gate and wait there for what will come.

Go to the western gate, Luke Havergal,
There where the vines cling crimson on the wall,
And in the twilight wait for what will come.
The leaves will whisper there of her, and some,
Like flying words, will strike you as they fall:
But go, and if you listen she will call.
Go to the western gate, Luke Havergal—
No, there is not a dawn in eastern skies
To rift the fiery night that’s in your eyes;
But there, where eastern glooms are gathering,
The dark will end the dark, if anything:
God slays himself with every leaf that flies,
And hell is more than half of paradise
No, there is not a dawn in eastern skies—
In eastern skies. (SP 5)

The background of the poem is carefully chosen to suit the mindscape of the lovelorn Luke Havergal. The wind is tearing among the leaves; the red leaves are falling to the ground; the light has begun to die in the west; there are graves on all sides—what backdrop can be more evocative, more suggestive of death, loss and deprivation? It suggests a dead universe and sets Luke Havergal’s emotional condition against an appropriate cosmic background.

Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” is considered the best example of a poem on the theme of lost love. It is interesting to note that “Luke Havergal” bears a remarkable resemblance to Poe’s poem. Apart from
being a mood study like “The Raven,” “Luke Havergal” employs the same techniques as the earlier poem.

Both are concerned with the theme of the “death of a beautiful woman,” Poe’s favourite topic for poetry. Both follow a common pattern of bereavement deepening into despair which in either case follows upon the implied denial of reunion. In both poems, the message of despair is transmitted by a visitor—the raven from “night’s Plutonian shores” and the voice which says: “Out of a grave I come to tell you this”; again, the atmosphere in these poems is remarkably similar and both are reputedly deliberate exercises. (Joseph 38)

As against the ‘lost love’ poems, which are few in number there are a lot of poems on the theme of the wrong-knot-tied, i.e., the marital discord. In these poems we see unfortunate partners ineffectually trying to get rid of each other—ineffectually because in Masters only death can liberate them. Robinson’s Cavender’s House partakes of the qualities of both the ‘lost love’ poem and the ‘wrong knot tied’ poem in that, driven by his conscience Cavender comes back to his house which he had left twelve years before after killing his wife Laramie by pushing her down from a cliff. Laramie’s death was accounted as suicide and he is safe from the law but a tormenting conscience and strong psychological compulsions have brought him back to the old house. Cavender sees or fancies that he sees Laramie sitting in her usual chair. Laramie speaks reproach while Cavender sneakily pleads non-guilty. This meeting
results in Cavender deciding to banish all thought of self slaughter from his mind. *Cavender’s House* is an examination of how a marriage broke down through the possessiveness of the husband.

There are quite a few situations in both Robinson and Masters where ill assorted partners struggle to extricate themselves and where when they see their way blocked, they take their own life. Robinson’s “The Whip” is a typical example of a poem of this kind. The story is narrated in the reticent indirect method typical of Robinson’s story-telling. As in “Richard Cory” it is one of the townspeople that narrates the story. He withholds as much as he states and the story has to be pieced together based on the scattered hints. The townsman addresses the person whose story he is telling.

The doubt you fought so long
The cynic net you cast,
The tyranny, the wrong,
The ruin, they are past;
And here you are at last,
Your blood no longer vexed
The coffin has you fast,
The clod will have you next

The opening lines do not enlighten us as to the story but as the poem progresses something like a finished pattern arises. It is clear from the first stanza quoted above that the dead man is lying in state. We learn that tyranny and doubt have something to do with his death.
The reference to ‘blood no longer vex’d’ hints that it was a case of suicide. In the next two stanzas we are indirectly told that the man had drowned himself. He decided to end his life because he could not prevent his wife from eloping with her lover although he had given chase to her. The townsman comments that his failure to prevent the elopement of his wife with her lover alone does not constitute a valid reason of killing himself. The narrator notices a welt on the dead man’s face and this serves as a clue to the whole tragedy. While the man got near the fleeing lovers, the woman turned around and dealt a blow on the face of the pursuing husband. Situations of this kind recur in many poems of Robinson and Masters.

The theme of adultery is as old as literature itself and as in "The whip" the theme of adultery holds the story together in "Roman Bartholow." The opening section of the poem shows Bartholow exulting over his recovery from the mental illness which had for years frozen him out of his senses. In section three we see him cutting down a tree because it has been obstructing for long the view of the river beyond. The removal of the tree that obstructs his sight, as we have already seen, is a symbolic presentation of Bartholow becoming aware of the liaisons between Penn Raven and his wife. It is the suggestion here that Penn Raven has planted himself between Bartholow’s and Gabrielle’s affections much like the ‘tree’ which has interposed between Bartholow and his soul sustaining view of the blue river. The complications resulting from this affair lead to Gabrielle’s suicide which is the tragic finale of the story. In the concluding
section we see Roman Bartholow moving out of his riverside villa so that he may shape a new life elsewhere in the light of the tragic wisdom his recent experiences have given him. What we see here is the usual pattern—loss of paradisial bliss consequent on the intrusion of illicit love.

The world of “Matthias at the Door” also is not one of domestic felicity. Matthias is a self righteous man of property; he has considerable social standing but he is walled up within himself so much so that he cannot see the truth about himself. The quarrel between Matthias and Natalie leads to the latter’s suicide. The strange fascination of extinction leads two more people to death—Garth and Timberlake. Paradoxically it is these deaths that lead to Matthias’ redemption. As Barnard has observed “in this redemption also Garth and Timberlake have had their share: Garth by his initial planting of the seed of distrust in Matthias’ mind and Timberlake by the healing friendship that he briefly brings after Nathalie’s death” (97).

Talifer’s marriage to Karen has not been a successful one. Perhaps Talifer deserves his fate in that it did not scruple him at all to jilt Althea in favour of Karen; he broke off his engagement to Althea to marry Karen. But his marriage to Karen turned out to be a mismatch. A year after his marriage Talifer regrets the error in marrying Karen and pays a visit to Althea, apparently for old times’ sake. The wind brings a red leaf to rest at his feet. He takes up the red leaf and offers it to Althea with a request: “Will you keep this until I come again.” The red leaf suggests what time has done to his passion for Karen and possibly also his desire for the
greenness of another spring which Althea alone can bring him, his own love for Karen having declined into a cheerless autumn.

There are many characters in Robinson and Masters who having tied the wrong knot spend a lifetime trying to undo it. And as they wistfully visualise the 'would have been spring' that they would have realized with another partner, they feel like blaming the blind destiny which had brought them to all these complications.

References were made earlier to the brief paradise that Annandale enjoyed in the company of his wife Miriam but his paradisial bliss would have been much greater if Annandale was ready to choose Damaris with whom he was in love even before he married Miriam. At least that is what we gather from the not too explicit hint that the poet drops. "Luke Havergal" and the "Book of Annandale" are alike in situation but while "Luke Havergal" is a poem of death in which everything points to suicide as the only remedy for the afflictions of life, the "Book of Annandale" is a poem of life because it deals with the growth of Annandale's mind. The main concerns of the poem are, as Carl Strauch has pointed out, "the growth of personality and of consciousness a groping towards free life (and) rebirth of death" (511). The book which he is represented as writing and which grows in bulk everyday represents his love for Damaris whom he wanted to marry but could not. He had started writing it before her husband died and he is still writing it five years later. As the poem opens, Annandale has just buried Miriam. He married her when Damaris, contrary to his expectations, refused to marry him on the ground that she
had promised lasting faithfulness to her dead husband. He kept on writing the book, whatever it was, and never showed it to his wife. In the second part of the poem Damaris realizes that she really loves Annandale. His book now appears to her as embodying what had for long been variously at work in him. As Ellsworth Barnard observed, “the book is a symbol of the new life that Annandale has subconsciously been waiting to build with another wife and that Damaris has been wanting to build with another husband” (93). It may be noted that there are many such situations in Masters too.

There are more than thirty poems dealing with the theme of marital discord. We have mentioned only a few of them in the foregoing discussion. In the poems we have left out also the general pattern is the same. In “Eros Turannos” for example the focal point is the woman’s ambivalent attitude towards her husband. “She fears him and will always ask/ What fated her to choose him.” Generally speaking, Robinson’s victims of ill-assorted marriages are not unlike the confused children who are trying to spell the word they want with the wrong blocks.

Robinson himself was a bachelor and what he presents in his poems on marriage and related themes is mainly what he has observed, not what he has experienced but Masters’ case is different. He had experienced the best and worst of marriage and had first hand knowledge of the factors that make or mar marriages. When it comes to giving the reasons for the wreck of a certain marriage, Masters is far more specific
than Robinson who can only hint at the reasons as he does brilliantly in the poem “The Whip.”

In “Mrs Charles Bliss” we see Masters in the role of an advocate pleading for the cause of divorce. This epitaph highlights the condition of the children when the family is divided and their parents are feuding with each other. Masters suggests that the Church also is responsible for this state of affairs because but for Rev. Wiley the couple would have got separated and a lot of people would have been spared a lot of suffering.

Mrs Pauline decides not to divorce but she knows that rearing children in a loveless household is like “the raising of souls where there is no sunlight but only twilight.” Mrs Purkapile too refuses to be drawn into a divorce for the sake of her children. Neither she nor her husband enjoyed their marital life and Roscoe Purkapile found comfort in the company of Mrs. Williams. Mrs. Purkapile swallowed the bitterness uncomplainingly. Her reason?

But a promise is a promise
And marriage is marriage,
And out of respect for my own character
I refused to be drawn into a divorce
By the scheme of a husband who had merely grown tired
Of his marital vow and duty (159)

In fact, the reader is made to listen to both the parties. Mr. Purkapile’s statement gives his version of the story. The two versions agree on one thing: both of them were profoundly unhappy throughout their married life.
Mrs. Purkapile has the same reasons as the woman in Robinson's "Eros Turannos" for not breaking her marriage: her own security and the good name of the family.

Margaret Fuller Slack, as we have already seen, regrets that she had opted for marriage. She thinks that she would have been a great writer but for the yoke marital responsibilities placed on her. Marriage gave her eight children but it ruined her ambition. Family and children claimed the time which she would have otherwise made available for writing. She cautions the passers-by: "Hear me ambitious soul! Sex is the curse of life."

George Trimble says that he started as an advocate of free silver and a supporter of Henry George's single tax proposal. Then he became a prohibitionist at the instance of his wife who was constantly nagging him to prove his morality. When he died, he says, there were neither the radicals nor the conservatives to lament his death. He has no doubt his was an unhappy marriage and he blames his wife for all that he could not become.

To Benjamin Pantier marriage is a snare. At least in his case it was a snare and it bled him to death. "In the morning of life I knew aspiration and saw glory." But the glory ended with his tying the wrong knot. He withdrew from home to a room back of a dingy office and lived the remainder of his life with Nig the dog. In "Mrs Benjamin Pantier" Pantier's wife explains for us the circumstances under which she chose to drive her husband out. Temperamental incompatibility was the real cause of all the
unhappy sequence. She was far too refined a lady not to feel disgusted at his coarse and vulgar ways. This added to her sense of frustration. It was as if she had been trapped to spend her life with the man she disliked. Obviously marriage has not been a pleasant experience for either party.

Sarah Brown claims in her epitaph that her illicit love for Morris, no less than her love for her husband, has wrought out her destiny and sent her to the ‘Nirvana’ of eternal life.

Julia Miller marries an old man. The marriage breaks down not because of the disparity in age—he is sixty-five she is only thirty—but because of the lingering memories of the man who had jilted her. She was expecting a child but she is not happy at the thought of its arrival. Suicide seems the answer to her problem and she kills herself by consuming morphine. Ironically, as it were, while waiting for her consciousness to ebb away, she happens to see the biblical verse promising paradise to the good thief: “Today thou shall be with me in paradise.”

Lillian Stewart demonstrates how the question of dowry was a wrecker of marriages in all ages. Lillian’s father was given to despair and his hill top residence gave the impression that he was immensely rich. The man who married her had expected that he would get a handsome dowry and was understandably very angry when he learnt that his father-in-law was merely bankrupt. He turned his anger on to Lillian.

He vexed my life till I went back home
And lived like an old maid till I died,
Keeping house for father. (165)
Lillian’s husband is typical of all those who marry for money.
In “Harman Whitney” we listen to a husband attributing the failure of his marriage to his wife’s frigidity. This made him turn to another woman whom he took in self contempt.

We meet another aggrieved husband in “Tom Merritt.” Tom Merritt has to live with an adulterous wife. He vows to kill his wife’s secret lover but one day the lover shoots him presumably in self defence. Tom Merritt has no weapon on him. From Mrs. Merritt’s epitaph we come to learn that Elmer, the nineteen-year-old boy, has acted against her advice. Mrs. Merritt protests that she is not responsible for the murder of her husband. She confesses, however, to having had adulterous relations with Elmer. She spent thirty years in prison and died there.

Spoon River has so many unedifying examples of ill-assorted marriages that it causes a few people to stay away from marriage. Trainor the Druggist expounds his theory that men and women who are good in themselves sometimes turn evil once they get married. He illustrates his theory with the example of Benjamin Pantier and his wife. Individually either of them is good but their marriage, as has already been seen, is a great disaster. “He oxygen, she hydrogen/ Their son, a devastating fire.” As for himself, he says, he lived unwedded.

Doctor Meyers’ marriage was a happy one but it was short lived. His wife died broken hearted of a scandal which the press blew up out of all proportion. However, Doc Hill, the other doctor in Spoon River, was a victim of ill-assorted marriage and he confided to the listeners that it was his wife’s hatred towards him that made him turn to humanitarian work.
Comparing the use of the same literary device by two different writers will give us an insight into their attitudes and techniques. The use of irony, for example, by Robinson and Masters will throw light on their different literary methods inasmuch as they use this literary device differently and in different measures. Robinson makes very little use of irony probably because the “hints and gleams” (Quoted in Richard Crowder 10) literary style he uses is not particularly conducive to any extensive use of irony. Of course, he uses irony in depicting the fate of Richard Cory “who glittered when he walked” but who went home and put a bullet through his head. It is the irony of fate that Captain Craig who is a scholarly man should be reduced to destitution for no fault of his. Robinson uses irony in “Isaac and Archibald” when the senile Isaac expresses concern for the growing senility of his friend Archibald; Archibald in his turn remarks that Isaac is becoming senile. Again it is ironic that Flammonde whose very name is suggestive of light and who brings about moral enhancement wherever he goes finds his own life curiously devoid of light. Cliff Klingenhagen pours wine for his guests while he himself drinks wormwood and yet it is unlikely that anybody would be as happy as Klingenhagen is. In general, irony of fate operates in several Tilbury lives; how else can one explain the many failures that Tilbury has to accommodate.

It is true that there is irony in many other poems too. As James Dickey has observed, irony serves to leaven Robinson’s poetry. He goes on to say that some people believe that in some cases Robinson’s
irony appears like callousness or even cruelty. He denies the charge. “It is rather the product of a detachment based on helplessness on the saving grace of humour that is called into play because nothing practical can be done and because the spectator of tragedy must find some way in which to save himself emotionally from the effect of what has witnessed” (James Dickey xxvi).

Compared with Masters, irony plays only an incidental role in Robinson’s poems. Robinson could have used irony as an effective weapon at least in those poems where he attempts social criticism. But even there his attempt, as Hertz has pointed out, is to unravel the working of the soul and there is not much scope for the use of irony as an effective device.

How different things are when we move to Spoon River, whose ground-breaking ceremony took place just seventeen years before that of Tilbury Town. Yet critics allude very cursorily to the two places as if each was the duplication of the other and both were nothing more than assemblages of grotesques. Such an indiscriminate generalization is not fair to either town, to either poet. Robinson is treated in the souls of a few men and women in an average New England village, souls which dramatize the writer’s notion of the human condition. Edgar Lee Masters re-vivifies in both spirit and body nearly an entire mid-western town, each of whose
inhabitants speaks pretty much about his own condition alone.

The poet’s purposes, presentation, and defects are conspicuously
different. (349–50)

In *Spoon River Anthology* irony is neither casual nor incidental but
a very important tool of social criticism. Irony takes mainly two forms. It
can take the form of a statement which is actually the direct opposite of
what is meant, the objective often aimed at being amusement or
emphasis. Secondly, irony results when what is represented as happening
is the opposite of what normally should have happened. It is generally the
second type of irony that we find in Robinson and Masters, the kind of
irony that is often called life’s little ironies. Most of the poems examined
below present a situation in which what actually happens is the opposite
of what was expected. When the speaker complains of the irony of life,
the reader is amused because in many cases what happens is in
accordance with poetic justice. In “Chase Henry,” for example, the
priest’s refusal to bury him in hallowed ground rebounded to his good
fortune. The Protestants bought up the lot and buried him close to the
grave of Nicholas and Priscilla. In “Lydia Puckett” the irony is of the first
type. It concludes with the solemn statement that “Back of every soldier is
a woman.” The statement is cynically ironic in that he turned a soldier
when Spoon River became too hot for him. Lydia Puckett claims that it all
started with her quarrel with him. In “Doc Hill” we see another man of
this kind. He cares for the poor and the sick by day and night all because
home is not sweet home for him. His wife hates him and besides there is
the disappointment of his son having gone to the dogs. In his epitaph Nicholas Bindle complaints of another little irony of life. He is one of the victims of Rhodes who has broken the bank. He had donated a pipe organ to the church and ironically, as it were, it was played when Rhodes worshipped for the first time after his acquittal. Sam Hookey in the poem of that name is a lion tamer who starved his lions for two days. The starving lions tore him to pieces when he entered the cage. Later when his soul met Robespierre in the region of the dead, the latter, whose name has become a byeword for cruelty, told the lion tamer that it served him right. Obviously Robespierre could not forgive him for cruelty he had shown to the lions.

The irony in “A.D. Blooc” is more amusing. Mr. Blood feels he has always been a strict moralist with many good works to his credit. He was a prohibitionist; he stopped all kinds of gamble; he brought Daisy Fraser, a woman of loose morals, before the court; he led relentless crusades to purge the town of all sins. But his own tomb is the secret meeting place of Dora and Reuben, Benjamin Pantier’s son. The Spoon River cemetery has witnessed other ironies also. “Jeduthan Hawley,” the coffin maker, has not noticed that if one person died in Spoon River, another one was sure to follow in a few days. He gives a list of who followed whom and asks complainingly: “And I the solemnest man in town/ Stepped off with Daisy Fraser.”

To Roger Hester the tethered cow is a metaphor with which to illustrate the operation of free will. He will say while arguing with Ernest
Hyde that free will is exactly like Mr. Prickett's cow. "Roped out to grass and free . . . as far as the length of the rope." The cow is a symbol of free will. One day in one of the irones of life the cow got free of the stake and gored him to death. Silas Dement in his epitaph confesses to having set fire to the court house with the intention of ridding the town of the court, which according to him is an ihuman institution. But he discovers to his horror later that by setting fire to it he was actually renovating it:

When I came back from Joliet
There was a new court house with a dome.
For I was punished like all who destroy
The past for the sake of the future

There is no need to give more examples. The very situation of the dead giving the lie to the coloured and exaggerated statements their tombstones flaunt constitutes the basic irony of the poems.

Among the blighted lives in Tilbury and Spoon River there are a few who are addicted to the bottle as is but natural in every society. Alcohol is a reducing agent, in the literal sense, of course, in that it prevents people from realizing their potentialities in full and from reaching their rightful positions in life. Addiction to the bottle is a regrettable condition and behind every such case one finds often a story of ruined ambition, domestic discord, wilful dissipation, the desire to spite someone or an unwillingness to face life's realities. In both Robinson and Masters there are representatives of this category of derelicts. As a whole drunks receive sympathetic treatment at the hands of these writers. They do not
present too many specimens of this category and the few that are presented in the poems seldom degenerate into despicable characters.

Robinson’s “Miniver Cheevy” is an extreme example of a besotted man who creates a world of unreality around him so as to justify his doings. He throws all blame on the period he was born into. He deludes himself into believing that if God had placed him in the Middle Ages, he would have been one of the finest examples of chivalry.

Miniver Cheevy, born too late
Scratched his head and kept on thinking
Miniver coughed and called it fate
And kept on drinking.

The most amusing situation in the whole of Robinson is perhaps Mr. Flood’s meeting with himself. He tries to ignore the bitter reality that he is a bit of floatsam left by the ebbing tide of time and he makebelieves that he is still with his friends. Mr. Flood is on his way home, having replenished his dwindling supplies of whisky and he invites himself to a party. Mr. Flood accepts his own invitation and the two Mr. Floods drink from the jug alternately.

Fernando Nash in “The Man Who Died Twice,” as we have already seen, is a gifted artist. Years of dissipation has played havoc with his art and ruined his ambition to become immortal by composing great music. His final debauch lasts three weeks. Fernando Nash has nobody else to blame but himself for becoming the shadow of what he wants.
In Spoon River too alcohol is a killer of talents and a leveller of families. “Dippold the Optician,” for example, presents a kaleidoscope of scenes whose progression shows, symbolically, the progression of the optician’s own life. From a “young woman with angel’s bending over her” the scene shifts to “many women with bright eyes and open lips” and as a corollary of this scene comes another scene, “just a goblet on a table” suggesting the alcoholic phase in the subject’s life. As a rule, ill-earned money finds an outlet in alcohol. Ralph Rhodes son of Thomas Rhodes is represented in his epitaph as sitting in his chair his head “bowed/ On a table covered with acrid stumps/ Of cigarettes and empty glasses.”

Interestingly enough, the Spoon River poems do not present drunkenness as a significant social vice. Of the 244 characters only three or four can be characterised as alcoholics. Both Robinson and Masters held anti-prohibitionist views and though they do not encourage the use of alcohol, they do not chastise anybody for getting addicted to it. Masters even makes one of his characters—Ezra Bartlett—say “Why will you never see that love of women,/ And even love of wine,/ Are the stimulants by which the soul, hungering for divinity/ Reaches to ecstatic vision.”

Even Chase Henry, the unmitigated drunk, gets a sympathetic treatment at the hands of Masters. Through the whirligig of time Chase Henry comes to be buried near to the grave of banker Nicholas. The Town Marshal who is a converted alcoholic, is shot by McGuire who was in a state of intoxication but the way Masters describes it canvasses our sympathies in favour of McGuire. The drunken Oscar Hummel is done
to death by the self righteous A.D. Blood and Masters sees to it that reader's heart goes out in pity for the dead Hummel.

Then I reeled through a gate and into a yard,
And called at the top of my voice:
“Oh Fiddler! Oh, Mr. Jones!”
(I thought it was his house and he would show me the way home)
But who should step out but A.D. Blood,
In his night shirt, waving a stick of wood,
And roaring about the cursed saloons,
And the criminals they made?
“You drunken Oscar Hummel,” he said,
As I stood there weaving to and fro,
Taking the blows from the stick in his hand
Till I dropped down dead at his feet (SRA 157)

However that does not mean that just about every drunken rogue gets a favourable treatment at the hands of these poets.

By comparing the two poets' attitude to drunkenness as a social vice we tried to examine their social attitudes: this comparison may be extended to their treatment of suicide which appears to figure prominently in either poet. All societies witness suicide and it is quite natural for writers to concern themselves with this negative way of ridding life of “the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to” (Hamlet Act III, scene 1, 62-63). But in Robinson and Masters suicide
takes the form of an obsessive concern and in both poets it is treated as a psychologically complex event. The sociologists would classify suicide into three groups—altruistic, anonic and egoistic. Altruistic suicide is killing oneself so that the group to which one is closely integrated may benefit out of it. In a sense it borders on self sacrifice. Anonic suicide results from social or personal disorganisation such as the disorganisation of one's way of life. Anonic suicide may result, for example, when a rich man suddenly becomes poor or conversely when a poor man hits the jackpot. Anonic suicides are more normal in an urban setting where there is a high rate of social change. Suicide may result from an individual's feeling of responsibility and guilt for moral weakness and failure. The presence of a strong value system, weak group integration and an overpowering sense of personal responsibility are often considered the reasons for egoistic suicides. In Robinson and Masters one finds mostly the second and third kinds of suicides although the poets do not treat of the theme of suicide from the sociologist's point of view.

In Robinson suicide is a powerful theme in both the short and the long poems. The entire concern in "Luke Havergal" is the irresistible fascination of self slaughter. The death of his mistress as we have already seen has disrupted Luke Havergal's life; the disembodied voice which urges him to go to the western gate is the externalization of the conflict in Luke Havergal's life.

"Richard Cory" is by far the most celebrated of Robinson's suicide poems. A superficial reading of the poem might make us think that the
suicide is due to the possible ruin of his ‘down town’ business. But a
careful reading of the poem will reveal the profound spiritual overtones of
the poem. As the very title of the poem suggests, the royal exterior of
Cory sits in sad contrast to the interior which has such desert places as
cannot be filled in with material possessions. It is no wonder that “one
summer night Richard Cory / Went home and put a bullet through his
head.” “The Whip,” which was already discussed earlier, is another poem
on the theme of suicide. While he tried to intercept his wife and her lover,
the wife whipped him (her husband) on the face and he acts as if it were a
signal for him to end his life. In “The Miller” too the theme of suicide
figures prominently. It is the story of the miller and his wife who commit
suicide unable to compete with the mechanized mills which ruined their
occupation. The miller has already hanged himself by the time the poem
opens. His wife decides to follow him. “The warm mealy fragrance of the
past” contrasts with the cold tea and the dead fire. As Anderson has put it,
the tea and the fire become “symbols of domesticity and life as well as an
unbearable present now cold and dead because the miller’s occupation
the miller himself is gone” (104).

In several of the long poems the story involves the suicide of one or
more important characters. In Roman Bartholow, as we have already
seen, the story climbs to its tragic finale with the suicide of Gabrielle. In
_Cavender’s House_ too suicide is a major concern. Cavender has been
contemplating suicide unable to stand the prick of his tormenting
conscience. The fancied meeting with Laramie rubs out all thought of
suicide from his mind. The regenerated Cavender decides to turn himself over to law. The dead Laramie then brings home to him the folly of self-slaughter and urges him to open another door in life.

There are still doors in your house that are locked;
And there is only you to open them,
For what they may reveal; There may be still
Some riches hidden there, and even for you,
Who spurned your treasure as an angry king
Might throw his crown away. (CP 1005)

It is much the same picture that we find in The Glory of the Nightingale. Malory journeys from the gloomy cemetery to the magnificent Nightingale mansion by the seaside. He is determined to kill Nightingale and then to kill himself but in Sharon Malory's plans go awry. As Charles T. Davis has put it, "the flashing waves evoke pictures of suffering humanity entreating the bacteriologist (Malory) to dedicate himself to the service of the suffering millions" (385). In Matthias at the Door, as we have seen in another connection, there are two suicides—Garth and Nathalie. But here also we see a movement away from death and towards a new life.

Robinson's concern with the theme of suicide is perhaps one that he could not help. The Robinson family had the misfortune of one of its members committing suicide. Dean, the eldest of senior Robinson's three sons, started his career as a doctor but ended as a drug addict who could no longer attend to his medical duties. Dean killed himself by injecting an
overdose of morphine. Dean’s suicide finds fictional expression in the poem “How Annandale Went Out.” In this poem Robinson disguises the incident changing what was really a suicide into an act of mercy killing. Professor Nivison, Robinson’s grand nephew, has said that if we recall the fate of Dean “we would have in the poem the words of the dead man, a physician who had been fatally ill justifying his own act of self destruction” (Quoted in Anderson 106).

The theme of suicide is much less important in Masters than in Robinson and so the number of suicides in Masters is not very high. Masters does not appear to give the same importance to suicide as Robinson does; however as in the chronicler of Tilbury it remains a major concern in Masters too.

Masters’ “Julia Miller” is typical of those poems in which marital discord finds relief in suicide. Julia Miller chooses self-destruction as the only way out of the maze of circumstances in which she was left by fate. Julia was only thirty but her husband was sixty five. She had married the old man to conceal her betrayal by her lover whose child she was carrying. “Then I took morphine and sat down to read.” In the last three lines of the poem the poet appears to vindicate her choice.

I see the flickering light of those words even now:

“And Jesus said unto him, verily
I say unto thee today thou shalt
Be with me in paradise”
“Albert Schirding” and “Jonas Keene” which are juxtaposed, offer a study in contrast. Albert Schirding and Jonas Keene kill themselves but for different reasons (as we have already seen). Keene commits suicide by refusing medical aid after deliberately catching a fever by getting drenched throughout. His reason? His children have failed in every enterprise they were engaged in. He says he would not have killed himself if he had one of his boys could run so much as a newsstand or if one of his girls could have married a decent man. He does not understand why Schirding, whose children have risen high in life, should turn his back upon life and find refuge in death. Schirding tells us in his epitaph that it was precisely his children’s success that ruined him. With his children rising high in life, Schirding began to feel he was not worthy of them. To reduce the gap between his children and himself he tried to improve his social status by running for the Superintendent of Schools. Schirding lost not only the election but also his money in the process. What confirmed him in his decision to kill himself was, ironically as it were, an honour his daughter received. His daughter, an artist in Paris, received the first prize for her picture entitled “The Old Mill.” The picture of the disused mill reminded Schirding of himself. Basically one finds here the same situation as in Robinson’s “The Whip.” It is as if Schirding receives a blow across his face while he was trying to catch up with his children.

“Washington McNeely” reads very much like “Albert Schirding” only that here the children do not turn out very well in life. McNeely starts
well in life but soon he suffers a series of domestic misfortunes, one of them being the suicide of his son Harry who “killed himself after a debauch.” Though it is not very clear how Clarence Fawcett met with his death, it is possible that he killed himself to escape from the disgrace of embezzlement charges.

“Ralph Rhodes” tells the story of another suicide which was expected and was a logical climax to the life Ralph Rhodes was leading. He is the son of Thomas Rhodes, the much hated, self righteous businessman of Spoon River. Ralph Rhodes manages to live his iniquitous life well on to this old age but always in fear that one day he would be exposed. Finally his fears prove true; when he is confronted with theft charges, he commits suicide.

And a knock is heard, and you know it's the knock
So long drowned out by popping corks
And the peacock screams of demireps-
And you look up, and there’s your Theft,
Who waited until your head was gray,
And your heart skipped beats to say to you:
The game is ended. I've called for you,
Go out on Broadway and be run over,
They'll ship you back to Spoon River. (*SR* 154)

Robinson and Masters are alike in their attitude to suicide. Both of them show an awareness of the complex psychological processes that precede any act of self slaughter and the treatment is sympathetic
in both cases. It is true in poems like “Richard Cory” there is the
suggestion that suicide is an avoidable outrage to social morality but even
in these poems the causal factor is so well presented that the reader feels
convinced of its inevitability. The thought of the “undiscovered country
from whose bourn/ No traveller returns” does not appear to deter the
victims. And whenever an individual commits suicide, it is resorted to
either to escape the consequences of something he has done or to spare
himself the despair resulting from the ironies of life. It all boils down to the
finding Robinson and Masters are alike, yet different.