Chapter VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The basic concern of the dissertation is the role the social factor plays in shaping the destinies of Masters’ and Robinsons’ characters. To put it in more precise terms, the dissertation purports to examine the correlation between an individual’s failure to achieve the targetted degree of success in life and the pull of the society he lives in. To understand why people fail, each case of unsuccess should be judged and examined by placing it against the social panorama which makes or mars a life through the interplay of circumstances. The term ‘blighted lives’ in the title, by which the ‘failure’ types are denominated, might appear to negate the individual’s responsibility for his unsuccess, throwing the blame squarely on the social factor. It is true that a minority of the ‘blighted lives’ have actually willed their lives into failure through what may be described as sheer perversity, Robinson’s Miniver Cheevy being the best example of one of this category. However, in most cases, it is the society that trips the individual up, preventing him from reaching the heights which he would have otherwise scaled. One finds in Masters and Robinson variations of this basic pattern.

Robinson’s Tilbury and Masters’ Spoon River can well be considered microcosms of the whole America – an America in little of the post Civil War period. Tilbury and Spoon River are alike in general characteristics but they differ in specifics. It is true that the Spoon River
epitaphs belong to a period of about a hundred years but the majority of them belong to contemporary America. In Tilbury too one sees the contemporary America.

The social period on which the spotlight falls in both Robinson and Masters is no doubt the Gilded Age and the first two decades of the 20th century. The term Gilded Age carries in itself a criticism of the period in that it suggests that compared to the golden age, the pre Civil War period, the present age was as cheap as costume jewellery. The term refers to the boom times of the post Civil War period when unscrupulous individualism was the order of the day and when unbridled acquisitiveness dominated American national life. Industry expanded rapidly but it brought in its wake more problems than the country had bargained for. Corruption became rampant and unscrupulous trade practices appeared to have become normal practices. It was a society where one could succeed only through money power and unscrupulous practices. In Masters' Thomas Rhodes we have a typical businessman of those times who thwarted the course of justice and silenced the mass media through the magical power of the American dollar. The economic depression of the 1890's and the consequent crash of the stock exchange reduced many a family to bankruptcy and destitution. The expansion in trade and industry resulted in the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few individuals and the hurdles economic competition put on the path of the average man were far too difficult for him to surmount. It is no wonder that the theme of failure is pervasive in the poetry of the period and in treating of
the blighted lives Masters and Robinson were just yielding to the compulsions of the period.

Poetry concerns itself with life and a poet's criticism of life is conditioned not by what he sees around him so much as by how he looks at the world around him. It is often the poet's world view rather than the hard facts he sees around him that determines the tone and temper of his poetry and it is so with Robinson and Masters. An attempt was made in chapter II of the dissertation to examine the poets' philosophy of life.

A quintessential statement of Robinson's philosophy of life is his comparison of human beings to befuddled children trying to spell the word God with the wrong block. He sees human beings as the children of the night but it is not darkness alone he concerns himself with. His night is shot through with rays of hope. As we have already seen "Robinson's vision of life as an ill-equipped search for an indefinable light finds an appropriate metaphor in the 'cark hill to climb' image which is pervasive in his poems" (Joseph 178) and which is the central situation in the philosophic poem "The Man Against the Sky."

Robinson expresses his hatred of materialism in quite a good number of his poems. As for his attitude to God and religion, he denounces all institutionalized religions. Though never a hedonist, he opposed prohibition tooth and nail and argued that the individual be given the freedom to drink or not to drink. Robinson is a traditionalist who does not want to appear an advocate of revolution. However Masters vociferously argued for social reforms. As Miss Monroe has put it,
at the heart of his philosophy is the love of the race and a fierce desire for its pursuit of happiness and reasonableness (278). He is a pragmatist in a limited sense of the term. He lashed out against everything that stood in the way of the pursuit of happiness. The pervasive corruption, injustice, intrigue and hypocrisy that he saw in the society filled him with disgust. It is possible that he presents the society as much worse than it actually was and Amy Lowell comments that the stories he tells are "strange tales, so brutal that one wonders if life in our western cities is as bad as this" (27). But even conceding that he has made the town's dark side appear darker, what he says of the town is basically not far from the truth.

Masters did not believe in any religion and in politics like Robinson was an anti-prohibitionist. He pleads for freer sex and in fact his philosophy of sex is in consonance with the Freudian theory concerning the centrality of sex in all human activities. Masters was a believer in populism and in politics he followed the Jeffersonian ideals. His experiences in life had so disillusioned him that the society being what it was, it was impossible for him not to become a cynic. However, like Robinson he too was aware of the light.

Chapters III and IV of the dissertation present the social panorama in the poems of E.A. Robinson. Robinson's short and medium length poems are examined in Chapter III and Chapter IV concerns itself with the social scene in the thirteen long poems. Each poem presents a glimpse of the social scene and the poem examined in Chapter III have been so selected as to present a composite yet complete picture of the America of
his days. The picture of the character in relation to the social ambience helps us to understand the interaction between the two to determine the extent to which the society is responsible for each thwarted life. It is argued in Chapter IV that the fact that Robinson family was a victim of the economic crisis of 1893 made him depict the social scene from the point of view of the aggrieved, the aggressor being the crass materialism of the times. The Tilbury Town is the fictional setting of a large number of his poems, and subsumed in Tilbury one finds the small town in New England with its repressive, utilitarian social climate and Puritan ethic. He creates his world out of his own vision and observation. Tilbury Town is concerned not with places but with people because the essentially human is not dependent on place or time. Though Tilbury is the true mirror image of Gardiner, he gives a trans-Gardiner identity to the characters so as to place them beyond easy recognition. He deals not only with social and economic failures but also with men and women in whom one finds a sharp disparity between the outward aspect and the secret inner, spiritual reality. Robinson’s poems are based on various social concerns. He stands for individual freedom and anti-prohibitionism. He also deals with problems like marital discord and social evils like adultery and immorality. He shows a live interest in man-woman relationship and treats of the theme of loneliness resulting from estranged relationship. He is against war and is anti-materialistic. He tries to impress upon the reader that spiritual triumph is possible even in the face of a cruel destiny. A look at the long poems of Robinson reveals that Robinson’s social concern is not
totally absent even in poems like Merlin and Lancelot which are set in far away times and based on the Arthurian legends.

Chapter IV consists of a discussion on the social scene in the long poems of Robinson. Robinson has written thirteen long poems and in all of them the central concern is the human situation. His favourite theory of ‘the success of failure’ gets a detailed treatment in his Captain Craig, the first long poem. The Arthurian trilogy—Merlin, Lancelot, Tristram—relates to modern times and is an allegorical presentation of the 20th century world immediately before the outbreak of the First World War. Avon’s Harvest is a psychological study of the destructive effects of hate and its two shadows—remorse and fear. Roman Bartholow is the story of a domestic tragedy with strong autobiographical elements. The hero’s repentance of his sins brings him back to life in The Man Who Died Twice. Robinson’s persistent search for moral values gets expression in Cavender’s House. The Glory of the Nightingales is a study of an egoist. Matthias at the Door presents the danger of ill-assorted marriages. The intrusion of destiny is seen in Talifer. His Amaranth is built on the theme of failure and his last long poem King Jasper is an allegorical narrative on the wreck of an industrial empire giving the message that nothing can exist on rotten foundations for long. It is actually the character, and not fate, that decides whether a life should blossom or get blighted.

The best assessment of the social scene in Masters is the comment by Childs already reproduced in Chapter V. Childs suggests that Masters’ poems may be read as “pictures of common human foibles accentuated
by an environment that is essentially unfriendly to the practice of ordinary Christian virtues.” Childs goes on to say that this “accounts for the prevalence in the villages of so many pathetic even sordid types . . .” (334). In Chapter V the main concern was the social scene in the poetry of Masters. He fought tooth and nail against the urbanisation of America because of his firm conviction that agrarianism is the most congenial way of life. In his personal life Masters confronted a severe ego crisis, the desperate conflict between the two warring factions in him, which he had inherited from the opposing identities of his parents. His hometowns—Petersburg and Lewistown—appeared to him to embody this unceasing conflict between two opposing ways of living one’s life.

Masters initiated a new genre of writing—graveyard realism—where the dead speak out the truth with fierce passion. His Spoon River Anthology is an excellent and truthful rendering of the American small town and some of its characters are disguised presentations of actual persons living in Petersburg or Lewistown. He had various social concerns and they are projected in his writings. He opposed war, for any war is against the people and hence highly detestable. Spoon River Anthology is a highly personal and subjective vision of the small town life as viewed by the poet. He deals with, as does Robinson, questions like marital discord, religion, anti-prohibitionism, anti-materialism etc. in his poetry.

Chapter VI explores not only the common elements in Masters and Robinson but also the divergences so as to demonstrate that the two poets’ choice of a common subject does not necessarily make them use
the same methodology. This is done by comparing them as creators of mythical communities, by examining the two poets' treatment of the same theme—marital disharmony for instance—the same literary device—irony for example, the same poetic form—the dramatic monologue for instance—the same social question—prohibition for example—and by examining either poet's assessment of the role of the society in thwarting individual lives.

Robinson's Tilbury corresponds to Masters' Spoon River. While Tilbury is Robinson's own hometown Gardiner in disguise, Spoon River is an amalgam of two different towns he was associated with, Petersburg and Lewistown. Both Tilbury and Spoon River are home to a queer assemblage of men and women several of whom fail to succeed in life or in some cases succeed in ruining their own life. Either town is materialistic to the core and its moral credentials are not very convincing. However, the Spoon River appears more realistic, as it is more specific with regard to social problems and the interaction between the society and the individual.

Either poet excelled in the use of the monologue form. Robinson's monologues are mostly dramatic and his speakers are generally historical characters like Ben Jonson, Napoleon, John Brown and St. Paul; as for Masters, he chooses the monologue in its simplest form and with rare exceptions, his characters are purely fictional; Masters' monologues, which are spoken epitaphs, are far more dramatic than Robinson's monologue portraits. As we have already seen, the Spoon River cemetery
can be considered a vast stage on which the characters appear (and in a certain sense reappear), each to make a dramatic confession.

A fairly detailed classification of Spoon River and Tilbury characters is also attempted in Chapter VI. A close look at these characters reveals that the poets present not a representative collection of men and women but those who “live at the outskirts of the conventional social world” (Hertz 348). The characters Robinson delineates in his poems consist of men who are social and economic failures, men whose outward aspect is different from their inner reality, men who may be described as non-entities, and men, as Hertz describes them, who are “victims of life and who suffer and endure” (347). The Spoon River characters are variously classified. One classification divides them into those who are in conflict with the Spoon River ethos, those who reveal some hideous secret which has been pressing at their hearts while alive, those who show a remarkable psychological insight into the forces governing their lives—and those whose epitaphs show a philosophic bend of mind.

One recurrent situation we see in either poet is a bewildered and confused individual turning to himself in the hope of finding the reason for the spiritual mess he has made of himself. The situation in “Rembrandt to Rembrandt” where the famous Dutch painter is seen addressing his mirror image is typical of a situation of this kind. “Eugene Carman” is a typical Masters’ poem of this kind.

The treatment of the theme of mismatched marriages is an index to either poet. In exploring the complexities of marital relationship Robinson
is more realistic than romantic and a little bit cynical into the bargain. In both Robinson and Masters marriages fail for the same reasons but Robinson is less explicit about the reason why they flounder. In both Robinson and Masters marital infidelity remains the single most important cause of discord. In several of his poems on the theme of marriage Masters appears to plead the cause of divorce. The social problems the two poets concern themselves with include alcoholism, alienation and self-slaughter. Chapter VI takes a look at these concerns as well.

A close study of the two poets placing them side by side reveals quite a lot of shared interests and perhaps as many divergences. The differences are often lost sight of when we see the two poets addressing themselves to the same social concerns. The eagerness with which they explore the social panorama for an answer to the mystery of blighted lives is as genuine as it is intense. But they look at the social panorama each in his own distinctive manner, and they give us the impression of being alike yet different.