Chapter I
INTRODUCTION

The two mythical communities, Tilbury and Spoon River, have attained a kind of immortality in literature by being home to a queer assemblage of men and women whose lives are conspicuously devoid of any achievement, at least in the worldly sense of the term. Some of them are born failures, some will their lives into failures through, if anything, perverse psychological compulsions, and some are accounted as failures unjustly through the society's failure to understand them. The creators of these towns are Edwin Arlington Robinson and Edgar Lee Masters and despite their mythical appearance these towns are based on Robinson's own Gardiner and Masters' Petersburg and Lewistown. The present dissertation examines the 'blighted lives' theme in Robinson and Masters and focuses mainly on the blighted lives of Tilbury and Spoon River.

The two poets belonged to a period of great material affluence, for the impact of the industrial revolution had begun to make itself felt in the American society as early as the 1860's. But the economic prosperity did not last long, for the Wall Street Panic of 1893 brought economic ruin and economy remained paralysed for quite a few decades. This period was highly discouraging and inhospitable to writers and artists in general and Robinson and Masters had to set their own course of life simply because there was no assurance that God would provide and American religion was in a state of flux.
Robinson was born in 1869 and Masters a year before him in 1868. While Masters lived up to 1950, Robinson predeceased him by 15 years. Robinson published his first collection of poems in 1896; with Masters publication history began in 1898. It is easy to see that these two poets, who were contemporaries, had witnessed the same cultural and social changes; they shared, more or less, the same world-view and they concerned themselves with the same enigmas of social existence.

The formative years of these poets were spent in what later came to be called the Gilded Age. There was something in the Gilded Age, as also in the age that followed, that tripped many a soul up. It was an age of affluence, of large scale industrialisation but it was also an age of exploitation. The Gilded Age is the quarter century following the Civil War, the title carrying the suggestion that in comparison to the golden age of the pre-civil war America the one that followed was merely gilded. The age witnessed a great scramble for wealth and power. It was an age

When our natural resources—farm lands, forests and mines—were exploited and ravaged, when a continent was developed without fear of enemies beyond two broad oceans, when individualism was "rugged" and materialism unbridled and unashamed, when political and moral corruption proceeded unchecked, when science and invention seemed to point to an irresistible law of progress, when artistic and literary taste was vulgarized and debased, when, in a word, plain living and high thinking became high living and plain thinking. (Foerster 941)
The rapid expansion of population, the invention of new machines and the consequent development of industry, the growth of an urban civilization, rampant individualism etc. were some of the salient features of the age.

The economic revolution the Gilded Age witnessed was made possible, among other things, by the expansion of the rail road transportation. Whereas there was only 35,000 miles of rail road in America in 1865, by 1900 rail road mileage increased to 2,00,000. The Westinghouse airbrake and other inventions increased the efficiency of rail road transportation. The expansion of the rail road transportation had in fact been necessitated by the expansion of industry which was stimulated by factors like the exploitation of resources like iron, coal and oil, the development of improved machinery, the procurement of cheap labour through immigration, government's policy of protecting infant industry and, of course, scientific inventions. Agriculture also underwent a revolution during this period. It became no longer labour intensive, drawing its strength from new machines. Cash crops supplanted subsistence farming. Financial return from agriculture was precarious and this encouraged migration from farms to cities.

The growth of an urban civilization was perhaps the most important social change of the period. If in 1860 the urban population stood at one sixth of the population, in 1900 it stood at one third. Writers like Theodore Dreiser, a close friend of Masters, tried to show the error of the
pervasive supposition that urban environment alone can enable a man
to develop his potentialities to the maximum extent.

The Gilded Age saw the rise of several labour unions organized under the American Federation of Labour. Industrial strikes increased in number and intensity. Factory management tried to meet the threat of strike by employing immigrant labour which was cheap. The Gilded Age was one of rugged individualism. They were tough-minded men who were determined to win and it did not scruple them to resort to “trickery, dishonesty, lying, bribery, stealing” (Foerster 947). It was as natural for men to fail as to win and in the competition for success it often did not matter who ditched whom. It was into this Gilded Age that Robinson and Masters were born and it was in this age that they spent their formative years. It was this age and the pre-war period that they sought to represent in their poems. All these characters may not be typical of the period they lived in but quite a good number of them are typical of the Gilded Age men and women. It was not their intention to attempt a history of the period; rather they merely highlighted certain aspects of this extraordinary age. In neither of them do we find a picture per se of the Gilded Age. But their depiction of life is certainly influenced by what they saw around them.

Robinson was born in Gardiner, Maine as the son of Edward Robinson and Mary Palmer Robinson. His industrious father acquired sufficient wealth for the family but unfortunately the economic self sufficiency did not turn out to be a blessing either for the family or for Robinson.
His eldest brother Dean, though bright and intelligent, had to, contrary to his wishes, yield to his father's whim and become a doctor. Desperate, he turned to drink, lost his health and finally succumbed to his fate in 1899. It was a great shock to young Robinson. His other brother Herman, who followed the path of his father, squandered the wealth of the family in real estate transactions during the Wall Street Panic of 1893. Herman too ended up as a failure, became a drunkard and died in 1909 leaving his wife and children under the care of Robinson. His mother had a poetic bent of mind, and it is to her Robinson turned for consolation and encouragement. Win, as he was called in his youngish days, was a reserved, book-wormish, attractive young man, who wrote a lot of odd poems that nobody would print and he had only a few friends.

Robinson, throughout his life, was a victim of frustration, defeat and poverty and he too followed the path of his brothers by taking to drink. No wonder, he lived either by accident or by someone's kindness. Roosevelt, the then President of the United States, at the persuasion of his son, Kermit, read Robinson's *The Children of the Night* and ultimately this helped him in getting a job in the New York Custom House. One may bear in mind that it was an era which neglected the artists, for though the America of his day was exceptionally filled with material growth on an almost unprecedented scale, at the same time it was marked by notable failures in both the material and moral spheres. He was closely observing the intellectual cross-currents which were strongly pushing America farther and farther away from its glorious past. He considered success and failure
as the two sides of the coin of life. The America of his day considered materialistic progress the yardstick of success and progress and the poet was actually disturbed and repelled by the then features of American civilization. And it was the herculean task of the artist to express the sometimes disturbing realities of lives without impairing the value of life.

Robinson underwent a long term of struggle and despair before he gained recognition as a poet. He made elaborate use of blank verse and wrote a number of poems at Peterborough during 1914-16. But he had to wait till he was forty to emerge from the shadows to become a widely read poet and also a three times Pulitzer Prize winner. Robinson believed that art is valuable only if it reflected humanity and human emotions. The message of the poet, as May Sinclair states, is:

Be true to the truth that lies nearest to you; true to God, if you have found him; true to man; true to yourself; true, if you know no better truth, to your primal instincts; but, at any cost, be true (“Three American Poets of Today” in *The Atlantic Monthly*, 98, 3, Sept. 1906. 325–35):

Robinson was of the conviction that “a poet writes because he must” (Barnard 9). Speaking about his works Barnard writes:

It is this centering of interest on individual human beings that even more than his style sets Robinson apart from other poets of the twentieth century, with the exception (as so often) of Frost and of the single success (Spoon River) of Edgar Lee Masters. (21)
Robinson strictly adhered to the terse diction, careful metrical forms and the philosophical themes of his predecessors, Robert Browning and Matthew Arnold, at such a time when the other poets were doing intense experimentation in other verse forms. Though many of his poems centre on the theme of failure, there are a number of his poems celebrating success. One comes across poems like 'Cliff Klingenhagen', 'Flammonde', 'Uncle Ananias', 'Eros Turanros' and 'Mr. Flood's Party' which speak about the spiritual triumphs wrung out of meagre and gruesome destinies. Significantly, while his colleagues viewed man as beset by the society, by his circumstance, Robinson, following "the true Greek tradition" considered "man beset by his own character, by his fate" (Neff 207).

Robinson's first book of poems _The Torrent and the Night Before_ was published in 1896, which was followed by _The Children of the Night_ in 1897 which found favour with the then President of the United States. His next work _Captain Craig_, a dramatic narrative published in 1902, modelled on Alfred Louis, speaks about a derelict whose deep and erudite observations of humanity in all its flawed nobility astound any reader; of course, it is an excellent example of Robinson's favourite theory of 'the success of failure'. He won his first Pulitzer Prize in 1922 for his _Collected Poems_. "The Man Against the Sky" is truly the truthful expression of his discontentment against the world at large. It is his most successful single volume of verse echoing his belief in the superiority of the spirit over matter, and morality over materialism. A second Pulitzer Prize came after him for his _The Man who Died Twice_, published in 1924 where the poet
substantiates his 'failure-redeemed theme' very successfully. The central figure Fernando Nash, a talented musician and composer, falls a victim to alcohol and sensual pleasures but he eventually redeems his soul by playing drums in the Salvation Army.

There are three book-length works known as his Arthurian trilogy—Merlin, Lancelot and Tristram published in 1917, 1920 and 1927 respectively of which Tristram became a best seller and it brought him yet another honour, his third Pulitzer Prize. His Avon’s Harvest is a dramatic dialogue on the theme of guilt and dereliction. Avon is haunted by the spirit of a schoolmate who died on the Titanic; he is frightened of the revenge for the severe blow he has meted out on his friend. Specimens of domestic catastrophes like betrayal, adultery and unrequited love do find expression in poems like roman Bartholow and Cavender’s House. Another book-length poem is The Glory of the Nightingales where he depicts two characters—Malory who is on his way to revenge himself on his arch-rival and enemy Nightingale and Nightingale who receives Malory and who expiates his sin by providing his wealth to be turned into a hospital by Malory. Of course, they remind the readers of their kinship with Richard Cory, Bewick Finzer or Captain Craig. In Cavender’s House, Cavender after killing his wife is haunted by the ‘other man’, his own conscience. In his Talifer there are four characters, Althea the domestic woman in love with Talifer, Talifer who falls in love with Karen, Karen the beautiful, erudite but treacherous lady and Doctor Quick who settles the impasse by marrying Karen thus leaving free Talifer with
Althea, his true partner. He published his poetic drama *Matthias at the Door* in 1931 and his collection of poems *Nicodemus* in 1932 which, as the title suggests, mainly centres on Biblical themes. *Amaranth* is an allegory where Robinson depicts Fargo, a disillusioned painter who gives heed to Amaranth and becomes an excellent pump-maker, while all the others meet with defeat and death.

Robinson's last allegorical work, *King Jasper* is on social themes and was published posthumously. King Jasper represents the modern industrialist, wealthy and powerful, and his son young Jasper stands for civilization. Evidently King Jasper becomes rich and powerful by cheating Hebron and Hebron is the representative of the common man. Honoria, wife of King Jasper, represents honour, and Zoë, who is in love with young Jasper, is intelligence and young Hebron who is seen in the role of an avenger, is the barbarian. Robinson is also the author of two dramas—*Van Zorn* (1914) and *the Porcupine* (1915).

Robinson, who never married, spent the last twenty four years of his life at the McDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. In 1934 he fell a victim to severe and intermittent headaches which landed him in New York hospital. It was diagnosed, that he had malignant cancer of the pancreas. It is worth-mentioning that it was in hospital that Robinson read the proof of his last major work, *King Jasper*. This great poet and genius died on 6 April, 1935.

Edgar Lee Masters, who reached the zenith of his fame through his unique work *Spoon River Anthology* was born in Garnet, Kansas,
on 23 August, 1868. Like his contemporary New Englander, Robinson, he too confronted trying situations very early in life. To begin with, the marriage of his parents was actually the union of two indomitable wills. Hardin Masters, his father, belonged to Petersburg—Southern, rural, agrarian, Jeffersonian and democratic—while his mother, Emma Masters belonged to Lewistown—northern, urban, mercantile, Calvinist and prohibitionist. Masters, like his father, was anti-prohibitionist. Hardin Masters was a lawyer and politician from Virginian ancestors and his mother Emma Masters was a bookish gentlewoman of New England. The incongruencies present in the parents had a telling effect on young Masters. Masters was brought up first in Petersburg with his grand parents and later in Lewistown, two small towns one on the Sangamon River and other on the Spoon River.

Masters, persuaded by his father who did not at all encourage his literary instincts, took to the study of law and in the early 1890’s he shifted to Chicago where he established himself as a successful lawyer. Attracted by William Jennings Bryan, he became actively involved in Populist politics. Significantly with the exception of Altgeld and Bryan, all the other political leaders of his reference are pre-Civil War. The Civil War turned out to be a turning point in the history of America for “it killed America’s past; it made way [as we have already seen] for corruption in government, for monopoly, for imperialism. Lust for money inspired the Civil War; the Civil War was, in Masters’ interpretation of history, “of the Jews” (Yatron 27).
Masters’ play *The Bread of Idleness* contains his populist message that men should abandon luxuries and go back to nature.

A lawyer, but by avocation a poet, Masters was reluctant to be known and recognized as a poet and he did his literary career under the pseudonyms of Webster Ford, Dexter Wallace, Lucius Atherton, Elmer Chubb etc. and all these characters are present in *Spoon River Anthology*. His friendship with Margaret Gilman George, the daughter of the Presbyterian minister of Lewistown, referred to as Ann in *Across Spoon River*, was of great inspiration for him, for this closeness opened for him the doors of their home library. Undoubtedly, it was a stepping stone in his transformation as a poet. It needs to be mentioned that he suffered two setbacks while still young—one was the death of his brother Alexander due to diphtheria in September 1878 at the age of five and the other, the death of his best friend Mitch Miller, who was killed in 1879 while hopping a freight train. The first memorial of his brother is seen in the epitaph “Hamlet Micure” in *Spoon River Anthology*.

That Masters had real admiration for Robert Browning, who died in 1889, is evident from the paper he presented at the Chicago Literary Club in 1912, titled “Browning as a Philosopher”. It was Browning who had introduced the dramatic monologue form in English literature through his poems like “Fra Lippo Lippi,” and “Rabbi Ben Ezra.” And Masters is indebted to Browning, for he has made ample use of this form in his *Spoon River Anthology*. Walt Whitman was another influence on him. Masters’ indebtedness to Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is clear in the
profuse use Masters makes of free verse forms and the occasional use of
colloquial idiom in his *Spoon River*. Mark Twain was yet another model
for him to emulate. His Chicago days gave him a panoramic view of the
society and cured him of "the pathos of rural life" (*ASR* 404). It was his
friend McGaffey who introduced him to William Marion Reedy, who was
a source of inspiration for Masters in his career; Reedy gave him a copy of
the Greek Anthology, from where Masters gathered the cue for his
Anthology. Willis Barnstone in his introduction to *The New Spoon River*
writes: "Most of the poems are about people—brief striking biographies—
and, like Masters' epitaphs, spoken in the first person singular. It contains
[as in Masters] poems that are amazingly objective, frank about every
kind of sexual activity . . ." (xix). The commencement of "Poetry: A
Magazine" by Harriet Monroe too had its role in shaping the poet, for he
came into contact with the poetry of Sandburg who made abundant use
of the free verse form. "In the literary world," as Wrenn puts it, "the
relevant events of 1896 were Edwin Arlington Robinson's publication of
his first Tilbury Town portraits in *The Torrent* and *The Night Before* and
in England A.E. Housman's publication of *The Shropshire Lad*, both
picturing the macrocosm through the rural or village microcosm, as
Masters was to do in the *Spoon River Anthology*" (27).

His first published work *A Book of Verses* was followed by
another collection of poetry *Blood of the Prophets* in 1905 under the
pseudonym Dexter Wallace. I: was followed by two dramas, "The Locket:
A Play in Three Acts" published in 1910 and "The Bread of Idleness:
A Play in Four Acts” published in 1911. The latter play is the core of Masters’ Populist literary message. Really the message was a rationalization of the agrarian way of life which involved hard work. He firmly believed that money and cities symbolized decadence, corruption and hence the end of democracy, while nature, poverty and hardwork glorified the individual and hence symbolised the flourishing of democracy. But it was his next work that earned him a place in his readers’ hearts namely, The Spoon River Anthology, which presented American life in a realistic, matter of fact manner, and not in a superficial way.

The Spoon River Anthology was published in book form in 1915 and it proved an immediate success. As we have already seen, he had got from his friend, William Marion Reedy a copy of The Greek Anthology which is a 10th century collection of epitaphs and epigrams reflecting on such themes as love, life and death. The success of Sandburg in using free verse weighed with him in choosing the free flowing verse form of the Anthology. As Willard Thorpe says “a visit from his mother in May 1914 supplied the final impulse” (LHUS1179).

As they gossiped about Petersburg and Lewistown, he determined to make a book out of the stories they knew about “Spoon River” people ‘characters interlocked by fate,’ misjudged souls who should be given a chance to be justly weighed. (LHUS1179)

A few more poems were added presumably to balance the overloading of sensationalism. To quote Babette Deutsch, “while exhibiting all the ugliness of life in a small American town of the industrial age, it admits the beauties that may also flourish there” ("Farewell Romance," *Poetry in Our Time*, 1952, 45–49). The two hundred and forty four speakers of epitaphs in *Spoon River* though dead, love life and remember its loss with regret. A society maimed by Puritanism, materialism and hypocrisy finds verbal expression in *Spoon River Anthology*.

The Anthology was followed by "Songs and Satires" (1916), "Toward the Gulf" (1918), "Starved Rock" (1919) and "The Open Sea" (1921), all in verse. Published in 1920, *Domesday Book* is a modern story of American provincial life, told in blank verse, written soon after World War I. In 1929 *The Fate of the Jury: An Epilogue to Domesday Book* saw light where he accuses America of being too materialistic. Then, as a sequel to the confessional epitaphs of *Spoon River Anthology*, Masters published *The New Spoon River* in 1924 which contained three hundred and twenty two monologues.

Masters' first play *Maximilian*, published in 1902, written in blank verse, deals with Napoleon's imperial escape in Mexico and at the same time it is an attack on United States' adventure in Philippines. His populist message and his nostalgia for the small town and nature find expression in "The Bread of Idleness." The three novels—*Mitch Miller*, *Skeeters Kirby* and *Mirage*—are very much autobiographical. Mitch Miller is truly an ideal depiction of Masters as a boy. The vanishing of Lincolnian America
is the pivotal theme for both Mitch Miller and Skeeters Kirby while Mirage, the later story of Skeeters Kirby, discusses marriage and promiscuity. *Children of the Market Place* is simply the story of Stephen A. Douglas who, to Masters, is the antagonist of Lincoln. Masters skilfully presents the several tragic marriages among the second and third generations of the pioneer family of Houghton in *The Nuptial Flight*, a novel published in 1920. Though a worshipper of Lincoln, gradually Masters became a Lincoln hater and it found expression in his *Lincoln: The Man*, a biography published in 1931. Masters accuses him of being a Hamiltonian who favoured national banks, denied states their sovereignty and the country was given over to the plundering monopolists. Another work of significance *Across Spoon River*, an autobiography, published in 1936, is really a pointer and also a clarifier to his earlier works.

Masters died in 1950 in Melrose, Pennsylvania, at the age of eighty-two and was buried in Oakland cemetery in Petersburg, Illinois.