Chapter II
THE WORLD VIEW OF E.A. ROBINSON AND E.L. MASTERS

In Edwin Arlington Robinson and Edgar Lee Masters we have an interesting pair of poets who contrast each other, paradoxically, by sharing a common world view. The distinctiveness of the philosophy of life each poet holds invites our attention more to the subtle differences between them than to the shared views. In either case, what we find is a peculiar mixture of sombreness, gloom and pessimism counterpointed by the subdued optimism that the children of the night are not totally devoid of the promise of light. Robinson’s well-known comparison of human beings to befuddled children trying to spell the word God with the wrong blocks shows the basic tenor of Robinson’s Weltanschauung. In Spoon River, too, life is a play with the wrong blocks; Masters’ men and women more often miss their targets than find them. “The children of the night” theme is common to both these poets and it is the centrality of this horrible vision of life that Robinson exhibits in “The Man Against the Sky,” which shows a man ascending a steep gradient silhouetted against the setting sun. This journey up the darkening hill suggests the basic pattern of human existence. It spells out in clear terms that life finds fulfilment in the pursuit of ‘light’—light that will liberate us from our befuddled condition and teach us to spell the right word with the right blocks. As Joseph has put it “Robinson’s vision of life as an ill-equipped search for an indefinable light finds an appropriate metaphor in the “dark-hill-to-climb” image, which is pervasive in his poems” (178).
Robinson's greatness as a poet is founded on such poems as "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford" and "The Man Against the Sky." Robinson wrote to Amy Lowell about "The Man Against the Sky":

Nothing could have been further from my mind when I wrote "The Man" than any emissary of gloom or of despair. In the closing pages, I meant merely, through what I supposed to be an obviously ironic medium, to carry materialism to its logical end and to indicate its futility as an explanation or a justification of existence. (Kaplan 15)

The poem highlights two aspects of the light—the sunset and the dawn—depending upon the point of view of the solitary man against the sky; he is not a single individual but a representative of the whole humanity. Not fully conscious of our destination, we do "of our transience here make offering to an orient Word." He need not assume that he is facing the sunset, instead, he may reasonably sacrifice himself to the dawn and, by doing so, he would be surrendering his transience. Being ephemeral, instead of striving for his own happiness, he is sacrificing himself to the future or what he hopes will be a rising light. "Time itself is thus a sacrifice to eternity. The real point is that to see beyond the sunset is not necessarily an illusion. Man need not think that his death is the end; rather his life, with its death, may be a contribution to a later dawn—a light for the future, but not for himself" (Kaplan 57). Robinson laughs at faith in heaven and in hell, in happiness and in fear of death; but he does not laugh at faith in the dawn, for light shows the way to the word, which
may be a rising God or an eternally living word. He finds ample reason for living because even a blind faith helps in the ending of blindness.

In “The Man Against the Sky” the sudden disappearance of the man behind the hill suggests to the poet man’s tryst with spiritual truths. It is an important moment of spiritual illumination, “when a sure music fills him and he knows what he may say thereafter to few men.” Unlike “The Valley of the Shadow” which is concerned with those who have already entered the valley, “The Man Against the Sky” is concerned with those who are about to enter it. One may consider it a prelude to a song of death. ‘The man’ stands for any man and the poem depicts his various attitudes in facing the end. Each man confronts an alienation and an aloneness since, as each climbs on alone, he sees a flame—a flame bright enough to kill the one who is

... alone up there

To loom before the chaos and the glare

As if he were the last god going home

Unto his last desire. (CP 60)

As each goes on his way, he goes toward his grave; yet variously they go. It is possible that he has taken the bread that every man must eat alone; or he went as one forsaken; or he went on steadily where others had fallen; perhaps he tried to mount higher than others had mounted before him; or, he may have gone down easily and with sure footing. One may have taken the light, not pessimistically but indifferently; he may have been a spectator watching life from a distance; or a cynic who sees little
truth in a world where everything is destined to doom; or as a person who considers “life a lighted highway to the tomb.” The man climbs up the hill so carelessly that ambition “his hopes to chaos led.” Certainly he is grieved to see his dreams shattered by the flame; his departure is made all the more difficult and confusing by the sufferings of his friends. Since the man cannot overcome his memories, he “may struggle to the tomb unreconciled.” Sometimes he prefers to bear the agony of remaining on the hill:

Or, seeing in death too small a thing to fear,
He may go forward like a stoic Roman
Where pangs and terrors in his pathway lie,
Or, seizing the swift logic of a woman,
Curse God and die. (CP 63-64)

The poet says that no one has been able to change the world, although “a few, by fate’s economy shall seem to move the world the way it goes” (Kaplan 61). But Robinson is certain about the fact that cannot alter destiny. And seldom is our destination our destiny.

It was the First World War which provided the immediate stimulus to the poem, for after the completion of the poem Robinson wrote to Hagedorn:

The world has been made what it is by upheavals, whether we like them or not. I’ve always told you it’s a hell of a place. That’s why I insist that it must mean something. My July work was a poem on this theme and I call it “The Man Against the Sky.” (302)
As one visualizes the solitary figure on the mountainside silhouetted against the evening sky, one captures the diminutiveness of the individual man in relation to the universe, and a sense of grandeur and mystery is experienced as the dark figure moves beyond the uttermost reaches of the natural world and the fires of time, homeward returning. The poet speculates on the various attitudes of men and their philosophy of life as they face death in the vision of the man against the sky. Man’s attitude toward life is predicated by his philosophy of life and the way he lives is coloured by his attitude towards death. Although the philosophical facts of human existence are eternally arcane, Robinson reasonably concludes that the universe is an ordered and purposeful one. Again man endures, and his continued will to live is itself an affirmation of belief.

Where was he going, this man against the sky?
You know not, nor do I;
But this we know, if we know anything
That we may laugh and fight and sing
And of our transience here make offering
To an orient Word that will not be erased
Or, save in incommunicable gleams
Too permanent for dreams.
Be found or known. (CP 129)

Robinson’s views on ultimate problems of what might be called his religious faith are explicitly dealt with in “The Man Against the Sky” where we find, subsumed in the figure who moves across the hill-top, the poet
himself dramatizing in his own plight the destiny of humanity. He is guided by:

- A vision answering a faith unshaken
- An easy trust assumed of easy trials,
- A sick negation born of week denials,
- A crazed abhorrence of an old condition
- A blind attendance on a brief ambition, (*CP* 128)

the last being the way of the confident materialist. Although his destiny is indefinite and uncertain, "his way was even as ours;" for at the end one, like him, "must each await alone at his own height/ Another darkness or another light."

The man against the sky moves alone either to failure or to glory.

For whether lighted over ways that save,

Or lured from all repose,

If he go on too far to find a grave

Mostly alone he goes. (*CP* 123)

Lancelot rides alone to find the light, Merlin leaves Vivian behind, as Arthur does his wife, taking with him only the pitiful jester Dagonet as he turns his back on the crumbling fabric built by human hands. Roman Bartholow and Matthias pass through a long dark night of loneliness before they emerge into the sunlight of a new dawn. Rembrandt hears and listens to his wiser spirit, alone.

As in the poems of Robert Frost, man occupies the central position in Robinson’s poetry. He is a humanist and man’s predicament is the
single-most important concern in his poetry. In fact, in this regard Edgar Lee Masters joins them to make a trio of American humanists. As Harriet Monroe says, “at the heart of his philosophy is the love of the race and a fierce desire for its pursuit of happiness and reasonableness” (278). Masters’ vision encompasses almost all spheres of life and he deals with the universal human condition in poems like Spoon River Anthology. His humanism is dashed with a strain of naturalism in that in poem after poem he seems to suggest that heredity and environment play a major role in shaping man’s destiny. Masters’ characters are basically what the environment—social, natural and familial—has made them. Reuben Pantier, for example, is evidently an example of the influence of inner force or heredity while Julia Miller, Nancy Knapp, Nellie Clark, Minerva Jones and a host of others are caught in the tangles of environment. Like Tess in Thomas Hardy’s novel Minerva Jones falls into the hands of fate, which, it appears, she did not deserve.

Masters possesses an existential view of life and considers it in relation to man’s unavoidable destiny. He appears to hold the same views as Kierkegaard, the Danish thinker, who believes that man is a unique and isolated individual in an indifferent and hostile universe. Because of his limited faculties, he is unable to comprehend the mysteries of the vast universe and hence his feeling of aloneness and alienation. His Starved Rock is a sombre book which expresses the sufferings and the spirit of revolt of a great soul against the limitations of human existence. It expresses, further, his belief that man has created a spiritual and temporal
reality to comfort himself. This is certainly against the philosophy of Wordsworth for whom man and nature are complementary. But Masters not only takes cognizance of the barriers separating man and nature but is constantly aware of the vast gulf that separates man from nature, or spirit from matter.

He is a pragmatic utilitarian who believes in the Jeffersonian ideals. Evidently he believes that the best rule of life is to aim at the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Though he adhered to the Jeffersonian tenets like belief in economic determinism, the nobility of the common man, a strong local, not national government and a realization of the necessity of protecting the common man against privilege, against the strong central power and the forces which bring it about, Masters could not find it in the Illinois county and the social scene of Spoon River is highly repulsive. It was vitiated by corruption, injustice, intrigue, seduction and hypocrisy. In his writings, there is an undercurrent of the craving for an ideal society and Masters' dominant theme is not physical decay so much as the growth of the human mind and its progress in its pursuit of truth through time and change. He depicts the Spoon River County as filled with such sexual denizens, private lechers, murderers, drunkards, whores, skinflints, secret saints, atheists, criminals, suicides and others that Amy Lowell remarked:

These are strange tales, so brutal that one wonders if life in our little western cities is as bad as this, why everyone does not commit suicide. Crime follows crime, and most of them are of
extreme violence and sordidness. Some are crimes of ambition, many of them are terrible, meaningless crimes which monotony breeds, most of them are crimes of sex. (271)

The poet is really pessimistic and certain that there is no hope for progress, for salvation.

Masters’ ‘Anthology’ is a vision of a small town, actually based on two Illinois towns—one represented to him all that was good in small-town life and the other all that was evil. To him, Petersburg, in the Sangamon River County was idyllic, settled by southerners, uninfected by Puritanism; and Lewistown, in the Spoon River County where Masters’ family moved when he was eleven, was a complete contrast. It had continual political warfare between the conservative, prohibitionist, New England Calvinist element and the libertarian, democratic Virginian group. The myth of the small town was based on a set of antitheses to the city. The “togetherness,” the unity of the town is contrasted with the cold impersonality and indifference of the city; the innocence of the town with the vice of the city; the simplicity and the naturalness of the town with the complexity and sophistication of the city. Certainly this myth “served as a mental escape from complexities, insecurities, and continual changes of a society in rapid transition from a dominantly rural to a dominantly urban and industrial civilization” (Channel 5). The small town myth is a myth of the community where there is the natural world and nature, so pure, simple and pristine that the villagers’ transition from life to death is largely natural and peaceful. The Spoon River Anthology is a story of the world,
a universal depiction of the eternal human situation. The poet strives to
strike a balance between two conceptions of human nature that certain
essential types exist, and that human beings are the products of their
temporal ambience. The manner in which the epitaphs summarize the
entire life of the people of Spoon River is beautifully expressed by the
poet through Samuel Gardner:

Now I, an under-tenant of the earth, can see
That the branches of a tree
Spread no wider than its roots
And how shall the soul of a man
Be larger than the life he has lived? (SR4 250)

Robinson believes that what makes life worth living points to a life beyond
life, towards a light, towards God who is a transcendent being and not an
anthropomorphic deity, for he writes in “The Man Against the Sky”:

Shall we, because Eternity records
Too vast an answer for the time-born words
We spell, whereof so many are dead that once
In our capricious lexicons
Were so alive and final, hear no more
The Word itself. . . .
Are we in anguish or complacency,
Not looking far enough ahead
To see by what mad couriers we are lead
Along the roads of the ridiculous
To pity ourselves and laugh at faith
And while we curse life bear it?
And if we see the scul's dead end in death.
Are we to fear it? . . . .

Why pay we such a price, and one we give
So clamoringly, for each racked empty day

That leads one more last human hope away . . . (CP 68)

Robinson is frequently dismissed as an inveterate pessimist because his stories are predominantly tragic, and also because he is too interested in human failures. Certainly he views life both realistically and ideally; ideally the world for him is filled with pure white light—"the gleam" or "the word." In his "The Man Against the sky," he is essentially aware that the world we move in is for the most part dark and pessimistic. According to Robinson, the desire is important because the achievement is unquestionably feeble. Robinson once wrote to Smith; "All I can see to life, as an occupation, is a kind of spiritual exercise (or at least a chance for that) by which we may, if we will, put ourselves beyond it." He was greatly criticized for comparing 'life' to 'prison house' and he later corrected it saying that the world is "a kind of spiritual kindergarten" and that the people like "bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks" (Neff 82). It is a traditional view of Christian thought and quite appropriately the first explicit statement of it in his poetry is in his portrait of Paul in "The Three Taverns," where Paul says
If the world
Were not a world of aches and innovations
Attainment would have no more joy of it.

The Apostle continues,

The power that holds the world,
Away from God that holds himself away
Was not, nor ever shall be, a small hazard
Enlivening the ways of easy leisure
Or the cold road of knowledge.

In three different letters to Smith, in 1896 and 1897, Robinson wrote, “My religion seems to be a kind of optimistic desperation and the deuce only knows what will come of it.” “There is good deal to live for, but the result pays. If it didn’t, there would be no universe. This may sound obscure, but it isn’t.” “This world is a grind and the sooner we make up our minds to the fact the better it will be for us. That, to my mind, is the real optimism. The world is as good as it can be, but God knows that’s bad enough.” (*Untriangulated Stars*, 246, 285, 286). After the First World War he asserts that the world is still a hell of a place; if life and the universe mean anything, there is no reason to suppose that it will ever be anything else.

Masters, though he was born into a Methodist family, had a strong antipathy to religion. He knew his Bible thoroughly and very early in life he turned a skeptic and refused to accept it as divine. He tirades against
Methodists, Sabbatarians and Puritans and aspires for the return of Nature. Yahweh, God of the Jews, is "an alien tyrant, who rules us out of arid Palestine"; his dislike towards Christianity is so intense, that he goes on to compare Socrates with Jesus in "The Serpent in the Wilderness." William Rose Benet comments, "In his endeavour to exalt Socrates above Jesus and, in fact, to prove that not only did Jesus bring "not peace but a sword, but merely a cloud of superstition and false testimony meaning nothing but centuries of spiritual disaster for the human race, Mr. Masters seems to me to drop out the essence of Jesus" (The Phoenix Nest 10:71).

Towards the end of the book The Phoenix Nest he raises up a new Prometheus, very proud of standing for all the things that Jesus, according to Masters, did not stand for. Unlike Robinson's "Tilbury Town," Masters' "Spoon River" is not destined for salvation. Masters' characters have reached their immortal destinies with a spiritual condition and frame of mind curiously similar to those they possessed in life. The happiest Spoon River immortals are those who lived to the fullest of their capacities. Certainly all these are brought to light when he observes, "Significant in the changes that did occur in his thought were his increasing skepticism concerning political idealism and his enfeebled belief in "the people" (Yatron 68).

Masters was strongly affected by the opposing stance taken by the religious authorities against his father who was an antiprohibitionist and was scorned by the Calvinists. To quote Masters: "This situation bore upon my attitude toward the church. I could not abide the men who
controlled it; and as I had thrown out the Bible as a revelation and the miracles as nonsense, my religious position was definite at an early time" (ASR 80-81). According to him Christianity had a good beginning in its attempt to achieve spiritual fulfillment, but gradually it absorbed what it wished from pagan learning and then attempted to change, turn upside down the remaining elements of paganism. Repression and Christianity were always associated in the mind of Masters. In "The Mournor's Bench" and "The Church and the Hotel" the poet discusses ways in which Churches try to force people to act contrary to their own inclinations. In his "Steam Shovel Cut" he describes how for a minor breach of the moral code a man might lose his life. "They hung him up for a little beer/With a woman on his knees."

Masters' attitude to religion can be more clearly understood from the following comments.

I told her (the Sunday-school teacher) that if we had some miracles like that performed in these days more would believe. However, with years and study I came to the definite conclusion that the Bible should be thrown away, and utterly eliminated so far as it is literature and that Hellas should take control of America. In spite of New England theology, America started under the influence of Hellas. Thomas Jefferson's was the great mind and vision that tried to commit America to the beauty and the rationalism of Hellas. Two summers ago after reading H.L. Mencken's excellent "Treatise on Right and Wrong," I read
Aristotle’s “Ethics” for the first time: and it revived my conviction that what America needs is the magnanimous man, not the man of charity of St. Paul. In a word, I think that Christianity has falsified and enervated the world, America included. It has bred the hypocrite, who was a far less prevalent character in pagan days. I think I can say this with as much justification in reason as I could say that a great pestilence and a vast slaughter in war were disasters to the world. To my mind, there is hardly an utterance of Jesus that is sound and true, while his mind and his character are inferior to those of Socrates, Confucius, Aristotle and Plato. (ASR 401)

Robinson had been greatly influenced by Emerson’s “Brahma” and was pushed forward by the “piercing and eternal cadence” of Whitman: The sense of ‘Light’ as a symbol of ultimate truth became established in his mind. He vehemently fought against certain aspects of emotional religion, while conscious of a close personal relationship with the Deity, and the figure of Christ retained a compelling attraction for him. After reading Mrs. Eddy’s “Science and Health” introduced to him by Jones, a Christian Science practitioner, Robinson wrote to Gledhill:

It is a remarkable book but I cannot accept it in detail. I have been slowly getting rid of materialism . . . but I fear I haven’t the stamina to be a Christian, accepting Christ as either human or divine. Selfishness hangs to a man like a lobster and is the thing that keeps humanity where it is, I know that, but
at present. I am pretty much a human being, though I see a
glimmer of light once in a while and then meditate on
possibilities. (Hageclorn 95)

Robinson’s attitude toward religion, his early faith in God and
in immortality underwent momentous changes, as time went on. The
certainties expressed in “The Man Against the sky,” “The Octaves,” “Two
Sonnets” and other poems of his young manhood lose their firm
conviction in the later poems. In his “King Jasper” one comes across the
idea that all who meditate must acknowledge God. One listens to Zoë
saying to the king:

I don’t say what God is, but it’s a name
That somehow answers us when we are driven
To feel and think how little we have to do
With what we are.

The Scriptures impressed him out of its literary value, and not spiritual,
and his nascent faith, tested in the years when he had to justify his poetic
vocation while misfortunes were descending on his family, was not
Scripture-based. Devastated by the pathetic death of his mother, he found
in the gospel according to St. John a meaning utterly different from its
interpretation by the popular Christianity against which he had revolted
and wrote “Calvary.” Robinson in “The Pilot” describes the mystic
voyage of fervent souls in search of the light.

Robinson’s Gardiner was in the heart of Puritan New England and
his pursuit of the ultimate issues had its origin in the Puritan belief that the
salvation of man depends not on his good works but on the mercy of God; for this he sought to understand God's ways and this led him to taking great interest in books and theological disputation; it was assumed to be the poet's role to dispel ignorance. Amy Lowell, in her *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* comments:

Puritanism, at this late day, has resolved itself into a virulent poison which saps vitality and brings on the convulsions of despair. . . . Unless one understand this fact, one cannot comprehend the difficult and beautiful poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson. . . . Mr. Robinson himself is a strong man, his weakness is his inheritance, no longer a tonic, but a poison, sapping the springs of life at their source. (8)

The theological base of Puritanism is summed up in the ideas of original sin, predestination, grace and election.

Robinson's mind was greatly preoccupied with the question of good and evil and the relationship of man to God and these themes are profoundly dealt with in his poetry. He was a child of his age which was scientific, empirical, materialistic, and skeptical. One of the major themes in Robinson's poetry is the place of man in the universe and his quest for the meaning of life; this leads to speculation on the existence and nature of God. While many of Robinson's poems speak of the question of God in a materialistic society, "Ponce De Leon" in particular dramatizes this dilemma over the place and function of the Church. Ponce was craving for a Catholic's consolation of the sacrament of Penance, when he was
overwhelmed by Wanhope. Again, in “Nicodemus” Robinson considers the theme of the competing and conflicting demands of a living faith and an institutionalized belief. He was a member of the establishment and saw that following Christ would bring him into conflict with the established order of things both in terms of the Church and in terms of the state.

Masters, when he speaks about the subject of religion, falls a victim to hostility and a terrific sense of loss. He, in his fight against religion chose as his champion “the great agnostic,” Robert Ingersoll, one of the most noted and denounced residents of the turn-of-the-century Illinois. He labelled him, “a general in the war of ideas for freedom.” In “Come Republic” he attacks the depravity of politics after the manner of Whitman.

Come! United States of America,

And you one hundred million souls, O Republic,

Throw out your chests, lift up your heads,

And walk a soldier’s stride.

Masters’ is grieved by the fact that the “great republic” he was dreaming of was not at hand. It turns out to be a vain hope because evidently the integrity of his own “great valley” was coming apart; besides the same kind of decline he himself was about to experience. Masters accepts the existence of the soul and clearly separates his characters into those living a purely physical existence and those concerned in one way or another with their spiritual natures. He visualized the soul as having at some time a birth of its own, a birth occurring perhaps after much suffering and after several appearances as a purely physical element in the
continuing life stream. And once this birth and growth of the soul through earthly existence is accepted, it is easy all the more to explain the difference in the fate of the characters in Spoon River and also to interpret some of Masters' underlying philosophy. The poet places emphasis on living life to the fullest, for such activity is the means by which the soul substantiates itself. As Seth Compton states, “no one knows what is good/Who knows not what is false” (SRA 186). The main objective of the soul is to identify itself with what is true, to climb the mountain as Elijah Browning puts it:

And I, bent over my staff, knew myself
Silhouetted against the snow. And above me
Was the soundless air, pierced by a cone of ice,
Over which hung a solitary star!
A shudder of ecstasy, a shudder of fear
Ran through me. But I could not return to the slopes
Nay, I wished not to return.
For the spent waves of the symphony of freedom
Lapped the ethereal cliffs about me
Therefore I climbed to the pinnacle,
I flung away my staff
I touched that star
With my outstretched hand.
I vanished utterly
For the mountain delivers to Infinite Truth
Whosoever touches the star! (SRA 278)
Masters, in his *Across Spoon River* writes,

> In communion with nature we can wrest from the gods ideas identifying life with eternity, and death which stalks the city with images of horror, of the swift hearse, of the quick business of disposing of the body. . . . I was in a way of mind to take up Confucius again and to worship the earth, and to believe with him that the only civilization is one of the feelings and that justice and happiness are worth more than the understanding and the taming of nature. And I saw with Vivekananda that there is no other God to seek but that one which is present in all beings, and in nature. (416)

*Masters' Spoon River Anthology* is really the pouring out of a heart filled with compassion for all humanity and moved with understanding for every suffering soul. According to some critics, he “was a great believer, a mystic who had seen into the heart of God, a nature as benign as Lincoln’s; with others I was the village atheist, full of curses for that revealed religion against which I had butted my satanic head in vain” (Masters’ “Genesis of Spoon River” 54–55). The rift that runs through the Pantier marriage reappears in every aspect of life in Spoon River—religion, politics, art, work. One witnesses the life-hating Puritanism of the Rev. Abner Peet that wars against the tolerant compassion of a Doctor Meyers; Elliott Hawkins’ political conservatism wars with John Cabanis’ liberal idealism; Petit the Poet’s fashionable but trivial verses triumph over the ridiculed but passionate poetry of Minerva Jones, and the self
destructive work ethic of a Cooney Potter clashed with the joyful playfulness of a Fiddler Jones. Masters was greatly proud of his father's liberalism with the result he emulated it throughout his life, but hated the asceticism of Lewistown, his mother's homeland.

One of the main concerns of Masters is the problem of private morality, i.e. human being as a continual victim of sexual maladjustment. For the first time after Whitman an author was daring enough to bring the problem of sex out into the open. In the Spoon River Anthology there are individuals and families for whom the Biblical system of monogamy was an insufficient solution of a very vexing question. It is really surprising that though he poses the problem of sex everywhere, nowhere is it solved. One comes across characters like Lucius Atherton, who is driven to the dregs of life by the force of sex; Willard Fluke, who recognized his responsibility for the blindness of his daughter exactly when he was rising in church to confess his sins of the past, and Daisy Frazer, a well-known town character, who records of herself that she,

... who always passed
Along the streets through rows of nods and smiles,
And coughs and words such as "there she goes,"
Never was taken before Justice Arnett
Without contributing ten dollars and costs
To the school fund of Spoon River. (SRA 42)

One also comes across the Pantiers—a pure case of marital incompatibility typical of Spoon River; and there are hundreds of others
who are directly or indirectly victims of sex in Spoon River: of sex starvation, or incompatibility, or crimes of violence or disease, or any other distressing guises this problem assumes. A typical Masters’ character is Elenor Murray in “Domesday Book,” who stands out in the number and intensity of her love affairs. “Domesday Book,” “a spiritual census” of America, is a Browningesque account of the investigations of Coroner Merival in the matter of the death of Elenor Murray, a free-spirited young lady whose life seems to have been made up of a series of love affairs. Quite interestingly, Coroner Merival himself has an affair with a lady, Arielle, whom he married in spite of her insanity. She goes insane and he is forced to look after her—a typical sexual problem. How to face such a situation in a monogamic society? And Masters does not give the answer.

Masters’ philosophy of sex is based on the Freudian theory of its centrality in all human activities. There are a number of sexual denizens in Spoon River whose distasteful candour grates on our moral sensibilities. It is Tennessee Mitchell, his one-time beloved, who “taught him the joys and sorrows of lovers of all times and greatly deepened his emotional powers” (ASR 313) and but for her he might not have composed many of his poems. In almost all his writings Masters either dwells at length on his love affairs and liaisons or makes tangential references to them. From the age of six he had been “carried along by an ecstasy about women, and filled with wonder and reverence for them as embodiments of mysterious beauty. The pursuit of the eternal feminine was deeply fated in my nature . . . . The search was destined never to end” (ASR 170-71). Through the
different characters Masters exposes the failure of sex in relationship with
the modern world. Sex has become a mere source of pleasure and has
lost its spiritual prominence. Hence family life has lost its sanctity; sex has
become a matter of intrigue and seduction and the cause of spiritual
starvation and death. In the treatment of sex, as Amy Lowell says,
"Masters is more pre-occupied with sex than any other English or
American author, and it is for the most part cruel, untamed, perverted
and tragic" (270). One lights upon Lucius Atherton who was ruined by
the force of sex; Nellie Clark, who was raped by a fourteen year old boy;
Mr. Benjamin Pantier, who is driven to drink and the sole companionship
of his dog by his wife, who snared his soul; Daisy Frazer, the town whore;
Henry Benett who dies of overexertion in the bed of his young wife;
Henry Barker, who knocked up his wife, out of hatred, knowing childbirth
would kill her and upon a host of sexual crimes and activities in the social
life of Spoon River. Along with Dreiser and Anderson, Masters considers
man both as a social and as a sexual being. Masters believed that the gulf
among humans is manmade and wrote about the war between the sexes.
Men live together for convenience—the two sexes live together simply
because of economic convenience, to avoid loneliness and also for the
gratification of the libido. Masters in his career as a poet, sees life through
the medium of sex.

Having convictions of his own on religion and the churches, Robinson criticised them vehemently. It might be that Robinson associated some of the “wrong blocks” with the churches; for he had
already expressed his youthful dislike against Trinity Church, Boston. Robinson’s desire to keep aloof from the church was maintained to the end of his life and was explicitly intimated in a letter to Laura Richards, written in 1933.

Leaving out the Romans and Methodists, there doesn’t seem to be much left of the churches but the buildings. Even the Romans will have to contrive some sort of symbolic compromise before long; and as for the Methodists, who come nearer to ruling us than we suspect, they are perhaps more an incorporated and shrewdly organized ignorance than they are a church, and the Church of England is more like a Social club with music and trimmings, than like anything in the Scriptures. The Christian theology has so thoroughly crumbled that I do not think of any non-Roman acquaintance to whom it means anything—and I doubt if you do. The Christian ethics might have done some good if they had ever been tried, or understood, but I’m afraid it’s too late now. There’s a non-theological religion on the way, probably to be revealed by science when science comes definitely to the jumping off place. It’s really there now but isn’t quite ready to say so (Selected Letters 169).

And Robinson was of the firm conviction that there was going to be a non-theological religion revealed by science for the future. Certainly his idea of God was something quite alien to a formal religion.
Robinson's vision of the Divine contains mainly three major themes—the Self of Idealism, the "no-God" of Science, and the father of traditional Christianity—all equally intrinsic to the American mind, which ultimately explains Robinson's reluctance in clearly indicating the nature of his deity. He went in for an idealistic interpretation of the universe as in "The Children of the Night" and "The Man Against the sky." He considers 'Light' synonymous with the Divine, or ultimate truth, and in "The Children of the Night" he confesses his faith in God as an individual. The Christ figure had a magnetic effect on him, himself being aware of a close and intimate relationship with the Deity. The Robinsons attended the Congregational Church, the creed of which was basically Unitarian. They were reluctant to follow the suppressive morality of the narrow-minded Puritanism. The Puritans were of the conviction that the elect, a chosen few only, were saved by God's grace; a man's merit was not a necessary guarantee of his salvation; the election solely rested with God. The utmost thing that one could do was to be good, avoid sin for the belief that the good would be rewarded and the bad would be punished. The poet grew up at a period of increasing skepticism when men began to adopt an extremely negativistic attitude to life as a result of the debate that began over science and religion. Robinson was influenced by Emerson, and, in particular, by the transcendentalist theory "that all human beings are part of one infinite life, and that the ends of this Absolute are best served through the cultivation by each individual of his special aptitudes" (Morris 38).
His transcendentalist views are clearly indicated in his poems, mainly "The Man Against the Sky" and "Matthias at the Door." Emerson had a pivotal role in the shaping of Robinson's transcendental idealism, supporting rather than formative. He was greatly influenced by Emerson's "The Over-Soul," and "The Children of the Night" published in 1897 doubtlessly was 'Emersonian.' Robinson, because of the Puritan trait in his writings, was not only concerned with material things, but also with heaven and hell in the human soul. In essence he was following the gospel of Emerson and of New England deepened by an idealistic appreciation of pessimism. We see Hawthorne's puritanism, Emerson's transcendentalism and Hardy's Pessimism amalgamated into a permanent pattern in his poetry. Untermeyer in Modern American Poetry analyzes Robinson's poetry as "a manifest searching for the truth, for the light beyond illusion" (Quoted in Kaplan 23). Unlike Thoreau, Robinson had the simplicity to face the realities of morality, both in society and in civilization; at the same time the poet was ready to follow the individualism of Emerson, rather than Royce's absolutism, though he was dispossessed of Emerson's optimistic self-confidence and the self-reliance was always his own. Robinson believed in the truthful expression of the human experience as he saw it to be the true and only function of the poet. Royce was of the firm belief that good and evil were infinite and contradictory and that they could never be reconciled, and Robinson was greatly influenced by New England transcendentalism, formulated mainly by Emerson.
According to Robinson, one must strive to cross the temporal and spatial barriers of the phenomenal world to have a glimpse of the unknown that lies beyond. Being a transcendental romanticist, he tried to show the relation between the individual man and nature on the one hand, and between the individual and other men in society on the other. One may conclude that he was a synthesis of both the English and the American romanticism. His idealism was, to a great extent, modified transcendentalism, where one could see a composite of Carlyle, Emerson, and Swedenborg filtered through the temperament and mind of a poet. Of course, he was a poet and not a philosopher and in poetry thought and expression are one. In 1895 he made an attempt to know for himself the essential Christianity by reading the New Testament. It was such an eye opener for him that he became fully aware of the materialistic values of many who projected themselves to be Christians, and also of the misinterpretation and distortion of Christianity itself. He had an affinity for Christianity but without the dogmatism of any particular sect or creed. He had given up Calvinism and the orthodox conception of heaven and hell. The Swedenborgian teachings had a great influence on Robinson’s philosophy. Swedenborg had set aside the doctrines of original sin and predestination, the orthodox view of the Trinity, the belief in the redemption of mankind through the atonement of Christ and also the understanding that faith was the only criterion for salvation. He believed in God, who in essence was Divine Love and Wisdom, and that there were two worlds, a spiritual world and a natural world. Since man
possessed both reason and freedom of will, he was free to accept or reject the voice of God. According to him man must spend himself wholly for the well being of others and there was no room for time and space in his doctrine. The spiritual world is ever present and "death is merely one more change of state toward complete spirituality" (Anderson 60).

The early transcendentalism of Robinson was founded on the teachings of Swedenborg; the reading of his works was essential for the understanding of the theology of the nineteenth century. But he knew, of course, from personal experience and observation, the unavoidable loneliness of the individual, the complex nature of the human psyche, the estrangement of man from man, from himself and even from God and above all, the limitations of human life on earth. While admitting the limitations of human existence, he was not ready to admit these limitations to be inevitable. He was very greatly shocked by the fate of his society and he knew that it was the result of the materialistic philosophy that was then prevalent. Robinson could not ever think of accepting a mechanistic-materialistic view of the universe for, according to Anderson, even "before Eliot's "The Waste Land" and Auden's "The Age of Anxiety," Robinson [had] mirrored the spiritual sterility of an age that was to hurl itself into two world wars and go crashing along on a "blind atomic pilgrimage" "(63). "The Man Against the Sky" was a complete and moving expression of Robinson's anti-materialism. To Robinson the war was the product of rampant materialism on a personal as well as imperial scale. He emphasized the importance of individual responsibility for what the economist termed pressures or the sociologist forces.
The influence of contemporary thought is greatly reflected in his work. He was a realist and he owed it to the scientific temper. This realism was actually the result of his keen appreciation of the stark reality of life which ultimately turned out to be the raw material of his art. Robinson had been called an “offspring of the scientific urge” in that he seemed determined to know man and his moral problems by a consideration of the material facts as science revealed them and not by reference to any abstract theory or theories. It is evident that for Robinson the pursuit of truth belonged to man and the possession of truth was reserved for God alone. Towards the end of his life, on February 13, 1933, Robinson commented:

As for religion in the future, I didn’t say that it wouldn’t be mystical. Of course, it must be that in order to be a religion, but it will be free from all theological machinery. I suppose you know about the recusant gentleman who said that he might believe in the Trinity when he saw one man riding in three carriages. (Franchere 144)

On May 4, 1934 again Robinson wrote to Laura Richards about religion:

Christianity never meant anything to me except for its ethics, which are often unfortunately expressed for the common mind. And they were evidently not expressed for the people but for initiates and specialists. What more could the man in the street or the women in the house, have made of the Gospels and Epistles than are made of them now? But it
would be interesting to know just what happened and how it all came about. Many books have been written about it, but they only tell us what the authors don’t know. Literal interpretations, or misinterpretations have made several hells on earth and a fairly rational interpretation merely tells us to be good and kind—-which we proceed immediately not to be. I don’t mean you. (Franchere 144)

One may conclude that whatever orthodox views Robinson may have held in the 1890’s, by 1933-34 he no longer had any faith in institutionalized religion. If at all he had any religious faith, it was simply personal and highly nebulous.

The social philosophy of Robinson finds expression in “Dionysus in Doubt” and “Demos and Dionysus,” where he states that the liberty of an individual must not be jeopardized by any form of government. He elucidates the theme of racial individualism in “Dionysus in Doubt” with an emphasis on freedom as opposed to uniformity. In King Jasper he speaks about the philosophy of government, where rulers, misguided by ambition, predatory love and selfishness, show no consideration for the millions and are unaware of the evils of poor ruling with the result, even democracy may turn out to be tyrannical in its methods against individual freedom. Dionysus warns man to reorganize the state in such a way that even a blind man may regain his identity and in “Dionysus in Doubt” Robinson treats of “the political principles and problems which confront any thinking individual and reveals the fact that Robinson was not indifferent to the social issues of his time” (Kaplan 128).
Masters’ philosophy of life cannot be pieced together as easily as the philosophy of Robinson whose poetry reveals that he had both transcendental and romantic feelings. When Masters was eleven years old, his family shifted from Petersburg to Lewistown where he saw a country town, a microcosm of the world, which could be a theme for “a universal depiction of human nature” (Channel 139). The intrafamilial warfare so beautifully narrated in his Anthology had been so authentically given to the reading public clearly from personal knowledge. His parents mirrored the split in the town: the mother, a prohibitionist, New Englander; his father of Southern ancestry and liberal convictions. His parents, Masters noted without resentment, never cared much for him. Masters’ father was affectionate and sympathetic towards him, but not his mother and sister. Hence, as can be imagined, the basic metaphor present in the Anthology is poison, for he was in the main poisoned by his environment—not only of his family life but also the number of love affairs he had been involved in, all of which turned out to be failures. His great achievement was to render and record his poisoning and that of others. Many of the epitaphs in Spoon River Anthology are idealistic ones, where he beautifully expresses his own limitations and those of his village and his era. He stands for a whole generation of thwarted idealists whose idealism never quite attained definition, idealists who are best remembered for their bitterness. The most dominant quality of Spoon River Anthology is a soured, sardonic, acrid, tangy bitterness that is coupled with a vague and intense idealism which expresses Masters and
his environment. Parallel with many of the epitaphs in the Anthology, Masters comes nearest to transcending his limits through the bitter honesty of his expression of them.

Masters, in the beginning was a follower of Populism, a way of life marked by simplicity, hard work, honesty, thrift and value of the product in terms of toil and time rather than in monetary terms. Populism was actually the collective protest of the agrarian faction of America against every kind of change they strongly objected and the new comers, they feared. The efficacy and meaningfulness of this movement were doubtful, for the literary Populism was reactionary in nature and the Populists intended to turn the clock back to a period a half a century before the election of 1896, which had ceased to exist. They wanted to return to the river world of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, to a boy’s world of straw hat, barefeet and fishing pole; a world characterized by small villages and farms, by hard working stoic agrarian people who knew how to live, love, work, fight and who were really egalitarian and democratic. Nostalgia was the essence of the reaction which was always present in literary Populism. Of course, Masters had a nostalgia for rural America which had its origin in his boyhood and youth.

The forty years of his literary career show that he is consistent in his original principles, prejudices, attitudes and nostalgias. Some of his convictions deepened, particularly that America was decadent and corrupt, and that its glories lay in the past whose return he alternately despaired of and hoped for. One notable change that occurred in his
thought was his increasing skepticism on political idealism and his deteriorating belief in the people. His poems betray the weakness of the Populist position. Masters' "nay-saying" was in conformity with the protesting spirit of Populism. He was thoroughly conscious of the criticism and ridicule levelled at the feckless politics of the Populists. He stood firmly on the side of "the Democratic Party since that was the agrarian party, the party of the South" (Yatron 68). Masters is very much a part of a tradition—the Jeffersonian tradition of free inquiry, humanitarianism and egalitarianism. In most of his writings a panorama of American history appears, through the eyes of a frustrated agrarian sympathizer, who, though he personally could tolerate neither the village nor the city, fervently wished that America had remained a country of small Jeffersonian villages occupied by a life-loving, homogeneous, farmer population. Masters, like Lindsay, was a thorough going Middle-Western agrarian reformer. They are different in their temperament and also in their attitude to Lincoln.

His grandfather, Squire Davis Masters was an industrious and incorruptible farmer and he represented everything that was admirable, though old fashioned. Masters had great love and admiration for his grandparents and they were his ideals with the result he firmly believed that Petersburg on the Sangamon was uniquely attractive. Despite all these in the background, Masters fell a victim to pessimism during his mature days owing to the sore, agonizing days he had in Lewistown to which his family shifted when he was eleven years old, and which he
really wanted to forget. Hardin Masters, his father, had rather miserable
days in Lewistown as a lawyer: he was against prohibition, abstained from
the Church causing greater enmity by his absence with the result the
religious leaders of the town stood against his ambition of becoming the
county judge.

But Masters was, as already said, really proud of his father’s liberalism and he followed his footprints throughout his life. He was strongly against the asceticism prevalent in Lewistown and avowed to be a free thinker, free lover and free drinker. The English poet and critic John Cowper Powys called Masters “the natural child of Walt Whitman,” the only poet with “true Americanism in his bones,” (Flanagan 5). The avowed message of his “The Bread of Idleness” is that all worldly luxuries must be forsaken and we must return to Nature. Money and cities brought about decadence, corruption and death of the Republic. On the other side, nature, the woods, poverty and hard work ennobled the individual and made for the true democracy of the Revolutionary days. The message was a rationalization of the agrarian way of life—hard work. It is, as it were, an atavistic message like the Gandhian message of “manufacture by hand” (Yatron 47).

Lust for money, Masters strongly felt, was the real inspiration for the Civil War. It turned the history of America topsy-turvy, causing the total annihilation of America’s past clearing the way for corruption in government, for monopoly and ultimately for imperialism. The agrarian South pleaded for “state’s rights” and certainly it was closer to the ideals
of Jeffersonian democracy and Populism than was the North. Masters’ “Lincoln, the Man” was dedicated “to the Memory of Thomas Jefferson, the preeminent philosopher-statesman of the United States and their great President, whose genius was devoted to the peace, enlightenment and liberty of the union created by the Constitution of 1787.” (Hartley 61). It explicitly states Masters to be a Jeffersonian Democrat, a believer in agrarianism, state’s rights and the constitution of delegated powers. But his admiration for Lincoln in the 1890s turned upside down, mainly after reading Albert Beveridge’s *Life of Abraham Lincoln*.

It was Beveridge’s book that stirred me to my performance. I could no longer bear to see pharisees, bankers, imperialists hiding behind the deceiving homeliness, the pretended democracy of Lincoln. I wanted to bring Lincoln out into the open where his character and principles would be clear to everyone. (Hartley 62)

His grandfather, too, had given him the necessary materials for an entirely different judgement of Lincoln. His chief offence was that he was a Whig ‘Hamiltonian,’ who allied himself with the rich and the powerful forcing the country into a civil war that eclipsed the ‘Jeffersonian’ ideal by delivering the United States into the hands of bankers and industrialists.

The antithesis between ‘hard’ father and ‘soft’ mother, which keeps surfacing in veiled ways in other antitheses between father and grandfather, city and country, law and poetry, here appears in the antithesis between Lincoln and Douglas.
Lincoln, for all his Petersburg association, ultimately stood with the North, the city, and the future, while for Masters, Douglas stood with the South, the country and the past. (Hurt 418)

Masters blames Lincoln for the chief political losses during and after the Civil War:

He became a man who broke all law
To have his law. He killed a million men
For what he called the Union . . . .

Masters is provoked to say so because he saw a new, urban society growing up indifferent to the old values. By 1933, the city had reached “a climacteric of intellect concerning itself with business and money; and little else could be expected when leading statesmen, expressing in terms of religion and politics, declared that the business of government was business.” (Masters, “The Tale of Chicago” 242) Masters really wished to follow the Jeffersonian ideals, and also wanted individual cities like Chicago to give more aid to the artist, and not make them starve. They stood for less government, for more individualism and for the romantic past and Masters sided with the views of the South and believed it to be the cause of the Republic. But writers like Whitman and Mark Twain had failed to see the justness of the cause of the South, an unforgivable sin because Mark Twain himself was a Southerner; all the more, contrary to the ideals of his family, he became a Republican and an abolitionist. Masters had his base in the America of Jeffersonian democracy while he wanted to call himself a Hellenist. In Spoon River Anthology he tried to
combine American provincialism with Greek universality. He wanted, by
telling the story of an American country town, to make the story of the
world. In *Domesday Book* by unveiling the life of the dead girl, Elenor
Murray, through the biography of everyone associated with her, Masters
makes possible an elaborate analysis of the Spoon River County and also
of American life.

Masters was a fatalist; he visited Emerson's grave in the summer of
1908 standing where he confessed to himself that Fate had cornered him,
and this was the answer he gave when asked, why he did not produce the
Anthology until he was forty five. The Anthology was the earliest popular
work to explore the myth of American traditional values, and for this
reason Masters was too closely associated with Sinclair Lewis and
Sherwood Anderson. Masters' *Spoon River* is made remarkable and also
unique because its main concern was humanity. Hence Masters' poetry
too, was truly a criticism of life in the Arnoldian sense. In his "The Genesis
of Spoon River" Masters emphatically states that the real purpose behind
his writing the *Spoon River* and *The New Spoon River* "was to awaken
that American vision, that love of liberty which the best men of the
Republic strove to win for us, and to bequeath to time" ("Genesis of
*Spoon River" 55).

The sense of fate was clearly revealed in *Across Spoon River*,
Masters' own autobiography. The nuptial union of his parents was to
effect a synthesis of the "Gospel Hate" of New England and the "Gospel
love" of the South. "The humour, the characterization [and] the lusty
vitality of the Spoon River portraits were from his father, and "the philosophy, the mysticism, the imagery, and the irony" were from his mother, their democracy from him, their doubt of it from her, "their passion and vitality" came from both" (Quoted in Wrenn 8). Titles such as "Poems of the People" and "More People" clearly state Masters' faith in the people and in America. Though pessimistic by nature, Masters never gave in to hopeless despair. He finds fault with America for being a vast mediocrity of materialism in "Fate of the Jury." In the epilogue to his first novel "Mitch Miller" "with unfailing consistency Masters had planted his populistic pessimism; there is a sermon on hating the dollar and gold; there is an insistence that the good American "stock" has been killed in the Civil War, that new strange breeds of foreigners are destroying the Republic" (Yatron 59). "Skeeters Kirby" a sequel to Robinson's "The Man Against the Sky," and an autobiographical work, echoes anti-war sentiments of Masters. Masters spoke about Skeeters learning law in order to please his father, contrary to his own inclinations and about the series of love affairs and the unfortunate marriage, ultimately giving the message that American materialism not only destroyed the lover, but also the artist.

Masters always favoured small towns and disliked cities and in his works his attitude was frequently as biased in favour of the countryside as was Wordsworth's in poems like "Michael." Masters was a capable lawyer who defended the downtrodden and was a friend of the proletariat. At the time he was writing and publishing the epitaphs in the Mirror in 1914, he was actually moving on with a difficult case through the Supreme Court of
Illinois and was acting for the Waitresses’ Union in an injunction case which kept him in court almost daily. As such he “was coming in contact with [the various] phases of human nature” and also “with stories of human suffering” and these certainly made him always conscious of the agonies undergone by his fellow beings (“Genesis of Spoon River” 27: 49). It is essentially a picture of a society punctured by puritanism, materialism, narrow religion and hypocrisy; it is not an objective or scientific account, instead, a highly subjective, personal vision of small town life and the national life.

*Spoon River* is neither an indictment on the American small town nor a criticism of Spoon River’s rusticity, instead it is a jeremiad on the corruption of the village, as Herbert Ellsworth Childs puts it in “Agrarianism and Sex”:

We must remember the Spoon River is rural Illinois in the closing years of the last century. As such, it had already been befouled by the selfishness and vices of a capitalist society. . . . It was the selfish destruction of liberty that brought so many Spoon Riverites to regretful graves. Spoon River represents to Mr. Masters a failure in social justice. (334)

*Spoon River Anthology* attracted a large number of readers in 1916 by its sour socialism. It was well grounded on Populism that whatever was originally built by the early settlers was stolen away when the small towns gave way to the cities, and hence the exhortation to the descendants of the veterans of the Revolution to stand united against the descendants of
the profiteers and the thieves in order to get back their inheritance. Just like Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” *Spoon River* too presents the modern society as a waste land. According to Masters, the sterility of modern society was not simply a matter of frustrated or loveless sex; it was the result of sexual, social, religious, economic and political forces. It is important to note that Masters emphasized the importance of sex as a basic human drive, a very strong and powerful natural force, which, suppressed, becomes personally and socially dangerous. Sex, being a basic human need, is a symbol of liberty and its suppression is a denial of that freedom. In its higher manifestation it is human love and in its highest, divine or spiritual love; Masters proved it through the epitaphs of Lucius Atherton and Daisy Frazer.

Though he was to some extent “a sex-obsessed radical and iconoclast,” Masters presented himself as “a proponent of traditional Jeffersonian values, strictly hetero-sexual relationships, and Christian love, all based in a fundamental individualism, which included a belief in personal immortality and a salvation determined by one’s conduct in this life” (Wrenn 55). In the Anthology a few epitaphs emphasize the hunger for immortality and its possible attainment. The Spoon River motifs are repeated in his novel “Nuptial Flight” which presents the miserable small town environment, the degeneration of American life since the time of the early settlers, the corruption of Christianity and finally the total failure of marriage as an institution; one would evaluate him as a writer who thought accurately and revealed life creatively.
Masters’ philosophy is built on human examples—he never dares to reason out things apart from life. He may be a realist and “his realism transcends mere fact, the finite and the infinite are equally real to him” (Monroe 51). He makes Elsa Ramsey say:

Do you know what makes life a terror
And a torture, Spoon River?
It is due to the conflict between the little minds
Who think life is real,
And who therefore work, save, make laws,
Prosecute and levy wars—
Between these and the big minds
Who know that life is a dream,
And that much of the world’s activity
Is pure folly, and the chattering of idiots. (NSR 280)

He chants the praise of life, describing it as something splendid and lovable, which most people never care for:

O life, O unutterable beauty;
To leave you, knowing that you were never loved enough
Wishing to live you, all over,
With all the soul’s wise will
And he is against any desecration of life, which is essentially an unpardonable sin. He considered himself

a southern liberal, a Democrat in politics, a man who inevitably opposed materialism and the rights of property but
who fought instinctively for freedom and progress . . . he could not conscientiously claim a completely Southern ancestry and flatly repudiate New England, as Vachel Lindsay, his Illinois contemporary could and did, he consistently allied himself with the forces of progressivism” (Flanagan “The Spoon River Poet” in Southwest Review XXXVIII, No.3, [Summer, 1953]: 232–33).

Masters was exposed to populist influence from his twenty third year to thirty seventh (1892–1906) and he never outgrew the Populist agrarian in himself. Though it was a slavocracy in the South, Masters considered it the lesser evil in comparison with the plutocracy of the North. Masters was convinced that the cause of the South was the cause of the Republic, for the South stood for less government, for more individualism and also for the romantic past. In “Blood of the Prophets” Masters published two companion poems: “America in 1804” and “America in 1904” where rural America and imperialistic America are juxtaposed and contrasted. All political personages, except Altgeld and Bryan are pre-Civil War. The Civil War was a turning point in American history—it destroyed America’s past, paved the way for corruption in government, helped monopoly and imperialism. The inspiration behind the Civil War was greed for money, and it was, in Masters’ own interpretation of history, “of the Jews” (Yatron 27).

A thematic study of Robinson’s poems indicates that the most conspicuous group is on the theme of failure. These are mostly thumbnail
sketches of Gardiner men who constitute, in the words of Robert N. Hertz, "a grotesque assemblage of the freakish, the deluded, the unhappy and the insignificant . . . the regrettable cases of social disaffection or moral perdition" (345). The theme of failure had left a deep imprint on the mind of Robinson very early in life for which his own family history contributed a lot. The period between 1893 and 1904 was, for Robinson, years of tragedy and discouragement; also it was a period of growth and triumph and his basic ideals and convictions, both philosophic and poetic, were forged in fire. Though his father was industrious and prosperous, he saw the slow decline of everything his father had earned. His mother fell a victim to black diphtheria and at her death the undertaker left the coffin on the porch. The minister read the funeral services, through an open window, standing near the porch. There was nobody present to carry the coffin and Mary Robinson's own three sons had to see to the rest of the funeral service—yet another psychological trauma to Robinson.

To crown all this, Robinson had his own personal reasons for being a victim of failure. Mary Palmer Robinson was thirty six when Win (Robinson) was born and she almost died of severe haemorrhage. And it was only after six months that the boy was named Edwin by lot. When he grew up, he fell in love with Mabel Moore, the sister of Ed Moore, one of his high school classmates. It came to nothing. His great love affair was supposed to be with Emma, who was exquisitely beautiful and who appreciated his poetry, but quite unfortunately she became the wife of Herman. The ear which the teacher in the grammar school had smitten
some ten years before was giving him excruciating pain. All these—a
precarious financial situation, two brothers broken, an unhappy love
affair, his mother's death, a troublesome ear and eyes that for a time went
bad, and Robinson's sense of insufficiency—were the problems confronted
by him very early in life.

Robinson's theme of failure follows two patterns. The first type is
the failure who seems to be beyond redemption, who does not at all
possess the saving grace of character that would find favour in men's
eyes. They are those who do not experience some inner change that
would render less severe the general indictment against him. One comes
across characters like Richard Cory, who has a sharp sense of emptiness,
of a life wasted, a sense of failure and of his own hidden agony; Doctor of
Billiards, a commonplace type of failure, a man without direction or goal;
Miniver Cheevy, who keeps on drinking and sinks into a state of oblivion.
Aaron Stark desperate and beyond redemption, does not even wish to be
saved; and Ferguson in "Tasker Norcross" aware of his emptiness, claims
sympathy from others, and these certainly are beyond redemption. There
is the second type, the failure who for reasons of almost infinite variety is
redeemed; the reader finds some changes of the inner man which lift him
from the shame of complete ignominy. There are men like Shadrach O'
Leary, a poet who writes trash for years, but later recognizes himself to be
a failure, puts his poetry aside for an occupation that permits him to
respect himself and at last, he finds the 'gleam,' the 'light' and is a 'failure
spared'; though Uncle Ananias is a total failure, everyone understands
him and is loved by all; and the heroine in “Growth of Lorraine” who driven by the urges of the physique over which she has no control and unwilling to accept the humdrum married life that most women seek, tells her lover,

I’ve gone too far; the life would be too slow
Some could have done it—some girls have the stuff;
But I can’t do it; I don’t know enough
I’m going to the devil—And she went. (SP 59)

Her lover reads her letter after some years, and he is not surprised to learn that at last she has recognized her inability to continue as a slave of passion and so has committed suicide.

Captain Craig and Fernando Nash are failures in the eyes of the world, but in the eyes of Robinson, they redeem themselves. Mostly the same situation is seen in Cavender’s House where Cavender, after twelve years of penance, finds courage to face the evil in himself. It is the very same peace Guinivere finds in her convent. Even Nightingale and Matthias save their souls at the end—one by dying and one by living.

Robinson, an observer of the facts of the spirit and also of physical realities, knows man’s limitations and drawbacks, and still believes in man’s destiny and in life’s ideal completion. Being an idealist, he remains close to Christian feelings, but unhampered by Christian dogmas. Emerson necessarily had an influence over him, by his spiritual fervour rather than by his actual teaching. For a sensitive person, the tragic disproportion between our longings and our achievements is the source of
exquisite pain. Robinson dwells more on the tragedy of defeat than on the complacent illusions of proclaimed victory. His artistic purpose is in accord with his philosophical outlook; for it is in the sincere and obstinate, but often frustrated, efforts of man to realise his better self that dramatic emotion lies. He has brought into broad day light the nobleness of man’s endeavour, even when the results stop short of the intentions. In fact, his best philosophical lyrics bear on what has been called “the success of failure” (Cestre 55).

Robinson’s acute personal sense of failure, by all New England standards and also by the standards of Tilbury Town, made him sympathetic to failure in other people and also believe in the spiritual victory behind every worldly defeat. At a time when the people of his family looked upon him for help, he was not in a position to aid them financially, which developed in him a sense of failure and guilt, and it rankled in him, like a painful sore, throughout the rest of his life. And his personal experience of poverty and alienation found expression in his portraits of non-conformists, derelicts, alcoholics, suicides and above all in his pre-occupation with human failure itself. He thought that his own townspeople considered him a failure, and more than anyone else he knew how little he had achieved. Though there was heavy pressure on him to follow in the footsteps of his father and Herman, he stood for the most difficult course, i.e. to stick on to his writing, for to do otherwise would be to fail. This bent of mind of his is clearly seen in his sonnet, “Dear Friends.”
Robinson's verse is rooted firmly in the background of his own home country. A major theme of his verse, the problem of individual responsibility for failure, had been staring him in the face ever since his brothers had willed their lives into failures through acts of omission as well as commission. The tragedy of Dean's life intertwined with that of Herman had a great impact on Robinson's sympathetic understanding of the suffering and the defeated as seen in poems like "How Annandale Went Out." Unlike Browning, who regarded the universe as full of sweetness and light, Robinson observed a different Weltanschauung, a scheme whose chief components were bitterness and blight. One sees a character in "The Glory of the Nightingale" doomed to defeat and in the "Cavender's House" a character who, as the tale opens, is a failure in his town's eyes, but ultimately they win a secret moral victory. His blank verse poem "Captain Craig" is a philosophy of life, given through the humorous lips of a social derelict who is considered disreputable by the world. "It is a drama of the unapparent, revealing the divine soul hidden in the starved body of that "sequestered parasite," a soul that had the courage to be itself abiding in its dream, facing the world as a superb failure . . ." (Sinclair 331-32)

The characteristics specially to be mentioned in Robinson are his firmness of purpose, allegiance to truth, trust in destiny, willing acceptance of hardship and above all a handsome and dignified life style. He was a sympathetic witness to human joys and sorrows. Though earlier he followed the teachings of Jesus and was a Christian liberal, later he
preferred a faith in the spiritual, without having any formal belief. He put his trust in his conscience, in the undying hope of man and believed that a prophetic heart could never fail. In *Merlin* he stands with the individual man and in the destiny of mankind.

In his view no illuminated life could result in failure or defeat. “Captain Craig” and “The Man Against the Sky” and many other poems written before 1916 are concerned with the tragedy of “light.” There is Captain Craig whose philosophy attempts to revive by mixed touches of beauty and humour, the human doctrine of Christ, which is just contrary to the sterner teaching of the Old Testament. Craig while realizing his material failure is happy and at peace in the company of “laughing” God. Captain Craig is an example of Robinson’s glorification of failure. Robinson was not interested in exterior realism, rather in states of mind, the interpretation of people and the consequences of their actions. Positively, he was interested in the failures, the misfits, the troubled, the people in the wrong jobs, people with wrong marital partners and also people with wrong goals.

The dominant theme in plays like “Van Zorn” and “The Porcupine” is the tragedy of self knowledge with regard to the failure of one’s house, home, marriage or some private concerns. In “Amaranth” for instance, the characters are granted self vision by Amaranth. Each character, in solitude, searches his own nature when one becomes conscious of one’s own failure. One might say that the poem itself is a new statement and a very detailed study of the real implications of self knowledge. There is the
central figure Fargo who finds his own self by contrast and self-understanding while all the other characters in the poem fail to find their proper places. "Amaranth is the desire within men towards immortality, toward fame" (Walton 21).

Robinson's artistic purpose is in consonance with his philosophic outlook. His work as a whole is based on the tragedy of defeat and not on the complacent illusions of proclaimed victory referred to as "the success of failure." Many a time he was haunted by disappointed love with its insistent pathos. In his poem "Her Eyes" he pictures a gifted painter, who, though he has reached the summit of fame, feels his life blighted just because he could not win the woman he loved. In "Captain Craig," spiritual success is achieved in spite of or rather because of, worldly failure.

Masters, in all his writings, is prone to have a pessimistic approach to life. His Spoon River Anthology and The New Spoon River are essentially pessimistic, where the hidden sins of the society are brought to light. One understands that of the 244 epitaphs of the Spoon River Anthology and the 322 of The New Spoon River, only very few are ideal; in other words, Masters holds on to the tenet that the world is essentially an evil place where only very few are good. The Spoon River County Masters pictures is a microcosm where there is pain, oppression and suffering ever present. Under the prevailing capitalist economy it is filled with corruption and injustice; the powerful and the wealthy use the existing laws and orders simply to suppress the poor. One meets with
characters like Thomas Rhodes, Editor Whedon and others who were in the forefront to exploit the poor and the downtrodden. It is all the more detestable that even the religious men, like Deacon Taylor, are tainted by corruption. Life is made all the more unbearable and difficult with the rise of industrialism and imperialism. These are the premises that made Masters' attitude to life dull and gloomy, and his conception of man as a lonely, isolated or solitary creature. Blind Jack, in Spoon River Anthology says, “And hear him sing of the fall of Troy.” John Horace Burleson utters, “Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll!” John M. Church comments, “But the rats devoured my heart/And a snake made a nest in my skull.”

Very early in life, Masters developed a pessimistic approach to life. It is worthwhile to think of his Domesday Book at this juncture for it enlightens the readers as to how lives are wasted from lack of sympathy and imagination. In Fate of the Jury he accuses America of being materialistic and of leaving the artist to poverty. In Mirage he speaks about money corrupting the Republic. Becky Norris, in “Skeeters Kirby” instead of marrying Skeeters Kirby, marries a rich and aging man. He was no optimistic observer of the American scene of his day; he evaluates Lincoln not as the pilot who weathered the storm, but as the fount and origin of much of the evil in modern America.

Masters' Anthology is a factual and socialistic presentation of the gradual disintegration of so many communities that wither and are obliterated. Every vestige of the town's glorious past has been annihilated.
“All is changed save the river and the hill: That is the secret of Spoon River,” said the New York Tribune, and it is as the record of a failure of an American community passed over and with its face turned to the past, that the book is to be judged” (Untermeyer 163). Masters looks at his little township as a cross section of a typical small mid-western city, where he brings to the lime light the conflict of purpose and passion, its hates and sacrifices, its jealousies, its callousness, its smugness, hypocrisies and frustrated dreams. By revealing the crisis of each individual life in Spoon River, Masters reveals the soul of the community. There is a general sense of tragedy in Spoon River of broken and wasted lives; of unnecessarily wasted lives. These people who are dead love life and remember it with regret. Not all of these people have yet gained the secure repose of the hill at Spoon River.

Certain events in his life had a negative effect on his poetry. He wished to retire to a rural place, to find a quiet atmosphere to write, and found Spring Lake, Michigan, to be the ideal place, but unfortunately he quarrelled with the residents, and all the more, got separated from his wife. Though it was quite a personal matter, he was sure he had been driven out by religious fundamentalists and political conservatives. In his poem “Spring Lake” in “The Starved Rock” he clearly states where the artist hero “the god Apollo” is driven out of the town by a group of preachers, teachers and dullards. His “Toward the Gulf” is a record of losses. “No fewer than fifteen of the forty six poems, [all visibly subjective], discuss a romantic ideal which has in some way, failed . . .” (Russell 343-44).
More than his anger, his outrage before cant, his cranky politics, his radicalism which is today not so radical, Masters may be read for his profound empathy with shattered lives, for his relentless preoccupation with the tragic limitations of small and great people. He writes about people who were victims of the old and new moralities, “of those inhabitants of Spoon River who were tragically obsessed with impossible ideals or flawed with every form of human corruption. Masters’ pessimism is absolute; often, at his best, most unbearable” (Barnstone, Introduction to *NSR* xix). To the end he was an inconsolable pessimist, not because of facile skepticism, but because he wanted more, he was profoundly wounded because life ran out on him, and like an arrested adolescent, he was forced to live with his dream. In his seventies his pessimism softened, yielding to a growing nostalgia in favour of America’s golden past.

Masters is against the rise of materialism, imperialism and industrialism. *The Fate of the Jury, Domesday Book* and his novel *Skeeters Kirby* present the materialistic world doomed to defeat and failure. In *Spoon River Anthology* he shows that industrialism and imperialism brought the protective tariff, the sordid war of aggression and the most pathetic struggle between capitalists and labourers. The result of all this judicial corruption, journalistic greed, public graft and private vice is the America of the 1930’s and Masters showed his opposition to it by taking a stand on the Jeffersonian democracy. He, being a Southern liberal and a democrat in politics, was opposed to materialism and the rights of property, and like his father, he was an anti-prohibitionist.
He condemns American materialism in his *Mirage*, which is destructive both for the lover and the artist. In his opinion World War I was an imperialist war, for money wants war, and war must have money for friend. He was totally opposed to every kind of war. He was greatly shocked by all American wars, civil or foreign, which followed the heroic struggle for independence from Great Britain. “The Spanish-American War deeply offended him, since in it he found evidence of barefaced American imperialism” (Wells, *Literary Half Yearly* 14: 21). The lives of most of those who came to lie in the Spoon River cemetery were marred by the cruelties of an economic system based on exploitation, by the meanness or stupidity of average minds and by an inherent weakness of body or spirit.

Masters published *Spoon River Anthology* in 1915 when “American verse was just recovering from the doldrums of the genteel tradition and was slowly responding to the revitalization being provided by Robinson, Frost, Pound, Sandburg and Masters himself. Old forms were being renovated or abandoned, vitality counted far more than method, and the extension of subject matter proclaimed by Whitman long before was finally being achieved” (Flanagan 233-36).

Masters, with his flouting of tradition, with his scorn for hypocrisy, with his sympathetic appreciation of the eternal problems of the artist as well as the eternal frustrations imposed by a materialistic culture, found himself the poetic voice of the age to much the same degree that Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald were the fictional voices. The atomic age has
made rural complacency seem superior to urban congestion; and with the revolt against the small town having run its course, the artist writes his battles on a larger front.

An analytical study of Masters’ forty years of literary production will show that he remained constant to the primary theme of literary populism, that America’s glory lay in its agricultural past, a past whose return he hoped for. Hence Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology* is not an indictment of the American small town, instead, it is a lament for its corruption. His *New Spoon River*, and other works present Masters’ sweet agrarian folk in their idyllic agrarian setting. Masters admitted that “America was a better country and life in it better than it had been during the years preceding the Civil War. But for Masters it was too late to change his themes; he could live only in the past and plead for his old gods” (Yatron 63).

In the majority of the Tilbury Town poems, Robinson holds up to ridicule the town’s stark materialism, its prudery and its self-righteous morality. Tilbury, very much identifiable with his own home town Gardiner, is the fictional setting of a large number of his poems, and like Faulkner’s “Yoknapatawpha County” or Masters’ “Spoon River,” the ‘Tilbury’ poems give a regional identity to the characters. Some of his antimaterialistic poems include “The Field of Glory,” “Fragment,” “Lost Anchors, “Richard Cory,” “The Flying Dutchman,” and “Vickery’s Mountain.” Robinson created “Richard Cory” explicitly to expose the claims of materialism as a
way of life. One meets with "Bewick Finzer" whose greed leaves him a pitiable wreck. Robinson was convinced that he must strike at the intellectual roots of materialism in current science and philosophy, especially since Marxian communism, looming as capitalism's most serious rival, drew sustenance from the same roots. He struck with all his might in "The Man Against the Sky." Twenty years later, having read Eddington and seen the approach of a second World War, he returned to them with apocalyptic King Jasper, which leaves humanity, among the ruins of a world in which both capitalism and communism have been destroyed to continue its slow evolution toward wisdom, guided by something beyond itself which it calls God. (Neff 256)

In 1919, the poets celebrated Robinson's fiftieth birth day when Amy Lowell introduced him as a "foe to materialism." He, like Emerson, is a son of the Puritans who has become antipuritan. Normally his thought is markedly spiritualistic, at the same time without affiliation to any narrow orthodoxy. He is "as averse to bigotry as to materialism" (Hagedorn 324). Robinson writes Hagedorn about the pathetic central figure in "The Field of Glory" that "the world is peppered with his kind, and I simply drew his picture to let people see what they thought about it in the light of contemporary materialism. If materialism is true, then parenthood is assuredly the greatest of all crimes, and the sooner the much advertised race is annihilated, the better" (SL 80). His "Roman Bartholow" is a
dramatic narrative of materialism in modern life; and a critique of traditional materialism he gives in *King Jasper*. He is certain about the futility of materialism as a "justification of existence." And he was never a materialist.

Robinson is an antiprohibitionist to the core. He took the enactment of the eighteenth amendment to the constitution in 1918 as an affront to personal liberty, setting a precedent for more dangerous restrictions of individual freedom. He writes Ledoux, one of his friends, that this infringement will not be accepted without a secession or civil war. Robinson is certain that this is something evil and at the same time arbitrary and certainly cannot work for good. He also asserts that in spite of all its dangers, alcohol is the least harmful of all the active demons that one comes across in life.

Robinson, like Masters, really liked Bryan and considered him "the greatest political figure in America since Lincoln." The finest of the political poems "Cassandra" probes deep into the weakness of the natural character. His poem "Demos" is directed against the vague enthusiasm for democracy engendered by war time slogans and warns against confusing it with levelling down:

See not the great among you for the small,
But hear their silence, for the few shall save
The many, or the many are to fall.

Having a socialistic outlook, Robinson places a social emphasis, in "Demos and Dionysus," "Dionysus in Doubt," and "King Jasper."
"Dionysus in Doubt" treats the political principles and problems which confront any thinking individual. The first two emphasize the idea that the liberty of an individual must not be impaired by a "miscalled Democracy," while "King Jasper" is a study of character growth and moral development, varying according to the extent and direction of the individual's sense of responsibility and value, ultimately culminating in the tragedy of power.

The development of his poetic maturity was boosted up by the writing of prose fiction, an outgrowth of his basic interest in people. His poetic character sketches and longer narrative poems were probably an outgrowth of his work in prose. Of course, he was headed towards the creation of his "Tilbury Town" and also of his own personal style. Along with his own poetry, he was also influenced by the poetry of the past, especially the work of Cowper and of Crabbe. "Captain Craig" was to be his justification, his answer to "Tilbury Town," his passport to recognition and above all, a livelihood. Alfred H. Louis is his living model for "Captain Craig" and the real theme of it is that man must learn to laugh with God.

The foregoing discussion was intended to show the basic cast of the two minds which conceived and expressed the Tilbury and Spoon River poems. They lived in the same age and had the same social, cultural and political environment to represent and comment on. Their depiction of the age they lived in can be expected to be similar, given the similarity of their world view. Each draws basically the same picture, yet in details
each is distinctively different from the other. The chief concern of the following chapters is to investigate Robinson's and Masters' representation of the failure type, which is denominated collectively as "blighted lives" in this dissertation. The next three chapters explore the social scene in Robinson and Masters so that individual failures are correlated to the social scene, which should be viewed as a causal factor so far as the blighted lives are concerned.