Chapter III

E.A. ROBINSON: THE SOCIAL SCENE IN THE SHORT AND MEDIUM LENGTH POEMS

Robinson was born into a society where poetry, like all the other arts, suffered from the absence of individuality. The poetry of the older group proved to be colonial to the core and had its allegiance to the established foreign traditions. The society was based on extreme Puritanism which precluded people from expressing themselves and paved the way for religious tyranny and literary dictatorship and for a destructive censorship. The period immediately preceding the Civil War was blind with dogma and denial; it was a period of stagnation. Literature in America was alienated from life; it was given the status of a handmaiden to politics or religion. Gardiner, Maine, of Robinson was typical of New England and the nation and the Robinson family were informed with bourgeois values. The industrial revolution came to full swing in the United States only after 1865; it was an age which preached a gospel of wealth—in fact, America was materialistic. Essentially like his ancestors, the early settlers in Maine, New England, he shared the Puritan sense of purpose and of obligation. But Puritanism in literature suffered a setback when Walt Whitman asserted his "glory of the commonplace." He wanted poetry to be human, racy and vigorous; just as it is close to nature, he wanted it to be close to the soul and to the mind of man. Apart from being intolerant of the Puritans, Whitman outraged the aesthetic formalists of his period by taking his themes hot from the rude and
raucous tumble of life, and his *Leaves of Grass*, which explores the possibility of an American, a cosmopolitan range of self expression, was his answer to them. Such individualized accents one comes across in Frost, Sandburg, Robinson, Lindsay et al.

Robinson's Gardiner was as materialistic as towns elsewhere in America and "most of its citizens were impatient with anything that could not be translated into dollars and cents" (Thompson xiv). He witnessed the material success of his father and also of his two brothers, Dean and Herman while he was at home doing nothing but writing. Quite unfortunately his father's health declined so drastically that he became an invalid at home. His brother Dean, a flourishing physician, became an addict to morphine, lost his health, and finally killed himself. Yet, it must be noted that Dean inspired him in writing poems like "Captain Craig," "The Pilot," and "The Dark House" and also the fatalistic quality in Robinson traces its origin to Dean's failures.

The national economy of America was flourishing at tremendous speed in 1889-90, and his brother Herman, who was impatient to acquire more wealth, persuaded his father to sell a major portion of his eastern assets and invest it in the west, mainly in St. Louis. But the over-expansion of industrial capacity along with the over-evaluation of property holdings caused the panic of 1893. Robinson wrote many of the early Tilbury Town poems immediately after the great depression of 1893, a catastrophe for both the Robinson family and the town, and a grim signal of the encroaching instability of a society at the mercy of
inexplicable forces. One comes across “signs of dollars, screaming saws, railroads (in “Captain Craig”), class differences, lost artisanal crafts (“The Mill”), and poets who have abandoned their high calling for the role of “Little sonnet men” (Trachtenberg *Massachusetts Review*, 1998, Vol. 39, 272). The crash in Wall Street had its repercussions throughout the entire economy. The Robinsons were not spared; the Missouri real estate investments and the Minnesota mining shares were wiped out. Herman, left with no other choice, came home to Gardiner, a total failure and tried to shut out reality with alcohol. Robinson was possessed of his own demon, neither drugs nor alcohol, but poetry, and he settled comfortably with the art of writing poetry as his vocation. His characters are as sharp and biting as and far more sympathetic than those of Masters and his New England backgrounds are as faithful as those of Frost’s. His “shrewd appraisals, his habit of constant questioning instead of passive acceptance, and his reticence that screens a vigorous analysis—these qualities reveal the spirit of the early Puritan operating with the technique of the modern psychologist” (Untermeyer 43). His poem “The Children of the Night,” is a triumphant vindication of the spirit that questions and of the courageous self rising above darkness and doubt.

The untoward happenings in his own house provided enough cause for brooding over questions as to how one should define and evaluate the ulterior meanings of disappointments, disgrace and failure. It fell on his shoulders to defend his brothers and himself against criticism which heightened his impatience with the smugly puritanical
conventionalism of his non artistic model for Tilbury Town and his bitterness found an outlet in a letter to a former Harvard classmate: “My philosophy does not swallow this teaching of our good old grandfathers who worked sixteen hours and sang psalms and praised heaven that a life is what we make it” (Thompson xv). Deeply hurt by the happenings in his house, Robinson went on with his self-assigned task of self discovery and made use of his poetry for self defence and also for self justification. Frankly speaking, his Tilbury Town poems have a personal touch about them. He used his own experience as the raw material, projecting his own personal perceptions through objective characterizations, thereby sketching the human heart in conflict with itself. The New England reticence and decorum helped him transform his personal views into genuinely classic and universal quality of poetry, supplying a fresh appearance to the inseparable joys and sorrows, good and evil, viewed against the contrasted background of those Tilbury Town prejudices and assumptions, differentiating all values in terms of either black or white. Hence these Tilbury Town poems represent his highest artistic achievement, and it is for the Tilbury Town poems that Robinson is justly famous.

Robinson’s Tilbury Town is the fictional setting of a large number of his poems which undoubtedly link him and his poetry with the small town New England and to the repressive, utilitarian social climate—its puritan ethic. The most frequent character in Robinson’s poetry is Tilbury Town which is truly “identifiable with his hometown Gardiner . . . and,
like Faulkner's 'Yoknapatawpha County' or Masters' 'Spoon River' gives a regional identity to the characters'' (Joseph 10). Tilbury Town first makes its appearance in "John Evereldown" in *The Torrent and the Night Before*,

Where are you going to-night, to-night,-
Where are you going, John Evereldown?
There's never the sign of a star in sight,
Nor a lamp that's nearer than Tilbury Town.
Why do you stare as a dead man might?
Where are you pointing away from the light?
And where are you going to-night, to-night,-
Where are you going, John Evereldown?

In his poetry Robinson created his Tilbury Town from the specific to the general, by first depicting interesting personalities and then locating them in the same town. It was his choice "to complete a conception of Tilbury Town, such as Edgar Lee Masters was to do the *Spoon River Anthology*, (1915), or to limit the number of characters he was to find in the town, as Sherwood Anderson had to do in 1919 when he collected related stories into *Winesburg, Ohio*" (Berkove 191). Robinson created his own world out of his own observation and vision. The world he unveils before the reader gains shape, poem by poem, and grows and takes shape with the poet's growing acquaintance and understanding of it. It is, not of places, but of people that Tilbury Town is concerned, simply because the essentially human is not dependent on place or time.
Tilbury is indeed the mirror image of Gardiner, for its topography, its people, and its moral milieu are quite the same as those of Gardiner. The riverside route old Isaac takes to go to the Archibald farm, for instance, is identical with the one along the Kennebec river. Robert Coffin says the old wharf mentioned in Amaranth brings to mind “the rotting piles of the port of Gardiner” (11). The moral ethos of both are the same; at heart they are puritanic but worldly and materialistic at the same time.

Robinson used strange sounding names for his different characters as it had the advantage that a strange and curious nomenclature would enable him “to achieve particularization without any possibility of identification with actual people” (Anderson 79). By giving them strange names Robinson sought to endow them with a trans-Gardiner identity placing them beyond easy recognition. Being totally devoid of particular associations these uncommon names stood little chance of a prejudiced or inhibited reaction from the readers.

It was practically essential for Robinson to have the disguise of unfamiliar names for his characters for quite a few of them in the Tilbury town poems had been modelled on actual personages in Gardiner. Characters like “Aaron Stark” has his prototype in “South West” Tarbox, the town miser who lived on Water Street and John Evereldown is modelled on another Tarbox, who never could leave the women alone, lurking in doorways, dishevelled and furtive eyed, on the lookout for a woman who would have him” (Hagedorn 53). The factual basis of the Tilbury portraits is further elaborated in chapter VI.
The vast majority of the proper names the poet makes use of are “his own inventions; for the rest he uses various sources like the Bible, histories, ancient myths and literary and non-literary sources. Names like, ‘Theophilus’ and ‘Ananias’ are from the Bible, ‘Bokardo’ from history, and ‘King Cole’ and ‘Clavering’ are from the nineteenth century English poet, Praed, who probably had a strong influence on Robinson” (Joseph 263-64). Every name Robinson makes use of is quite unusual, each one being an attempt either to symbolize the character or to achieve particularization, or to give a sense of universality to the characters. The name “Tilbury Town” itself is emblematic for, according to Hagedorn, Robinson coined this name from ‘till,’ which stands for “a cash-box,” “implying the town’s pre-disposition to material riches, which makes it evaluate a man’s performance by the standard of worldly success” (87). But Neff identifies it with “the Tilbury,” a smart two-wheeled open carriage of those days” a great status symbol” (61). Be it “till” or “Tilbury” the connotation is the same namely that it implies the blunt materialistic bias of the town.

Robinson’s character ‘Richard Cory’ hinges on the incongruity between Cory’s stormy inner world and the bright exterior, which belies the conflict within. Richard, the name of several kings in history, evokes the picture of a royal figure, and the possible pun on the word “rich”— “And he was rich—yes, richer than a king” suggests his material possessions. Again the word “Cory” directs “our attention to the character’s core—the soul or the psyche—and gives the faint hint” that all
is not well with the inner world” (Joseph 264). William Childers suggests that the title “is an adaptation of ‘Richard Coeur de Lion; the title of Richard I” (225). Robinson clearly demarcates the difference between Cory’s majestic outward appearance and his inner spiritual bankruptcy. In “Captain Craig” one comes across a tavern named “Chrysalis,” which means a pupa, and it possesses a thematic link with the poem in that it hints at the metamorphosis at the end of the poem. “Theophilus” means “Lover of God” (Lk 1:3) but ironically Robinson’s “Theophilus” is an unmitigated scoundrel.

John Evereldown, as William C. Childers points out, is “the coalesced form of “ever held down” which explains Evereldown’s libidinosity as having its origin in sexual repression” (225). Childers refers to “Aaron Stark,” a typical Jewish name, where “Aaron suggests associations of Jews and of Jewish usury; it also reminds one of the Biblical Aaron (Exodus 4:14), the first high priest, who cast his staff before the Pharaoh” (225). Robinson’s Aaron Stark, “a loveless exile moving with a staff,” certainly has an ironic affinity with the Aaron of the Exodus, while the surname “Stark” suggests the pathetic degeneration of one of God’s chosen people. A historically original name is used in “Bokardo.” “Robinson attains an added symbolism here by naming this imagined character after a mathematician [Bokardo]” (SP 136); for, here the meaning is ironic since Bokardo, the cowardly atheist, is simply a parody of the scientist.
The poet enthusiastically places a cross-section of a community in front of his readers. Though he uses phoney names for his characters, mostly all of them are people he knew sometime and somewhere in life. Robinson’s characters fall under different rubrics: failures, paradoxes, non-entities and victims or stoics. Among his failure portraits, one can never forget 'Miniver Cheevy,' who

. . . loved the days of old
When swords were bright and steeds were prancing;
The vision of a warrior bold
Would set him dancing.

Eben Flood in “Mr. Flood’s Party” tries to fight his loneliness with the help of the lovingly caressed jug.

“For auld lang synne,” The weary throat gave out,
The last word wavered, and the song was done.
He raised again the jug regretfully
And shook his head, and was again alone.
There was not much that was ahead of him,
And there was nothing in the town below
Where strangers would have shut the many doors
That many friends had opened long ago.

In the portrait of Vickery, he dreams of the hidden gold at the foot of the far off mountain to which he alone has the key. He has a tear for the others who do not possess such golden secret while he dreams away:
He dreams and lives upon the day
When he shall walk with kings.
Vickery smiles and well he may.
The life caged linnet sings.

'Bewick Finzer' loses his self-respect and self-esteem with his fortune, and
continues a humiliating existence through the largess of former friends. He
brings us back to the world of reality, and his "fond imponderable
dreams," are the children of his own desire to regain what once was his—
not so much the half million dollars as the self-respect that vanished with
it. The poet draws a pathetic Finzer,

Poor Finzer, with his dreams and schemes,
Fares hard now in the race,
With heart and eye that have a task
When he looks in the face
Of one who might so easily
Have been in Finzer's place.

'Aaron Stark,' as the name suggests, is a miser, a loveless exile—"cursed
and unkempt, shrewd, shrivelled, and morose," another case of failure.
There is Levi, in "The Field of Glory," an insignificant fellow whom even
the stars deserted. He has neither the material wealth to give him
satisfaction nor the fatal power to see the cause of the vacancy and
negation of his life.

Robinson is not only concerned with social and economic failures
but also interested in men in whom one finds a sharp disparity between the
outward aspect and the secret inner, spiritual reality. The most prominent portrait is that of Richard Cory, whose unhappiness is undetected by the rest of the town as in the case of Jack Claycomb in “Jimtown’s Bride,”—an elegant man of mystery. Richard Cory is cursed with the inability to believe that life is worth living, and hence life becomes intolerable. “No light shines in the darkness, no “word” breaks the silence in which he moved and has his being, no Amaranth guides him through and out of a wrong world, no voice firmly forbids him to pass through the door of death. Why this spiritual vacancy exists remains a mystery” (Barnard 128). Richard Cory’s life is not conspicuously a failure at all, instead it is an oblique comment on the deceiving rewards of worldly success.

Reuben Bright, having lost the woman he loves, tears down his abattoir and thus he reveals the intensity of genuine passion which his occupation would normally have belied. It was soon after the burial of his wife, 

. . . and he had paid

The singers and the sexton and the rest

He packed a lot of things that she had made

Most mournfully away in an old chest

Of hers, and put some chopped-up cedar boughs

In with them, and tore down the slaughter house. (SP 16)

Another interesting character is Flammonde, the possessor of almost all the virtues of a cultivated and polished person. But he has his hamartia, which makes him live upon the generosity of his neighbours.
“There was some ‘satanic sort of kink’ in his brain that limited and distorted his powers” (Stovall 3). His own name and the reference to the ‘hill’ refer to Robinson’s efforts to realize a Christ image.

We cannot know how much we learn
From those who never will return,
Until a flash of unforeseen
Remembrance falls on what has been.
We’ve each a darkening hill to climb,
And this is why, from time to time
In Tilbury Town, we look beyond
Horizons for the man Flammonde.

He is a friendly chap who made the lives of those around him happier and complete and so everyone is desirous of his company. He accomplishes a lot of good work in Tilbury Town: settles disputes, humanizes the town’s malcontents and even rehabilitates its scarlet women.

In “Cliff Klingenhagen” the intangible discrepancy between life in its expression and life in its private consciousness is more clearly distinguished.

Cliff Klingenhagen had me in to dine
With him one day; and after soup and meat,
And all the other things there were to eat,
Cliff took two glasses and filled one with wine
And one with wormwood. Then, without a sign
For me to choose at all, he took the draught
Of bitterness himself, and lightly quaffed
It off, and said the other one was mine.
And when I asked him what the deuce he meant
By doing that, he only looked at me
And smiled, and said it was a way of his.
And though I know the fellow, I have spent
Long time a wondering when I shall be
As happy as Cliff Kingsenhagen is.

Robinson intends to say that the secret of success and happiness in life depends on quaffing off the bitterness of life, just like Klingenhagen who drinks his wormwood, a symbol of the bitterness of life itself, with a smile. William J. Free argues that Klingenhagen achieves happiness simply by being able to choose wormwood for himself and it is “the spiritual compensation he received from accepting the bitterness of Life upon himself” (79).

There is another group of characters whose lives the poet observes from the distance of memory, men who can claim no prominence of their own but there is something unusual or abnormal about them. Only after his death, in Charles Carville's Eyes, do his acquaintances understand his human worth. He is an apparent non-entity redeemed from oblivion. In the words of the poet:

A melancholy face Charles Carville had,
But not so melancholy as it seemed,
When once you knew him, for his mouth redeemed
His insufficient eyes, forever sad,
In them there was no life — glimpse, good or bad,
Nor joy nor passion in them ever gleamed,
His mouth was all of him that ever beamed,
His eyes were sorry, but his mouth was glad.
He never was a fellow that said much,
And half of what he did say was not heard
By many of us: we were out of touch
With all his whims and all his theories
Till he was dead, so those blank eyes of his
Might speak them. Then we heard them, every word.

We come across another character, Uncle Ananias, a colourful old liar but "every child who knew him, far or near/ Did love him faithfully" for his stories:

_His words were magic and his heart was true_
And everywhere he wandered he was blessed.
Out of all ancient men my childhood knew
I choose him and I mark him for the best.
Of all authoritative liars, too
I crown him loveliest.

For Ananias and the prodigality of his trespasses against truth our smile was an encouragement simply because he and his world are redeemed from disaster by the stern and unchallenging adoration of his young audience. What is more astonishing is "the discomfiture, in his presence,
of the town's solid citizens, whose inherited puritan assumption that happiness is a reward reserved for industry and truthfulness, is here so blithely challenged” (Barnard 185) and shattered to pieces. One comes upon John Evereldown, the compulsive old lecher, who loathes but cannot escape his inner tyranny of sexual desire. He says,

“I follow the women wherever they call,

That's why I'm going to Tilbury Town.

God knows if I pray to be done with it all,

But God is no friend to John Evereldown.

So the clouds may come and the rain may fall,

The shadows may creep and the dead men crawl,

But I follow the women wherever they call,

And that's why I am going to Tilbury Town.”

He, too, belongs in the company of Uncle Ananias and Charles Carville about whom “There isn't very much to write/ There isn't very much to do.” They are an important part of the human community and Robinson's romantic notions have immortalized them in verse.

Masters too is full of similar characters. There is Cassius Hueffer, to whom life was not at all gentle; the epitaph of Chase Henry reveals the “cross-currents in life/ Which bring honor to the dead, who lived in shame.” Judge Somers speaks out his mind,

That I lie here unmarked, forgotten,

While Chase Henry, the town drunkard,
Has a marble block, topped by an urn,
Wherein nature, in a mood ironical
Has sown a flowering weed? (SR4 35)
Nellie Clark, raped while too young, is forced to live a miserable life: Louise Smith is deceived by the man of her choice to whom she was engaged for many years. Albert Schirding and Jonas Keene are two contrasting characters. Keene’s sons are failures; Schirding considers himself a failure while his children are successes. If these are miserable characters, there is Lucinda Matlock who lived for ninety-six years, raising twelve children and passed to a sweet repose; there is Marie Bateson who lived a virtuous life, “with the index finger pointing heavenwards.”

One can also discern people like old King Cole and the wife of “Eros Turannos” who are stoics or victims of life. “Old King Cole” is the pathetic tale of a father in Tilbury Town, whose sons and heirs disgraced him, or would have disgraced him had he been less of a smiling philosopher. When his two sons, Alexis and Evander, opted for the path of thieves and liars, it turned out to be a deadly blow to him but when the neighbours came to sympathize with him, they found him above sympathy; he tells them:

There may be room for ruin yet,
And ashes for a wasted love;
Or, like one whom you may forget,
I may have meat you know not of.
And if I’d rather live than weep
Meanwhile, do you find that surprising?
Why, bless my soul, the man’s asleep;
That’s good. The sun will soon be rising.

King Cole is incapable of transforming his sons from their “rascality, but he can prevent it from destroying his happiness” (Barnard 228).

“Eros Turannos,” like “John Evereldown,” has as its theme “the power of sex to rule a life. The tone is [evidently] tragic; for to be driven by sexuality is seen as a defeat of the human spirit” (Rosenthal 104). The disillusioned wife of “Eros Turannos” ultimately surrenders to love since no other choice is left for her.

Meanwhile we do no harm; for they
That with a god have striven,
Not hearing much of what we say,
Take what the god has given;
Though like waves breaking it may be
Or like a changed familiar tree,
Or like a stairway to the sea
Where down the blind are driven.

Here one may grasp the message: that spiritual triumph is possible even when confronting a cruel destiny as in “King Cole,” “Mr. Flood’s Party” or “The Poor Relation.”

Among the seventy odd Tilbury Town poems only some twenty-five do have some direct reference to “Tilbury.” The Tilbury poems consist of long narratives, short dramatic narratives and character studies,
which are often "terse and elliptical probings into obscure psychological motivation" (Thompson ix). In the majority of the Tilbury poems the poet holds up to ridicule the stark materialism, prudery and self-righteous morality of the town. Robinson’s Tilbury anticipated by several years Masters’ “Spoon River,” Anderson’s “Winesburg,” Wilder’s unnamed municipality and Sinclair Lewis’s “Gopher Prairie.” Most of Robinson’s Tilbury Town poems are based on various social concerns and a few important Tilbury poems are discussed in the following pages.

The most important social concern that Robinson takes up in a small group of poems such as “Demos,” “Demos and Dionysus,” “Dionysus in Doubt,” and “The Garden of the Nations” is individual freedom. “Dionysus in Doubt,” deals directly with anti-prohibitionist ideas and indulges in conscious social propaganda. The poet vehemently attacks the national prohibition amendment but “the situation is so well disguised that it seems that a disinterested artist is protesting against the subjection of the individual mind to the will of the majority” (Joseph 93). The results of the First World War include prohibition and the bootlegger, easy money and easy virtue. And in the face of the superficial gaiety one could listen to the sudden rumblings of another storm gathering and of the coming depression. Robinson firmly believed that the eighteenth amendment was an affront to personal liberty which might quicken greater curtailment of individual freedom. “The tendency toward conformity, with the consequent loss of individuality, the power of big business and the machine to control the lives of people, the equating of
equality and mediocrity with democracy” (Anderson 97), all this filled him with apprehension, inspiring him to write “Dionysus in Doubt” and “Demos and Dionysus.” Demos warns us:

That you shall have
Your kingdom undishonoured. Having all,
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
Still to be wrangling in a noisy grave. (SP 166)

If the poet means that a democracy can survive only if it is regularly governed by great men, then it is almost an impossibility, for great men appear and come to power only occasionally.

Robinson deals with the prohibition amendment of 1918 and also with the impropriety of the legislation upon questions pertaining to matters of personal rather than public morality in his “Dionysus in Doubt.”

Also I marvel at a land like yours
Where predatory love
In freedom’s name invades the last alcove;
And I foresee a reckoning, per force,
That you, not eager to see for
From where your toys and trumpets are,
Make nothing of.

The poet has articulated his views on art and poetry in another group of poems. One is delighted to read the sonnet relating to the
fortunes of “Shadrach O’ Leary” who was a poet for a while; though an acknowledged failure, he still found happiness,

But this was not the end. A year ago
I met him – and to meet was to admire;
Forgotten were the adies and the lyre,
And the small ink-fed Eros of his dream.
By questioning I found a man to know
A failure spared, a Shadrach of the Gleam. (SP 84)

With an amount of autobiographical element, Robinson’s “Rembrandt to Rembrandt” addresses itself to the problem of the solitary artist. The poet centres his thought on the artist’s agonized yet sardonic assessment of his own plight. Being in a mess, without any way out, without any higher aims, “he moves among demons of self-doubt, self-delusion and self-pity” (Unger 522). Rembrandt, a victim to a materialistic community, antipodal to spirit, has a better time of it, for “he makes the choice of art at the sacrifice of his fame and fortune in Holland and becomes free of the rending antagonisms within himself” (W.R. Robinson 133). Rembrandt cannot change the artistic taste of Holland, but is free to yield to it or defy it.

Nor more are you
In any sudden danger to forget
That in Apollo’s house there are no clocks
Or calendars to say for you in time
How far you are away from Amsterdam,
Or that the one same law that bids you see
Where now you see alone forbids in turn
Your light from Holland eyes till Holland ears
Are told of it, for that way, my good fellow,
Is one way more to death. (SP 48)

The same situation is found in his poem “Ben Jonson Entertains a
Man from Stratford.” In Shakespeare the problem of the artist is
internalized; as was Robinson’s own experience, he falls a victim to the
mutual animosity of both sides. This poem presents the perfection of
Robinsons’ sense of scene and portraiture, of how he sees and renders
the actual, the human with extraordinary richness. Shakespeare, though
he was “The lord of more than England and of more/ Than all the seas of
England in all time/ Shall ever wash” could not be happy simply because
he was not the lord of the manor in Stratford. These two poems bring
home the truth that even the most matter of fact representation of the
conflict between self and society, between an artist’s worldly ambition
and his devotion to his art, transcends the moral and psychological issue
of art versus materialism which in turn becomes an antipathy inherent in
the dualistic nature of life. These are eternally two hostile realities of life
and the artist is between the devil and the deep sea for he must tackle
the situation either by self -betrayal or by accepting exclusion from the
human community.

Robinson, in his sonnet “Dear Friends” refers to his choice of
poetry, which he firmly believes to be his vocation, though it could be said
the way to wealth was the way his father and brothers had shown; his father was a prospering businessman, and both his brothers showed promise of becoming rich though fortune was not on their side.

And who so reads may get him some shrewd skill,
And some unprofitable scorn resign,
To praise the very thing that he deplores;
So, friends (dear friends), remember, if you will,
The shame I win for singing is all mine,
The gold I miss for dreaming is all yours

"Amaryllis" is a quiet moving poem which narrates the death of an old farmer's wife and the preparations for her funeral. The title being a common name in classical as well as pastoral poetry, one may surmise that it does possess an inner meaning. The poet says,

Far out beyond the forest I could hear
The calling of loud progress, and the bold
Incessant scream of commerce ringing clear
But though the trumpets of the world were glad,
It made me lonely and it made me sad

To think that Amaryllis had grown old.

According to William Childers, Amaryllis could be a symbol for poetry as a whole, and, the poem a lament on the decay of poetry. The 'old man' who dug the grave is a representative of poets in isolation—the 'genteel' school of poets such as Henry Stoddard, Thomas Bailey Aldrich and George Henry Boker—and the grave, the destiny of isolated poetry, and
by giving a pastoral setting to the poem with an indifferent world in the background Robinson has dramatized his belief that the modern materialistic world has left poetry to men who “much as they professed to love and respect poetry, inadvertently hastened its death by separating it from the main stream of life and living with it in isolation” (Joseph 103).

The dilemma posed by the decay of poetry is discussed in the “Ballade of Broken Flutes” as in “Amaryllis”. The poem speaks about the poet’s discovery of the broken flutes of Arcady in a nook of the dreary autumn forest and about how he tries to inject new life into it and at last throws it off to look for fresh woods and pastures new. Fussell views it as the poet’s “own effort to revitalize the great Nineteenth Century Tradition of poetry” (104-5) while Neff is of the opinion that expresses the poet’s “despair at his failure to breathe new life into the flutes; it allegorizes Robinson’s farewell to poetry” (66). The poet writes,

No more by summer breezes fanned,

The place was desolate and gray;

But still my dream was to command

New life into that shrunken clay.

I tried it, and you scan to-day,

With uncommiserating glee,

The songs of one who strove to play

The broken flutes of Arcady.

So, Rock, I join the common fray,
To fight where Mammon may decree;  
And leave, to crumble as they may,

The broken flutes of Arcady. (SP 7–8)

It is a parable on the decay of poetry; the picture of the songless autumn woods, with their gaunt, leafless trees, vividly presents the desolation of the American poetic scene. In “The False Gods,” Robinson unsympathetically expresses his contempt for the creations of modern art—the straw-made clay-footed idols as false gods. As Neff says these mortal gods whom our “doom is to adore” symbolize “the ephemeral nature of writing that flouted organic form” (257).

Robinson's character studies are really graphic and incisive and at the same time more sympathetic than those of Masters. He is economic to the core and in order to avoid excesses he censors everything except the meaning. Untermeyer likens him to “a sculptor who takes an old statue, and in order to give it fresh vitality cuts away the insipid ornaments and floral excrescences that spoil a simple outline” (43–44). An ambitious and proud mother is visualized in “The Gift of God” whose great illusion about her mediocre son gives her life a fulfilment that few achieve.

She crowns him with her gratefulness,

And says again that life is good;

And should the gift of God be less

In him than in her motherhood;

His fame, though vague, will not be small,
As upward through her dream he fares,

Half clouded with a crimson fall

Of roses thrown on marble stairs. (SP 105)

In “Vain Gratuities” the wife, like the mother in “The Gift of God” is an object of pity to her acquaintances.

Never was there a man much uglier

In eyes of other women, or more grim:

“The Lord has filled her chalice to the brim,”

They said and there was more they said of her

Deeming it, after twenty years with him,

No wonder that she kept her figure slim

And always made you think of lavender. (SP 196)

“The sweet-souled calm of Isaac and Archibald holds up an idealised past to us with delicate pity and laughter. It is a past recalled from the speaker’s childhood—a remembrance of himself and of two old men” (Rosenthal 109). The two old men, though absurd and pitiable, lived with an earnest dignity, were considerate towards one another’s interests, and read their own frailties into each other.

Isaac and Archibald have gone their way

To the silence of the loved and well-forgotten.

I knew them, and I may have laughed at them;

But there’s a laughing that has honor in it. . . .

Here are two old men whose felicity is simply in “all the warmth and wonder of the land” around them, in their thankfulness to God “for all things/
That He had put on earth for men to drink” and enjoy. In their serene and unwavering faith

“There’s a light behind the stars
And we old fellows who have dared to live,
We see it.”

There are some eighty-nine sonnets to his credit, which comprise character sketches, dramatic narratives and philosophical ruminations. The character sketches fall under two categories: fictional and historical. Some of his fictional characters are Aaron Stark, Cliff Klingenhagen, Reuben Bright, The Rat, Charles Carville and so on. His historical characters include men of letters, philosophers and reformers, like George Crabbe, Verlaine, Matthew Arnold and Erasmus. The poet has great admiration for George Crabbe for he writes,

Give him the darkest inch your shelf allows,
Hide him in lonely garrets, if you will,
But his hard, human pulse is throbbing still
With the sure strength that fearless truth endows.
In spite of all fine science disavows,
Of his plain excellence and stubborn skill
There yet remains what fashion cannot kill,
Though years have thinned the laurel from his brows. (SP17)

As was already stated, Emerson had been highly influential in the shaping of Robinson’s philosophy and the poet commemorated him in “The Sage.”
Another group of sonnets is based on the ‘wrong-knot-tied’ theme, “An Evangelist’s wife,” “The Woman and the Wife,” “The Story of the Ashes and the Flame,” “Job the Rejected”—to mention a few. In “An Evangelist’s Wife” Robinson depicts a woman who is on the breaking point as she listens to her husband’s sanctimonious denials of adultery. She is utterly grieved by the infidelity of her adulterous husband who does not obey the vows of marriage. She says:

Jealous—of Her? Because her cheeks are pink,
And she has eyes? No, not if she had seven,
If you should only steal an hour to think,
Sometime, there might be less to be forgiven.
No, you are never cruel. If once or twice
I found you so, I could applaud and sing.
Jealous of—what? You are not very wise.
Does not the good Book tell you anything?

Social evils like immorality are exposed through these poems. “The story of the Ashes and the Flame” tells the story of an unenviable husband whose lot it is to play Andrea del Sarto and connive at the martial infidelities of his wife.

No matter why, nor whence, nor when she came,
There was her place. No matter what men said,
No matter what she was; living or dead,
Faithful or not, he loved her all the same.
The story was as old as human shame,
But ever since that lonely night she fled
With books to blind him, he had only read
The story of the ashes and the flame.
There she was always coming pretty soon
To fool him back, with penitent scared eyes
That had in them the laughter of the moon
For baffled lovers, and to make him think
Before she gave him time enough to wink
Her kisses were the keys to paradise.

In “Job the Rejected,” too, the discord between the man and woman is prominent. “The Book of Annandale” is a poem of life dealing with the growth of Annandale’s mind. This book is a symbol of his love for Damaris whom he wanted to marry, but could not. As the poem opens, Annandale has just buried his wife, but quite unfortunately Damaris refuses to marry him in accordance with the promise she has made to her husband namely that she would remain faithful to him throughout her life.

Poems like “London Bridge,” “An Evangelist’s Wife,” “The Whip,” “The Clinging Vine,” and “Eros Turannos” concern themselves with the theme of adultery and immorality. In “London Bridge” and “The Clinging Vine” one sees pictures of desperation where a wife is driven to suicide by her husband’s infidelity. The woman, in “The Clinging Vine,” says,

No more – I’ll never bear it.
I’m going. I’m like ice.
My burden? You would share it?
Forbid the sacrifice:
Forget so quaint a notion,
And let no more be told;
For moon and stars and ocean
And you and I are cold.

Here, in this poem, the poet depicts the flickering and dying of the love of a husband and wife as seen through the eyes of an external observer. As was already said, "An Evangelist's Wife" speaks about a man deviating from his normal sense and treading the path of immorality. "The Whip" is the grimmest of Robinson's tragedies; here, strangely enough, it is not always the man who betrays or the woman who suffers. The narrator of the story sees a mark on the face of the drowned man, "Blue, curious, like a Welt," and he thinks it might be from a whip in the hand of a woman filled with desperate hate of the husband whom she has wronged. The poem ends with the lines:

There were some ropes of sand
Recorded long ago,
But none, I understand,
Of water. Is it so?
And she, she struck the blow,
You but a neck behind . . . .
You saw the river flow—
Still, shall I call you blind?
The short Lyric "Eros Turannios" refers to the conflict in the marriage relationship. It might be that, as in the case of "The Clinging Vine," it does possess some vague overtones of Emma–Herman relationship.

Robinson shows great interest in the man-woman relationship and treats of the loneliness resulting from estranged relationship. The betrayal occurs either by death or by other external circumstance, as in "Reuben Bright" or in "Annandale Again." The husband's quiet desperation moving towards self-destruction in "The Mill" leaves his wife in a world too empty to be endured. In "Mortmain" the man Seneca puts an end to an unsatisfying relation. The woman is to be blamed for her heart has been buried in her brother's grave for more than a decade. And her lover has been waiting for her reply all these years, which she can never give. Seneca says:

When I know
That you are married to your brother's ghost
Even as you were married to your brother—
Never contending or suspecting it,
Yet married all the same. You are alone,
But only in so far as to my eyes
The sight of your beloved is unseen,
Why should I come between you and your ghost
Whose hand is always chilly on my shoulder
Drawing me back whenever? Go forward.
I'd best be rational
I'm saying therefore to myself today,
And leave you quiet (SP 220)

The theme of martial discord is dealt with again in Chapter VI but from a different perspective. There the focus is on the areas of commonness that exist between Robinson and Masters in the treatment of the 'wrong knot tied' theme.


St. Paul makes a detailed analysis of the relative importance of faith and law. "Actually, Robinson abandons here a heritage of Calvinism; a more recent tradition of puritan fideism comes out strongly in the persona of Paul for a faith at once personal . . . and painstakingly acquired" (Unger 522). "The Valley of the Shadow" in "The Three Taverns" presents a miserable group of unfortunate men whose fate it was to fail in life. The valley of the shadow is a symbol of failure in life. The poem "Lazarus" speaks about the plight of one who, having experienced two worlds, is unable to claim either as his own. Lazarus is entombed at his death and the tomb is transformed into a womb of birth issuing in a renewed life, giving real meaning to human existence. Though he attains
a unique experience of the miracle of resurrection, he is unable to articulate his experience; he is an inactive and dumb prophet. Robinson makes use of the myths and stories from the Bible and his Biblical poems mainly focus on one major theme the "mystery of rebirth." It is all the more prominent in the meeting of Jesus and Nicodemus. "Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God" (Jn 3:3). The black cloak he wears to hide his identity is a symbol of his desire to be reborn as Christ said he must, though his ostensible reason for wearing it is to escape unnoticed by the people. In both, "Nicodemus" and "Lazarus" the poet refers to the mystery of rebirth and there are several references to Gospel passages stressing the need for becoming a child again in order to enter the Kingdom of God; to become a child again is to be born again.

In "The Prodigal Son," the son appeals to the future for the meaning of the present events.

Brother, believe, as I do, it is best
For you that I'm again in the old nest-
Draggled, I grant you, but your brother still,
Full of good wine, good viands, and good will
You will thank God, some day, that I returned,
And may be singing for what you have learned,
Some other day and one day you may find
Yourself a little nearer to mankind.
And having hated me till you are tired
You will begin to see, as if inspired,
It was fate's way of educating us. (SP 242)
The Old Testament equivalent of ‘Nicodemus’ is Gideon and though both seek to guarantee the presence of God, quite sympathetically, they fail to find in themselves the resourcefulness to have such a belief. Robinson is in a privileged vantage position in the poem “The Prophet” for he could explore the border between what is subjective and objective, between rights and duties or between conscience and law.

Robinson makes an idealistic interpretation of life and of God in The Children of the Night and “The Man Against the Sky,” of which reference has already been made. The poem “Luke Havergal” in The Children of the Night “echoes the old desperate urge of a bereaved lover to gamble on self inflicted death as a way to reunion with his lost love” (Barnard 59).

There is the western gate, Luke Havergal
There are the crimson leaves upon the wall
Go, for the winds are tearing them away!
Nor think to riddle the dead words they say,
Nor any more to feel them as they fall;
But go, and if you trust her she will call
There is the western gate, Luke Havergal

Robinson firmly affirms man’s essential dignity and his eternal destiny, a destiny culminating in God and it is this confession of faith in God which is expressed in The Children of the Night. In “Siege Perilous” the poet cautions men to keep off materialism, a danger to the modern society,
and to trust his conscience and his God. And once man follows this, he can easily ignore the rest of men.

There fell one day upon his eyes a light
Ethereal, and he heard no more men speaking;
He saw their shaken heads, but no long sight
Was his but for the end that he went seeking. (SP 135)

In the poem the hero ventures to do an act that is sinful and wicked from the viewpoint of the Tilbury group, to occupy the siege perilous which they had warned him to keep off. It is an adaptation of a simple incident from the Grail legend and it means “a departure from the materialistic values of the town” and hence an “idealistic dedication to the highest truth,” (Joseph 115) a detachment from the ways of the world.

Robinson fights tooth and nail the stark materialism of his town of Gardiner in the majority of the Tilbury poems. One comes across men who fail in the plenitude of their material prosperity, their tragedy being knowing too well their own spiritual poverty, and the best model is “Richard Cory.” He “was always human when he talked” and persuaded others that he “was everything to make us wish that we were in his place”

So, on we worked and waited for the light
And went without the meat and cursed the bread.

And Richard Cory one calm summer night
Went home and put a bullet through his head.
The Biblical allusions in the above lines enrich the context and introduce into the poem a subtle religious symbolism. The above lines contain words like ‘bread’ and ‘meat’ which evoke the Biblical verse, “Man does not live by bread alone but by every word of God (Lk 4:4). Enjoying every material advantage of the world Cory lived only at a materialistic level. One might suppose that Cory would not have killed himself if he had “waited for the light,” like his fellowmen or if he had related his life to values other than those symbolized by meat and bread.

Another sympathetic character is the miller; it dawns upon him that “there are no millers any more,” and he hangs himself. But if he had a fuller knowledge of his spiritual resources, he might not have succumbed to his material losses. The poem tells the story of a miller and his wife who commit suicide, unable to compete with the modernized, mechanized mills which had ruined their occupation. The suicidal mood is seen in the poem, quite clearly where there is the hankering for release and oblivion.

Black water, smooth above the weir
Like starry velvet in the night,
Though ruffled once, would soon appear
The same as ever to the sight (SP 165)

“Lost Anchors” is an antimaterialistic poem and if one could think of the ‘anchors’ to signify the moral and spiritual anchors, then the poem becomes the story of a spiritual shipwreck; an old sailor is made a symbol of the immeasurable antiquity of the sea and its ruins. Robinson’s antimaterialism finds expression in the form of an attack on all forms of
utilitarian social thinking, like money worship, obsession with worldly success, the inhumanity of capitalism and the evils of economic rivalries. In “Fragment” Robinson presents Briony’s conversion from the materialistic to the spiritual attitude to life. Briony turns his back on material success after possessing it, for “he knew too much for the life he led.” One is reminded of 2 Corinthians 5:1 when Briony says, “there are still some gods to please/ And, houses are built without hands, we’re told,” for in ‘Fragment’ there is a contrast between Briony’s perishable house and the everlasting heavenly tabernacle “built without hands” which “ultimately symbolize the materialistic and the spiritual attitude to life” (Joseph 109).

In “The Field of Glory” an ordinary situation is presented where Levi is sorry that he is unable to go to the war front since he has to look after his mother. On the other side, his mother knows that Levi is no match for the terrors of the war. He has “no talent of any sort either to put to use or to bury; his portion is a “painful acre,” the dependence on him of a selfish, bitter and unloving mother, and the curses of those who fail to appreciate their relative good fortune in being able to experience the positive sufferings of war” (Barnard 131). But, as in “Tasker Norcross,” Levi fell an heir to another life and a kinder destiny:

When even Levi, tired of death,
Beloved of none, forgot by many,
Dismissed as an inferior wrath,
Reborn may be as great as any.
According to Richard Crowder, the poem is “part of Robinson’s never-ending criticism of materialism. The war stands for the world of materialism and Levi’s inability to join it need not make him fall in our estimation. Rebirth of the spirit and the unending pursuit of the Light—these give meaning to our lives” (Quoted in Joseph 109).

Robinson was of the conviction that “the war was an extreme manifestation of materialism—materialism carried to its logical, destructive end. This is the main or subordinate theme of a number of major poems written in the context of World War I” (Anderson 95). In “Cassandra” the poet warns against nations founded on materialism where “your Dollar is your only word/ The wrath of it your only fear.” The poet goes on to question the enthusiastic commercialism of the early part of the century.

Your Dollar, Dove and Eagle make
A trinity that even you
Rate higher than you rate yourselves;
It pays, it flatters, and it’s new

Robinson’s “The Man Against the Sky,” the last poem in the collection of Tilbury Town poems, “is a serious argument against a materialistic explanation of the universe, and carries with it a sense of finality which forbids its being followed by any other poems” (Lowell 53). Robinson shows his fellow travellers the spiritual pilgrimage of man from the sunlit innocence, through the shadow of guilt and shame towards his final redemption. He confronts with the spiritual truths ultimately partaking in this moment of spiritual illumination.
“Vickery’s Mountain” is yet another poem on the theme of materialism and tells us about man’s wilful indifference to spiritual values. The poet focuses on the hopelessness of the search by science for the ultimate truth in “The Flying Dutchman.” It is the story of a determined sailor who goes out sailing, all alone “by the light of his one thought.” But it is certainly miserable that the sailor positively fails in his endeavour,

He steers himself away from what is haunted
By the old ghost of what has been before,
Abandoning, as always, and undaunted,
One fog-walled island more. (SP 167)

It may be interpreted as a parable of science and its limitations.

“On the Way” is a poem with a political theme and is in the form of a dialogue between Hamilton and Burr who stand aside to let Washington pass and the whole situation foreshadows an untoward incident in the life of the characters, a few years later. They discuss the politics of the country and disperse to take their different courses. Anderson comments, “The journey together, the verbal duel, and the parting of the ways are symbolic. The implication of the poem is that already in 1794, Hamilton and Burr were ‘on the way’ toward the duel ten years later that resulted in Hamilton’s death and Burr’s disgrace” (124).

Poems like, “Old King Cole,” “Eros Turannos,” and “The Poor Relation” have a didactic purpose behind them in that they seek to conscientize the reader that spiritual triumph is possible even in the face of cruel destiny. King Cole, though a pathetic figure because of the disgrace
brought upon him by his sons and heirs, overcomes it through stoicism, the power of self control.

Eben Flood in “Mr. Flood’s Party” finds shelter in the old days when the tides of life were surging high in order to escape from the reality of a friendless world. Flood, on his journey back home from Tilbury Town, talks to himself and invites himself to drink from his “lovingly caressed Jug.” He is simply a paradigm of many of Robinson’s characters in Tilbury Town who truly possess the notion that life is difficult and sore, and so to be handled like his jug.

Then, as a mother lays her sleeping child
Down tenderly, fearing it may awake,
He sat the jug down slowly at his feet
With trembling care, knowing that most things break

The premature and intolerable loss of the innocent and triumphant youth of a woman through poverty, morbidity and obscurity is the central theme of “The Poor Relation.”

Her friends come, and
Her lip shakes when they go away
And yet she would not have them stay;
She knows as well as anyone
That pity, having played, soon tires.

The poem continues,
But one friend always reappears,
A good ghost, not to be forsaken;
Whereat she laughs and has no fears
Of what a ghost may reawaken,
But welcomes, while she wears and mends
The poor relation's odds and ends,
Her truant from a tomb of years—
Her power of youth so early taken.

Robinson has written poems where happiness is not anything quite
natural or without pains, but "the result of a conscious effort and struggle,
of the renunciation of the more immediate and tantalizing goal, or of the
wisdom, bought by trial and error, to distinguish between mirage and
substance" (Barnard 141). C.iff Klingenhagen, entertains his guest with
the wine and keeps the wormwood for himself. Mostly the same situation
prevails in the poem "Shadrach O'Leary" who "was a poet—for a while."

One finds as in most other authors, considerable autobiographical
elements in Robinson. Some of his sonnets and dramatic monologues
become for him an appropriate medium for telling his own story. One
may not find one to one correspondence between Robinson and any of
the Tilbury characters, but certain situations that recur in these poems
remind one of similar situations in Robinson's life. Some of the characters
like Flammonde, Bokardo and Finzer are reminiscent of Robinson's
brothers, particularly Herman. Herman's marriage to Emma, with whom
Robinson himself was in love, finds truly veiled representations in quite a
few poems.
A nearly perfect self portrait of Robinson is seen in “Aunt Imogen,” earlier titled “The Old Maid.” He hides his real identity in this poem by transmogrifying himself into an aunt which is “only a mask for the poet’s own emotions” (Neff 120). One finds an analogy between the spinster aunt finding happiness in the company of her sister’s children and Robinson’s visits to Gardiner to meet Emma and her children. The poet truly dreams of a life with a woman and the children he loves; he had real and passionate love for Emma but unfortunately their love did not consummate; she became the wife of Herman and “Aunt Imogen” is Robinson’s “Dream Children,” an objectification of real experience under the facade of fiction. Evidently Robinson “generalizes the need of the thousands of unmarried, childless, yearning Aunt Imogens through this poem” (Franchere 80).

As in “Aunt Imogen,” in “The Tree in Pamela’s Garden” Robinson switches genders so as to reveal another side of his own psyche and the choices he made for his life. Here too, there is an echo of his love towards Emma which did not come to fruition. He was a bachelor but it does not mean he led a loveless life. The tree symbolizes the difference between Pamela’s (Robinson’s) knowledge of love and the ignorance of the townspeople of the true state of her (his) heart. In the sestet, the poet stresses the difference between private feelings and public speculation:

Her neighbors – doing all that neighbors can
To make romance of reticence meanwhile –
Seeing that she had never loved a man,
Wished Pamela had a cat, or a small bird,
And only would have wondered at her smile
Could they have seen that she had overheard.

“Aunt Imogen” is an interesting and tender study of the spinster type, which is a favourite subject of New England literature.

Finzer in “Bewick Finzer” was shrewd enough in making a fortune but his unslakable greed finally went in for the loss of everything—very much in tune with the life of Herman which, though greatly successful in the beginning, at last turned into an utter tragedy. Herman possessed genius and but for the depression, he would have brought a fortune to the family. In “Bokardo” Robinson expresses his bitterness against Herman who though possessed of nearly everything in life has fallen and has become a failure in the world through questionable practices.

Talk a little; or, if not,
Show me with a sign
Why it was that you forgot
What was yours and mine
Friends, I gather, are small things
In an age when coins are kings:
Even at that, one hardly flings
Friends before swine.

The poem reveals to the reader “a period in Herman’s life after his separation from Emma when he was living a quite irregular existence. While Bokardo expresses a greater intensity of personal emotion, Finzer
edges into pathos" (Franchere 76). But poems like “Exit” and “Memoir” tell us that Robinson was more compassionate and sympathetic towards Herman in later years. For in “Exit” he commemorates his brother Herman who fell a victim to the depression of the 1890s, necessitating the loss of his wealth and ultimately leading towards his own pathetic end.

For penance he would not confess,
And for the fateful emptiness
Of early triumph undermined,
May we now venture to be kind.

His most passionate love for Emma is echoed in his “Cortege” which begins,

Four o’clock this afternoon,
Fifteen hundred miles away
So it goes, the crazy tune,
So it pounds and hums all day.

Four o’clock this afternoon,
Earth will hide them far away:
Best they go to go so soon,
Best for them the grave today.

An intense study of the poem gives the impression that the poet is speaking about a young couple, recently married. David Nivison comments:

That Robinson could scarcely have hoped that a poem like ‘Cortege’ would be fully understood by anyone except a few members of his family. . . . I must apologize for saying no
more of 'Cortege' at this time except that it was conceived one black afternoon in the late winter of 1890, when Robinson's brother and sister-in-law left Gardiner after their recent marriage... on the four o'clock train for St. Louis—fifteen hundred miles away.” (174-75)

“The March of the Cameron Men” is another autobiographical poem by Robinson. A woman requests a doctor, an old friend and lover of hers, to come back to attend to her dying husband, who is about to breathe his last. The friend now hopes that he can win her back now that the man is dying. But the woman expresses her decision not to marry him and sends him away with her blessings and promise of prayers. Certainly it is a recollection of the long walk by Emma and Robinson soon after Herman’s funeral.

When he let you again there were stars in the way
Of his eyes, and he wandered alone
In a dream that would mock him for many a day
With a music unheard and unknown
Till at last he awoke, and remembered, and found
All there was that remained of it then.
There was only the sound of the world going round
And the March of the Cameron Men.

And while they part, the woman declares that “There will be a time for you to bless me/ That all has ended well.” Hence the Emma-Robinson relationship is so well revealed in “The March of the Cameron Men.”
One may conjecture that Emma's promise to Herman is anticipated in "The Book of Annandale," published seven years before his death.

She had told

Him then that she would love no other man

That there was not another man on earth

Whom she could ever love, or who could make

So much as a love thought go through her brain;

And he had smiled. (SP 49–50)

The sonnet "How Annandale Went Out" pictures the death of Dean, Robinson's eldest brother, a physician, whom he loved dearly. It tells the story of how a physician treats a patient who is "a wreck, with hell between him and the end." To quote Prof. Nivison, "... we are poorer if we are unable to consider what this poem meant to Robinson, its intimate connection with a painful memory, a case in his own life and family of that problem which always absorbed him, of worth in apparent failure, of the man enduring through the rain." (184) It is by injecting an overdose of morphia that Dean kills himself but Robinson disguises the whole thing and transforms the suicide into an act of euthanasia. In "Mortmain" the man's proposal is rejected by the lady not because of a husband or his memory but because of a brother. Avenal Gray turns down Seneca's proposal even though he has been her lover for a long time, because she is bound by an oath to her brother. "Mortmain" is an autobiographical poem. Since it refers to the "Robinson-Emma relationship and the twist in the brother-sister relationship ("my brother" and not "your brother" as in
the original), it is a piece of deliberate mystification” (Joseph 97). A few glimpses of the poet’s boyhood are well depicted in “Isaac and Archibald,” where two old men, placing their trust in the lad, who is Robinson himself, tell him of their fears for each other.

They marched away together towards the house
And left me to my childish ruminations
Upon the ways of men. I followed them
Downcellar with my fancy and then left them
For a fairer vision of all things at once
That was anon to be destroyed again
By the sound of voices and of heavy feet
One of the sounds of life that I remember
Though I forget so many that rang first
As if they were thrown down to me from Sinai.

“The Clinging Vine” is on the ‘wrong knot tied’ theme and it reflects Robinson’s view of Emma–Herman union which should not have happened.

There was a man who married
Because he couldn’t see;
And all his days he carried
The mark of his degree
But you – you came clear-sighted
And found truth in my eyes
And all my wrongs you’ve righted
With lies, and lies, and lies.
There is another short poem "The Pilot" which memorializes the life of his brother Dean who was too sensitive to bear "the physical and emotional wear and tear of a physician's life;" he was a physician, and to avoid boredom he found solace in drugs ultimately paving the way for his own damnation.

For the Breed of the Far-going
Who are strangers, and all brothers
May forget no more than others
Who looked seaward with eyes flowing.
But are brothers to bewail
One who fought so foul a gale?
You have won beyond our knowing
You are gone, but yet we sail. (SP 87)

Robinson's social consciousness manifests itself in poems like "The Master" and "The Revealer," which are tributes to Lincoln and Roosevelt respectively. The poet vaguely hints at his distrust of the common man and firmly asserts his belief in the superior leader as the only hope for democracy. The poem "The Master" ends with the lines:

For we were not as other men;
It was ours to soar and his to see;
But we are coming down again,
And we shall come down pleasantly;
Nor shall we longer disagree
On what it is to be sublime

But flourish in our perigee

And have one Titan at a time. (SP 66-67)

It is interesting to note that Robinson had great admiration and respect towards Lincoln while Masters had only contempt for him. Lincoln denied the states their sovereignty proving himself a Hamiltonian and not a Jeffersonian. To expose him to the world Masters wrote *Lincoln the Man* where he is proved to be inferior to Jefferson in mind, in learning, in tastes and in statesmanship. He was a greedy man who was on the side of the strong and who permitted the country to be plundered by the monopolists and the banks. Masters indicted him as “a man of contradictions and inconsistencies; a sophist; a hypocrite who was ashamed of his early life and poverty; a lazy man. He was a man of intellectual cunning, a twister of dialectic, an equivocator; he was superstitious, melancholy, mentally unbalanced, cold, undersexed, reticent, deficient in aesthetic gifts” (Yatron 29).

In “The Miracle” the poet tells us of a woman who is dead and is buried against her wishes under a bed of red roses. When “flushed autumn and the snows” go by, surprisingly white flowers appear on the rose bushes. This miraculous happening has a touch of Hawthornesque quality in it suggesting “the woman’s elemental innocence that lies beneath love’s red incandescence” (Joseph 107). There is another poem which is written in the context of the clamour against the Versailles peace settlement,
"The Garden of the Nations" which foretells of the future generations to be committing worse blunders than their older generation.

And when we are all gone, shall mightier seeds
And scions of a warmer spring put forth
A bloom and fruitage of a larger worth
Than ours? God save the garden, if by chance
Or by approved short sight, more numerous weeds
And we evils be the next inheritance (SP 223)

Robinson speaks about man's dependence on God's guidance in "The Garden."

In a sense, in most of Robinson's poems he is endeavouring to answer the question—why do so many lives fail despite being endowed liberally for a spectacular ascent? While in Masters, as we will see, there is a clear correlation between the Spoon Riverites and their social world, in Robinson it is character, rather than any social factor that determines the course of one's life. A 'satanic kink' operates in the life of many people laying them low or putting impediments on their path. It makes them spell the word success with the wrong blocks, to use one of Robinson's own metaphors.